
MIZUE TANI 7
Earl and Fairy
The Secret Behind Your Tears


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CHARACTERS

LYDIA

A girl who can see and talk to fairies. After helping Edgar to secure his earldom, she ended up as his fairy doctor and in an engagement of convenience with him. Unsure what he truly wants, Lydia has taken a leave of absence and returned to her hometown to reexamine her own wavering feelings.

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.

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.

ULYSSES

A close associate of Edgar's longtime enemy, the Prince. Seems to be a fifteen- or sixteen-year-old boy at first glance, but the truth is shrouded in mystery. He has the power to command fairies, and he despises Edgar for securing the title of Blue Knight Earl.

RAVEN

A mysterious boy. He is Edgar's servant. He is skilled with weapons, and his loyalty to his master is flawless.

NICO

A fairy that takes on the form of a cat. He has been Lydia's friend and partner since her childhood. In spite of his coarse nature, he is fussy about his food and attire, and very much acts like a gentleman.

Table of Contents

Cover
Characters
The Unease of Separation
Return to the Merrows' Isle
The Premonition
On a Lonely Night
His Remaining Hours
The Lady with the Golden Hair
In Exchange for One's Life
Afterword
Bonus Translation Notes
About J-Novel Club
Copyright

The Unease of Separation

To my dearest Lydia,

We had much snow in London yesterday. It caused a number of carriage accidents throughout the day. Scores of unfortunate men and women were sent sprawling on the ground in front of their estates. It was truly a sight to behold. The Thames has frozen over completely and was alive with skaters. Seeing some of them hand in hand as they enjoyed themselves made me wish you were here.

The Christmas season is one to be spent with family, and so I daresay you and your father are having a peaceful time together. When I imagine how you might be spending your time, I am overcome by the fervent desire to make it so that you will one day spend your Christmases and your New Year's Days with me. The Twelfth Night is nearly upon us, ending the season. However, I shall refrain from doing the boorish thing of asking you when you plan to return. As was written into your contract from the very beginning, you are free to take leaves of absence as you see fit, and I would hate for you to regard me as a slave driver rather than a fair employer. I am therefore writing to you to take my mind off how urgently I wish to see you, a desire I am endeavoring to suppress. The truth is I find myself rather anxious. I am sure you took with you to Scotland a number of misapprehensions regarding me, and I have been beginning to question whether it is your intention to return to London at all.

I suppose it is cold in Scotland too. I worry whether you are staying healthy in light of the weather. You have told me many times that you struggle to believe what I say to you, but if I may ask you to believe one claim of mine, let it be this: though we may be apart, my thoughts remain with you.

Edgar Ashenbert

Lydia folded up the letter and placed it in her small chestnut box with a quiet sigh. It was the first time the fairy doctor was spending such a long time away from her employer, the Earl of Ibrazel. Having wrangled a generous leave of absence for herself, she had spent it far from London, at her home on the outskirts of Edinburgh.

So far, however, she had found her time away anything but restful, and she blamed it on the letters Edgar had been sending her on a near-daily basis. In his eyes, they were engaged to be wed, but she struggled to fully believe the saccharine words he showered her with. The thought of falling in love with him frightened her, and so, not knowing what else to do, she had fled to Scotland. Edgar was highly experienced in the dark art of seduction, so much so that she wasn't even sure how much of his letters to take seriously. Regardless, when she read his correspondence, she found herself smiling at his trivial descriptions of London, and her heart ached when she thought of how lonely he must have been there without a family to love him.

His words, too, *seemed* more sincere than usual, enough to move her. The man who had written these letters came across as honest and uncomplicated. He was far removed from the beautiful demon Lydia was familiar with: the bold, arrogant earl who could be desperately cruel depending on whom he was dealing with. However, he also had a sensitive, lonely side, and it was this that had kept her both working at his estate in London and unwittingly betrothed to him.

On her left hand, she wore a moonstone engagement ring. Only Edgar had the ability to remove it, and she had forgotten to ask him to do so before coming back to Scotland. The stone was imbued with fairy magic and had a steward in the form of a coblynau, a mining fairy, who had thankfully made it so that the ring was invisible to the human eye. Neither her father nor any of her town's inhabitants had noticed it.

Lydia's father was her only remaining family. After a party spanning the New Year, he had traveled to northern Europe to undertake a geological survey before he was required back at the university. Alone as she was, she was aware that she could return to London at any time. It was her lack of resolve that left her lingering in Scotland.

Leaving her writing desk, she moved to the window and ran her finger over the foggy glass. The gray clouds outside were hanging low, and the sun was already showing signs of setting, even this early in the afternoon. The window was cold as ice from the air outside, and the moment the warmth of the hearth hit it, it fogged up before her eyes. When she wiped it clear again, she caught

sight of her translucent reflection in the glass, her russet hair falling below her shoulders. There, too, were her golden-green eyes, capable of seeing the fairies ordinary people couldn't. Others loathed them, denouncing them as witchlike. In that moment, they had a competitive light as they stared back at her. Edgar wrote that his thoughts remained with *this* girl, the one in the reflection. She still struggled to believe it, which was why she didn't have the strength to face him.

"What are you doin', Lydia? Waitin' for a letter from him?" Another girl had appeared in the doorway. Her coffee-colored hair seemed to have been tied up in a rush.

"What? Of course not, Miss Lotta. Whyever would you think that?"

Lotta looked entirely unconvinced by her flustered denial. The former pirate had decided to stay in London for a while after reuniting with her grandfather and had come to visit Lydia a few days ago. "But you stand by the window at this time every day. Y'know, the time when the mailman shows up."

"Do I?"

"Look, there he is!"

Lydia brought her face closer to the glass reflexively, only for Lotta to say, "Kidding," and bring her back to her senses.

Embarrassed, she pouted. "That was rather unkind."

"Sorry. But it's nothing to be ashamed of, is it?" Lotta gave her a pat on the shoulder, and she sighed anew.

"I just cannot help but wonder why the letters have *stopped*. I was receiving one every day. Suppose he has fallen ill or injured himself in some way?" The letter Lydia had been rereading earlier had been delivered some time ago.

"Nah, Edgar's not that frail. This has gotta be one of his schemes." Lotta sat down in a chair, crossing one leg over the other. Although she had started living with her grandfather, it seemed the more masculine mannerisms she had picked up as a pirate chief were yet to leave her.

"A scheme?"

"He knows you'll start worrying if he suddenly stops sending letters. He thinks it'll make you cut your holiday short and draw you back to London."

Oh, I see!

Lotta had known Edgar for a long time, so she knew how he operated in terms of both scheming and seducing women. Lydia lamented how close she had been to falling for the earl's trick. She stepped away from the window, resolving not to obsess over the letters anymore. However, the moment she heard the mailman ring the bell, she dashed from the room. Once in the garden, she pushed open the wicker gate and rushed over to the mailbox. There was a white envelope sticking out of it but, when she reached for it, a gray, bushy-furred cat pinched it before she could.

"At last! I've been waiting for this."

"Nico? You write letters?" Lydia stared at the fairy cat, who was standing atop the mailbox on his hind legs and looking back at her.

He puffed out his chest. "Letter writing is a gentlemanly pastime."

Nico wore a perfectly straight necktie and was constantly watchful of the state of his fur and his manners, considering himself more gentleman than fairy. He had been her companion for as long as she could remember and—perhaps due to his prolonged proximity to people—was capable of reading and writing. He was the most human of any fairy Lydia knew. However, for whatever reason, he maintained the form of a longhaired cat, so the more human he acted, the stranger he seemed.

"My lady! Mr. Nico!" the coblynau cried from within a nearby bush. The bearded, pug-nosed fairy started to claw its way up the fence several times its size. "You must listen!"

Fairies had a tendency to exaggerate, which was why Lydia was more concerned with searching the rest of the mailbox. But as it turned out, Nico's letter had been the only one to arrive.

"My lady, I have news concerning your fiancé, the Blue Knight Earl."

At last, she turned to the coblynau. "Edgar is not my fiancé."

The Blue Knight Earl was another way to refer to the Earl of Ibrazel. Lydia's engagement to Edgar was far from official. There had been an incident a while back, after which the fairy had considered them betrothed. She had corrected the coblynau on this matter several times, but as far as it was concerned, her possession of the moonstone ring made her the Blue Knight Earl's fiancée.

“It has come to light that one of the earl’s ancestors may have appeared in Britain as recently as a hundred years ago.”

A hundred years ago? According to official records, the last known holder of the title had been around closer to *three* hundred years ago.

“Where did you hear that?”

“The swans at the riverbank heard it from their colleagues. As you know, there are traveling fairies who live amongst them.”

Indeed, there were fairies who traveled with migratory birds. Since they chose wild birds as their companions, they tended not to get too close to humans.

“Apparently, the flock in question was rescued by that Blue Knight Earl.”

“The *real* Blue Knight Earl? It might have been an impostor from an illegitimate descendant,” Nico pointed out.

The legitimate Ashenbert line was supposed to have ended, although the Blue Knight Earl of several generations prior had produced an illegitimate child whose bloodline lived on in one man. He had no right to the title, but he was currently antagonizing Edgar, who had taken the earldom for himself.

“I am sure it was the real earl, for the flock also saw soldiers from Ibrazel and a banshee. Only a legitimate descendant would be accompanied thus.”

The Blue Knight, who was, as legend would have it, the human ruler of Ibrazel, was loyal to the king of England, from whom he had received his earldom. His descendants had taken the title of Blue Knight Earl, but although they held territory in Great Britain, they worked mainly from Ibrazel, an island considered fictional by the general population. It would therefore be logical for him to command a private army there, and it followed that the fairies among the migratory birds had indeed met the real earl.

That being the case, what if a legitimate descendant of the Blue Knight Earl still existed somewhere? If not, then perhaps the one seen a hundred years ago was the final heir. What, then, was the reason he had made no attempt to retrieve the sword that his forefather had left with the merrows?

Lydia turned to the coblynau. “Might I meet with the fairies who traveled with the birds?”

“Oh, the riverside flock has long since moved on. They would

have liked to have met with the earl and his bride too, but unfortunately, they could not dawdle."

I am not his bride. She quickly grew sullen.

"Why were they in such a hurry?" Nico asked in her stead.

"Well…" The coblynau faltered.

"Lydia! I got somethin' for ye!" They were interrupted by a young man with rugged features. It took him a single stride to clear the shrubbery before he stopped in front of her.

"*What*, Kelpie?"

With a boyish grin, he ran a hand through his dark, unkempt curls before scattering a collection of white feathers over Lydia's head. If only there had not been a barbaric water horse before her, perhaps she would have found the sight of those angelic feathers floating down around her romantic.

"You ate a swan?!"

"I saved its feathers for ye. Remember how ye picked up that feather on our walk the other day? Ye looked so happy."

It had been a gorgeous, snow-white feather. Of course it had pleased her. These feathers, however, had likely been torn from the bird as Kelpie sank his teeth into it, and *that* made them feel slightly different. These were the Lowlands near Edinburgh. No doubt the swans had not expected to come across a kelpie, creatures that inhabited the Highlands.

Lydia brushed the feathers from her clothes. The birds and the fairies with them had likely moved on due to the loss of their companion, and she lamented her missed opportunity to meet with them. His eyes alight with glee, Kelpie peered at Lydia. There was still a feather in his mouth.

"Isn't Scotland a bonnie place to be? Fresh food wherever ye look, and the waters are nice and clean. Ye're wantin' to live here for much longer now, aren't ye?"

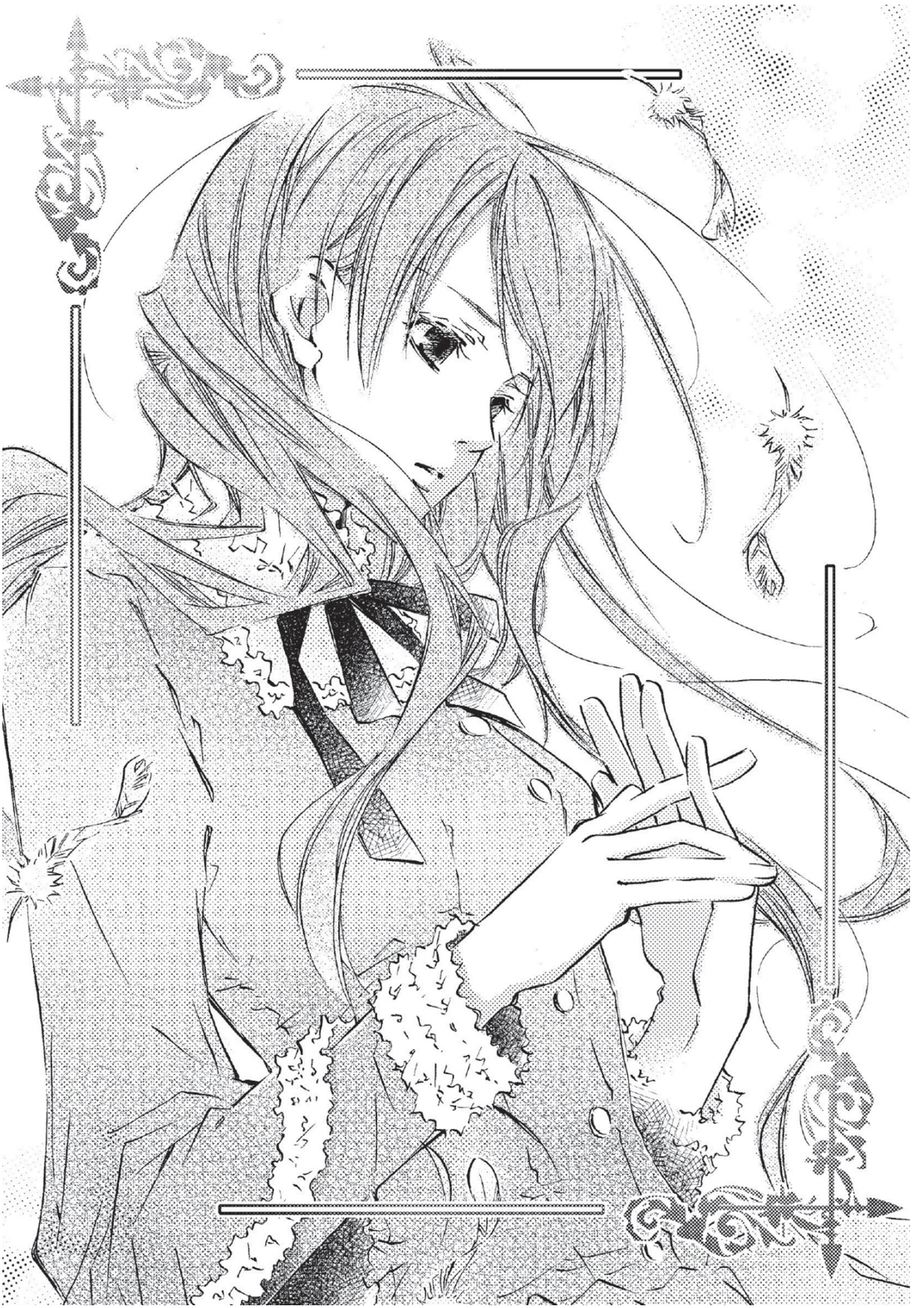
"Please, my lady, this fairy is of the Unseelie Court! You mustn't listen to him!" The coblynau tugged at Kelpie's hair as the water horse leaned forward.

"The earl cannae make ye happy. Ye're weren't happy when ye came back, I can tell ye that much. It's 'cause of him, right? 'Cause he goes after all these lassies, and it hurts ye."

"Who told you that?" Lydia glanced at Nico, who averted his gaze.

Stupid, gossipy cat! Despite her frustration, she couldn't deny that Kelpie was likely right. Her lukewarm relationship with Edgar had been showing signs of change. Not knowing if that was what she wanted, she had fled to Scotland. Having stayed here for a while now, it was slowly starting to feel like she had never left. The townsfolk still didn't believe in fairies and kept their distance from her, but even when they spoke about her behind her back and failed to understand her, she found that she was no longer affected by it. After all, she had the fairies for company.

When she had run out on Edgar, her heart had felt uneasy and suffered from pangs of loneliness, even though she knew the fairies would still be there for her. Perhaps being with him had kept her under the misconception that she was an average girl, or even desirable. Edgar was a nobleman, handsome, and sought after by countless women. When she realized that she had, for a split second, *dreamed* of him choosing her over all of them, she could come to no other conclusion than that she had grown conceited. It was important for one to live within one's means. For Lydia, perhaps that meant an inconspicuous life among the fairies.



“You must understand, my lady, a gentleman’s infidelity is much like an illness. Open your heart and show him the extent of your love! The illness will be cured, and the earl’s love will stay with you alone!” the coblynau went on, not pausing its attack on Kelpie’s hair.

Lydia couldn’t see how that made any sense, and she was indignant about the apparent need to open *her* heart.

“If infidelity is a concern, your ladyship ought to return to the earl as soon as possible. You yourself must resist temptation, particularly with this kelpie around.”

“Och, now there’s a fine idea! If ye’re wantin’ to teach that earl a lesson, Lydia, ah’m more than happy to help!”

“I’m not out to teach him anything!”

“Then, to London!” cried the coblynau.

“Would ye be quiet, ye wee goblin? Lydia doesnae wanna go to London no more!” Kelpie pinched the mining fairy and held it up between two fingers. The color drained from its face, and it promptly fell unconscious. It must have feared being eaten.

“Honestly, Kelpie, you mustn’t be so unkind to him.”

“Tea’s ready!” Lotta called.

Nico was the first to move, leaping down from the mailbox and hurrying indoors. At the same time, a flock of brownies emerged from a nearby bush. The coblynau slowly roused itself, then dashed as far from Kelpie’s grip as possible.

“Human food is no satisfyin’ in the least,” the water horse grumbled, nevertheless following everyone else into the house.

Lydia sighed. Fairies were all but strangers to keeping their thoughts to themselves and acting out of consideration for others. Having said that, she was rather fond of their shallow whims and selfish tendencies. They could be kind, if one knew how to draw that kindness from them. For example, the Carlton house—one that humans avoided and which was full of fairies—found assistant housekeepers in the form of hobgoblins. Everyone in town knew the Carltons, and Professor Carlton was well respected by them. As long as he was at home, the house was tended to by human housekeepers. However, given Lydia’s reputation, he refrained from hiring any help during the times she was living there alone. Now, though, there *was* a fellow human in her house, waving at her and calling her for tea.

The hobgoblins had prepared the tea, and as far as Lotta was concerned, it was appearing on the table by itself. This did not seem to concern her. Lydia was surrounded by her beloved fairies and, for once, a human friend. She couldn't think of anything that would make her happier. Maybe staying here would be for the best. Here, her heart wasn't at risk of being led astray by Edgar. She hoped not, at least.

What would he think if I were never to return to London at all?

"What're you up to, Lydia?"

Though it was late at night, the library's light was on, and the fairy doctor was searching through the books. Her activities must have caught Lotta's attention.

"You not going to bed yet?"

"No. I wanted to look into something," Lydia replied. She was searching for her mother's diaries. Her mother had also been a fairy doctor, and her diaries were full of useful information about the creatures. Lydia had flipped through several of them, hoping to find something related to the Blue Knight Earl, but she'd had no luck so far. The earl was English, so perhaps it was unsurprising that her Scottish mother had known nothing about him, or maybe she'd only known him as a fictional character.

Lotta placed her candlestick on the table and read over the hastily written notes that Lydia had left there. "Something about the Blue Knight Earl?"

"Well, yes…I *am* employed by the earl himself. Edgar doesn't know the first thing about fairies, but he needs to learn how to deal with them lest he set himself up for trouble in the future."

Edgar had shown an interest in living up to his title. It was something he needed to do in order to face his adversary, who had inherited the mysterious powers of the true Blue Knight Earl. The coblynau's story had also been weighing on Lydia's mind, and she thought she would take this opportunity to look more closely into Edgar's adopted lineage, not out of concern for him, but for the sake of her profession. Though she knew it must have sounded like an excuse, she explained as much to Lotta.

The former pirate cocked her head. "Tell me straight, Lydia. Are you in love with Edgar?"

"I beg your pardon?" Lydia would have liked to have laughed off

the insinuation, but Lotta's gaze was so serious that she was rendered speechless instead.

"If being apart from him has made you realize you love him, I'd be happy to go knock some sense into him for ya. Straighten him up so he won't ever be unfaithful."

Lydia wasn't sure that Edgar's habits could be rectified. Mind whirring, she closed the diary in front of her. "I cannot say whether I love him or not. No one has ever flirted with me like he has, and now and then, I find myself seriously considering a relationship with him. Sometimes, I feel as though I *want* to have faith in him. However, I also feel perfectly content here without him."

"But you're still doing research late into the night for him."

"I am doing this more for my own sake. I value being a fairy doctor. Without fairies, I am sure I would be terribly unhappy."

"Right. I get a strong feeling that the fairies here love you too." Lotta smiled.

As Lydia smiled back, a thought occurred to her. Her fairy doctor mother had left her hometown to elope with Lydia's father. She had chosen to leave behind her fae friends—with the exception of Nico—and settle in a place where the only person she could rely on was her husband.

However did she come to that decision? Lydia's father was a serious man, and perhaps that made him trustworthy, but she had the sense that there had been factors at play beyond his personality. Surely, this question was another reason she had unbound her mother's diaries that night. However, the contents were strictly limited to fairies. Given how close her mother had been to the fae, it was quite probable that she had known when death would come for her and so had worked to fill her diaries with as much useful information as possible for the sake of the daughter who had inherited her abilities.

"I think I might visit the Isle of Mannan," Lydia said.

"Where's that?"

"It's one of Edgar's islands, home to a group of merrows who hold a deep and ancient connection to the earldom. Edgar and I know little about the earldom itself, and I believe the time has come to learn more."

It was partly due to Lydia's assistance that Edgar could become the Blue Knight Earl in the first place. Were he the true heir, his

abilities would have been enough to rule over an entire land of fairies, but neither he nor his fairy doctor possessed such capabilities. The best Lydia could do was gain as much knowledge as possible, slowly but surely, in order to fulfill her duties.

"That's why you wanna go to this island? But this whole thing with Edgar... Y'know it's your feelings that are important and not your abilities, right?"

She knew. But she was too scared to give a definite answer as to what her feelings were. That was why she was trying to shift her focus elsewhere. Perhaps her main motivation in going to Mannan was so she could put off returning to London for a little while longer.

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When Paul Firman woke up that morning, he saw before him a young man with dazzling golden hair.

"Good morning, Firman."

Had he not spoken, Paul might have assumed he was staring at a portrait in his half-awake state. The man wore a top hat and held a cane, and stood with perfect posture. Between the gentle smile on his handsome face and his elegant attire, he was a work of art, even down to the slightest of shadows in his clothing.

The background, however, was most unsuitable. It was a room so cluttered and filthy that the mind boggled. It offended the artist's sense of aesthetic and made his blood boil. What was *he*, a nobleman, doing in such an awful place? Realizing he might still be half asleep, Paul made to close his eyes, only to fully pick up on the captivating ash-mauve eyes staring his way. His mind found clarity at last as he realized this man could be no other than the real Lord Ashenbert.

"My lord... What are you... Sorry, I mean, please forgive the state of my dress." Flustered, Paul sat up. It made little difference. His longish hair was unruly at the best of times, let alone after a night of drinking with his artist acquaintances. Not to mention he had fallen asleep in his clothes, which were now covered in creases.

"I did knock, but let myself in when I received no response. I thought you might be dead, as the door wasn't locked either." The

earl spoke of death and danger like it was nothing, as he often did.

Paul sighed. “I apologize for causing you concern, my lord. I was out till dawn, having drunk perhaps a little too much, and fell asleep immediately upon my return.”

“I see. You ought to count yourself very lucky indeed. I have heard about an uptick in robberies lately, particularly those where the perpetrator turns violent upon being discovered. I thought you might have been targeted in particular. That perhaps the robber or robbers in question were no ordinary criminals.”

Paul buttoned up his mess of a shirt. The gravity of the earl’s tone made him frown. Only then did he really open his eyes to take in the horrendous mess of his room and his workspace beyond the open doorway. He wasn’t one for tidying up, but never had he seen it in such a bad way.

“What?! What the— What on earth happened here?!” He had come home drunk and collapsed into bed. He could remember nothing else. Apparently, he hadn’t even noticed the state of his room. Rolling off his bed and somehow managing to get to his feet, he rushed to his workspace.

“You ought to check whether anything was stolen.”

“I doubt it,” Paul stammered. “I don’t have anything *worth* stealing.”

He was an amateur painter of fairies. The majority of his work was produced for Lord Ashenbert, his sole repeat patron. Even if any of his paintings were stolen, they wouldn’t fetch much of a price. Indeed, they were all still there, scattered across the floor. Despite how the intruder had treated them, Paul treasured them. He quickly gathered them up, checking to make sure they were still clean and that none of the paint had peeled off.

“Mr. Slade’s club was ransacked too, just recently. He tells me the servants were restrained and trapped in the cellar,” the earl continued.

Slade was Paul’s art dealer and the proprietor of a high-class gentlemen’s club. More importantly, he was among the upper echelons of a secret organization called Scarlet Moon. As Paul was also a member, it seemed likely that the society was the reason they were being targeted. Originally a guild of craftsmen, the artists at its head had been assassinated by a man known as the Prince. That very same man had murdered Lord Ashenbert’s family

when he was just a child, taken him to America, and enslaved him. After escaping, the earl had become Scarlet Moon's leader and had sworn to work with them to exact revenge against their common enemy. Now it seemed that the Prince's underling, who had been in Britain for some time, was instigating a scheme once more.

"Does your lordship suspect Ulysses?" Paul asked. He had briefly encountered the Prince's aide, who looked to be about fifteen or sixteen years old, before.

"Yes. I believe he might be searching for something. For instance, your father was killed on the Prince's orders, and you mentioned that you weren't sure why he was targeted. Suppose he had in his possession something that would be inconvenient to the Prince? Or even something that the Prince *needs*?"

"Something that I might have inherited, you mean?"

"Does anything spring to mind?"

"Nothing."

"Mr. Slade said much the same. The other question is how Ulysses discovered that you are O'Neill's son, and indeed his connection to Scarlet Moon, a secret your father kept close to his chest."

Paul had only narrowly escaped death when his father was murdered, and it was by pure luck that he had survived. After that, he had been taken in by a man named Firman, who had been both a painter and a member of Scarlet Moon, just like Paul's birth father. The two men had been friends, but O'Neill had never spoken of his membership to any of his other friends or family. Moreover, there was only a small handful of people who knew that Paul was not Firman's real son. Lord Ashenbert was one of them, leading to his curiosity about how the information had leaked.

"But, my lord, nothing was stolen. Ulysses must have been satisfied that I do not possess what he seeks."

"I wonder about that. The fact that O'Neill's son still lives is something he may not permit. For example, if your father was in possession of a grave secret." Again, the earl's tone was as if he had said nothing disturbing.

"What do you suppose I should do?" Paul shuddered. He wanted to avoid being murdered, if at all possible.

"I shall shelter you at my estate for the time being."

Paul gave a grateful nod. The young earl was a dependable man indeed. Not only did he possess elegance and an aristocratic beauty but he also wielded a powerful charisma that had become exceedingly rare among modern nobles. He was composed, generous, courageous, and capable of flexible thought. All this while remaining amiable, which was precisely why the younger members of Scarlet Moon, Paul included, were so taken with him. If he had one fault, it was his brazen womanizing, but he seemed to be refraining from that at present for the sake of one girl in particular. All in all, Paul admired him greatly.

"Hopefully we can beat them to the punch and find whatever it is they're searching for first," Lord Ashenbert said.

"My father left behind nothing but sketches and practice pieces. I could show you, if you'd like." The pieces in question were scattered across the floor.

"It doesn't seem as though art is what they are after."

Paul had to agree. If what they wanted had been drawn or written in a document, they would have taken every last scrap of paper from his room.

"I must say, I'm impressed, Firman. I do apologize for intruding at this hour."

Paul was still gathering up the drawings and wasn't sure what the earl was talking about until he turned around. Lord Ashenbert was standing next to the open door to his bedroom. At the end of his gaze was the painter's bed, upon which the pile of blankets was stirring. A moment later, what lay beneath them had risen up, thrown them off, and was staring this way. It was a girl with long hair. She had to be around fourteen or fifteen years old. Her face was white and pallid, and she wore a single layer of clothing that resembled an undergarment. Lord Ashenbert glanced at Paul, who was so shocked he couldn't even utter a cry, and approached the girl.

"My apologies, young lady. Might you be Mr. Firman's lover?" His smile was as sweet and disarming as ever, perfected for the purpose of reassuring any member of the opposite sex. Indeed, the girl looked relieved and responded with a nod.

"My lord!" Paul cried out frantically. "I do not know this girl!" He turned to address her. "Um, forgive me, but…what are you doing here?"

The girl's face immediately crumpled like she was on the verge of tears.

"Come now, do not cry. Here, I shall tell him off for you. Mr. Firman is as earnest as they come. It's going to be all right." Speaking in soothing tones, Lord Ashenbert retrieved a green hooded cloak from under the bed and placed it around her shoulders. It must have been hers; Paul didn't recognize it. He was still in a daze when the earl dragged him into the next room.

"My lord, I swear I do not know her," Paul insisted, feeling like he wanted to burst into tears himself.

"And yet she is in your chamber."

The artist hesitated. "I was intoxicated last night, so my memory is not quite clear…"

"I see. Then you have fallen prey to a very common situation. At times like these, maintaining one's composure is of the utmost importance. You do not want her to raise a fuss about this—that would be the most bothersome outcome. We must not risk her becoming overly emotional, so I suggest you do not tell *her* that you have no recollection, or make any similar statements in front of her. All you can hope for now is that she will agree to act as though it never happened." The earl delivered the admonishment under his breath. This was when he was at his most devilish.

"My lord, you promised her that it would be all right, but it doesn't sound as though you have her best interests in mind."

"I meant simply that there are a number of solutions to this predicament. You might, for example, turn her attentions to another man so that you can wash your hands of her."

"Does your lordship have firsthand experience with this, by any chance?"

The earl frowned as though he would rather Paul had left the question unasked. "I have never been so intoxicated as to bring a woman home without any recollection of it. What fun would it be if there was nothing to remember? The best practice is to tempt the lady without tempting *malady*."

Lord Ashenbert's pearls of wisdom only left Paul feeling all the more drained.

"Excuse me, but does this man claim not to recognize me?" the girl asked anxiously, peering through a crack in the door. "I remember nothing at all of myself, so when he called out to me

last night as though he knew me, I followed him here, confident that he was an acquaintance of mine."

"So you *did* invite her home, Firman."

"I'm sorry? I don't believe I did..."

At last, he was starting to remember. The girl had been crouched down, crying, on one corner of the street. That was why he had talked to her. He hadn't understood why all the other passersby were ignoring a girl in distress. It had been as though they couldn't even see her.

While Paul grappled with the fraying threads of his memory, the earl turned to the girl. "Did you stay the night here?" His eyes twinkled. He seemed to be finding Paul's predicament immensely entertaining, perhaps because he wasn't the one in trouble for once.

"I did. Being with him felt very nostalgic..."

"Then perhaps this meeting was arranged by fate."

Paul decided to step in. He could only see things getting more chaotic if he allowed the earl to have too much fun. "Did I... That is, did I...*do* anything to you?" Taking the situation and her feelings into consideration, he determined that he ought to be as sincere with her as possible.

"For example?" She sounded utterly perplexed.

"Mr. Firman is asking what you did together after returning here," the earl clarified, much to Paul's chagrin.

"He collapsed onto his bed and fell asleep at once, so I decided to go to sleep too."

"Oh, how anticlimactic," the earl replied.

Paul, however, was so dizzy with relief that he was forced to take a seat.

"Am I to take it, young lady, that you do not recall your name or where you live?" asked Lord Ashenbert.

"That's correct. But, I serve a noblewoman, and her I do remember."

"Is that right? Perhaps you are a live-in servant. What is her name?"

"Lady Gladys. She is both beautiful and brave." Out of nowhere, tears started falling from the girl's eyes. "Forgive me. Thinking of her ladyship never fails to bring me to tears..."

"Did something happen to her?" Paul was already sympathetic.

It was obvious by now just how pure of spirit this girl was.

“I’m not certain.” Unable to stem her tears, she buried her face in her hands.

“Your mistress sounds like a wonderful woman, and I should very much like to meet her. I may already be acquainted with her, but without a surname, I cannot be certain. If you would allow me the time to try and find her…” he offered.

“Of course. Thank you.”

Just then, something at the girl’s feet caught Paul’s attention. He knelt down to inspect it. Several yellow beads were scattered over the floor, and more were falling from above. They were her tears, pattering down one after the other. The earl noticed them too and picked one up.

“Is this amber?”

“Amber?”

The men stared at the girl, who was still crying. Her tears ran down her cheeks as normal, but by the time they reached the floor, they had become beads of amber. It was as though they hardened upon contact with the air. She couldn’t have been human, no matter how one looked at her.



“Might you be a fairy?”

The girl nodded through her tears.

“And how about your mistress? Is she a fairy too?”

She shook her head, but it wasn’t clear whether she meant to say “no” or that she wasn’t sure.

“My lord, perhaps it would be prudent to call Miss Carlton back to London.” Paul had recently grown used to seeing fairies for himself, but his interest lay in painting them. He wasn’t an expert by any means. The fairy doctor, Lydia, was away on an extended Christmas holiday, but the season was coming to a close.

“Call her back? By informing her that there is work for her? I cannot do that.”

“Why not, my lord?”

“If she hears there is work for her, she will return out of a sense of responsibility. However, I wish for her to return for *my* sake instead.”

“But, my lord, so far she has shown no inclination to—” Paul cut himself off in a hurry.

As a rule, Lord Ashenbert only needed to set his sights on a girl, casually flirt with her, and she would be head over heels for him. For whatever reason, Lydia was an exception. He insisted to anyone who would listen that they were lovers, but oftentimes they seemed more like friends. Paul didn’t know what had convinced Lord Ashenbert to accept her request for an extended break, but the earl was taking it unusually seriously—though he would normally have gone after her and coerced her back in that typical way of his, it seemed he wasn’t even able to do that.

Paul had learned over the past month that alluding to any of this was a surefire way of drawing the earl’s ire, which was why he was currently breaking out in a cold sweat. The man would smile, then come back with a response several times more scathing than the words that had invoked it.

This time, however, it seemed Paul was off the hook. Lord Ashenbert had let his verbal gaffe slide.

“In any case, I shall be leaving to meet Lydia today, but I do not wish to speak to her about work.”

Relief washed over Paul. “Your lordship is off to see her at last.”

“I have been informed that she will be going to the Isle of Mannan. The island is part of my territory; therefore, she is

expressing her desire to see me."

Informed by who? Did the earl have someone investigating Lydia's movements? If she hadn't told him she was going, there wouldn't be any reason for her to expect him there. Surely she hadn't told him anything because she *didn't* want to see him?

Naturally, Paul had scruples about giving voice to these thoughts. Instead, he replied, "In that case, might I ask that you take this young lady with you and introduce her to Miss Carlton?"

"Did I not just say that I would refrain from speaking to her about work? Quite apart from anything else, I daresay that appearing before her with an unfamiliar girl is likely to invite the usual misapprehensions."

"Of course." Paul paused. "Well, then, my lord, might I accompany you too?"

"By no means. I must spend time with Lydia alone. It is imperative that I use this opportunity to show myself in the best light possible." The thought of meeting with her in his own territory seemed to bolster the earl's courage. "Firman, I ask that you take responsibility for the young lady and keep an eye on her until Lydia's return."

"But, my lord," Paul stammered, "how does one look after a fairy?"

"I shall leave that to your judgment." The earl pulled out a pocket watch. "Ah, my train is due to depart soon." He smiled. Paul had not seen such a contented smile from him for the entire month. "Do try and keep yourself safe from Ulysses. And I would pack up your things sooner rather than later. If you explain the situation to my senior maid, Harriet, she will see to you."

Return to the Merrows' Isle

Though it was a cold day with gentle snowfall, the boat didn't encounter a single choppy wave on its way to the Isle of Mannan. The merrows that occupied these waters must have been aware of Lydia's approach. The small, lone island was located off the west coast of England in the Irish Sea. She had last visited in early spring, when it had risen out of the water as a pale green shadow. Now, with its dusting of midwinter snow, it more closely resembled a sugared cake.

"That's Mannan, huh? Edgar's territories aren't the easiest places to get to, are they?" In the end, Lotta had accompanied Lydia to the island.

"Fairies thrive in remote places. That's why these territories were conferred to Lord Ashenbert all those centuries ago."

"Yeah? It's definitely got some great views. Wait, is that a castle? This place isn't as shabby as I thought it'd be."

"Are you sure you ought to have come with me, Miss Lotta? I thought you told His Royal Highness that you would be back in London yesterday," Lydia said, referring to Lotta's grandfather.

"I'm sure it'll be fine to add an extra day or three."

The splendorous castle stood at the island's highest point. Its bluish exterior looked all the more vibrant against the white backdrop. Mannan's harbor had been totally deserted the last time Lydia was there, but the number of ships had increased, and it was now alive with people loading and unloading cargo and fish despite the season. Lydia and Lotta had taken a ride on a small cargo ship, and they were now making the journey from the harbor to the island's lone inn.

"Where's Nico?" Lotta looked around. The gray cat had alighted with them but was now nowhere to be seen.

"He's just had a happy reunion with some of his brownie friends. They must have gone off together somewhere."

"What about the invisible one?"

"The coblynau? I imagine it joined them too."

"Excuse me, but might you be Miss Carlton?"

Lydia stopped in her tracks upon being approached by the unfamiliar man. He introduced himself as one of the inn's staff. She had sent a letter giving notice of her intent to visit, so he must have come to greet her.

"Please allow me to welcome you to Mannan, Miss Carlton. The roads are slippery at present, so we have arranged a carriage for you." With a cordial smile, he pointed at the carriage waiting at the roadside.

"Oh, but it isn't too far to the inn," she protested.

He motioned for her to mount the carriage despite her bemused objection, and she decided to do so. The inn was managed by the Tompkins family, historical stewards to the Ashenbert estate, so she had no reason to be wary.

Lotta made to follow, only for the door to be closed right in her face.

"What are you doing? Open it at once!" The carriage made off as Lydia tried to pull the door open. She caught a glance of Lotta trying to give chase before the man from the inn stopped her. A second later, he was on the ground, but then the carriage turned a corner and picked up its pace, following the road into the woods.

"Please do not be concerned, Miss Carlton. We were simply asked to escort you to your lodgings separately," the driver said.

He's a part of this too, is he?

They had long since passed the inn. As they moved through the trees, Lydia caught sight of the castle on the hill ahead, and her heart stirred uncomfortably. She had lost count of the number of times Edgar had tried to all but kidnap her like this.

Isn't he supposed to be in London?

While she fretted, the carriage passed through the castle gates and straight through the gardens to bring itself parallel to the main entrance. She didn't recognize the servant who greeted her and showed her dutifully to the small reception room. She was left alone again before she could ask who she might be waiting for, and whether it might indeed be Edgar.

She surveyed her surroundings. The castle interior looked completely different compared to her last visit. It was an old building erected in the sixteenth century, and Edgar must have touched it up since it came into his possession. The fixings were certainly cleaner. The furnishings carried the weight of history in

their appearance and had not been replaced. Instead, they had been repaired and polished to the extent that one would think this castle had been routinely tended to for centuries. The room itself was perfectly warm.

Lydia took a seat on the sofa, which was when the exhaustion of her long journey suddenly caught up with her. She was growing more convinced that Edgar *had* come to Mannan. She hadn't expected to be meeting him at all, and she wasn't sure how to face him. Having said that, it was quite possible that he had made the decision not to try and seduce her anymore. She was one of several women he could pick to distract him from the one who truly occupied his heart. It was more likely that he had come because too much work had piled up in her absence or he was facing a new predicament relating to fairies. In order to avoid disappointment, Lydia held fast to these expectations. She did not go so far as to consider *why* she would be disappointed if his motivations lay in official matters.

The rhythmic ticking of the clock on the table was the only thing alluding to the passage of time. Outside the window, the snow continued to fall silently. Sinking down into the comfortable sofa, Lydia eventually dozed off. She continued to doze even as she sensed someone entering the room. She felt so at ease that she was loath to be interrupted. The visitor carried the scent of snow and the sea breeze. They must have come from outside, she realized vaguely, as she felt fingers running gently through her hair. They lulled her deeper into her nap, and she let go of her consciousness once more.

"I missed you."

She hummed an unconscious response.

"But now you have finally returned to my side, my fairy."

There was only one person who would call her that without a hint of ridicule or sarcasm.

"Edgar?"

"Yes, Lydia. It's me."

It was the gentle caress of his whisper on her ear that pushed her to blink her eyes open at last. She found an ash-mauve gaze staring back at her. His face was inclined downward, and his golden hair was close to touching her. Realizing that she was lying with her head resting in his lap, she hurriedly leaped up into a

sitting position.

“What are you doing?!” she stammered.

“Oh, dear. I would have gladly allowed you to rest for a while longer.”

Lydia stood up from the sofa and took a deep breath to calm herself.

“I was merely observing you while you slept, but then you came to lean on me.”

“More importantly, why are you in Mannan?!” Lydia hadn’t meant to let her guard down immediately upon their reunion. It both frustrated and embarrassed her that she had found Edgar’s lap so comfortable.

“I came to meet you here. It would be most inhospitable of me not to be present when you arrived at my country house.”

“But *how* did you know I would be here?!”

“I received a letter informing me of it.”

“I sent no such letter.”

“No, but Nico did. I gifted him a seal with his initials carved into it. It seems he has discovered the joy of writing letters.”

Lydia *had* wondered who on earth the fairy cat had been corresponding with. He must have been telling Edgar absolutely everything that the earl wanted to know. No wonder he had vanished the moment they had arrived on the island.

“Incidentally, when you didn’t reply to my letters, I paid a visit to the post office, as I suspected they were neglecting their duties. Fortunately, I did not need to make a scene, because there was finally a letter waiting for me. I cannot understand why they did not deliver it to me immediately instead of hanging on to it.” As usual, the earl spared no consideration for others when it came to getting what he wanted.

“I barely had time to pen a response before receiving another letter from you.”

“You needn’t have worried about that. It warmed my heart to hear from you, even though I only received one reply for every five letters.”

Lydia thought she had written to him more than that. Her vague intention had been to send one reply per three letters so as not to be impolite. At some point while she was losing herself in thought, she suddenly noticed that Edgar had stood up and was

approaching her, so she instinctively backed away. He stopped a short distance from her and studied her evenly.

"Unfortunately, I have been unable to write to you for the past few days. I hope you did not feel offended."

"Perish the thought. It isn't as though you were under any obligation. Besides, Miss Lotta informed me that it was a trick of yours to make me worry about you."

"That isn't the case, I can assure you. Rather, I was involved in…something of a predicament. Ah, but now isn't the time to discuss that. It wouldn't do to sour our reunion." Though he showed her a smile, there was a hint of sadness about it, as though Lydia's lack of faith had upset him. Even after all this time, she could not work out to what extent his expression was calculated. "I shall be holding a supper to welcome you tonight. I have brought the cook with me, so I can promise you your favorite apple tart, freshly baked. Accompanied by cold cream, of course. You must be looking forward to it already."

The Ashenbert cook had been trained in France, and supper at the estate was too good to miss, even if it did mean sitting through Edgar's endless sweet talk.

Knowing this would give her pause, he continued relentlessly. "There is much I wish to speak with you about, Lydia. If nothing else, can you promise to stay for the time being? Might I come a little closer?"

As she hesitated, the door swung open. An out-of-breath Lotta rushed into the room, covered in snow.

"Why, you! Your stupid carriage splashed muddy water all over me when it went past! And why'd you ignore me when I asked you to stop and let me on?!"

"Oh? I had thought you were enjoying your walk in the snow, given how rare it is. You were always beside yourself with excitement when we had the slightest snowfall in America."

Edgar's dismissal left Lotta livid. Her shoulders shuddered with each breath. "This *isn't* the 'slightest' snowfall! It's goddamn freezing out there!"

"Did you *walk* all the way here, Miss Lotta?" Lydia hurried up to her and began to brush the snow from her hair.

"I dunno *what* he was talking about, but that man from before tried to get me to stay inside the inn. I was too worried about you,

though."

"I'm so sorry. I had no idea any of this was going to happen."

"Course not. It's *his* fault."

Lotta glared at Edgar, who responded with little more than a disgruntled folding of his arms.

"If I may remind you, Lotta, this is *my* castle, and there is nothing stopping me from having you removed."

"Come now, Edgar! If you are going to force Miss Lotta to be on her way, I shall leave with her."

"I was looking forward to enjoying my supper with you. *Without* interruption," the earl muttered. Still, he gave a resigned sigh, knowing that Lydia would not be swayed. "Very well. However, it will be a formal supper. I expect even the filthiest of ladies to respect the dress code." He shot Lotta a meaningful look.

"*Filthy*?! I wouldn't be so filthy if you hadn't splashed mud all over me!"

Ignoring her, Edgar scooped up Lydia's hand and brought his lips to it. He had taken her by surprise, and she had missed her opportunity to shake him off. "You are already perfect without the enhancement of jewelry or expensive clothing, but I should like to think it my personal privilege to adorn you in such finery." He smiled at her warmly. "I shall come for you again later." He left the room without giving her time to respond.

Lydia found herself frozen in place. Edgar hadn't changed in the least. Although a part of her felt relieved, her mind was more jumbled than ever. What on earth was he planning? If his flirtations with her were as shallow as they had always been, she wished he would stop and release her from this confusion.

Watching as the door closed behind Edgar, Lotta tutted. "He never changes, does he?"

"Do you suppose he was serious about the dress code? I didn't bring any gowns with me."

"Me neither."

"Does that mean *he* has brought dresses with him?"

Lydia was used to him going to such lengths, but Lotta looked more exasperated than ever. The fairy doctor could only give her a sympathetic smile in response.

"I'm sure it won't be a problem. You and I likely wear similar sizes."

It wasn't long before Ermine arrived to take them both to the dressing room.

"He brought you with him? What about your Asian brother?" Lotta asked.

Ermine and Raven were half-siblings who shared the same mother. They had been Edgar's loyal servants since before he became an earl.

"Raven is here too, as is Mr. Tompkins, Lord Ashenbert's butler."

Most noblemen used their manor houses as their primary residences, and there was nothing strange about bringing their entire staff over from London. In Edgar's case, it looked like he had only been accompanied by a handful of them, so perhaps he did not intend for his sojourn to last very long.

Lydia watched Ermine as she promptly prepared a selection of dresses for the pair. She truly was beautiful. She could handle a weapon as well as any man and even wore male attire on a daily basis. Despite that, there was something oddly sensual about the woman in a plain black jacket and necktie. She had spent endless faithful years by Edgar's side, and he treasured her as he would a sister. Ever since Lydia had realized that Ermine might have meant something even more to him, she had been in a state of turmoil. To her, it seemed that Edgar had refused to enter into a romantic relationship with Ermine in order to protect her. Moreover, he had gone through countless lovers to distract himself from the hopeless feelings he held for his servant. If Lydia's suppositions were true, she did not want to become merely another name on that list.

"Is that the dress you're gonna pick?" Lotta's question brought her back to her senses.

"I'm sorry? Oh, well. Yes, I suppose."

"I'll have this one, then." Lotta sighed. "Just how many dresses *does* Edgar have made for you?"

"I'm not sure. I've never stopped to count them."

"I bet he loves it. But you're more than a doll, Lydia."

I doubt Edgar sees it that way. She was sure the light-pink dress she had unconsciously picked up wasn't her color, but she considered it silly to put too much thought into the decision, so her mind was made up.

“Care to explain yourself, Edgar?” Sitting at the supper table in a vivid blue dress, Lotta looked rather sullen.

“I beg your pardon? Did you say something?”

“I *said* that this is ridiculous!” she shouted from her end of the needlessly long dining table. It was clearly meant for a dinner party of thirty, perhaps forty, guests.

Lotta was positioned at the opposite end from Edgar, as far away from him as it was possible to be. Immediately next to him was Lydia.

“But Your Royal Highness, you are our guest of honor. Surely we must have you seated appropriately?”

Indeed, Lotta’s grandfather *was* a grand duke, even if his principality had fallen. He had fled, and though she had only recently been confirmed as his granddaughter, Lotta was still a princess. That was despite the fact that she had been raised by pirates. Having said that, it seemed she didn’t yet consider herself royalty, and even found upper-class life with her grandfather somewhat stifling, which was why Lydia suspected she had come to Scotland.

Lotta still saw Edgar as something of a gangster, and it was obvious that his apparent reverence of her position was not sincere. In short, he *was* being ridiculous. Meanwhile, Lydia was left baffled. Even if there were only three of them at this supper, she didn’t know enough about the customs of the upper classes to argue against these apparent formalities.

“Might I recommend the pheasant pie, Lydia?” Edgar’s smile was rich with amusement.

The pie *was* superb. However...

“Perhaps we ought to have eaten in a different room,” she suggested, “seeing as we are a small party.”

“Supper becomes a much more enjoyable affair when I share it with you. If only we could eat together like this every day.” It seemed he was in no mood to listen to her.

Lotta appeared to have given up. She emptied her wine glass in a single gulp, then held it out to Raven to request more. He was acting as their waiter that evening.

Just then, Tompkins entered and whispered something into Edgar’s ear. The earl grinned at Lotta, and it was painfully obvious that he was plotting something. “Your carriage has arrived, Lotta.”

“Huh? What?”

“His Royal Highness was frightfully worried about you, given what happened. I hear you vanished without consulting him, leaving only a poorly penned note to say you were going to visit Lydia.”

“Poorly penned!” Lotta scoffed. “I’ve only just learned to write, y’know!”

“As I am sure you are aware, His Royal Highness is staying in London for your sake, as English is the only language you know how to speak. However, you will soon be due in the Netherlands for an audience with the royal family. The day of your departure is quickly approaching, and His Royal Highness is concerned that you have not yet returned home.”

“Is that true, Miss Lotta? What has happened?” Lydia asked.

Lotta stared at the table in front of her uncomfortably. “It wasn’t my fault. Noblemen are always actin’ like they’re so much better than anyone else. Besides, I don’t wanna go with grandpa, ’cause I’d just embarrass him!”

“But that doesn’t mean you should concern him instead,” Lydia replied.

“Fear not, Lotta. His Royal Highness’s reputation can survive you striking a nobleman or two. I would not have told him where you were had that not been the case.”

Lydia could hardly believe that Lotta had already gotten herself into such trouble. Was that why she had come to stay with the fairy doctor?

“You shouldn’t have told him, Edgar,” the former pirate muttered.

“You shouldn’t have started bothering my fiancée.”

“What, you’re gettin’ jealous of *girls* now too?”

“I did not act out of jealousy. Lydia and I are to be married. She is to become a nobleman’s wife. If you wish to continue associating with her, I ask that you adopt a more ladylike demeanor.”

“Edgar, I should hardly think that matters!” Lydia exclaimed. “Miss Lotta, you do not have to change yourself. You will always be my friend.”

“That’s right!” Lotta agreed. “At least leave her friendships alone!”

“I would be more than happy to. *If* you can promise to stop speaking ill of me to her and filling her head with nonsense.”

Edgar looked at Tompkins, who obediently opened the dining room door. Two large men entered the room. One of them apologized to the earl for the intrusion, while the other restrained Lotta from behind.

“Hey! Let go! I’m not done eating!”

“Forgive me, Your Royal Highness, but you are at risk of missing your train.”

It seemed Lotta wasn’t to be given a choice in the matter. As she struggled, she shot Lydia a regretful look. “Well, Lydia, it was fun. Take care.”

Lydia hurried after her before she was dragged away completely. “Do have a safe journey, won’t you?”

“And don’t forget he’s a wolf! Keep your bedroom door locked at all costs! I dunno what underhanded tricks he might use, but once he’s in your room, he’ll assume you’re all right with anything! Don’t lower your guard!” Lotta shouted as she was taken away.

With that, the door was closed right in Lydia’s face. She had hoped that coming to the Isle of Mannan would mean she could avoid Edgar for a while longer, but clearly, she had miscalculated. This was his island. *His* castle. And now she was here with him all by herself.

“Privacy at last.” Edgar’s voice came from right behind her, and she instinctively jumped away from him. “Honestly. Do not tell me that Lotta has made you less trusting of me than ever.”

My trust of you has always been at rock bottom, she thought.

“If I may, Lydia, I am not one to neglect the order in which things ought to be done. There is nothing for you to worry about.”

If only she could believe that.

“Without further ado, let us continue with dessert. We shall take it in a more relaxed space, I think. This room is a little large for my liking.”

Paying no heed to the dubious look on her face, Edgar took her by the hand. When they reached the drawing room, she was able to find comfort on the sofa by the hearth. However, she resolved to return to her chamber and stay there as soon as she had finished her tart.

“How do you like the castle?” Smiling like he was incapable of

harming a fly, Edgar took a seat beside her. “There still remains much work to do on the interior. I was hoping to ask about your preferences.”

“It is your castle. You ought to decorate it however you wish.”

“It will belong to you too, in time.”

“No, it won’t.”

“It may be an old building, but there is plenty of space, and it boasts a magnificent build quality. The layout, too, is gorgeous. I wonder whether we shouldn’t make it our main residence once we are married.”

Oh, how she wished he would listen to her. At least just *once*.

“Of course, I suspect my true manor house lies in Ibrazel, though I doubt I shall ever be able to visit.”

Although the Blue Knight Earl held territory in Fairyland, as his descendant in name only, Edgar lacked the mysterious powers that would otherwise enable him to associate with fairies. Lydia couldn’t help but sympathize slightly. She knew it rankled him.

“You are still the Earl of Ibrazel, even if you are unable to reach it.”

“You are as kindhearted as ever.”

Lydia had to avert her eyes from his longing gaze. She wondered whether it had been his intention to draw those words from her. She pulled the dessert, left on the table by Raven, toward her. Eating it would make a fine distraction.

“You should have some too. The cream will get too warm if you leave it.” Lydia was eager to rid the air of any hint of romance.

But Edgar merely stared at her, apparently unwilling to let her uproot the seeds he had sown. “Kelpie is unable to come to the island because of the merrows that protect it. That would make it the perfect place to spend our newly married life without that nuisance getting in the way, wouldn’t you agree?”

Despite his tendency to follow Lydia around the United Kingdom, Kelpie had indeed not followed her into the merrows’ territory. A ferocious water horse, his type was both feared and disliked by the majority of fairies. Not only were merrows among kelpies’ greatest enemies, they also possessed powerful magic, so it was no wonder he was keeping his distance. Lydia surmised that Edgar must have learned this information from Nico.

What a traitorous feline!

Kelpie aside, with Lotta gone and Nico missing, Lydia found herself unexpectedly alone with Edgar in his castle. She was in the least favorable position she could think of. All she could do now was endeavor to keep her wits about her.

"We shall experience no such 'married life' for as long as we live!"

"Oh? But you have been wearing your ring ever since you left London." Edgar dropped his gaze to the moonstone.

"Yes, because I cannot remove it by myself. However, you and I are the only humans capable of perceiving it. I asked the coblynau to do that for me, so that nobody, not even father, is aware of it."

Edgar frowned, seeming slightly disappointed. However, he recovered almost at once. "Do you like the tart? You may have my share too, if you like."

"No, thank you. As I said, you ought to eat it sooner rather than later." She wanted to divert his attention by any means possible.

"*This* is my dessert. A sauce of burnt caramel, perfectly sweet. I need only to gaze upon it for my appetite to be satiated."

Then perhaps you would see fit to let go of it.

His fingers played with her russet hair—"caramel," by his definition. Watching him, Lydia lamented that she was struggling to appreciate the taste of her apple tart.

"I suffered without you by my side, Lydia. I had thought that our feelings were finally beginning to mirror each other's, only for you to leave me so suddenly."

Lydia wished he wouldn't allude to what had preceded her departure. Recently, her absence had helped her to reframe her feelings during that shared moment as mere illusion.

"Our feelings are destined never to intertwine. Your smooth tongue might lure me into misapprehensions when we are together but, when alone, I am able to understand that I am not in love. I didn't miss you all that dreadfully, and I was perfectly content to be away from you." Despite her insistence, Lydia wasn't sure she was being completely honest with him. "You yourself must be aware that you would be just as happy in the company of another woman."

"I have thought of no other woman but you since you left. I couldn't." Edgar sighed as Lydia lowered her gaze. "Although I don't suppose you will take me at my word. Very well. Let us cut

this conversation short."

While relieved, Lydia wondered whether Edgar himself would rather neither of them come to any conclusion on the matter. He was happy to treat her as his fiancée because he required her to stay with him as his fairy doctor. However, if he were to face his true feelings, he might find their current relationship unsustainable.

"I suppose it was rather uncouth of me to immediately complicate things upon our reunion."

Perhaps Edgar *had* changed, if only slightly. Her discomfort hadn't used to make him concede like this. In fact, it had seemed to amuse him. Now, however, he appeared to share in her troubled emotions. As soon as she had considered that loving him might not be so bad, she had doubted whether that was what *he* truly wanted. And so, she had distanced herself from him. She had always pushed him away, and she was certain that her newfound openness was making him feel conflicted. That was why he had ended the discussion before it could grow too serious. Realizing this frightened Lydia, and she found herself even more reluctant to lower her guard.

"Now that I think of it, you haven't told me why you came here. Would you share that with me?" Edgar asked.

"Oh! Yes, of course..." She quickly worked to gather her thoughts. It was difficult when he was staring at her at such close proximity, as though he already knew exactly what she was thinking. "I decided that there is more I need to know about the Blue Knight Earl."

"You were thinking of me, even whilst you were—"

"No, this is strictly for professional purposes."

"To think that you would not even allow me to finish my sentence before spurning me."

"Something rather curious was brought to my attention."

"Oh yes?"

"As far as we know, the Blue Knight Earl before you lived on these shores three hundred years ago. However, I have heard from the fairies that they witnessed an ancestor as recently as a hundred years ago. I thought that might have been when the Prince and the Blue Knight Earl first crossed paths."

"I see. A hundred years ago would more or less correspond to

Prince Charles Edward's rebellion."

Grandson to the exiled James II, Charles Edward (also known as Bonnie Prince Charlie) had invoked a rebellion in order to assert his claim to the throne. It had ended in failure, putting an end to the prestigious House of Stuart. However, the "Prince," who had kidnapped Edgar as a child, apparently still carried Stuart blood and had his sights covertly set on the British throne. The Prince abhorred the very existence of the Blue Knight Earl and had killed every person carrying the earl's blood, save for his own attendant, Ulysses. The source of this hostility, however, remained a mystery.

In any case, Edgar, the current holder of the title, was now being targeted. Although he didn't possess the abilities the Prince may have feared, there was a need to protect himself, his title, and the reputation that came with it. That was why Lydia wanted to do what she could as his fairy doctor. Even if things grew awkward between them, she intended to hold fast to her principles.

"I believe we need to learn more about the earldom," she went on. "It will help us to understand Ulysses better too."

"Yes, he does seem to hold much more information than we do. We cannot afford to lag behind, lest victory slip from our grasp."

Edgar's expression always grew that much more severe when he was discussing his most hated adversary. Invoking his desire for revenge added a sharpness to his fine features that was breathtakingly beautiful. It made him seem an entirely different person to the man who whispered sweet nonsense in Lydia's ear, but she knew it stemmed from the agonizing burden he carried. It was enough to make her heart ache and her eyes fix themselves on him. No doubt he was unaware that this side of him was able to draw her in much more successfully than the one that flirted with her constantly.

"Anyway," she stammered. "I believe the merrows are likely to hold more knowledge about the earldom than anyone else. I shall attempt to speak with them tomorrow."

Edgar's expression softened at once, and he peered at her as though concerned. "May I accompany you for that?"

"Yes, that might be for the best." As she spoke, she made to pull away from him slightly. "Thank you for supper. I think I ought to—"

Edgar took her hand before she could finish. She froze, heart pounding, while he stared at her in silence.

“What is it?” she eventually managed.

“You aren’t planning to steal away in the middle of the night, are you?”

When Lydia had left for Scotland, she had done so just before dawn without a word to him. It sounded like he hadn’t forgotten. “I cannot speak with the merrows if I do that.”

“Please do not leave without telling me again. If I treat you without due sensitivity, I would rather you lose your temper with me than run away.”

“You misunderstand me. It wasn’t your fault that I left. I felt there was…something not quite right with me. While I know it is true that you require me to be your fairy doctor, I felt as though I was growing conceited, and so I thought it wise to go away from you and regain an objective view of my position. Still, I felt guilty about leaving without saying anything, and so I came here to investigate the earldom.”

Edgar kept his grip on Lydia’s hand like he wasn’t entirely satisfied with her explanation.

“I…promise to ask for formal permission for any leaves of absence in the future.”

He let out a particularly labored sigh. “Will you permit me a goodnight kiss?”

“I’m sorry?” The moment she raised her head, he planted a kiss on her cheek.

“Sweet dreams, my fairy.”

“Good night…” Lowering her gaze so that he wouldn’t see the redness of her cheeks, Lydia hurried from the room.

Edgar rested his chin on his hand and looked at Raven when his servant came in to clear the dessert plates. “I have the sense that her guard is higher than ever.”

The dark-skinned boy cocked his head. His master’s statement made no sense to him out of context.

“I would rather it *was* my fault. Lydia said she felt that something ‘wasn’t quite right’ with her. Was *that* why she seemed close to reciprocating my feelings at last? If her loving me requires her to be ‘not quite right,’ then what hope is there for me?”

Raven had paused in his work to give the matter due consideration. However, it seemed that problems of a romantic

nature were still a touch too difficult for him.

"If her feelings toward me *were* growing more favorable, then our time apart ought to have intensified them. That would be natural, wouldn't it? I certainly never neglected to send her letters, but it wasn't as though I arrived unannounced in Scotland to see her. I thought that she would eventually realize she was missing me. However, it instead appears she has decided to give up on me altogether. Why do you suppose that is?"

Lydia truly was immune to such tactics. Edgar's withdrawal seemed to have convinced her that his feelings weren't genuine after all.

"My lord, you have defied my expectations," Raven said.

"What do you mean by that?"

"As you have explained to me before, once one has lost all hope of a relationship with a particular woman, it is time to move on to another, your justification being that there are plenty of women out there. I had thought your lordship was following this philosophy by refraining from traveling to Scotland."

"I haven't lost *all* hope when it comes to Lydia. She accepted my supper invitation and even allowed me a goodnight kiss." Edgar decided not to dwell on the fact that he had tempted her with a delicious tart, or that he had kissed her before she was able to give a response. "Besides, Raven, while there may be plenty of women, there is only one Lydia."

This earned a most sincere nod from his servant. Meanwhile, Edgar began to mull over his own words. He wondered whether it had gotten to the point that he couldn't imagine being with anyone *but* her. He certainly liked Lydia and desired both her company and her love. So genuine were his feelings that he was prepared to stop fooling around with other women as long as she was with him. It almost baffled him, the way he felt increasingly attracted to her the more he got to know her. But did that mean she was the *only* one for him? If things really didn't work out between them, he was sure he would find another woman to fall in love with. As logical as it was, though, that was an eventuality he was hesitant to consider.

"It is too soon to move on from her," he stated. "I still have countless tricks up my sleeve."

"If I may, my lord, I ask that you begin with the fastest and most

effective means."

"Why the hurry, Raven?"

"I fear we have little time left."

Ulysses was already making his next move. It seemed he had been paving the way for the Prince to come to Britain, and if that was the case, the decisive battle may soon be upon them. If Edgar didn't want Lydia involved, he needed to gather the resolve to let her go.

Having said that, Ulysses already knew about her. Sending her away now might well be pointless, and Edgar couldn't bear to lose her completely. If that was the case, he needed to find the resolve to involve her if need be, and to protect her with everything he had.

"Can I ask for your assistance, Raven?"

"Of course, my lord."

The earl beckoned to the boy, who approached with a most serious expression on his face. "Tompkins has the spare key to Lydia's chamber. If you would take it from him without him knowing… Ah, that was in jest, Raven!" Edgar called out as soon as Raven turned, realizing the boy was taking him seriously. As tempting as it was to let his servant act on that misunderstanding, he was not *that* bereft of common sense.

Raven turned around, an apologetic look on his face. "My lord, I have neglected to mention that Ermine is in charge of Miss Carlton's room. I am not confident that I could steal the key from my sister."

The news was something of a relief to Edgar. "There are no fast or effective means when it comes to love, Raven, which is why I must ask for your patience. You need not concern yourself with this any longer, for I shall come to a final decision."



The earl had always fought knowing that death was a real possibility, as had his companions. Fighting against their most hated captor had been the proof of their freedom and their reason for living. However, should he get Lydia involved, death would cease to be an option. He would need to place a much higher value on his own life. He still wasn't sure whether he was capable of fighting for the future rather than revenge, which was why he had pushed Lydia away just as she had been on the cusp of falling for him. He had wasted a golden opportunity, and, quietly hurt, she had returned to her hometown under the pretext of a leave of absence.

Whether he would be able to draw her heart back to him remained to be seen. All he knew was that when he had touched her shoulder after so long that evening, it had felt more tense than he had ever known it to be.

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"If you were awake, Lydia, the least you could have done was open the door for me. Why didn't you say anything?"

Nico finally showed himself the next morning. He came in through the window and stood in front of Lydia looking most dissatisfied as he used his tail to brush the snow from his pelt. The light snowfall had continued into the morning. More of it had settled since yesterday, and the plots of the large, stately garden looked like pure-white building blocks.

"It's a bit of a hassle to open," Lydia said, brushing her hair. She had only just finished getting dressed.

"What's all this?" Standing on his hind legs, Nico frowned up at the chairs and tables stacked in front of the door.

"I wouldn't ask, if I were you."

It was a precaution against Edgar sneaking into her bedroom. Not that she thought he would want to come in *that* badly. However, it had preyed on her mind, and even the slightest sound had been preventing her from falling asleep. Now that morning had come, it seemed terribly absurd. Edgar hadn't tried anything after all, and now she felt embarrassed about overreacting. She reached for a chair to put everything back in its place before Ermine or Tompkins came to see her.

“Would you like some help?”

“Yes, pl—”

Wait a moment. Who could that be?

Lydia turned around slowly, only to see that Edgar had been the one to hoist up the chair she’d been reaching for.

“How did you get in here?!” she demanded, stammering more than ever before.

“I came in through the servants’ door. Ermine told me earlier this morning that I would have no luck with *this* one.”

As a commoner, Lydia had completely forgotten that nobles’ houses tended to have hallways and doors exclusively for servants’ use. It would also explain the fresh water prepared for her in her dressing room washbasin this morning, which would have been thanks to Ermine.

“Were you perhaps hoping I would pay you a visit during the night?” Edgar asked.

“*Hoping?* Perish the thought. This was to *prevent* you from coming.”

“If you were waiting for me, then I suppose I ought to have visited as a matter of courtesy.”

Lydia could imagine nothing *less* courteous. Besides… “I wasn’t *waiting* for you!”

“Making it difficult for a man to enter your room while very much wanting him to seems to me like a tantalizing lovers’ game. More specifically, one played by a couple wishing to be covert.”

She dearly wished he would refrain from interpreting everything in the most indecent way possible.

“You’ve got a visitor, Lydia,” Nico said, tugging on the hem of her skirt. He turned to Edgar. “He asked me if it was all right to connect the castle to the sea to allow them easier access.”

“The sea? I’m afraid I don’t quite understand, but I don’t mind as long as he can put everything back to normal afterward.”

The moment the earl agreed, the scenery outside the window transformed. The light suddenly dimmed as though the sun had been covered by clouds, and everything took on a bluish hue. There was swaying seagrass and fish swimming past. It was like the castle and everything in it had sunk to the bottom of the ocean.

Lydia recognized it as merrow magic. Motivated by curiosity,

Edgar went to open the window. Though panic flashed through the fairy doctor, it appeared that it wouldn't open anyway.

"What is all of this?" he asked.

"I suppose, as Nico said, the castle has been linked to the sea."

"Meaning that what we see before us really is the ocean floor? Then what about that tree over there? Is that not one of the cypress trees from the garden?"

"It must be the tether. It is more difficult to return things to normal without using an image of something from the real world."

A man appeared in the room, tipping his red hat. "Very sorry to bother you." He had a large mouth, and there was a sizable gap between his eyes. Clearly he was making himself appear more human, but his short, stout stature and his scaly, webbed hands gave him away as a merrow. From what Lydia could tell, he was the merrow chief she had negotiated with all that time ago, although he had been in his natural form at the time.

"You wanted to speak with the merrows, didn't you? I called him here for you." Nico stood next to the aquatic fairy and puffed out his chest proudly. "So there's no need to be angry with me anymore, Lydia." Apparently, he wanted her to forget that he had leaked information to Edgar. His whiskers twitched when she shot him a meaningful glare, but he kept his boastful stance.

"I have come to see the earl's fairy doctor. I heard you wished to meet with us," the merrow said.

"I thought you were Tompkins for a moment," Edgar murmured.

"Did you need something, my lord?" The butler joined them. Having the entire group standing in front of the barricaded door made for an even more absurd picture.

"Ah, Tompkins. We have a guest. Would you see him to the reception room?"

With a nod, the butler swiftly dismantled the pile of chairs and opened the door for the merrow. They really did look alike, from their physiques to their facial features.

"Why, Tom, I didn't realize you were still alive," the merrow noted.

"I suspect you may be thinking of an ancestor of mine, sir."

"You look just like him, although I suppose by now you must be far more human than he was."

“Perhaps it is a case of atavism.” Although Tompkins’s line carried merrow blood, this was probably the first time he was meeting one of the fairies himself. Though he seemed slightly perturbed, he was doing a fine job of maintaining his composure.

“Forgive me for not coming to see you earlier,” the merrow said, turning to Edgar. “Everyone has been most content since you reclaimed the island. There has been no discord between the islanders and us to speak of.”

“I would like to express my gratitude as well,” Edgar replied. “If not for your granting me the sword, I would have been unable to do a thing to help you.” They had come to the reception room, and he offered the merrow a seat.

“I see, too, that you are engaged to be wed. My sincerest congratulations. I can see that accepting you has ensured our security for generations to come.”

Lydia hurried to hide her ring with her other hand, even though it was meaningless at this point. The coblynau had made it so that *humans* couldn’t see it, but the spell had no effect on fairies.

“I see you are also eager to see us blessed with an heir.” Edgar was quick to have his fun.

“Naturally.”

“Excuse me, but may I speak on the issue at hand?” Lydia asked quickly, hoping to change the subject. “I have heard from another fairy that a previous Blue Knight Earl was witnessed a hundred years ago. I was wondering whether you might know why, if that is true, the earl did not come to retrieve your sword.”

“A hundred years ago, you say? Ah, then it was true after all…”

“You know about it?”

“Ever since the Blue Knight Earl first disappeared three hundred years ago, countless attempts have been made to steal the sword. Only one before you was able to reach us and speak with us face-to-face. Of course, unable to fulfill our contract, that human lost his life. He demanded we hand over the sword because, as he described it, the last human to carry the Blue Knight Earl’s blood died a hundred years ago.”

“When was it that this man appeared before you?” Edgar asked.

“Very recently. I believe it was just a few years before you came.”

“Was his name Ulysses by any chance?” Edgar asked.

Surprised, Lydia looked up at him.

"Yes, that's right. He was a middle-aged man."

"Then he wasn't the Ulysses *we* know," said Lydia.

"But likely a relation. So, this is where he died," Edgar murmured. He looked back at the merrow. "I don't suppose he claimed to carry the Blue Knight Earl's blood illegitimately?"

"His claim was meaningless, as he could not prove it."

"In other words, he was unable to solve the final riddle that would have secured him the sword."

The merrow nodded.

The Blue Knight Earl's legitimate bloodline had ended, and even those who carried his blood illegitimately had all been killed. Clearly, Ulysses's family had thought that would be enough to earn them the right to the sword. That assumption had led to the death of the man who'd come to retrieve it. If the Prince had given up on the sword then, it mustn't have even crossed his mind that Edgar, who carried no such blood, would ever get his hands on it.

"It sounds as though this Blue Knight Earl a hundred years ago had some sort of tie to the Prince," Edgar said.

"In any case, the earl you speak of never visited the Isle of Mannan," the merrow explained, "which is strange considering that every generation before did so. I'm afraid that is all we can tell you."

"Is there any way to find out more about the earldom itself?" Lydia asked. "We know nothing about this earl of a hundred years ago either, and we would also like to learn more about Ibrazel and the sword."

"While I would normally urge you to ask the earl himself, I understand that would make for a dissatisfactory answer in this case. If the legitimate bloodline ended when this Ulysses said it did, then I'm afraid the banshee would be your only source of information."

"The banshee?" Edgar looked to Lydia for an explanation.

"Fairies attached to distinguished families. Some say they are the souls of family members who died at a young age, but in general they are said to watch over the family and shed tears when they receive foresight that one of its members is close to death."

"Where do they live?"

“Usually at the family’s estate.”

“The banshee we need would live in Ibrazel, then. That’s unfortunate.”

“She was known to come to this castle sometimes when the earl stayed here,” the merrow said.

“Oh, yes, I do remember that the earl who appeared a hundred years ago was apparently accompanied by a banshee.”

“I suppose we shall simply have to pray that she is presently in the human world. How ought we to search for her?” Edgar asked.

“They tend to take on the form of a young girl with long hair, green clothing, and eyes swollen from crying.”

A thoughtful expression crossed the earl’s face. “Do their tears transform into amber, perchance?”

“My, I hadn’t expected you to know that.”

It was then that Tompkins returned. “My lord, Mr. Firman is here to see you.”

“Forgive me, my lord.” The painter had rushed in after the butler, seemingly too impatient to even wait to be shown inside. “This is simply too urgent. The young lady… She just won’t stop crying.”

Edgar stood up to welcome his friend. “Firman! Your timing couldn’t be more impeccable. I hope you’ll forgive me for asking you to stay in London.”

“Oh, but, surely…surely I am in the way…”

“I was just on the verge of writing to you and asking you to come as a matter of urgency. But, as to be expected of my bosom friend, you came to my aid without needing to be summoned.”

Though most people would be irritated by Edgar’s theatrics, Paul was too good-natured for that and instead gave a relieved smile. He was the earl’s devotee and never seemed too put out to be caught up in one of Edgar’s self-righteous whims.

“That is good to hear. I am at the end of my tether, you see, and I felt I could not go a second longer without seeking advice from Miss Carlton.” Paul ushered a girl into the room. She wore a hooded cloak that covered her from head to toe. As she raised her head, she rubbed at her red eyes.

“Ah, that’s her. That’s the Blue Knight Earl’s banshee.”

Lydia gasped. “I beg your pardon?”

The merrow peered at the girl’s face. “I recall her accompanying

him in the past."

"You do?" The fairy doctor turned to the newcomer. "Excuse me, but might you be the Ashenberts' banshee?"

"Miss Carlton, this young lady seems to have lost her memories."

Lydia had no clue what was happening, least of all why Paul was accompanied by a banshee. "Does that mean she wouldn't know anything about Lord Ashenbert and his house?"

"It would seem not. Ah, but there is one thing she remembers. I believe it is the name of her mistress."

"Lady Gladys…" the banshee murmured. Tears fell from her eyes and turned into amber.

"We merrows have not heard of an earl by that name."

"Then perhaps it belongs to the Blue Knight Earl who appeared a hundred years ago," Edgar said.

"So, not an earl, but a countess?" asked Lydia.

"I see," the merrow muttered. "If the earl's only successors were female, then it is no wonder that his line was already considered to have ended before her lifetime."

Edgar quickly caught on. "The Ashenbert earldom—that is, the British part of it—is handed down through male heirs only. Retrieving the sword and requesting an audience with the king would have been a meaningless endeavor for the countess."

"As far as we fairies are concerned, the Blue Knight Earl is the Blue Knight Earl, regardless of sex. It is you humans who insist on complicating matters."

"But then I have to wonder what reason Lady Gladys had for coming to Britain," Lydia said. She turned to the banshee. "Is her name all you remember about her? For example, you cannot remember what happened to her or when?"

The banshee shook her head. "I have been wandering the human realm for so long. Time, along with everything else, has frozen for me."

"I would venture a guess that her memories have been sealed away," the merrow said, "most likely by Gladys herself."

"For what purpose?" Edgar asked.

"Gladys has more than likely perished, else her banshee would not be wandering around alone without her memories. I wonder whether the countess, having had no successors of her own,

entrusted this banshee with something of vital significance to the earldom before sealing it away along with those memories. In fact, I can think of no other explanation."

Hearing that her mistress was probably dead, the banshee started to stumble. She grasped the hand Paul offered her for balance.

"Have you any idea what this significant something may be?" Edgar asked the merrow.

"There is no way of finding out beyond breaking the seal."

"I should be able to remember upon meeting my mistress," said the banshee, "but if her ladyship is gone, then I suppose I am destined never to remember..."

"That shouldn't be the case," Lydia assured her. "After all, Edgar is your master now. He is the current Blue Knight Earl."

The banshee seemed confident that meeting her master or mistress would unlock her memories, suggesting that she had been told this by Gladys herself. Gladys had known that the Blue Knight Earl's bloodline was about to end, and yet she hadn't discounted the possibility that a new holder of the title would eventually appear.

"I see. Perhaps then, young lady, you might remember something if you were to embrace me," Edgar said, stretching out his arms.

"She said 'meeting,' not 'embracing'!" Lydia snapped, stepping in front of the banshee and glaring at him. She turned back to the fairy. "You may already know how to unseal your memories. Perhaps meeting your master is the key to recalling the method. Set your sights on him, accept him as the Blue Knight Earl, and try to remember."

The banshee raised her anxious gaze toward Edgar, but it wasn't long before she gave a small shake of her head. "I cannot accept this man as my master. I do not feel the same power from him that Lady Gladys possessed."

Edgar gave a small sigh. "I suppose I have a long road ahead of me before I become the true earl."

The Premonition

After a spell of bawling her eyes out, the banshee eventually fell asleep on the sofa. The merrow had returned to the sea, restoring the view through the window to its wintry state. Edgar gazed out over it in gloomy silence, propping his chin up on his hand. Perhaps being rejected as the banshee's master had proved a real shock to him. Lydia's mild concern kept her in the reception room.

"I would suggest the banshee be allowed to rest in a separate room," Paul said, and Edgar nodded. "Miss Carlton, all she has done is cry and fall asleep repeatedly. You don't suppose she is ill, do you?"

"No, I don't think there is anything wrong."

"It is difficult to believe she is a fairy. She looks like an ordinary human girl to me."

"That might be because banshees were human beings at one point. And this one has lost her memories associated with being a banshee, so perhaps she is all the more human as a result."

A small smile appeared on Paul's face. "And yet she is as light as a feather."

As Lydia watched him carry the fairy away to another room, she thought about whether there was anything she could do. Ideally, the banshee would accept Edgar as the Blue Knight Earl and regain her memories. It was the lack of power she felt from him that was preventing her from doing that. Lydia worked as his fairy doctor in order to make up for his shortcomings in that regard. However, thinking of Ulysses, their adversary who *did* carry the Blue Knight Earl's blood, never failed to dampen her spirits. She struggled to see how she could be of any use in the fight against him.

The reception room floor was littered with the banshee's amber tears. Edgar and Paul were both able to perceive the fairy, whose history meant she was probably used to maintaining a form visible to the human eye. The only proof that she wasn't human herself was these beads of amber. Lydia picked one up, her chest stirring anxiously.

“What would you like me to do with these, my lord?” Raven asked. He was gathering up the beads himself.

“I wonder whether there are enough to make a necklace,” Edgar said, partly in jest.

“You mustn’t.” Lydia hesitated. “These are tears of sadness. Nothing good can come of keeping them.”

“Incidentally, Lydia, didn’t you say that banshees cry when they foresee the death of someone in their family?”

“Yes, but that isn’t the only reason for their tears. It doesn’t seem to be why this one is crying, at least. Oh, I know! Try burning the amber. If it burns, that means it hasn’t been imbued with fairy magic.”

Edgar nodded, and Raven tossed the beads he had collected into the fireplace. They quickly caught alight and burned. Relief washed over Lydia. Clearly, she had been worrying too much. Her lack of knowledge about everything had unsettled her heart. That was probably the main cause of her anxiety.

“Edgar, I promise to unseal the banshee’s memories. You only need to worry about protecting everyone, including yourself, from Ulysses and the Prince.”

He studied her, his gaze unusually earnest. “The only way I shall be able to move forward as the Blue Knight Earl is if I possess the worth to do so. I cannot profess to hold such worth if I do not remove the seal on the banshee’s memories myself.”

Lydia wondered whether he meant to say that he didn’t need her. “*You* employed me for this. You. Does my being here and helping not make up a part of your worth?”

“If that is what you want, then are you prepared to link your fate to mine? If I am unable to deal with fairies without your help, then are you prepared to follow me for the rest of my life?”

“I am willing to keep working for you as an employee of your estate, as I have been up till now.”

“That isn’t enough.”

“Why not? Does my assistance only mean anything if we are married? What utter rubbish!”

“I cannot burden you with such things if you are merely my employee. If my future is not tied to your happiness, then what am I doing but using you?” With that, Edgar left the room.

As far as Lydia was concerned, he had paid no heed to what she

was trying to say. She had told him time and time again that she did not want to marry him, and now he seemed to be saying their marriage would mean that he *wasn't* using her.

"It's too late to act like you have a heart now! You have done nothing *but* use me since the moment we met!"

Though Raven was looking at her like he wanted to say something, she was too irritated to stay in the reception room any longer.

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Once he had laid the banshee down, Paul made to slip out of the room, only for a feeble voice to call him back. He turned to see the fairy sitting up and grabbing on to his jacket.

"It's all right. You can rest a while longer. It was a tiring journey, wasn't it? Especially since we traveled by train."

Lydia had mentioned before that fairies hated iron, so he had asked the banshee whether she minded coming by train. She hadn't voiced any objections. It seemed to be a matter of comfort rather than anything that risked real harm.

"I'm so sorry for losing my composure. But it has nothing to do with the journey and, as I am a fairy, I do not tire."

Paul sat down in a nearby chair, sensing that the banshee was simply afraid of being alone. "There is a fairy doctor close at hand. I am confident she will be able to help you."

The fairy nodded, though she still looked anxious.

"And Lord Ashenbert is a most trustworthy man."

The banshee hesitated before asking, "Is that man truly related to Lady Gladys?"

Paul knew that Edgar didn't carry Ashenbert blood. In truth, he was the son of the Duke of Sylvanford, a prestigious nobleman with royal ancestry. If not for the Prince's plot, the earl would surely have inherited the dukedom and presently been a source of strength for Britain and her people. However, his high noble blood made no difference to the fact that he had no genetic connection to the Ashenberts and therefore no fae-related powers.

"The human world has recently gone through vast swathes of change. It wasn't too long ago that traveling the entire length and breadth of our island nation by train was impossible. The larger

towns are filled with factories, and more people than ever are wont to believe only in what they perceive in front of them."

"The number of humans who can see fairies has dropped too, hasn't it? I was crouched by the roadside for several days but, contrary to my expectations, the majority of passersby didn't even notice me. Oh, how relieved I was when you called out to me. You have a strangely pleasant scent about you too."

"I suppose you mean the scent of oil and varnish. Most women seem repulsed by it…"

"That can't be right!" The banshee passionately shook her head. "It's a lovely scent!"

Paul ran a hand through his unkempt hair. He hadn't meant to make a girl so much younger feel sorry for him. "Um, thank you. Anyway, what I meant to say was that the powers possessed by the Blue Knight Earl's descendants have been gradually weakening. His lordship is well aware of his own shortcomings, and yet he has pledged to rule his territories regardless. With the aid of his fairy doctor, he is taking great pains to ensure that the fairies inhabiting his land can live peacefully. That is the sort of man he is."

Paul had decided that it was for the best that the banshee believed Edgar was the true Blue Knight Earl through and through.

"You trust him a great deal, don't you, Mr. Paul?"

He did. He was aware that he might have been glorifying the earl to some extent, but he did like Edgar's broad-mindedness and fearlessness, of which his frivolity was a part.

"Yes. In fact, I owe him a great deal."

For the first time, the banshee showed a slight smile. When she did so, she looked all the more like an ordinary girl. Paul even thought she seemed rather sweet.

"Say, if you find yourself with nothing better to do, I wonder whether I might draw your portrait. Fairies are the main focus of my art."

"Of course you may!" She nodded enthusiastically, and Paul excused himself to go and get his sketchbook.

The banshee had vanished but a few minutes later. In searching for her, Paul went as far as looking beneath the table. Only when his eyes happened upon the window did he catch sight of the girl

in a green cloak, barely distinguishable from her surroundings. Snowflakes flitted around her long, fluttering hair, and she was hurrying barefoot along the road toward the gate. It wasn't long until the shrubbery hid her from view completely.

Paul decided he would pursue her. As a fairy, she might have been immune to the cold, but that didn't stop him from worrying. The problem was the sheer size of the castle grounds. The carefully maintained gardens slowly transformed into natural forest, and there were several footpaths to choose from. However, there was no sign that anyone had walked them recently, while the main path was marked with the tracks of several carriage wheels. Paul could only surmise that fairies didn't leave footprints in the snow.

Where could she have gone? She might have taken one of the paths that left the grounds completely.

He came to a stop. There was no sign of her, and he had no idea what to do next.

"Hello. What brings you out here?" someone asked from below his waist. Looking down, he saw Lydia's cat. As he recalled, its name was Nico. He had seen and grown used to Lydia speaking to it, but it was a curious sensation for a cat to address him directly.

"Have you seen the banshee by any chance?" Paul asked. It wasn't as though he had anything to lose.

Nico had gone to see the stout visitor from earlier—who was, apparently, a merrow—off, and it seemed he had just returned from the errand. He was standing on two legs and carrying a fish as tall as himself in his forelegs. It must have been a gift from the merrow.

"Yes, she just ran past me through the gate."

"Thank you." Paul made to dash off.

"Wait a moment. You can't see fairy footprints, can you?"

"You mean to say they *do* leave footprints?"

"Cripes. Here, follow me," Nico said, handing his fish over to an invisible companion. "Take this to the kitchen, would you? And make it very clear that it belongs to *me*."

To Paul's eyes, it looked like the fish was swimming away through the air, but he knew there must have been another fairy with Nico.

"Come, Paul."

The painter followed him as instructed.

“Don’t feel obligated just because I am helping you, but I actually have a favor to ask,” Nico said, running a paw through his whiskers. “I was wondering whether you might take my portrait? A proper gentleman has a portrait or two of himself lying around, doesn’t he?”

“I would be delighted,” Paul replied, and the cat narrowed his eyes contentedly.

Nico was surprisingly nimble on his hind legs. The painter had to rush to keep up, noting that his companion left no pawprints either. He seemed to be following the banshee’s footprints with ease, but there was still no sign of the girl. After around an hour of walking, the village by the harbor came into view, which was when Nico stopped.

“Her footprints are gone,” he said.

“Really? I wonder why.”

“She might have gotten into a vehicle. A carriage or a handcart, for example.”

“I shall search the village for now.”

The settlement was so small that one came to the water almost immediately after reaching the row of houses. There was barely anyone on the street, but Paul could see plenty of activity at the harbor itself. That was where he spotted a green-cloaked figure about to board a boat at its very end.

“There she is!” He rushed to the wharf. “Stop right there! Where are you going?!”

The banshee turned around. There was somebody with her, urging her onto the vessel. She was a middle-aged woman and, at first glance, the pair looked like mother and daughter.

“Excuse me, madame, but might I ask who you are? That girl came here with me.”

The moment he caught up with them, Paul reached for the banshee. Before he knew it, the woman had a pistol pressed against his chest. He froze. She had her hand on the pale, trembling banshee’s shoulder and sneered at the fairy.

“Didn’t I warn you that you mustn’t be seen?”

“What do you know about this girl?” Paul asked, nerves coursing through him.

“You mean, do I know that she’s a banshee?” She let out a

laugh. “I know, too, that you are one Mr. Paul Firman. Very well. If you are worried about her, you may accompany us.”

Paul hesitated, but he knew he didn’t really have a choice. Besides, he couldn’t leave the banshee by herself, especially when she was gazing at him so anxiously. He boarded the boat with the pair.

Once on board, he covertly scanned their surroundings for Nico, but the cat was nowhere to be seen. Regardless, he calmed himself with the thought that Lydia’s companion had to be watching from somewhere, which meant that Edgar would eventually hear of it.

Paul had no idea who this woman was. Given that she knew *him*, he guessed that she might be one of Ulysses’s subordinates. It didn’t matter. He was the only one currently capable of protecting the Ashenbert banshee.

***

“You wanted to see me, my lord?” When Ermine entered the study, her posture was as perfect as ever, and she regarded her master with an even eye.

“Where have you been? Tompkins said he searched the castle for you, but he could not find you anywhere.”

“Forgive me, my lord.” Her face fell. “I went to look out over the ocean.”

Edgar understood at once. Mannan’s waters were where Ermine had lost her life. She had thrown herself into them after admitting to betraying him. Though she had returned to him, she had undergone a significant change. She had been reborn as a selkie, and though Edgar didn’t know exactly how she felt about her transformation, he could well understand how returning to the place of her death would cause her great grief.

“It’s all right. I was concerned, that’s all.”

She lowered her head shamefully.

“Perhaps it was inconsiderate to have you accompany me here, Ermine. I had thought about asking you to stay in London, but then I grew hesitant to broach the topic altogether.”

“My lord, it is good that I have come. It has once more strengthened my resolve to follow you, the master who has

forgiven me absolutely everything."

Edgar could sense no deceit or hesitation in those words. However, something else sprang to mind. It was a concern raised by Slade after Paul's London boarding house had been ransacked. He had spoken with Edgar on the train platform just before the earl left for the Isle of Mannan, and pointed out that there were very few people who knew about Paul's lineage. Therefore, it was unlikely that this information had leaked to the enemy.

"Are you certain that your trust is placed in the right people, my lord?"

There had been some irony to Slade's tone when he suggested there might have been an informant among Edgar's close allies, but the earl took his words into consideration nevertheless.

Only Edgar, Lydia, and Raven knew that Paul was O'Neill's son. Ermine might have known that Edgar and Paul had first met at the Duke of Sylvanford's estate, but that should have been the extent of her knowledge.

That Lydia or Raven would betray him was out of the question. It had been Ulysses, however, who had given Ermine new life as a selkie. If their adversary had learned that Paul used to visit the Sylvanford estate, then it was very possible he had worked out the link with O'Neill himself. However, that would require Ermine and Ulysses to still have contact. Edgar wanted to believe that this wasn't the case.

When he approached Ermine, he could see the snowflakes that remained in her hair. He used his hand to brush them free, and when he touched her cheek, a frown flickered across her face.

"Your skin is rather cold."

No doubt she had noticed the subtle change in his usual behavior. When he spoke to or touched her, he always tried to do so in a familial or friendly manner. He had meant this touch to be casual too, but if she hadn't taken it that way, perhaps she was starting to doubt his intentions. Or perhaps he was treating her like he would any other woman.

"I was outside for a long time. Since becoming a fairy, I no longer feel the cold, but in return, my body takes much longer to warm up."

"I see. As long as you yourself are not feeling a chill. Incidentally, Firman is here. He brought with him the Ashenbert

banshee.” Though he swiftly changed the subject, Edgar did not remove his hand from her face.

“Yes, my lord. Mr. Tompkins told me.” Ermine was looking at him nervously.

“Have you met the banshee?”

“Not yet, my lord.”

Edgar brushed the snow from her shoulders thoughtfully, then lowered his hand. “It seems that she remembers nothing. She cries near constantly, so please do try and keep her company when you have the time. She might find more solace in your company than she would a human’s.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“That’s all I wanted to talk to you about.” Turning his back to her, Edgar went to stand by the window. He felt Ermine’s perplexed gaze on him for a few more seconds before she left the room, her steps as brisk as ever. He only turned back around after he heard the door close. Leaning against the window sill, he opened up his fist, revealing the honey-toned bead of amber within. He had found it stuck on Ermine’s shoulder. It looked like hardened candy, with a few fibers from her suit still caught on it, almost as though they had been woven into it.

Ermine must have met the banshee, but it was difficult to imagine a scenario in which the girl’s tears had fallen onto her shoulder. Nor could he come up with a reason for why Ermine would want to keep their meeting a secret. He shuddered to think what it might mean, but there was something else he wanted to confirm. Something that might spell just as much trouble.

Edgar placed the amber upon a silver teaspoon and brought it to his oil lamp, which was currently without its glass chimney. The amber did not burn. A pale light enveloped it, like it was repelling the flames, but it maintained its form.

Banshee tears warned of the death of a member of their families. At present, Edgar was the only person living who could be considered an Ashenbert. He wondered whether this tear was predicting his death. Even supposing that was the case, a resigned sigh was his sole response. After antagonizing the Prince, he had been prepared to die at any time. If it was destined to happen soon, then it likely meant he would lose the fight. Though the idea frustrated him, he remained unburdened by the human desire to

avoid death at all costs. In fact, he felt he would rather die than go through the pain of being betrayed a second time by someone he trusted so deeply.

There came a knock at the door.

"Yes?" Edgar called, concealing the amber in his pocket.

"Edgar? Do you have a moment?"

Lydia's voice loosened the tension in his muscles. She was the only one capable of reminding him of his humanity. She temporarily pulled him away from thoughts of enemies, suspicions, and death's constant shadow, and showed him that there was such a thing as peace in his life.

The fairy doctor pushed the door open tentatively. Thinking he would lend a hand, Edgar pulled it open from his side, leading to her staggering into the room. He lamented the fact that he hadn't pulled on it with more force and had thus missed the opportunity to catch her in his arms.

"Ah, Lydia, I was just missing you. Perhaps our hearts were aligned."

"I didn't come because I *missed* you."

She was frightfully endearing, even when she replied in a huff. She lingered by the door rather than come in any farther, and Edgar was taken with the urge to tug her deeper into the room.

"There is something I wanted to ask...assuming you are listening?" she continued.

"I am most assuredly listening."

"Why have you taken my hand?"

"I wanted to." His heart only stirred all the more when Lydia glared at him, her cheeks flushed. "Why not have a seat?"

"We can talk here."

She really did seem less relaxed around him than before. So Edgar tried to change his perspective. If Lydia was more anxious to be alone with him, then perhaps it was because she felt less confident in outright rejecting him as she used to. He didn't mind if he was being overly optimistic; he simply wanted her by his side. Though he liked to pretend that he was against using her, he didn't want to let go of her either.

Edgar pulled her in closer and let his gaze drop to the moonstone ring on her finger. The stone, imbued with fairy magic, was proof that Lydia was his fiancée. There was no need for him to

hesitate to keep her. It was simply a matter of summoning the resolve to fight with her and protect her from the Prince. As much as he wanted to make his decision once and for all, he couldn't help but think of the unburnable amber. It was possible that he would die very soon. Though she was his fiancée, he doubted that Lydia counted as an Ashenbert when they weren't yet married. But then, perhaps she did so long as she was wearing the ring.

"Edgar, it seems that the banshee and Mr. Firman are missing!" Lydia blurted out as she attempted to push him away with both hands.

Apparently, the coblynau had seen the banshee leave the castle. Paul had gone out to search for her, with Nico there to help follow the girl's footsteps. Lydia had learned of this when her companion had failed to show up for his tea, so she had asked the coblynau if it knew anything. It had been some time since the pair had left. Worried that something might have happened to them, Lydia had come to consult Edgar.

The earl promptly sent Raven off to search, and the boy took until the evening to return. Edgar summoned Lydia to the drawing room, where they were to receive his report. The servant had heard from some fishermen at the harbor that two people—who seemed to be Paul and the banshee—had boarded a boat with a middle-aged woman in dark clothing. The boat was bound for a town on the opposite shore, and Raven had gone to investigate further. There, he had met a cabman who had taken the trio to the station. Apparently, they had spoken of going to London. That was the extent of what Raven had learned.

"Excellent work, Raven."

"Unfortunately, I have no idea whether Mr. Nico went with Mr. Firman or not." The servant looked at Lydia, and she sensed he must have been feeling apologetic.

"Nico can make himself invisible to the human eye, and he is rather selfish. He is not one to wander into danger if he can help it. We should be much more concerned about Mr. Firman and the banshee."

"In any case, I think we can safely assume that the woman who lured the banshee away knows she is a fairy, if not that she served the Blue Knight Earl."

"I wonder if she works for Ulysses."

“I can think of no other possibility.” Edgar knitted his brow, looking uncharacteristically anguished. His expression took Lydia by surprise. Ordinarily, she would have expected him to have forgone anger and moved straight on to enjoying the challenge posed by his enemies. “Raven, we shall leave for London at first light tomorrow. Tell Tompkins to make the preparations.” Though he was as decisive as ever, something still seemed to be amiss.

“Where is Ermine, by the way?” Lydia asked. It struck her as odd that Edgar’s other servant wasn’t there. The first possibility that came to mind was that the two of them had fought, but she couldn’t imagine them ever doing so. Ermine wasn’t the type to lose her temper with him like Lydia did. Not only was she loyal, but she knew better how to handle him.

“I had her go to London. There was an urgent letter I wanted passed on to Mr. Slade in his capacity as a senior member of Scarlet Moon.”

It wasn’t the kind of errand he would usually entrust to Ermine. In the midst of all this trouble, it almost felt like he had sent her away on purpose. It was a passing thought, and Lydia didn’t dwell on it. Perhaps she was afraid of prying too deeply into their relationship.

At some point while she had been caught up in her thoughts, Raven had left the room, and now she was alone with Edgar once more. She braced herself, ready for him to start flirting with her, but he stayed sunk into his chair and gazed at the fire.

“What will you do tomorrow?” he asked wearily.

At first, she wasn’t sure what he meant.

“Will you come with us to London?” In the past, he never would have given her a choice.

“Yes. After all, I need to think of Nico,” she replied. However, she quickly realized that she wasn’t being completely honest and added, “Besides, I want to do whatever I can for the banshee too.” She wanted to help Edgar become the true Blue Knight Earl, but she found herself unable to admit that to him.

“Very well. There is a high chance of danger should Ulysses be involved. But you mustn’t worry, for I vow to protect you.”

Lydia wondered whether her accompanying him would only prove to be a burden. That was what he seemed to be implying. However, if Ulysses *was* planning something involving the

banshee, then Edgar could not be without his fairy doctor.

"I shan't do anything to cause you trouble," she said firmly.

"That would make me rather sad. If anything, I would rather you relied on me." A strained smile on his lips, Edgar got to his feet. "Now that I think about it, I invariably seem to be the one causing you trouble. I am always leaning on you before I know it. I must really learn to fend for myself."

Lydia studied him closely, wondering why he sounded so bitter and critical of himself. Even when he approached her, she felt no sense of discomfort.

"May I see your hand?" he asked.

She was still trying to work out why when he slipped the moonstone ring from her finger.

"Will you continue to keep it safe?" He gave her a sad smile, passing the ring back to her. "Even if nobody can see it, I know you would rather not wear it, so I feel it would be best not to force you."

Indeed, she saw no reason to keep wearing it. Although she had thought less of it since the coblynau had made it invisible to the human eye, she'd still had a sense that it wasn't supposed to be there whenever she saw it. And speaking of things that shouldn't be, she had never once thought that Edgar would remove it of his own accord. Was he saying that he would no longer consider her his fiancée?

There was something subtly different about him today. He had started to fawn over her, only to step away suddenly. If she had said that she wouldn't go to London, would he have accepted that? If he didn't want her to fall in love with him, she wished he would just be clear about it.

He had left the room after passing her the ring, and now she held it tightly in her grasp, all alone.

"Oi, Lydia! Open up!"

Lydia didn't know how long she had been sitting there with her own vague thoughts when there came a rapping on the window. She turned to see a jet-black horse waiting there. Surprised, she rushed over at once.

"Kelpie! You should know better than to come to the merrows' island!"

"I only came to see how ye were doin'. I willnae stay long."

Lydia opened the window, and he took on human form to enter the room.

"The earl's here too, isn't he? Everythin' awright?"

She hesitated. "Yes, I suppose."

"Ye don't look sure."

Hiding the hand holding the ring behind her back, Lydia somehow managed a smile. "I'm sure. But something has happened, and now we are going to London tomorrow."

"London? So ye're goin' back to the earl's place after all?"

"It is where I am employed."

Kelpie stepped closer to Lydia and peered at her carefully. Though he was suppressing his magic, his devilish beauty had the power to sway human hearts, and she found herself growing slightly dizzy at his proximity.

"Somethin' happened? Is this somethin' to do with that group that's after him?" Kelpie was more astute than she gave him credit for. "Ye need to stop gettin' involved, Lydia. That Ulysses lad, he's no guid news. Ye don't have to be goin' that far for the earl, do ye? I don't think he's even serious about marryin' ye."

Lydia couldn't agree more. Edgar was quick to have her wear the ring when it suited him, and quick to remove it when it didn't. The entire concept of their engagement was something he kept in his back pocket for when it might prove useful. The ring was digging into Lydia's palm, and it was growing painful. She frowned unconsciously. Seeing that, Kelpie pulled her into an embrace without warning.

"What are you doing?"

"I dunno. Ye seem depressed."

Although he had taken her by surprise, Lydia felt unable to push him away. He was quick to attune himself with her soul. It might have been due to his fae magic, but his ability to calm her was undeniable.

Why *was* she depressed, anyway? Edgar had stopped trying to seduce her. That was supposedly what she wanted. The ring's removal ought to have *lifted* her spirits, not dashed them. She wasn't even sure that her spirits *were* dashed. Edgar wasn't a fairy. No matter how much time they spent together, she would never understand his true feelings, nor would she be able to show him hers.

“Please step away from Miss Carlton.”

Lydia recognized the voice as Raven’s. Coming to her senses, she tried to shove Kelpie away, but he tightened his grip on her.

“Hallo, lad. Ye cannae tell us what to do.”

“Miss Carlton is Lord Ashenbert’s fiancée.”

“No officially.”

Raven tried to grab Kelpie, who brushed the boy’s hands away. Letting go of Lydia, he slipped backward.

“Stop that. Ye cannae control yer own power by yerself, can ye? If ye really wanna do this, ye’re no gonna be comin’ out alive.”

“Kelpie, *don’t*!” Lydia hurriedly jumped in between them.

“Stop him, no us. If whatever he’s got in him gets mixed up with my power, there’s a chance he’ll go mad and be rampagin’ till he dies.”

Growing even more panicked, Lydia turned to Raven. “Please calm down, Raven. I shall have Kelpie take his leave.”

“What?! How’ve I gotta leave?”

“You have no choice *but* to leave, don’t you? Quite apart from anything else, the merrows will notice that you’re here if you stay for too much longer.”

Though Kelpie clicked his tongue, he obediently returned to the window when Lydia pushed him. “Tell the earl for us, lad: jist ’cause he’s engaged to Lydia doesnae mean I cannae do nothin’. Ah’ve got a plan for if he causes her any pain.”

Once Kelpie had disappeared into the darkness outside, Lydia closed the window and tentatively turned back to Raven.

“There is nothing to worry about, Miss Carlton. I am perfectly composed.”

She was relieved to see that he was as impassive as ever, but when she remembered that Raven had witnessed her embrace with Kelpie, she quickly grew uncomfortable. She would have felt better had Edgar been the one to see it. Edgar would have made his displeasure known, but Raven was just staring at her in silence as though he disapproved greatly.

After a moment to gather his resolve, he said, “Miss Carlton. I ask that you do not betray his lordship.”

“Betray him? I have done nothing to betray him.”

“It would be an act of betrayal were you to fall in love with Kelpie while being engaged to Lord Ashenbert.”

As far as Lydia was concerned, Raven was overstepping the line. "'Fall in love' with him? You speak as though I am in love with Edgar, when I have said no such thing. Besides, you know as well as I do that our engagement was entered into for convenience's sake."

"The circumstances of your betrothal do not lessen its validity."

"Then perhaps you ought to have a word with your master on the subject of betrayal! I am sure that a philanderer such as him is burdened by much more guilt than me!"

"His lordship has been nothing but faithful to you."

Lydia didn't believe it for a second. However, Raven hadn't hesitated, and he wasn't a liar. She shook her head, not sure what to think. She had been gone for a month and a half. There was no way that Edgar *wouldn't* have taken advantage of her absence when there had been no risk of getting caught. He would have struggled to endure for that long without female company.

"His lordship needs you," Raven insisted.

"It isn't *me* he needs."

After all, Ermine had returned to him after her supposed death. If Edgar *had* refrained from philandering as of late, then it must have been because his feelings had started to settle on her rather than Lydia. Perhaps there was no longer any need for him to keep rejecting Ermine after her rebirth. Despite Kelpie's comfort, Lydia was beginning to feel irritated and tight-chested all over again. She rushed from the room, if only to escape Raven's steady gaze.

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When Paul's blindfold was finally removed, he found himself in an unfamiliar estate. He had no idea which part of London they had come to. They seemed to have spent quite a long time in the carriage. From the lack of noise, he guessed that they were on the outskirts of the city rather than somewhere more central. The windows in this room were boarded up, so he couldn't be sure. Naturally, the door wouldn't open.

"Are you in there, Paul?"

The painter jumped at the sound of Nico's voice, but he quickly pressed himself against the door. "Mr. Nico! You followed us here?"

"Yes. I kept myself invisible. Listen, this is quite the fix you've

gotten yourself into. Ulysses is here."

As Paul had suspected, the worst-case scenario was true. With Ulysses as his captor, being killed was a very real possibility.

"Paul? Are you listening?"

"Oh…yes. Forgive me. It was a little bit of a shock."

"There isn't time to be shocked. I'm going to unlock this door, and then we can make our escape."

"You have the key?"

"I saw the woman putting it in a drawer, so I swiped it."

Paul was coming to appreciate the advantages of a fairy companion, and he was bloody glad that Nico was there. Once he heard the door unlock, he twisted the knob and opened it. The corridor beyond was pitch black.

"This way."

He followed the sound of the fairy's voice, keeping one hand against the wall. It was too dark to see whether Nico was still invisible or not.

"If I may ask, why did you come after us, when you are Miss Carlton's cat?"

"I'm not a cat, and Lydia and I are equals. I do what I wish, and besides, there would be no one to take my portrait if you disappeared. I had to prevent that."

He's doing this all for a portrait? Paul quickly reframed the thought. *No, I ought to be flattered that he likes my paintings.*

"Incidentally, Mr. Nico, do you know where the banshee is?"

"No. I came after you, not her."

"We need to rescue her."

"She's a fairy. She won't die if we leave her."

Paul couldn't shake the image of her anxious, teary eyes from his mind. "Perhaps not, but she must be frightened." It was then that he heard the faint sound of sobbing. Certain that it was the banshee, he turned on his heel.

"Oi! Where are you going?"

Arriving at the source of the quiet sound, Paul gently pushed the door before him. It wasn't locked. The hooded banshee sat crying in the center of the room, head down, hands placed upon her lap.

"Are you all right? They haven't hurt you, have they?"

As he called out to her, her head snapped up in surprise. She

quickly shook her head. “No, nothing of the sort.”

“Thank goodness. Can you stand?”

“I’m sorry, but I was told that I wasn’t allowed to see you anymore.”

“Come, we shall escape together.”

The banshee shook her head again fervently, like she was refusing to so much as stand up. “I must stay. I am here to meet the real Blue Knight Earl.”

“I beg your pardon? You already met his lordship at the castle on Mannan.”

“The one I am to meet here carries the earl’s blood.”

Paul looked at Nico, baffled. The gray cat, who was now fully visible, had his forelegs folded and was obviously concerned. “Who told you that? The woman who brought us here?”

“No, it was written in a letter that I received on the Isle of Mannan. It said that if I wished to meet the true Blue Knight Earl, I was to leave the castle without anyone noticing and go to the docks. The woman there would take me to him.”

While that explained why the girl had vanished from her room so suddenly, it posed a new question.

“Who gave you that letter?” Paul asked.

“A maid with dark, short hair. She was wearing men’s clothing. She gave me the letter and left, saying I ought to read it as soon as possible.”

Paul knew this maid as the sister of Edgar’s most loyal servant. As much as he hated to suspect her, panic coursed through him. Could Ermine have passed Ulysses’s instructions on to the banshee? Perhaps she had simply delivered the letter, unaware of its contents. But regardless of who she had taken it from, surely she would have consulted Edgar first, given how significant its recipient was. It also struck Paul as odd that she had chosen the brief moment when the banshee had been alone to hand it over. He was overcome by a sense that he had just learned something he ought not to know. Nico also seemed dumbstruck, continuously running a paw through his whiskers.

“Have you got the letter with you now?” Paul asked.

“No. It said to throw it into the fire as soon as I had read it. In any case, I wish to see whether this man carries the earl’s blood or not for myself. If Lady Gladys is truly gone, that makes him my

new master."

"That's banshees for you. They are endlessly loyal to their family's lineage."

Paul froze as they were joined by a newcomer: a boy with light blond hair was standing in the doorway.

Ulysses...

Though he could be no older than sixteen, he was a close aide to the Prince and well-versed in fairy magic. Paul started backing away and, when he realized the banshee needed his protection, just about managed to position himself in front of her.

Ulysses stepped forward as though Paul wasn't even there. "I have been eager to meet you for a long time, banshee."

The girl got to her feet unsteadily. She stared at Ulysses, slipping past Paul to approach the younger man. "Are you the Blue Knight Earl's..."

"You ought to be able to tell. You ought to be able to sense his blood."

"Yes...I can sense it. You possess the same power as Lady Gladys."

"Wait a moment," Paul warned her. "This man does not carry the earl's blood legitimately."

Angered, Ulysses grabbed the painter by the collar. "Because my ancestor was born out of wedlock? What does that mean, truly? Marriage is a human concept. As far as the fae are concerned, one need only carry one's parents' blood to inherit everything."

The boy shoved Paul to the floor, and the banshee rushed over to him. It must have shocked her to see her long-awaited master treat him with such violence. Flustered, she looked from one man to the other.

"That man is my enemy," Ulysses said. "Any kindness he showed or will show you is a ploy."

Sitting up, Paul looked back into the banshee's fearful eyes. "You mustn't trust him. Please believe me. Have faith that the man you met at the castle is the real earl."

"One does have to wonder how Ted manages to attract so many admirers. It is one of the most irritating things about him." Ulysses pulled out a pistol and aimed the weapon at Paul.

On a Lonely Night

London’s midnight was accompanied by a thick blanket of fog. The chimes of Big Ben rang out over the city, sleeping at the bottom of its mire. Though gas lamps lined the streets and offered blurred balls of light, they weren’t enough to clarify the cobblestones or shadowy buildings. Perhaps due to the freezing cold and the mist, there was barely a person in sight, nor were any carriages passing by.

Kelpie trotted down the road to the earl’s estate, seeing no reason to change from his horse form. Lydia had said she was coming to London, so he had gotten there first. As far as he was concerned, she should have extended her holiday indefinitely, but it seemed she didn’t agree. It bothered him too that she hadn’t simply canceled her engagement. He could easily whisk her back to the Highlands. He had the strength for it. And if he did that, Lydia ought to understand that he was trying to protect her, especially if it was only a temporary measure.

Kelpie quietly leaped over the briar-entwined fence onto the earl’s grounds and decided to go and take a rest in the fountain. He just so happened to glance up at the mansion’s second floor, which was where he spotted a figure extracting itself through a window.

“The selkie,” he muttered.

This wasn’t the first time he had caught Ermine behaving strangely. It seemed she was acting behind her master’s back, and that made Kelpie concerned—not for the earl, but for Lydia, who spent much of her time by his side. If Ermine was going out on an errand, she would have used the door, especially considering that she didn’t yet have full awareness of her fairy self. Suspicious, Kelpie decided to tail her.

After leaving the estate, Ermine hurried down the street. She wasn’t slowed by the fog or the darkness, things that rendered humans blind. She followed the path that ran alongside the park Kelpie had settled in while in London and walked for some time after that till she reached the suburbs. Eventually, she came to a

marshland where the grass was dry and withered, and approached one of the few nearby buildings. The door opened immediately when she reached the entrance, as though someone had been waiting for her.

All Kelpie could see from his position was a smudge of light that quickly vanished as the door was closed again. He approached the building quietly. The boarded windows prevented him from seeing what was inside. There was no light seeping out between the boards either. He circled the building then, wondering how he might scope out the inside, when something fell down right in front of his feet.

“Och. That coulda hit me.”

It seemed to have been thrown from one of the building’s skylights, but when he looked up, there were too many tree branches in the way to be sure. He crouched down to investigate the object. It was a worn suitcase. He rocked it experimentally. There appeared to be something inside, but it was locked and wouldn’t open. As Kelpie sat down to try and break the lock, a voice called out to him from behind.

“You again?”

“Haven’t seen ye in some time, selkie.”

She was looking down at him with her arms folded and seemed distinctly unhappy to find him there.



“What’re ye doin’ out here alone? Schemin’ somethin’ without the earl knowin’?”

Ermine pressed a finger to her lips just as someone called for her from the doorway. Smoothly stepping away from Kelpie, she gave her reply.

“No. There doesn’t seem to be anyone around.”

Kelpie caught a glance of a young man in the doorway’s light. The water horse’s eyes widened. It was the boy who had tricked him once before, the boy who possessed the skills of a fairy doctor. Not to mention he had tried to kill the earl. And yet, the other party was a woman the earl trusted fully.

“You said you heard a noise.”

“Yes. I saw a fox, but that was all.”

“Take a good look around.” With that, the boy disappeared back inside.

After a sigh of relief, Ermine glared at Kelpie again.

“Ah’m no a fox.”

“No. You’re a nuisance of a fairy.”

“How aren’t ye handin’ us over to him, then?”

“Because then you and I would have to fight, which would be a waste of my energy.”

Kelpie found that quite understandable and nodded. Both of them knew who the victor would be if she were to face off against a water horse alone. “So ye’re betrayin’ the earl and followin’ this lad instead?”

The selkie’s elegant eyebrows knitted together slightly. Kelpie thought that she was unusually beautiful considering she was a fairy who had retained most of her human traits. Apparently, she had been just as gorgeous as a human, which made it all the more baffling that the philandering earl had never attempted to seduce her.

“Open that suitcase for me. Your brutish strength ought to be enough to manage it,” she said, not answering his question.

“How?”

“Your friend is inside. I was trying to get him out when I thought I heard someone coming, so I threw it out of the window. I came outside under the pretense that I was investigating a noise, only to find you here. Listen, just open it, take what’s inside, and make yourself scarce.”

“I don’t have no friends.”

“Fine. A friend of someone dear to you, then.”

A pal of Lydia’s? Despite his suspicions, Kelpie focused his strength, broke the lock, and opened the case. Inside was an unconscious gray cat.

“Oh, *him*.” Grabbing Nico by the scruff, the water horse looked at Ermine. “Ye wanna trade this cat for my silence, is that it? Lydia’ll be pleased to see him, but I don’t wanna be makin’ no deal like that if it’s gonna put her in danger later.”

“This is no deal. You won’t side with Lord Ashenbert because you do not want him taking Miss Carlton from you, so why would I need to silence you? Surely you would rather have his lordship out of the picture so that you can return to Scotland with Miss Carlton?”

“Ye’re gonna kill the earl?”

Anxious, Ermine cast her gaze downward. “I do not wish for his lordship to be taken from me either.”

Kelpie didn’t know what that meant: whether she wanted to protect him or make him hers even if it meant betraying him. For his part, the water horse would be prepared to do either when it came to Lydia. He didn’t like the thought of hurting her physically or emotionally, so he wanted to protect her. However, he had also considered taking her with him to the lakebed despite any protests, where he suspected she would eventually resign herself to staying by his side. And, he suddenly realized, she would be safe as a consequence.

“Weren’t ye sayin’ that ye weren’t gonna make Lydia’s life difficult?”

“If you are so concerned about her, I suggest you do what you can to separate her from his lordship.” Picking up the empty case, she walked away toward the rear garden.

***

“Nico? Wake up. You mustn’t die on me now!” Lydia desperately stroked her companion, whom she had laid down on a cushion. He didn’t so much as twitch. She had taken him to the parlor in the Carltons’ London home, and Edgar and Raven were there to support her.

“He doesn’t appear to be injured.” The earl was flipping the unresponsive fairy cat over and lifting up his legs and tail. Lydia had to dart in to stop him. “Or perhaps he is ill. *Do* fairies get ill?”

“I’m not sure. But let’s try not to move him too much for the time being.”

When the housekeeper had welcomed Lydia back home, she had informed her that Nico had been lying unconscious outside the front door that morning. Though they had originally been seeing her home from the station, Edgar and Raven had alighted from the carriage to make sure that Nico was all right. Lydia wondered whether she would have been better off sending them on their way.

“Perhaps he will wake up if he smells tea.”

“Leave.” On the verge of tears, Lydia scooped up Nico in her arms and turned her back to Edgar.

“That wasn’t entirely in jest, Lydia. I merely wished to lift your spirits somewhat.”

“You can do that by staying quiet.”

“Ah,” Raven interjected suddenly, then cleared his throat. “Sorry. I shall stay silent also.”

“*You* may speak freely,” Lydia said. “Did you just think of something?”

“It has become apparent that you treat the two of us quite differently,” Edgar said.

“Of course I do.”

Raven seemed hesitant to speak in front of his sulking master, but then Edgar gestured for him to proceed. “Mr. Nico appears to be missing his whiskers.”

Lydia quickly studied Nico’s face. Sure enough, his prized whiskers had been cut. “I see. But he is a fairy. Losing his whiskers shouldn’t have hurt him, nor does he need them to…” she trailed off as the fairy cat’s eyelids cracked open. “Nico! You’re awake!”

“My…whiskers…” At once, his eyes flew open, and he leaped out of Lydia’s arms to wedge himself behind a cushion.

“See that? He’s right as rain.” Edgar went to remove the cushion, only for Nico to grab hold of it as though his life depended on it.

“Don’t look at me!” he screeched. “Avert your eyes!”

“Why? Because you have lost your whiskers?”

“Don’t say it!”

“More importantly, do you know what happened to Firman and the banshee?”

So pertinent was the question that even Nico paused to think about it. “They were taken to what I assume was an abandoned house in the suburbs. It was south of Chelsea, over the river, and there was a water mill right by it. Ulysses was there. I don’t know what became of the painter and the banshee.”

“Did Ulysses catch you too?”

“Yes, and then he had the bloody cheek to go for my whiskers! It gave me such a fright that I fainted. That’s the last of what I remember.”

“You remember nothing else? How did you return to the Carlton residence?”

“No idea.” Nico held the cushion tightly over his head, then called out to Lydia, voice quivering. “Pass me a mirror, would you?”

She did so, and he must have seen the state of his whiskers because he let out a frail cry and immediately fell motionless under the cushion. It seemed he still wasn’t able to handle the shock. Lydia let out a sigh, not sure whether she was relieved or exasperated. When she lifted the cushion, she found him unconscious, with the same anguished expression he had worn as she’d cradled him.

“Ulysses must know instinctively what would most disturb the adversary he is facing,” Edgar said. “At least we can take comfort in the fact that Nico’s life is not in danger.”

“Indeed. I am relieved that he is all right.”

The fairy cat was still hunched over in his weakened state, and Lydia readjusted his necktie. She didn’t notice the way Edgar’s eyes softened as she did so, or the subtle sadness that overcame his features then.

“Raven. Join Scarlet Moon to search for the building Nico mentioned at once,” the earl said.

Lydia got to her feet. Nico may have been safe, but there was no telling what had happened to Paul and the banshee after their encounter with Ulysses. Their biggest problem had yet to be solved.

Edgar was making to leave with Raven. Just before doing so, he stopped suddenly. “Incidentally, Lydia, is there a time limit of sorts when a banshee foresees death?”

“A time limit? Why do you ask?”

“Curiosity.”

She already knew that Edgar had strange interests, so she was satisfied with his answer. “I suppose it would be around a week.”

“I see. I shall be in touch as soon as we learn anything about Firman.”

Lydia received a messenger from Edgar the very next day. They had found the building in question, and when Raven had infiltrated it, he had found Paul tied up in one of the rooms. Other than that, it had been abandoned.

Lydia went to see Paul, who had been taken to the earl’s mansion and regained consciousness at last. He was sitting in one corner of the parlor, and there were marks on his face that suggested he had been struck.

“Oh, Mr. Firman! I am so glad to see you safe and well!”

He was scratching his head awkwardly, a common habit of his, and Lydia was relieved to see that the rest of him was uninjured.

“I must apologize heartily for the concern I have caused and my failure to protect the banshee.”

“Was it the banshee Ulysses was after?” Edgar asked.

Furrowing his brow slightly, Paul sat up straighter. “Yes, that’s right. But that isn’t all. It seems he is also searching for the amber that will unlock her memories.”

“Amber? That is the key?”

“He seemed desperate for it. It would appear the amber in question was formed by the banshee’s tears when she foresaw Lady Gladys’s death. The memories are sealed within those tears.”

“Did Ulysses divulge all of this to you himself?” Lydia asked dubiously.

Edgar, however, didn’t seem all that surprised. “That would go some way to explaining why you are still alive, Firman.”

For some reason, Paul seemed apologetic as he nodded. “Yes, my lord. I was told to search for the amber. Ulysses asked me again and again whether I knew where it might be hidden, but I hadn’t the faintest clue. He then said that I ought to be able to find the magical amber with *your* help…”

It sounded like Ulysses was trying to goad Edgar. The earl scoffed. “Clearly he’s clutching at straws. Asking us to accomplish

what he was too witless to manage himself, even after ransacking your quarters."

Despite his attitude, Edgar had no choice but to search for the amber. His claim to the Blue Knight Earl's title depended on it.

"Mr. Firman, does that mean that Ulysses is keeping the banshee hostage?" Lydia asked.

"Not quite. I wouldn't say that she is in danger of being harmed."

"So, she met Ulysses and recognized the Blue Knight Earl's blood within him. Is that it?"

Paul hung his head. Edgar must have been right once again.

"But why would he tell Mr. Firman, of all people, to search for the amber?" Lydia asked.

"He believes that Firman's biological father had it in his possession. Indeed, that was likely the case, but we do not know where it might be now."

It seemed that Ulysses had flashed them a glimpse of the truth to incite them to search for the amber. That was why he had allowed Paul, who had the greatest chance of finding it, to live and act as his messenger. He must have been absolutely certain that it would be found in the artist's vicinity. If he hadn't found it even after searching through Paul's lodgings, then there was likely some trick to its concealment. In any case, the unsuccessful search hadn't shaken Ulysses's conviction that the painter was the key.

"I am confident that the amber is still close to Mr. Firman," Lydia said.

"May I ask why?" Paul asked in surprise.

"The banshee appeared before you. I suspect that was because she sensed something."

The artist took a moment to consider this, but it seemed he still couldn't think of anything pertinent among his father's possessions.

"Say, Lydia, do you suppose that whoever finds the amber and unlocks those memories, as well as whatever the banshee received from her mistress, will inherit the Blue Knight Earl's powers?"

Lydia paused. "That might well be the case. Lady Gladys sealed these things within an amber imbued with fairy magic. There might be something more to the amber itself."

“Ulysses seems very much hung up on it. Either the Prince wants it for himself, or he fears it falling into enemy hands.”

“Yes, and perhaps the latter is why he worked to end the earl’s bloodline.”

“All the more reason for me to locate the banshee’s amber and break its seal. The problem is that, even if I come into possession of the amber, I’m not entirely sure what to do next.”

Lydia wondered whether Ulysses knew how to break the seal. Perhaps he did, or perhaps the banshee, having acknowledged him as the Blue Knight Earl’s descendant, had remembered the method and shared it with him.

“For now, we ought to endeavor to find the amber,” Lydia decided. “Mr. Firman, would it be all right to visit your lodgings?”

“Yes.” He paused thoughtfully. “I suppose it would be worth having another look there.”

“I shall gather Raven and a few others to lend their assistance.”

Paul nodded. But then, suddenly anxious, he raised his gaze toward Edgar. “My lord, there is something else I ought to share with you.”

Lydia hesitated on her way out of the parlor.

“If possible, I would like to ensure that your lordship is the only one who hears this,” he continued apologetically.

She left before Edgar needed to tell her to, but she couldn’t help but feel a slight pang of rejection.

Will Edgar even need my help? The same doubts that had been sparked when he had removed the ring were starting to pile up higher and higher within her.

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The banshee had left the castle on Mannan in order to meet Ulysses. She had received a letter telling her that the true Blue Knight Earl was waiting, and it was quite possible that it had been delivered by Ermine. Far from being surprised when Paul relayed this to him, Edgar was relieved that he had solved the mystery of the amber bead on Ermine’s shoulder. Naturally, he didn’t yet want to settle on the conclusion that she was betraying him. Though the question of who had passed it on to her remained, she might have delivered it in good faith. Having said that, Ermine had claimed

that she had never met the banshee when Edgar had asked, and that weighed on his mind. He would have to proceed with caution for the time being.

He had been holed up in his study for some time now to think things through. Even during Ermine's previous life, he had been blind to the inner workings of her mind. His only choice might be to keep a very cautious eye on how things progressed, since he doubted that questioning her would prove fruitful. At the same time, he ought to ensure that she wasn't privy to more than she needed to know. She couldn't be allowed to learn too much about what he was doing, yet it would not be wise to delegate her nothing but menial tasks lest she grew suspicious. The problem was that Ermine was rather perceptive.

Bringing his hands together on the desk, he reassured himself that he would manage somehow, even though it would be difficult.

"Why?" he murmured to himself. Why was Ermine *still* under Ulysses and the Prince's orders? She was a selkie now, and removing her sealskin had allowed her to take on human form. Without its skin, a selkie was unable to return to the sea and had no choice but to follow the orders of the human who had stolen it. But taking her freedom should have been beyond Ulysses's capabilities by now, since *Edgar* had her skin. It was not the earl's intention to trap Ermine; he was simply keeping it safe for her. He would gladly return it if she asked for it, and she knew that.

With all that in mind, he couldn't possibly think of why she would have gone back to serving their enemies, supposing she had done so of her own volition. Did she wish for Edgar's ruin? Perhaps holding on to such a desire was the only way for her soul to be at peace. What if she resented him for constantly raising her hopes while being unable to grant her the happiness she sought? A small corner of his heart whispered that he would happily die for her were that the case. He had never been able to give her anything, and his life would be a small price to pay in light of that.

Edgar pulled the bead of amber from his breast pocket, held it up to the light, and gazed at it. This might have been the proclamation of his approaching death, the one Ermine wished for. He brought it close to the flame of a nearby candle. Just like before, it glowed faintly and repelled the fire.

“I can *see* death’s shadow behind ye.”

Edgar turned around to find Kelpie slipping in through the window.

“That’s one of yer banshee’s tears, right?” The fairy had the perfectly proportioned body of a Greek statue, and now he was using it to stand right in Edgar’s way. He was very much unwelcome.

“What have you come here for?”

“I jist wanted to ask if ye’re ready to break off yer engagement with Lydia yet?”

“No. Leave.”

“How no? Ye’re gonna die soon anyhows. Best ye call things off *afore* somethin’ happens to her. There’s no guarantee that whatever kills ye is gonna leave her alone.”

Naturally, such a concern had already been preying on Edgar’s mind. That didn’t mean he was willing to let Kelpie lecture him about it. “I shall protect her. Get out of my sight.”

“Ah’ve got a plan, y’know. I can take her away from ye easy, even if she hates us for it.” His eyes, devilish black pearls, bored into Edgar.

The earl couldn’t chase out the water horse by himself. His title might as well have been a complete joke. Though he did his best to glare back at Kelpie, he doubted it was having any effect.

Just then, there came a knock at the door. “May I come in, my lord?” called Raven.

“Bloody raven,” Kelpie muttered, backing off. “He’s got a real talent for gettin’ on our nerves.”

The water horse vanished, leaving Edgar to sigh at the window he had left open behind him. Even Raven had more of an effect on the fairies than he, the supposed Blue Knight Earl, did.

His servant entered the room and swept it with a curious gaze. “Did you have company, my lord?”

“Indeed. The horse.”

With a nod, Raven closed the window and locked it. “May I suggest that your lordship remains cautious of Kelpie? Though he may be a friend to Miss Carlton, he is no friend to us.”

“Did something happen?” Edgar asked. It was unusual for Raven to be so forward with his opinions.

The boy answered after a moment’s hesitation. “I witnessed

him attempting to seduce her."

Unless it was Edgar's imagination, a small flicker of distress crossed his servant's otherwise impassive features. He could only imagine that Lydia had responded to Kelpie in a way she would never have responded to him. Perhaps she was capable of accepting the water horse's emotions at face value. Although she didn't wish for a future with him because he was a fairy, she didn't have to doubt his feelings for that very same reason. Fairies did not lie.

It was beyond frustrating. Edgar wanted to rush to see Lydia and beg her not to have a change of heart and fall for Kelpie. "Change of heart" was perhaps an exaggerated description from her perspective, but she had finally started to show some favor toward Edgar, and he was loath to let those feelings of hers peter out. That said, he might not have the time left to do anything about it.

"Will you protect Lydia for me, Raven?"

The boy nodded determinedly, unfazed by the abruptness of his master's request. "Without question, my lord. She is your fiancée, after all."

"That isn't what I am asking. My request is that you protect her as her friend, regardless of what may or may not happen to me."

Raven frowned in confusion. But it didn't matter how much he understood now, as long as he understood eventually. The same held true for the matter of Ermine. Edgar had no intention of sharing his doubts about her with her brother. Should Raven find out, he was liable to try to kill her. At this point in time, his loyalty toward the earl was far stronger than the affection he held for his sister. Even if it transpired that Ermine *was* betraying them, Edgar didn't want him to have to "fix" the problem. It would rid him of the chance to lead a normal human life for all eternity.

"Anyway, what happened at Firman's lodgings? Did you find the amber?"

"Not yet, my lord, even though we have been going so far as to search the frames of paintings and canvases."

"It may not appear to be amber at first glance."

"Amber that does not appear to be amber…"

Edgar himself couldn't fathom what that might mean. It might have been painted a different color, for example, but he was

certain that their enemy would have thought of such a possibility too. Or it could be a simple matter of breaking the object in two to find the amber inside. Whatever the truth, it had to be beyond Ulysses's powers of imagination as much as Edgar's. He wondered if their adversary's plan was to have them find the amber and then steal it from them. Or perhaps the banshee was the key; perhaps her memories could be unlocked by simply knowing the amber's location.

"Include Mr. Slade's club in your search."

Raven nodded and made to leave.

As he did, Edgar called out to him again, almost unconsciously.

"Where is Lydia? Is she still at Firman's boarding house?"

"Miss Carlton has gone home. Her father is due back from a survey trip this evening."

"I see."

It seemed there was no point in trying to invite her to supper that evening. But, he realized, he had been about to fall victim to a bad habit of his. Being with Lydia helped him to forget all his ills, and so he would all but force her to spend time with him. That definitely counted as using her. If he really cared for her, he ought to send her back to Scotland. However, if he was capable of making such a decision, he would have told her not to return during her leave of absence.

Still in the throes of indecision, Edgar pocketed the amber that sat on his desk.

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"Are you quite sure you won't have any supper, Nico?"

The fairy cat gave no response, remaining burrowed under Lydia's bed.

"Father has brought some smoked salmon and whiskey back from Finland. You might miss out if you don't come now."

Lydia had finished her own supper—the first meal she had shared with her father in some time—and returned to her bedroom on the second floor. However, her promise of liquor had failed to draw Nico out, so she could only imagine that his wounds were very deep indeed. When she sat down on her bed, the tiniest fraction of his bushy tail that was poking out from under it quickly

slipped out of view.

"Nico, you are a perfect gentleman even without your whiskers. After all, only a gentleman would brave danger as you did searching for Mr. Firman and the banshee." There was no sign that the fairy had even stirred beneath the bed. "You may be fickle and selfish at times, but I know you have several good qualities too." Lydia tucked a small packet under the bed frame. "This caught my eye on the way home. It's a masquerade mask. This one is meant for decoration, so it's small, but it should fit you perfectly. It ought to hide your whiskers."

At first, it seemed that Nico wasn't impressed. However, he suddenly spoke up as she made to leave. "Keep your wits about you, Lydia. I think Ermine might be betraying the earl."

"Ermine? No."

The accusation had come out of nowhere and, as such, Lydia could only think it was a poor attempt at humor. She giggled, but he continued speaking, his tone grave.

"It might have been Ermine who brought the banshee to Ulysses by delivering her a letter that promised to unite her with the 'true' Blue Knight Earl. Paul already knows about this, so it's quite possible that he's passed it on to the earl."

Had that been what Paul had wanted to discuss with Edgar in private? It would make perfect sense, and suddenly, Nico's words seemed far more credible. To be betrayed by someone he held so dear *twice* would have dealt Edgar a huge blow. Was he alone at the moment? What was he doing? Was he all right? Her thoughts left Lydia restless.

No…he isn't as weak-willed as that.

In all the time she had known him, Lydia had never once seen him cower at anything. However, she also knew that he was good at concealing his emotions. She was still ruminating when she returned to the downstairs parlor and took a seat next to her father, who was reading a newsletter.

"It has started to snow, Lydia. I daresay we have a chilly night ahead of us."

"Yes, father."

What was she doing? There was no need for her to worry. Even if he did end up deeply hurt and desperately isolated, he had countless female companions whom he could depend on for

comfort. She didn't want to be counted among them. After all, that was why she had made an effort to distance herself from him in the first place.

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Edgar arrived at the lavish club, whose membership was only offered to very select gentlemen of the upper classes. It acted as a headquarters for Scarlet Moon, a secret society, and Slade had established it as a place where the society's artists could find patrons for their work. As a result, it displayed countless paintings and sculptures. The selection process for what went on show was highly exclusive—the club had to stay true to its status—but there were several pieces from artists who had yet to make a name for themselves.

Edgar was shown through the hall with its red carpet, up the grand staircase, beneath a glittering chandelier, and to the area where the club's gentlemen patrons would socialize for the entire night. As usual, there were more than a few familiar faces who nodded at the earl when he passed.

"It seems we are seeing you here more and more often as of late, Lord Ashenbert."

"I have to say I am quite concerned. Surely your lordship would rather a club where women are permitted? Or perhaps your fiancée has had a strict word about your infidelity?"

"Let us leave it at that," Edgar said. "However, should you witness me exit through the back entrance, I shall thank you to keep your silence."

He left the men, who were already tipsy, to laugh among themselves while he passed through a door at the far end of the room. There was another door beyond it, leading to the chamber that had been ransacked recently. It had yet to be fully cleaned up, and though none of the members were to be allowed in, the man guarding it let Edgar through after exchanging a nod with him.

Slade was inside the reception room, and it looked like half of the mess had been cleared away so far. "Lord Ashenbert. I do not remember receiving any amber from Mr. O'Neill."

"But you have several paintings of his."

"Yes, and they are all here. I still intend to inspect them

thoroughly, but I can already see so many with broken frames or damage to the painting itself. We've suffered a real loss here."

Edgar gazed at the works in question, painted by Paul's father. They were lined up against one part of the wall. He recognized the style of those landscape paintings and was overcome with nostalgia. O'Neill had also painted the Sylvanford estate, where Edgar had grown up, and the earl kept several of the artist's works in his manor house. That was how he had met Paul when they were children; the father and son had stayed with the Sylvanfords so that O'Neill could create his art.

Of course, all the paintings of the duke's family and estate had been lost in the fire, and they wouldn't have been here at the club in any case. Nevertheless, O'Neill's touch was unmistakable and brought Edgar back to his childhood home. The earl followed each delicate brushstroke with his eyes, noting how Paul had inherited his father's style.

"Mr. Slade. I ask that you pass on any significant developments in this case to Firman or myself."

"I mustn't send such messages via anyone else, is that it?"

"You were the one who insinuated that our information was getting out somehow. This is just a precaution."

It pained Edgar to have to be so careful about ensuring that Ermine wasn't privy to anything superfluous. He didn't like doubting his companions. Even if his suspicions proved false, the fact that they had existed in the first place would shadow him like a curse. He wondered whether such things were just as hard on the traitor themselves. And Ermine had betrayed him once before. He may have forgiven her, but he could imagine her having convinced herself that he would never truly accept her again.

"Well, this makes for a perfect opportunity, then. As it happens, I have something to pass on," Slade said, looking ever so earnest. "It relates to Wallcave's fluorite."

Wallcave was the village where Edgar had assisted with slaying a dragon, or worm. It was home to some fluorite mines, and Ulysses had attempted to use the worm's magic to create an especially rare variety known as Freya. The Freya itself was supposed to possess a mysterious power, and a pair of villagers had managed to pocket some and escape. Edgar had tasked Scarlet Moon with tracking down the missing thieves.

“The thieves’ corpses have been located. They must have drowned in the seas by the cave. Their clothes were packed with stones, and it was stormy waters that brought them to the surface.”

“What about the Freya?”

“It was missing.”

There was little doubt that the thieves had been murdered, given the state in which they had been found. And they had been found in the caves. They must have died almost immediately after taking the Freya. It had been Ermine who had reported catching the villagers with the stone. According to her, she had pursued them only for them to escape.

“I suspect whoever murdered them must have made off with the Freya,” Slade continued. “It must have been one of the Prince’s stooges.”

Without another word, Edgar turned and made to leave.

“Have you thought of something, my lord?” the art dealer called uncertainly.

“No, I rather fancy a drink. Might you fetch me some gin?” With that, he returned to the lively circle of alcohol and entertainment.

“My lord, I had thought you were going to escape through the back!”

“Indeed, and I have just returned.”

“Why, that was fast. Your lady friend was content with a mere five minutes of companionship, was she?”

“Why not go and see for yourself? I happen to know that there are a few lovely ladies waiting just outside in the alleyway who would gladly give you five minutes of *their* time for the right price.” Edgar took a drink from his gin. He felt like he needed to get to the same stage as these men, who had burst into laughter at his silly, uncouth quip. If he allowed himself to become intoxicated, he might find some respite from his racing thoughts.

Someone offered him a cigarette, which didn’t taste entirely of tobacco. Through the whitish smoke filling the room, Edgar caught sight of a painting on the wall. It was a portrait of a maiden holding a shield. The pictures around it were impressively large, making this smaller, more plain piece seem as though it were there merely to fill the space. Its position near a gas lamp, however, made the subject’s golden hair look particularly striking.

She also seemed frightfully familiar. Perhaps he was simply imagining things. Or perhaps it was her green eyes, alight with a powerful sense of justice, that reminded him of Lydia.

Lydia…

So intensely did he long for her that his heart seized with pain.

***

It was late at night, and after ensuring that her father showed no signs of leaving his study, Lydia slipped out of the house. Snow fluttered down around her. Her breath came out in white smoke, and the wind was freezing cold. Her cheeks, however, burned, not least because she was doing something as brazen as going out by herself late at night.

She hailed a cab and asked to be taken to the Ashenbert estate. The carriage's gentle rocking helped her to regain a calm mind, enough that she started to wonder what she hoped to achieve by going to see Edgar. She had even lied to her father, telling him she was going to bed, all so that she could make sure the earl wasn't down in the dumps. But why? Simply asking him to cheer up would be far from enough to lift his spirits. Besides, he might be out. Or he might be at home but in the company of an unfamiliar woman.

Lydia was starting to think she ought to go back. Just as she leaned forward to ask the cab driver to turn around, she caught sight of the lights of Edgar's mansion. She was overcome with a strange sense that he might be waiting for her, and she found herself unable to make her request. Though she knew she must have been imagining things, she had lost her chance to return home and ended up alighting at her original destination.

One of Edgar's servants must have noticed the carriage, because the door had already been opened for her by the time she made it to the entrance. Raven was standing there to see her in.

"Good evening, Raven."

"Good evening. To what do we owe the pleasure of your visit, Miss Carlton?"

She had never come this late at night before, and he must have found it odd.

“Um, I left something behind.” She was too embarrassed to admit that she had come to see Edgar, a desire that left her questioning her sanity. Instead, she decided she would search for her make-believe item and casually ask about Edgar as she did so.

Lydia did not take off her cloak, telling Raven that she didn’t intend to stay for too long, and made for her office. The servant followed with a candle to light the lamps for her.

“Is Edgar out?”

“His lordship returned just before your visit.”

“And is he doing well?” she said, knowing it was a strange question to ask. Raven was perceptive. He was likely to realize that she was here under false pretenses.

“He is his usual self.”

She was glad she was talking to Raven.

“Is he alone?” Relieved, Lydia had chanced another question, but this time, the servant responded with an uneasy silence. Panic flared within her at the thought that there was another woman on the estate at this very moment. “Of course, I won’t be put out if he has a guest! I have no business with him tonight.”

However, it seemed that Raven’s silence had stemmed from something more innocuous. “Miss Carlton, since you are here, might I ask that you see his lordship?”

“I’m sorry?”

Ignoring her bewilderment, Raven lit the office’s lamps in a hurry and then left, presumably to go and call Edgar. Perhaps he thought his master would scold him if he failed to disclose Lydia’s presence.

When she glanced at the clock, she found herself wondering for the umpteenth time what she was doing here. She and Edgar weren’t close enough to warrant the concern that had sent her calling on him uninvited at this time of night. No doubt Edgar himself would have no idea what to make of it. Perhaps she had been unduly influenced by him sitting in that chair beside her desk and waxing lyrical about their supposed engagement.

“Did you find what you left?”

Lydia’s head snapped up upon hearing Raven’s voice. Fortunately, he was alone.

“Yes,” she stammered, “I did.”

“Then please follow me.”

Apparently, Edgar wasn't going to come to her. Lydia followed Raven as asked, but they didn't stop at the parlor or the reception room. They even went right by the study. It transpired that their destination was Edgar's chamber. Quite apart from the fact that she had been expecting to meet him somewhere else, Lydia was somewhat reluctant to enter a man's room so late at night. Especially one belonging to a sinister philanderer.

Raven knocked on the door despite her concerns. "My lord, I have brought Miss Carlton to see you." Although there came no immediate response, he continued to wait, standing outside the door with a perfectly straight posture.

Lydia was just beginning to wonder whether they would be there all night when the door burst open.

"Lydia! What a pleasure it is to see you!" Appearing with a bright smile on his face, Edgar took her by the hand and pulled her into his room. "You will forgive me for not being entirely decent, won't you? I hadn't expected you to pay me a visit this late at night."

He wasn't wearing his necktie, and the buttons of his waistcoat were undone. It was strangely alluring, and Lydia felt a jolt race through her heart.

"Oh, um, I just… I just came by to pick up something I'd forgotten. I shan't stay long."

"Come, there's no need to worry about that. Have a seat. Why not have a drink with me since you are here?"

"No, I really…" She heard the sound of the door closing behind her. Now that she knew Raven was gone, it suddenly weighed on her mind that she and Edgar were alone.

"I was just thinking about you. Perhaps you sensed that." He all but forced her to sit down on the sofa, taking the seat right beside her. He was his usual, cheerful self.

It seems I worried for nothing… His high spirits made their being alone together all the more precarious. Lydia decided to leave as soon as she could.

Edgar must have had other ideas, because he pulled her in close by the shoulder, put a glass in her hand, and poured her some gin. "The drink of the working class, or so they say. I drank it often in America. It was reliable fuel to fight on."

The smell was too strong for Lydia, who was struggling to work up an appetite for it, but a part of her understood how Edgar had

become so intoxicated on his “fuel.” Perhaps his cheer was superficial and he was depressed after all.

“Anyway, Lydia, what was it that you left behind?”

“Oh, nothing too important. Edgar, you seem to be quite intoxicated,” she said, eager to change the subject.

“Do I? I haven’t had all that much to drink. Perhaps it was the mysterious substance I took at the club. Everything feels rather pleasant at the moment.”

This admission worried her. She peered at him, trying to gauge whether he was simply putting on a brave face. He turned to her unexpectedly, and their gazes met in close proximity, enough that she could see herself reflected in his eyes. A serious expression crossed his face, and he took her hand.

“How did you know that I was missing you?”

“Oh, I… I didn’t…”

“Did Nico mention something to you, perhaps? Did he tell you what I discussed with Firman in private? And then you came to see me out of concern. That’s it, isn’t it?” His ash-mauve eyes caught hers as firmly as they did when he was sober. He was just as perceptive as ever, to the extent that Lydia wondered whether his drunkenness was all an act.

“It *has* been preying on my mind a little bit,” she began, “but I simply cannot believe it to be true.”

His expression grew more severe still, unusually so. “You won’t tell anyone, will you?”

“Of course not. What do you intend to do about it?”

“I haven’t decided quite yet.”

“I can see why. It isn’t as though there is any hard evidence. I want to trust her.”

Edgar led her hand to rest on his cheek. “That is just what I wanted to hear from you. I am glad you’re here.”

Her face was burning, and her chest was beginning to tighten, so Lydia made to stand up. Edgar grabbed her cloak, which then slipped from her shoulders. He embraced it tenderly with his usual subtle, mischievous smile on his face, and planted a kiss on the lining.

“Don’t go just yet.”

“But it’s dreadfully late.”

“You cannot go without your cloak, can you?” Edgar said,

holding it closer to himself.

Lydia was starting to feel uneasy. “I think I shall do just that.” She started to back away, but when he stood, then stumbled, she rushed back to him without thinking. “Are you all right? Perhaps you ought to lie down.”

“You really are too kind for your own good.” A triumphant smile came over his face as he grabbed her by both arms.

Was that a trick?

But then his expression took on a lonely hue. He pulled Lydia into his arms and pressed his cheek against her head. “Stay with me. Please?”

He sounded so desperate that she lost the will to push him away. His suffering ran deeper than she could imagine. And there was no one but her to whom he could show his hurt. That was what stilled her hand.

When he realized that she wasn’t resisting, he wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her in even closer.



“You must want to help me, even just a little bit, or you wouldn’t have been worried enough to come and see me. Am I to take it that you wish to support me as a lover rather than simply offer me your assistance as my employee?”

That wasn’t why she had come. But it wasn’t as though she had come in her capacity as a fairy doctor either. She had just been worried that he might be suffering, and the only thing she could think to do about it was to be by his side.

“I didn’t come as your employee, Edgar, but as your friend.”

He sighed, clearly unhappy with her answer, and his warm breath brushed over the nape of her neck. “I want to spend the night with you.”

“I beg your pardon? You can’t…”

“That I *need* you has only become more evident. I cannot resign myself to a life without you. I don’t want Kelpie to take you. I need you to be mine.”

“Why Kelpie? I do not intend to belong to anyone.”

“But you *will* help me, won’t you? Save me? If you were ever to abandon me, I’m sure I would begin to wish for death.”

Lydia sighed inwardly. She had heard that line before. He had a proven tendency to exaggerate, and he had done so in order to deceive her right from the very beginning. Though she knew this, and though he was pressing his lips against her ear, she still couldn’t summon the strength to push him away.

“Edgar… No…”

It didn’t seem like he took her protest to heart. He lifted her in his arms and made to carry her away. A rational corner of Lydia’s mind now recognized that his earlier stumble *had* been a ruse, but the rest of her was too flustered to do anything but freeze. She had no idea how to escape anymore. When she had made up her mind to comfort Edgar, she hadn’t imagined *this*.

“Edgar! Let me down!” For a moment, she thought he had complied, until she realized he had placed her on his bed.

“I love you.”

Lydia never had any faith in his use of the word “love.” However, when he stared at her so earnestly, she felt like she might just change her mind.

“But you can’t—”

“I hardly deserve to be called a man. Knowing that, will you still

accept me?" He pressed his lips to her forehead without waiting for an answer.

Perhaps it wasn't words of comfort that Edgar needed right now, but assurance that Lydia would be with him for the rest of their days.

Does he really need me that much?

"You will allow me this, won't you?"

She wasn't sure what she wanted. But he sounded so weary and pained that she found she could no longer refuse him. In the midst of her confusion, she felt his hand softly stroking her hair. His lips traversed the line of her neck. Nervous, Lydia could do nothing but tense her entire body. Just then, his muted murmur sounded in her ear.

"Ermine…"

Ermine?

For a second, Lydia's mind went blank…until she realized he was imagining her to be someone else.

I don't believe it… I'm such a fool…

She wasn't angry. She just felt pathetic. Pathetic enough to almost burst into tears. Edgar wasn't longing for *her*. How laughable that *he* should speak about wishing for death. Lydia's wretchedness only left her feeling all the more frail. The most she could do was turn her head to one side and squeeze her eyes shut. She didn't want to have to look at him.

She was wrong to have been concerned about him. She never should have come. And yet, it was too late to do anything about it now.

His Remaining Hours

Lydia's golden-green eyes were staring right at him. His fingers sank into her delectable caramel hair, and he was completed by her camomile scent. He kissed her, wanting to be confident that there was no need to give up on her after all.

This was happiness. It wasn't just satisfaction that enveloped him, but something more wholesome and blissful than that. Within these sensations was an unnerving sense that something was missing. And then, suddenly, tears were spilling from Lydia's eyes. Her soft lips were murmuring something, the words barely audible.

"Even when we're this close, I fail to comprehend you."

Why?

"You long for me, but you have already pledged your life to another."

Another? No, Lydia, that isn't true. In fact, if I could, I would give you more *than my life.*

"Stop lying to me." She started to cry again. Even when he took her into his arms, she didn't stop. *"Stop hurting me."*

Am *I hurting you? I admit that I might have been a little forceful at times, but it isn't as though I ever* made *you do anything…*

"I cannot be with you anymore, Edgar. I'm going to the fairies' world."

Wait, Lydia.

She had vanished from his embrace. He opened his mouth to cry out her name, which was when his eyes snapped open.

A dream? Relieved, Edgar sat up.

Though the thick drawn curtains left the room dim, it seemed the sun had already risen outside. He ran a hand through his disheveled hair, grimacing when the heavy headache set in. As far as he could tell, he had had drinks at Slade's club, come home intoxicated, and then had another drink, but the events that came afterward were hazier still. The only thing he could vaguely remember was holding Lydia in his arms, but perhaps that had merely been a part of his dream.

“Of course it was a dream…”

And yet, her expression, her softness and fragility as he held her, and the tears on her cheeks that glowed like amber in the light of the lamp, all came back to him with mysterious clarity.

What a waste of a dream that it stopped there.

Just then, he caught sight of a button on his sheets. He picked it up and recognized that it wasn’t his as the translucent memories started stitching themselves together. Raven had come to his chamber last night to announce Lydia’s arrival. And then…

Panicking that his memories might hold some water, Edgar hurried from the bedroom. He called Raven to his dressing room next door, and his servant appeared at once.

“Good morning, my lord.”

“Lydia was here last night, yes?”

“She was, my lord.”

“Did you show her to my chamber?”

“Yes, my lord.”

A hand to his head, Edgar started pacing the dressing room. He didn’t speak again for some time. “When did she go home? How was her countenance?”

“I am not sure, my lord. I believe she left without my noticing.”

Panicking would solve nothing. Edgar swept his eyes over his room, looking for anything that might jolt his memory. Lydia had been here. She had regarded him anxiously. Nico had told her about Ermine, so she had come here worried that his spirits might be low. He was confident that these events had all occurred in reality. Everything that came next, however, was far less clear, and he wasn’t sure if he had truly embraced and kissed her, or if it was all part of some delusion. He couldn’t remember anything of what he really *needed* to.

“What a bloody mess I’ve made of things. Our first night of passion together, and I remember none of it.”

Raven cocked his head, visibly confused.

Edgar sighed. “My clothes, Raven.”

His servant was prompt in laying out his clothes in front of him. While the boy would usually have assisted in his getting dressed, today, Edgar stopped him.

“I shall do it myself. Go and summon Tompkins for me, would you?”

The butler arrived without a moment's delay. As Edgar continued knotting his tie, he asked when Lydia had gone home.

"I'm afraid I don't know either, my lord. It seems that Miss Carlton was rather stealthy in her escape. I did not even know she had been until Raven told me this morning. Would you like me to inquire with the other servants?"

Edgar suppressed a scoff. He would rather the entire estate *not* learn that he had come home drunk, pulled Lydia into his bedroom, and worst of all, that he remembered none of it. One thing was clear: it was highly unlikely that Lydia had come seeking intimacy. From the state of things, he could come to no other conclusion than that he had forced himself on her.

"That's all right. Incidentally, Tompkins, you were married once, yes?"

"Yes, my lord, although my wife passed away ten years ago."

"How did you propose to her?"

"Your lordship is asking me to think quite far back, so my memory is a little hazy…however, I believe I expressed that a child with a fin on its back would be rather endearing. My wife agreed wholeheartedly. As it transpired, my son was born without a fin."

"That's an exceedingly unhelpful answer, Tompkins."

"Yes, my lord, I was afraid of that." The butler's round eyes, positioned quite far apart, blinked thoughtfully several times. "If your lordship would like me to inquire with the other servants—"

"That won't be necessary. Thank you."

"My lord, while it is true that the way of the world is to wait until marriage, it is not unheard of for couples to confuse the order of things. Live together for long enough, and it will soon become a trifling matter of the past."

"Long enough." None of this would be troubling Edgar if such a thing were possible. Should the banshee's tears have been prophesying *his* death, then who could say what was to come tomorrow?

Even if he and Lydia were to rush into matrimony, he might only be sealing her fate as a widow. Having said that, being a widow might be better than the alternative. If he died *before* they were married, he would leave her an unmarried girl, defiled and robbed of her innocence. He took up his jacket, unwilling to leave things as they were.

“Tompkins, I require a bouquet.”

“What kind of flowers, my lord?”

“Whichever you can produce the fastest. I shall be going out, so I would like you to prepare my carriage for me too.” As Tompkins left, Edgar turned his gaze to Raven, who was standing in the doorway. Though there was no emotion to be gleaned from the servant’s face, Edgar could tell he was bewildered. “Why did you show Lydia to my chamber, Raven? Did I not ask you to tell her that I had retired for the night and would not see her?” He could vaguely remember doing so out of self-restraint. He had been intoxicated and hadn’t been sure what he might do to her if he saw her.

“I was under the impression that your lordship wished to see her nonetheless. There seemed to be something on your mind, and I thought Miss Carlton might have been able to offer you good counsel.”

Raven was completely and utterly correct. It was exactly why Edgar hadn’t been able to keep himself from flinging open the door last night, despite knowing his servant was acting against his orders.

“I am grateful—and pleased—that you were able to perceive how I was feeling.” It marked considerable progress for Raven, who had formerly been a bloodthirsty killer with no comprehension of human emotion. “But you ought to have spared a thought for Lydia as well. I was drunk and without self-restraint: a wolf, if you will. And one mustn’t throw a pure, innocent lamb in with a wolf.”

Raven nodded, though it was unclear from his expression whether he truly understood. “But, my lord, are you not like a wolf at all times?”

Edgar considered this. Raven may have had a point. At that, he quickly fell into a pit of self-loathing.

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Lydia heard the bell at the front entrance from up in her bedroom. She rushed to the window and, upon seeing the earl’s carriage outside, promptly drew the curtains. Her room was directly above the entrance, and she could hear her father

speaking to their guest.

"Good morning, my lord. Lydia seems to be developing a cold, so I was just about to send a messenger to ask whether she might be allowed to stay at home today."

Edgar had come just as she had feared. She began to pace her room restlessly. While it sounded as though her father had believed her when she had said she might be unwell and refused to leave her bed, she doubted that Edgar would be dissuaded.

"I thought that might be the case, and that is precisely why I came to see her."

Yes, that makes perfect sense, of course.

When he next spoke, her father sounded perplexed. "Oh, I see. How gracious of your lordship to pay us a visit, and this early in the morning too."

"Might I be allowed inside?"

No.

But her father, apparently having found no reason to refuse Edgar, let him in. It wasn't long before she heard footsteps coming up the stairs and there was a knock at her door.

"Lydia, his lordship is here to see you."

Her father would probably grow suspicious if she asked him to send Edgar away. With no other option, she opened the door, keeping her face downcast so neither of them would see her swollen eyes.

"Your father tells me you're developing a cold, Lydia. How are you feeling?"

Not well.

"May I talk with you for a bit?"

She stepped back from the doorway, allowing Edgar access to her room. Her father retreated to the hallway, leaving the door open.

She turned her back on the earl. "Why did you come?"

Edgar came around her to stand in front of her, holding out a round bouquet of roses. They were a passionate red, and Lydia had a vision of her father scratching his head at the thought that they were meant for visiting the sick. "Lydia, I want you to marry me at once."

"What utter rubbish. The answer is no, and you should have expected as much."

“Of course… ‘At once’ is asking too much. Normally, we would need to give notice to the parish and then wait three weeks. How about three days, then? I am confident that I would be able to procure a license for us.”

“Are you still intoxicated?”

“Not in the slightest.”

“Then insane, perhaps?”

As it had become apparent that Lydia was disinclined to take the flowers from him, he placed them on the table. He then started to approach her, and as she gradually retreated, she ended up with her back to the windowsill. After that, the best she could do was turn her face away from him, only for him to place a finger under her chin to lift up her face and peer at her.

“I made you cry with my actions last night, didn’t I? Was I that forceful? The alcohol might have lessened my self-restraint, but I can assure you that I am usually much gentler.”

Usually meaning…with whom, exactly?

“I did not give you due consideration when I ought to have done so in light of your inexperience. But please do not let that taint your expectations going forward. I shall endeavor to alter anything that is not to your liking.”

She had completely lost him. “Edgar—”

“In any case, there is no choice for us now but to be wed as quickly as possible.”

“I’m sorry? Why?”

“We have lain together, haven’t we?”

Lydia could feel the heat rising to her cheeks as she stared at him. “Have you taken leave of your senses?! We have done nothing of the sort, as you well know!” Swiping away his hand, she managed to shove him back and restore some distance between them.

“I don’t understand.”

“You mean you don’t remember? You fell asleep midway through!”

It had happened seconds after he’d whispered Ermine’s name and Lydia had looked away. She had panicked when his weight fell on her, but his lack of movement had soon made her realize that he had fallen into a deep sleep. Careful not to wake him, she had disentangled his fingers from her hair and slipped out of the bed.

She had been endlessly relieved upon coming home but had also felt so wretched that she'd burst into tears. The very memory of it made her vision blur all over again. Still, she was determined not to cry in Edgar's presence.

He looked troubled as he regarded her, running a hand through his bangs. "Midway being…how far exactly?"

Embarrassment caused her to jump in at once. "How would I—Immediately! You fell asleep immediately!" She wished he wouldn't speak about such matters like they were trivial. There wasn't a shadow of shame to be seen on his beautiful features.

"You are saying that, essentially, nothing happened. Correct?"

She was so exasperated by his total lack of recollection that even her tears dried up. "Correct."

"Then why have you been crying?"

"I…" Lydia was determined to keep the truth to herself, even if it killed her.

"I'm sorry. It must have been a deeply humiliating experience for you regardless. I was very close to laying my hands on you, after all."

She was relieved when he found his own explanation. At the same time, seeing him visibly relax left her feeling hollow.

"Nothing happened," he repeated.

"Precisely. So there is no reason for us to rush into marriage."

"I suppose not…"

Was it really that much of a relief not to have to marry her? Now, she was starting to fume. "Congratulations. You may keep your flowers and return to your estate."

"No, Lydia, my proposal still sta—"

"Then allow me to give my answer at once. *No*."

Edgar looked uncharacteristically put out, and she had the sense that she was being unkind.

No. He *is being cruel.*

"Lydia, while I admit that I cannot recall everything that happened last night, I *can* recall the depths of my longing for you, and it was very much real. I really do love you, and I wanted you to be near to me. I wanted to depend on you."

She could not believe him.

"I love you and only you."

How many other women had he used the same line on?

“As far as you are concerned, I exist only for your convenience and when you require comfort. That is all there is to it.”

“You must believe me.”

The only reason he had opened up to her last night rather than one of his numerous lovers was because she was the one who had happened to turn up. If not that, then it was because she was the only one who understood the source of his anguish. Either way, the fact remained that his heart pined for another.

When she tried to turn away from him, he grabbed her by the shoulder.

“Lydia.”

He then tried to pull her closer, so she thrust both hands out as hard as she could.

“That’s enough! You were not longing for *me*. I cannot believe you would hold me just to call another woman’s name! You are abhorrent!”

Naturally, this was enough to bewilder him, and he released her. “Another… Whose name did I call?”

“I doubt you will have to ponder long to find your answer. It was the woman you hold most dear.”

Edgar fell silent, and she wasn’t sure if he knew who she was talking about or if he was hesitant to come out with the wrong name and dig his grave deeper.

Suppressing a fresh wave of tears, Lydia turned to face him properly. “This is exactly what happened before. My feelings wavered, and I found myself wanting to trust you, only for you to let me down. That is why I refuse to believe you. Please take your leave.” Snatching up the roses, she shoved them into his chest. Then she pushed him out of her room and slammed the door shut behind him.

Edgar called her name several times from outside. It failed to stir her, and she kept her back pressed up against the door at length. It was then that she heard footsteps—he must have given up—and she gazed at the teardrops that were falling to the floor in front of her.

“Are you on your way home, my lord?” came her father’s voice.

“Ah, professor. You are welcome to these if you would like them.”

“I’m sorry?”

Lydia could imagine her perplexed father taking the bouquet of roses.

"I shall return at a later time."

Please do not feel obligated.

She only started crying all the more when she heard the front door close.

"Don't cry so, Lydia." Nico's tail was swishing from under the bed. "I'm here for you, all right? Here, I'll even send the earl his letter-writing stationery back."

The fairy cat crawled out from under the frame, and Lydia noted that he was wearing the mask she'd bought him. The sight brought an unconscious smile to her face and stemmed her tears.

"Don't laugh at me!"

"I'm not laughing. You look very endearing— Sorry, *dashing*."

"Do I?"

"Like a gentleman thief shrouded in mystery."

"Perhaps I ought to find myself a cloak." Nico trotted over to her on his hind legs.

Rubbing her eyes and wiping her tears away, Lydia crouched down and took his forepaws in her hands. "Thank you, Nico. I think I'll be all right."

***

The end was drawing closer day by day. Supposing the banshee's prophecy was true, Edgar estimated that he had three days left at most. With that in mind, he realized it was for the best that nothing had happened between him and Lydia. For all the thoughts he had of marrying her as quickly as possible, he worried that it would mean her becoming susceptible to the banshee's prophecy also.

When it came to Lydia, it seemed he was prone to acting entirely on impulse. It had always been so, but only recently had it resulted in such a mass of errors. He struggled to paint a clear picture for her, all the more because he was aware of the part that his own indecisiveness played in muddying the waters, and only ended up eroding her trust further.

"You called for us, my lord?" Raven and Ermine appeared in his study.

Setting Lydia straight and regaining her trust might not have been possible any longer. Having said that, there was still business to attend to that required him to make full use of his remaining time. Putting the matter of his fiancée aside for now, he addressed his servants.

"I want you to send this to the abandoned property in which Firman was confined." Edgar handed Ermine a signed letter. "We have located the disputed amber. This is an invitation to Ulysses to do what he may."

Neither servant reacted with surprise. They simply waited for him to continue. The amber's location was still unknown, and he was bluffing. His plan was to goad Ulysses into action, then react accordingly and alone.

"I found it. Where I did, and where I have hidden it, is information too valuable for me to divulge to anyone. I shall barter with Ulysses myself."

"But my lord, won't that be dangerous? Ulysses possesses supernatural powers." Ermine did not look or sound any different from usual.

"And I possess my intellect. Or do you believe Ulysses will best me?"

After a pause, she nodded. "Perhaps I do, my lord."

Edgar wasn't sure if that was what she truly thought, but it didn't especially matter. "I shall entrust that letter to you, Ermine. You won't require any support, will you?"

"No, my lord."

"Raven, you will accompany me to Mr. Slade's club."

Once Ermine had left, the earl approached her half brother. The boy's stiff posture did not break as Edgar gazed steadily at his face. He merely waited for his master's next words. Edgar made a silent vow to use part of his remaining time to protect his loyal servant. Raven ought to have grown beyond only opening up to his master by now. He needed only to realize that to avoid falling into the Prince's clutches a second time.

"Raven. You should consider those whom I trust to be your allies as well. Understood?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Lydia and Tompkins, for example. They care about you as a human being in your own right."

Raven frowned up at him. “Was Miss Carlton not upset with me?”

“Not at all. Her anger was entirely reserved for me.”

“But, my lord, I was undoubtedly the cause of all this trouble.”

“Worry not. Lydia understood your motivations. Incidentally, Raven, can you think of any names I might murmur in my sleep? Specifically, those belonging to women?”

“Yes, my lord,” he answered at once.

“Can you elaborate?”

“Would you like them in alphabetical order, my lord?”

“Never mind.”

Regretting both the question and—to a lesser extent—his past behaviors, Edgar patted his servant on the shoulder before exiting the study.

Edgar was returning to Slade’s club because of a memory that had cropped up. Despite his drunkenness, something had caught his eye there yesterday. He walked through the front rooms with Raven in tow. Slade and Paul were waiting for them in the private reception room. It was a stroke of luck that the club’s membership was reserved for men, as it meant he could keep Ermine out of the discussion without her growing suspicious.

“Is this the painting you were referring to, my lord?” Slade pointed to the artwork in question, which he had already removed from the other room. It was the one depicting the maiden with the shield, and it had been on Edgar’s mind since he’d seen it.

He picked it up by the frame and gazed at it. It could only have been around eight square inches. “Do you know the painter? There’s no signature.”

“I inherited it from my father,” Paul began hesitantly. “However, I do not believe he painted it. The style isn’t his, so I wonder whether it was a gift from another artist, or whether he was keeping it safe for them.”

“What is it doing in the club rather than at your lodgings?”

“I had always been curious about the painter myself. I recently entrusted it to Mr. Slade, as I heard there was a foreign appraiser among the club’s clientele.”

“We never did get our answer,” Slade said. “I hung it in the billiard room, thinking we could use a few more paintings there.”

“Is there something significant about this painting, my lord?”

Paul asked.

Edgar nodded, placing the artwork gently on the table. “I have seen it before. I believe it was at the Sylvanfords’ manor house.”

“Would that mean His Grace passed it on to my father?”

“While I cannot say *when* my father became aware of the Prince’s machinations against his estate, if we suppose this painting is significant in some way, then perhaps he gave it to O’Neill because he sensed danger. It might explain in part why the Prince then had O’Neill murdered when he had no blood connection to either the dukedom or the Blue Knight Earl.”

“Does the amber exist within the painting, then?” Slade asked, immediately setting about examining it. He had been about to take it out of the frame when a thought seemed to strike him. “I remember now. This painting was not originally framed. I was the one to frame it, so it cannot be hiding the amber.”

“It came as the painting and nothing else?” Edgar asked.

“Correct, my lord.”

Disappointed, the earl flopped down into a seat.

“Still, it is a frightfully curious painting. The composition is…lacking,” Paul said, and Slade, who was an art dealer, nodded his agreement.

Edgar also thought the balance was off. The silver shield attracted the eye too much, taking away from the maiden herself.

“It is as though the shield is the main subject.” The earl brought his face to the shield to study it. Its pattern was that of a woven spiral. Here and there, the complex lines seemed to resemble letters. “I wonder whether we might find a message within the painting. See this line? It resembles a capital *G*. Here we have an *A*, *D*, *Y*… ‘Gladys’? Gladys Ashenbert?” Edgar turned to Slade. “Fetch me a loupe, would you?”

The art dealer practically flew from the room, returning just as quickly. Turning up the light of the gas lamp, Edgar soon discovered more letters in the shield. Paul noted them down beside him, stringing them into words. Any that were too incomplete to deduce their meaning elicited a search for more characters. It soon emerged that the blue lines of the intricate pattern contained a message.

In the lavish room outside, gentlemen were whittling away the long night making idle talk and partaking in various

entertainments. While their lighthearted conversation occasionally made its way to the ears of the three men, it was far from enough to snap the tension in their midst. The only sounds were Edgar's voice as he picked out the letters and Paul's pen as he scrawled them down. Once the minuscule message had been extracted from the shield on the tiny canvas, Edgar read it aloud.

"In 1747, one unfortunate soul was born. He is the Prince of Calamity, who has dealings with fairies of the Unseelie Court. All my efforts shall hereafter be devoted to banishing this soul from Britain. I am under no illusion that I shall lose my life in doing so, as the banshee foretells it. I must entrust what remains to the future. The Prince of Calamity will no doubt one day attempt to return to British soil. To whoever takes on the title of Blue Knight Earl, I beseech you to put an end to the prince's bloodline. It is only by our power that the fiend might be returned to the ground. I pray that one day, a successor will appear and bear the mantle of everything my family has left behind. Gladys Ashenbert."

No one said anything for a while as they pondered their discovery.

"The Prince of Calamity. I wonder whether that refers to the Prince we know so well," Slade said.

"But this message comes from over a hundred years ago. The Prince is not an elderly man, is he, my lord?" asked Paul.

The Prince wasn't young, but nor was he especially old. Logically, Gladys's message must have referred to the current Prince's father or grandfather.

"All we can say for certain is that this message was written by Lady Gladys, the Blue Knight Earl of a hundred years ago. I daresay that she is the subject of this painting too," Edgar said.

"So, this lady drove out the Prince of Calamity and lost her life in the process?"

"And with that, the Blue Knight Earl's bloodline came to an end. She must have left this message under the assumption that there were no heirs left," Edgar explained.

"In that case, she must have foreseen the possibility that someone would inherit the Blue Knight Earl's *powers*, if not his blood."

Although Edgar wasn't clear on the specifics, it sounded as though the earl's powers were necessary to bring an end to the

Prince's schemes. It also seemed that the mysterious power of the fae had been involved from the very beginning. Specifically, the first Prince's birth. That must have been why the Blue Knight Earl's successor, who was supposed to have knowledge of and powers relating to fairy magic, was the only one who could counter the evildoer. It was likely that whatever Gladys had sealed away along with the banshee's memories was key to obtaining those powers.

The banshee's amber was the shield that would defend against the Prince's plot. Should it fall into Ulysses's hands and he obtain everything left behind by the Blue Knight Earl, there would no longer be anyone able to put a stop to the Prince's schemes. It was imperative that Edgar find it first and keep it from his adversary.

Even knowing that, there was something else that concerned him slightly, and that was Gladys's request to sever the Prince's bloodline. If it referred not just to the Prince of Calamity's direct lineage, but to all of his blood relatives, then it might well include Edgar.

The Prince was supposed to be related to the Stuart king, James II, who had been banished from Britain as a result of the Glorious Revolution. Though the king's direct bloodline was supposed to have ended, his blood had in fact lived on through Edgar's mother. The Prince had set his eyes on her, seeking to create an heir who carried this blood.

Edgar's mother, with her close genetic ties to both James II and the Prince, had married the Duke of Sylvanford. The duke, Edgar's father, had already had similar, deep ties to royalty, including the Stuarts. It seemed that Edgar, who had inherited this royal blood and was closely related to the Prince, was seen by his enemy as an ideal successor. It might have been the case that his own death would act as a shortcut of sorts to ruining the Prince.

He thought back to the banshee's prophecy. To Ermine's suspicious behavior. It felt to Edgar like he was being tested to see if he would choose the right path. If he wasn't worthy of his title, then clinging to it like he was may prevent the arrival of a true Blue Knight Earl, one who could put an end to Ulysses and the Prince for good. One who could locate the banshee's amber and unlock her memories. One whose substance was enough to back up his title. All of this was beyond Edgar's abilities, so perhaps accepting his death was the most important choice he could make.

As he considered this, his heart whispered Lydia's name. Death did not bother him. He was constantly prepared for it. However, he was also concerned about the effect it might have on her. Then again, nothing had happened between them, so perhaps there was nothing to be concerned about. His death would leave her neither alone and damaged nor a widow. It was for this reason that he had dropped the idea of marrying her posthaste, but it seemed that she thought he had given up on marrying her altogether. He had given her the impression that he had only wanted to because he was out of options after lying with her. However, *because* he hadn't, he had lost the right to long for her at this point. It wasn't as if he could tell her about the banshee's prophecy either.

"What shall we do, my lord?"

Paul's question helped push the matter of Lydia from his mind and pull him back to the present.

"Bring the painting back to my estate."

"Yes, my lord."

"Mr. Slade, I ask that you continue to devote your efforts to finding the amber. As for you, Firman, given that the banshee trusted you, it's possible that she might return to you. If so, enlist Lydia's help and keep her safe."

Though Paul seemed unconvinced that this would actually happen, he nodded nonetheless.

Edgar and Raven left the club together once the meeting was finished. Snow continued to flitter from the dark skies, just as it had the previous night. The streets of London were foggy, and even the light of the gas lamps appeared hazy. It was difficult enough for them to see the cobblestone at their feet as they made their way to their carriage, and it was only seconds after they had started walking that a second carriage, this one jet black, slipped out from the darkness and stopped right in front of Edgar. Wary, Raven stepped forward with his hand on his knife.

The carriage door opened, and out stepped a lone boy who looked to be around ten years old.

"Ah, Master Jimmy. I see you are alive and well."

The pale-faced boy grinned at Edgar's greeting. In reality, he was not a human but a black dog—a fairy under Ulysses's control.

He had once received a vicious bite from Kelpie that had left him at death's door.

"I have come to escort you to see our master, my lord."

It seemed that Ulysses had already received the message that Edgar had sent to the abandoned building. As he put a hand on Raven's shoulder to stop him from lunging at Jimmy, it struck the earl that it hadn't taken long at all. However, it wasn't beyond the realm of possibility that Ermine had delivered the letter directly. Perhaps Edgar was mistaken in expecting it to have taken longer.

"Might I ask that you come alone?" Jimmy said.

The request did not surprise Edgar in the least. He hadn't intended to bring Raven into the heart of enemy territory in the first place, and he nodded without hesitating.

"You mustn't go alone, my lord. They will kill you."

Jimmy stepped back from Raven, as though uncomfortable being in range of his bloodlust. Yet Raven was human, so Edgar presumed that he wouldn't be able to do much harm to a fairy anyway.

Naturally, Edgar had no intention of getting killed. At the same time, he didn't know what might happen if it became apparent that he was bluffing about having found the amber. Still, supposing his remaining time was limited whether Ulysses killed him or not, he felt it was a risk worth taking.

"I shall go, Raven. You will let me, won't you?"

Unable to stop Edgar with brute force, Raven fell silent. He may have been confused about what his master was planning, but there was nothing to be done about it. Edgar got into the carriage alone, and the black dog closed the door.

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"The moon's bonnie tonight, Lydia. Let's go out."

It was the middle of the night, and Kelpie was tapping on Lydia's bedroom window. She turned over in her sleep, not quite processing the sound as dream or reality. After all, it made no sense. The moon wouldn't have been visible because of the snow. She could still hear the whistling of the cold wind from outside.

Besides, I'm sleeping.

"See? It's perfect."

What?

Before she knew it, she was riding on the back of a galloping black horse through a moonlit meadow. The wind smelled fresh and felt pleasant against her cheeks. There wasn't a snowflake to be seen. She wondered whether it was because she was dreaming. Kelpie had pushed his way into her dream and was expanding the world within it. A mysterious force seemed to envelop her, keeping her on his back. No matter how he dashed around, she never once felt like she was at risk of falling.

Once they were through the meadow, a hill with endless blooming flowers rose up before them. Kelpie stopped, letting Lydia float down from his back and run up the colorful hill. She smiled, watching the glowing flower fairies dancing around.

"Are ye havin' fun?"

"Yes. It's absolutely beautiful."

Kelpie had turned back into his human form, and presently he stood beside her. "Ah'm glad."

When she raised her eyes slightly, she could still only see his chest. Only when she lifted her neck did the tall fairy's head come into view, his dark curls glimmering in the moonlight. He turned to look back at her then, reached out with his long arms and pulled her close.

"What's the matter?"

The human custom of hugging wasn't something that Kelpie understood. He had only learned to do it for Lydia's sake. As a water horse, he would never be able to comprehend the feelings of affection that could exist between human beings. However, Lydia knew that he made the effort to love her in his own way.

"It feels odd, holdin' ye like this. Comfortable, but then my heart feels uneasy. Ah've never felt this way, even with how long ah've been alive."

"Oh?"

"How's it feel for ye?"

It felt like being surrounded by the calmest of waters, without a ripple to disturb the peace. A thought floated vaguely to the surface of Lydia's mind: that it was a whole different sensation than when Edgar held her. And because of that, being with Kelpie was neither trying nor painful. Fairies did not lie. They did not break their promises.

“Let’s go right up to the moon, Lydia.”

“*Right* up to it? How can we, when we cannot fly?”

“Look.”

Following his instructions, Lydia found that, at some point, she had come to stand at a lakeshore. The water’s surface was as clear as any mirror, and it held a crisp reflection of the moon in its center.

“Let’s go,” Kelpie said.

“I do not know how to swim.”

“Mibbe, but this is a dream. ’Asides, ah’m with ye.”

He led her by the hand toward the lake. She knew that entering the waters with a kelpie wasn’t the best of ideas. The thought was quickly dismissed as she also knew that Kelpie wasn’t interested in eating her. Besides, this was a dream. It would all vanish as soon as she woke up.

“My lady! Please don’t go!” came what seemed to be a disembodied cry. Then, Lydia saw a tiny figure pushing through the grasses as it approached her. “You mustn’t go with the water horse!” The bearded coblynau, wearing his usual pointy hat, fell flat on his face. He hurriedly got to his feet again. “He plans to drag you to the watery depths of the fairy world! You won’t ever be able to return!”

Kelpie clicked his tongue. “Shut yer maw, rat. C’mon, Lydia.”

“Wait a moment, Kelpie. If I were to come with you, would I pass out of my dream and into the fairy world?”

“Aye. What’s the problem?”

“The problem is that I need to be able to return to the human world!” Lydia tried to back away from the lakeside, only for Kelpie to grab her by the arm.

“Ah’m no about to let ye stay with that earl for a second longer. He cannae protect ye.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“That he cannae win against that Ulysses lad. He cannae even protect himself.” When Kelpie peered at Lydia, his eyes were alight with magic. He had never once set those devilish eyes on her before this. “And I know ye’re no jist gonna sit back and let him do his thing. He’s gonna drag ye into it, and ah’m gonna lose ye. I don’t wanna let that happen.”

Bewitched, Lydia slowly began to walk forward.

“Please, Mr. Kelpie, stop this! She is the Blue Knight Earl’s fiancée!”

“Aye? How’s she no wearin’ the ring, then?”

Only then did she remember that Edgar had removed it. He might not even worry about her in the least should she vanish here with Kelpie.

“I love you and only you.”

She could still hear those unusually assertive words as clear as day. And yet, she knew how flippantly he must have spoken them. Her steps slowed despite that. The coblynau took the opportunity to jump onto her skirt. He climbed her desperately, then showed her the moonstone ring in his grasp.

“My lady! Please put this on at once!”

“I *said* to shut yer maw, ye wee basturt! She’s no one’s fiancée! Or she’s no gonna be after a few days when the earl’s dead!”

Lydia froze. “What did you just say?”

“He’s got one of the banshee’s unburnable tears. He’s the only one left in the earldom, no? Once he dies, yer no gonna have a fiancé no more. So come with us now, Lydia. *Afore* he dies, so ye don’t get caught up in nothin’.”

The banshee foretold Edgar’s death?

Was that why he had removed her engagement ring? And then there was his asking her to marry within three days, only to withdraw his request when he realized he hadn’t touched her.

She could have been wrong. All of it could just as easily have been down to his whims. But he must have been prepared for death, or he wouldn’t have asked her how long a banshee’s prophecy took to come to fruition.

“I’m going back, Kelpie.”

“Ye don’t have to think about him no more. All he ever does is uses ye.”

She knew he was right. And yet, she slipped the moonstone onto her ring finger. With that, Kelpie’s spell was undone, and the lake before her vanished. He let go of her as her dream began to dissipate around her.

“What are ye doin’?”

She wasn’t sure of that herself. Perhaps because she was the earl’s fairy doctor. But was that really all there was to it? She was still unsure of the answer as she slowly opened her eyes and

found herself gazing at the familiar ceiling above her bed. Exhausted, she pushed herself into a sitting position.

"Oh, thank goodness I wasn't too late!" The coblynau was sitting on her lap and joyfully running his hand over the ring on her finger. "Bow informed me that the kelpie was trying to kidnap you, so I jumped into your dream as soon as I was able."

Though it was still the early hours of the morning, Lydia had more important things to do than go back to sleep. She wasted no time in slipping out of bed.

The Lady with the Golden Hair

As early as it was, the servants of the earl's mansion ought to have been up for some time already. When Lydia knocked on the door, Ermine opened it for her. Taken back for just a moment, the fairy doctor quickly rearranged her features into a smile. Ermine's disloyalty had yet to be proved.

Lydia had left her house in a hurry and, as such, she had forgotten to think up an excuse as to why she was at work so unusually early.

"Forgive me for disturbing you so early in the morning," she stammered, thinking on her feet. "I just—"

"I was just on my way to see *you*, Miss Carlton."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Lord Ashenbert has been taken by Ulysses's underling."

Lydia was too shocked to say anything, letting Ermine explain at pace. Last night, as they were leaving Slade's club, the black dog Jimmy had appeared and taken Edgar away right in front of Raven. Apparently, the earl had gone willingly. Lydia wondered if he'd had the banshee's prophecy in mind.

"Raven, along with a number of Scarlet Moon, are searching for clues as to Ulysses's whereabouts. I shall be joining the search myself."

"What about Mr. Firman?" She had heard that the painter was living at Edgar's estate free of charge for the time being. Not only was he a member of Scarlet Moon, but he was also well-informed about the current tensions with Ulysses. He had also picked up on the change in Ermine and was the only person Lydia felt able to consult about what to do next.

"Mr. Firman is in his room. His is the guest room on the second floor to the right."

Relieved that he was indeed there, Lydia made her way to his room. There was no reply when she knocked, and the room seemed to be locked from the inside.

"Mr. Firman? It's Lydia Carlton."

After her third series of knocks, the door cracked open at last.

Paul's eyes darted this way and that as if to make sure she was alone. Then he ushered her into the room urgently and locked the door behind her.

"I don't mean anything by this, you understand!" he said quickly. "There is something I need to discuss with you that is both important and urgent." As he spoke, he approached an easel that was leaning against the wall, and beckoned her toward it. "We came upon a significant discovery last night. This painting was entrusted to my father by the Duke of Sylvanford. However, it would seem that the dukedom received it from Lady Gladys: the previous Blue Knight Earl."

Edgar's true family, the Sylvanfords, boasted an impressive noble history that stemmed from time immemorial. The same held true for the Ashenberts, so it wouldn't be strange to think that the two families had maintained a relationship with each other.

As Lydia listened to Paul explain about the message hidden in the painting, the strangest of thoughts struck her: that the truth was so fantastical that no one could have expected it. Who would have thought that the last living Sylvanford would go on to revive the Ashenbert name?

"Miss Carlton. I have been wondering whether this painting isn't concealing any further messages. For example, something pointing us in the direction of the amber. Though I have been studying it for some time, I have yet to find anything."

Edgar had passed into enemy territory by himself to face Ulysses. Meanwhile, Paul seemed to have devoted himself to locating the amber as soon as possible, in hopes that it might put the earl in a stronger position. Lydia agreed with the notion that the painting might hold an important clue.

"I quite agree, Mr. Firman. I came here hoping to make some progress in our search. There is also something I wish to speak to the banshee about. The amber holds her magic, so it should be able to lead us to her."

Lydia studied the painting carefully. There was its subject, a long-haired noblewoman holding a shield. Though she wore no armor, she was painted as a gallant knight, a worthy descendant of the Blue Knight himself.

The Blue Knight, or the first Blue Knight Earl. It was said that his wife had been Gwendolen, who was of a race of fairies called the

daoine sidhe. They were the embers of the gods of old, identifiable by their gorgeous golden hair. That same glittering hair ran down the body of Lady Gladys in the painting, hinting at her ancestry.

"Now *that* is a fine painting indeed!"

Only then did Lydia notice the coblynau poking his face out from the hood of her cloak.

"I didn't realize you had accompanied me."

"See how vivid the blue of the lapis lazuli is! And the green malachite is of such a fine quality!" The coblynau was a mining fairy and an expert in minerals. It seemed that the materials used for the paints interested him more than the artwork itself.

"I'm sorry to ask, but might you excuse yourself? Mr. Firman and I have something frightfully important to discuss."

"If your ladyship wills it. However, I came because Bow told me that I might be of use to you." "Bow" was the name the coblynau had given to the ring's moonstone. "So, how might I be of service?"

If only Lydia knew. "Well…oh, you are able to detect hidden gemstones, aren't you?"

"Only if I have already made their acquaintance."

Her hopes were immediately dashed. It had been quite clear that the coblynau had never met the banshee before.

"I can, however, deduce all sorts of things from a mineral placed in front of me." Though he sounded most proud of himself, it wasn't a skill that could help with their current predicament.

Lydia fell into thought to consider their options. Meanwhile, the coblynau continued to speak as though nothing were amiss.

"Oh, would you take a look at this amber! See the depths of its color and its luster? I daresay it's a perfect specimen!"

"Amber?!" Lydia and Paul cried in unison.

Unable to see the fairy, the painter had reacted with confusion at the disembodied voice. Now, however, he placed both hands on the table (where the voice had come from) and leaned forward. "Where is this amber?!"

"Here. It is this fine lady's golden hair."

"This… This golden pigment?!" For a moment, Paul seemed to seize up in shock for a while before suddenly taking his head in his hands. "How could I not have noticed?! I'm a *painter*! Miss Carlton, it is very unusual to use amber as a pigment. It is too expensive to be broken down into a powder and painted onto a canvas.

Normally, agate would be used for this color… Yes, agate is particularly useful because it comes in so many hues. For goodness' sake… Think of it like so: would anyone think this red was made from rubies? Who would use rubies to make paint? For *goodness' sake*! I suppose I have my frugal lifestyle to thank for such an oversight!"

Lydia looked hard at Gladys's blonde hair. There seemed to be a subtle shimmer to it. "So this paint is the banshee's tears?"

"It must be. I cannot think of another possibility. Can you?"

She shook her head.

"Was I able to assist you, my lady?"

"You were. Thank you, coblynau."

The fairy looked very pleased indeed as he sat on the table and started smoking his pipe.

"Might I borrow the painting, Mr. Firman?"

"Of course, but why?"

"I would like to see the banshee. If she is in Ulysses's hideaway, I have no doubt that Edgar will be there too. I shall bring them both back. One way or another." Lydia tucked the small painting into her cloak, then turned to the coblynau. "Could you open up a fairy path for me?"

"I can, my lady, but I shan't be able to guide you. A human who loses his way becomes trapped for all eternity. I would suggest bringing with you a fairy like Mr. Nico, who will be able to guide you the entire way."

"Nico wasn't under my bed when I looked for him. He must have found entertainment elsewhere, and I haven't the time to search for him. However, with this amber, I am confident that I shan't lose my way."

The coblynau nodded, then began digging a hole in the floor. Paul watched, bewildered, as a dark cavity appeared at one end of the carpet.

"I know, Miss Carlton! How about I go with you?"

"I cannot guarantee that it will be safe."

"All the more reason I cannot let a lady such as yourself go alone."

Paul possessed an honest sense of chivalry. Lydia doubted she would be able to convince him to stay. Besides, it might prove easier to convince the banshee to come back if he was with her.

She nodded, and Paul, ever the gentleman, said he would enter the hole first.

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Raven had turned from the street into the lane and back again several times without finding relief from his confusion. This was the very spot where he had lost sight of the carriage after he had chased it last night. Though he had witnessed it taking this corner, when he had turned it for himself, the vehicle was nowhere to be seen. It was as though it had been consumed by the darkness. The lane was perfectly straight. Raven ought to have seen the carriage, no matter how fast it had been traveling, and he just couldn't understand where it had gone.

"Have you lost something?"

He looked down to see a gray, long-haired cat standing on its hind legs. The fancy mask it was wearing left Raven somewhat taken aback, although it didn't show on his face.

"Mr. Nico. Is that you?"

"I am a mysterious thief."

It was Raven's habit not to devote too much thought to things he didn't understand. There was no reason for him to ruminate over anything unrelated to Edgar anyway, so he decided just to answer Nico's question.

"Lord Ashenbert had disappeared. There is no way to describe it other than that, and I find myself at a loss."

"Did he disappear here?"

"Yes."

Folding his forelegs behind his back, Nico started walking slowly forward. He glanced back at Raven like he expected the servant to follow. The people around them were paying no mind to the cat in the mask and the cloak walking on two legs. He must have been able to conceal his presence like he was able to turn invisible. Indeed, although Raven could see Nico, he felt as though taking his eyes from the cat for a single second would result in losing sight of him. And that was considering how striking Nico's bushy gray tail was. He focused everything he had on keeping the fairy in his sights.

After some time, Nico came to a sudden halt.

“I have found a space!” he announced.

“A space?”

“The human and fairy world blur together here. The earl must have entered through here onto a fairy path.”

Raven had no idea where this “space” was supposed to be. “How might I go through it? I need to search for his lordship.”

“You can’t because you are human.”

“But this is where his lordship vanished.”

“I don’t suppose he was with somebody else? Somebody who *could* have entered the space?”

Raven thought for a moment. “Can *you* pass through it?”

“Of course I can.”

“Then please, bring me through it.”

“Lydia is the only human for whom I’m permitted to create such a path. You could *follow* me through it, but I won’t be able to help you if you get yourself stuck.”

“Then I shall take him.” At some point, Ermine had joined them without their noticing. “You can open a path for a fellow fairy, can’t you?”

Raven noted that Nico was looking up at Ermine quite uneasily for some reason. He stayed frozen like that, with his forelegs folded behind his back, for no more than a split second. But it was enough to detect how tense he was.

“Well, I suppose I *could*.”

“Mr. Nico. Miss Carlton and Mr. Firman have both vanished, and I believe they have entered a fairy path themselves. The possibility is even greater if it is true that Ulysses has also taken Lord Ashenbert through such a path. I would assume that they are on their way to his lordship.”

The mention of Lydia seemed to fluster Nico. He groaned quietly, scratching at his head. “Is that true? She’s off her rocker, I tell you… That earl has done nothing but make her cry, and she *still* won’t let him alone!” However, it had been enough to change his mind, and presently he beckoned to the two servants. “I suppose there isn’t anything else for it. Do *not* lose sight of your sister, Raven. You’ll never come back to the human world if the pair of you get separated.”

Ermine took Raven’s hand and gripped it firmly. “We are ready.”

It felt a little odd to walk hand in hand with his sister, something

they hadn't done since childhood. However, Raven realized that now wasn't the time to become distracted by such things, so he quickly refocused. They were soon pulled from the snowy sidewalk between two buildings, through a space that ought only to have been wide enough for a cat. On the other side, they were greeted by a large, springtime field.

***

Edgar had been waiting inside one of the abandoned mansion's rooms for some time now. For whatever reason, there were two thin crescent moons in the sky outside. But he couldn't afford the luxury of getting confused over every trivial detail.

When the carriage had first started moving, he had been gazing out over London's fog until the scenery had suddenly transformed. The haze had vanished, leaving the carriage running over a green field beneath countless twinkling stars. It had run over several hills to reach this lone building, and after coming to this room, Edgar had watched as the second moon made its ascent. His pocket watch had come to a complete stop.

The fairy world was full of mysteries that he was unable to rely on his intuition to comprehend, so he had decided to stop dwelling on them. Edgar was well aware that, on this front at least, he was incapable of besting Ulysses. Not that he intended to challenge his adversary in the field of magic. He had his own tried-and-true methods.

When the knock came, Edgar stayed silently sitting in the chair at one end of the room. He would not stand up. Even if he didn't say anything, the knocker was the one with the key.

Sure enough, the door opened by itself, revealing Ulysses behind it. "Thank you ever so much for gracing us with your presence, my lord."

"Forgive me for being frank after such a kind invitation, but I must say that your estate is falling apart. One cannot take a single step without the floorboards creaking."

"Oh dear, it appears I have displeased you. Perhaps I oughtn't have kept you waiting for so long."

"Perhaps you oughtn't have shown your face to me at all."

Very cautiously, but without losing his smile, Ulysses lowered

himself into the seat in front of Edgar. “It was my idea to extend this invitation to you tonight. I wanted to ensure that the dispute we have with one another is put to rest before His Royal Highness’s arrival on these shores.”

The dispute presumably being which of them was the true successor to the Blue Knight Earl.

“There is nothing to put to rest. The answer is clear. I have the merrows’ sword and have been recognized as the Earl of Ibrazel. You are descended from the illegitimate child of Julius Ashenbert, who held the title three hundred years ago. No one will take you seriously if that is your claim, but that is the least of your problems. You are descended from the earl’s *mistress*, which makes you little more than a commoner with absolutely no right to the title.”

Edgar was purposely trying to draw Ulysses’s ire. It seemed to have worked. Displeasure showed on the boy’s face, as though keeping up a smile had been more effort than it was worth.



“It would seem that you are well-informed about my heritage.”

“I know even more than that, thanks to a certain merrow. Was it your father who appeared before them demanding the sword? Alas, he was unable to solve their riddle and became one with the scraps of seaweed floating in the ocean.”

“That was in fact *me*, my lord. Evidently I survived the ordeal.”

“Oh, yes. You are Ulysses, as was your father. However, the Ulysses I heard of when I was with the Prince was not an infant such as yourself. The Ulysses who appeared before the merrows was also middle-aged.”

The boy suddenly burst into laughter. His next words would only confuse Edgar further. “I remember well when you came to join His Royal Highness. Orphaned, without a penny to your name, and stuffed in the bilge of a freighter that had eventually arrived in America. The waifs in the slums were in a finer state than you, who looked wretched enough to die at a moment’s notice. I could hardly believe that you held such importance to His Royal Highness.”

Edgar could hardly remember anything about arriving in America. He’d had so little strength that he had spent much of that time unconscious. It was quite possible that Ulysses had come to recognize him while he had recovered at the Prince’s estate. But the boy who was currently in front of Edgar would have only been six or seven years old around that time. And yet he spoke as though he had been a grown man.

“What really surprised me was when I touched you to see if you were alive, and you tried to resist—if only feebly so. Your eyes were barely open, but they told of a boy who couldn’t abide being touched by a commoner. They were the eyes of a young lord who expected respect and service from everyone around him. I knew that you had survived the harrowing trip with pride and anger in your heart, unable to forgive the fact that you were being treated in such an unjust manner. In fact, seeing that moved me. I realized that you were a fine vessel for His Royal Highness after all.”

Edgar had been kidnapped to become the Prince’s puppet. The Prince had tried to destroy his sense of self in order to create another just like him, the man who led a strange, secret society. The earl’s memories of his time in America had only started to solidify after he had returned from the brink of death. That was

when the endless days of psychological torment had started, something that had been perhaps even more unbearable than his physical pain. Ulysses's words had called up those memories, and though Edgar kept a straight face, his palms were beginning to sweat.

"Do you mean to say that you were working as the Prince's aide even then? As a small child? What claptrap is this?"

"This is my second body." Ulysses sneered when Edgar failed to fully disguise the shock on his face. His expression still burned with a fierce, personal anger. "The Blue Knight Earl's legitimate bloodline has ended. Julius Ashenbert died, and there has not been a male heir born in Ibrazel since, and neither did anyone come to Britain to retrieve the sword. The last female descendant, Gladys Ashenbert, died herself a hundred years ago. His Royal Highness has spent from then until the present day destroying everyone who still carried the line's blood. That is, the illegitimate descendants."

"You being the exception, of course."

"Indeed. I am the only living person with blood ties to the Blue Knight Earl. There were two keys required to reach the sword's hiding place. His Royal Highness already held them both. In fact, those keys were crafted by my ancestor: Julius Ashenbert's lover. It was Julius Ashenbert who hid the sword in the first place, as you know. The simpler golden key was forged several times over the next three hundred years, but there was just one silver key. Its craftsmanship was much more intricate, making it harder to copy. I suppose you would remember stealing it, wouldn't you, my lord?"

While forming his escape plan, Edgar had worked to gather as much information on the Prince as possible. It was during this time that he had stolen the key, although he hadn't known what it was at first. Knowing one's enemies was pivotal to fighting them. However, there had still been too much about the Prince that had remained shrouded in mystery. Edgar had taken the key purely on the basis that it had seemed valuable. He had only learned of its use after escaping. Believing he would be able to receive the earl's title, he had dragged Lydia along to the Isle of Mannan.

"You went to Mannan without the key?"

"The blueprint had been passed down through my family line, and I was able to create a new one. Without that, I would have

vowed to hunt you down and tear you limb from limb whether I had His Royal Highness's permission or not."

"And yet your key wasn't enough for the merrows to bequeath the sword to you. That is because you failed to interpret the riddles in the text correctly, yes?"

Angered, Ulysses got to his feet. His discomposure was greater than Edgar's after learning that this was his "second body." "Do you really mean to say that the riddle called for something other than sacrificial blood? Merrows fall over themselves to collect human souls. A soul is what I brought them."

Edgar had also originally interpreted the text that way. Only Lydia's presence had caused him to falter. He had spent most of his days believing he needed to discard all forms of sentiment in order to live, but she had reminded him what it meant to be righteous and sympathetic toward others. Even after learning that he was deceiving her, she had tried to understand his suffering. She had been incredibly eager to put her skills as a fairy doctor to good use then.

The usual tricks Edgar would have exploited as a gang leader would never have gained him the sword or the title that came with it. He couldn't have sacrificed Lydia; that was not the sort of puzzle that the Blue Knight Earl would have set. Realizing this had not led him to the answer and, without a solution, he and his companions had been in grave danger. He had therefore made it his priority to protect Raven and Lydia, who were with him at the time. He had remembered and held fast to the concept of noblesse oblige, something no one of noble birth should ever turn their back on even in the most dire circumstances. It was also the only chance he had at besting Ulysses. Realizing anew what must be done, he studied the boy in front of him.

On the other hand, Ulysses seemed eager to vent his overflowing emotions. There was real venom in his tone as he said, "I cannot understand it. I am the only one left. The merrows sent their violent waves after me, dragging me into the ocean. Those waves pushed me this way and that, slamming my body against the rocks. They are harsh waters. It would have been kinder of them just to drown me."

Was that how he had lost his original body? It seemed that the Ulysses who had appeared before the merrows truly had died.

That truth did little to explain how this boy could speak as though these memories belonged to him. However, a seed of understanding had started to form within Edgar's mind. This boy was the result of the secret society's satanic research.

Ulysses placed both hands on the table and leaned over it toward Edgar. "And yet, I live. Obtaining this new, younger body allowed me to survive."

"Is that what you truly believe? Is that what you have been taught?"

"Taught? I suppose my education is important, but it is my soul that is vital. Ah, I should mention that I am something far more sophisticated than a spirit that has possessed another's body. This body and this life are mine completely. It is just like how you were chosen to become His Royal Highness's new body."

Every last one of the Prince's characteristics had been drilled into Edgar. That included his knowledge, along with the way he thought, spoke, and behaved. The earl knew what it was for his sense of self to be eroded. Perhaps if he had stayed with the society, his mind itself would have shattered completely and he would have believed himself to be the Prince. Having said that, it would be nothing more than Edgar's perception that had been altered. He wouldn't have *been* the Prince himself. Or perhaps the Prince's past would have been drilled into him too, and he would have believed those memories to be his own, making him a perfect replacement.

Nothing was adding up. All that was certain was that this Ulysses believed himself to be the same man who had died. Even if he had a soul as he claimed, Edgar had to wonder what would happen to the soul originally inhabiting a body when a new one came to possess it—if such a thing were even possible. It was black magic. There was no other way to describe it. Though Edgar struggled to believe it, the nightmarish experiences he had been through made more sense if one assumed that the Prince had seen him as a vessel rather than an heir.

"I may have failed to obtain the sword, but His Royal Highness assured me that my failure proved that *no one* would ever obtain it. We had no reason to fear a successful claimant to the Blue Knight Earl's title. But then, my lord, you graced these shores with your presence." That seemed to be what angered Ulysses more

than anything else. He had the earl's blood and ability to communicate with fairies. Edgar had neither, and yet it was the latter who had received the title. "How could you succeed where I had failed? The Earl of Ibrazel: a man who knows nothing about the Blue Knight Earl and cannot even *see* fairies. I very much want to kill you."

Edgar ignored Ulysses's fury and took a deep breath to compose himself. "Be my guest."

"You do not believe me capable of doing so, do you? His Royal Highness has already given me his blessing. We cannot allow any successor of the Blue Knight Earl to live."

"The Prince cannot afford to lose my royal blood. His body is aged and racked with impairments. I suppose you ought to decide which is more important to you, the eradication of one who holds the Blue Knight Earl's title in name only or the preservation of a new body for the Prince."

"That decision has been deferred to me. Your blood may be ideal for His Royal Highness's purposes, but there is nothing preventing him from finding a body that will allow him to survive for the time being. The desire to kill you exists as an unquenchable flame within me." Ulysses produced a pistol and pointed it at Edgar.

"Kill me if you must. It won't help you obtain the amber."

Naturally, Ulysses did not need Edgar to tell him that. The earl doubted that he was truly ready to pull the trigger.

"You want the banshee's amber. Should her memories return and she acknowledges your blood, you can become Ibrazel's lord. You would rather hold the irrepressible authority that allows you to have the fairies at your beck and call than a peerage here in Britain, yes? It would mean that my possession of the earldom would no longer constitute a threat to the Prince. There would no longer be any possibility of me obtaining the power that he so fears. You would also be able to deliver me to him alive and well. The amber represents an ideal solution for you." Edgar made a deliberately irritating show of brushing the pistol aside. "Not that I have any intention of yielding to your plans. I came here to make a wager."

He pulled the bead of amber from his breast pocket and let it rest on his palm, presenting it to Ulysses. The boy studied it

dubiously. While it was certainly imbued with the banshee's magic, it was not the amber in which Gladys had sealed the secrets to the earldom, but rather the tear prophesying Edgar's death. Nevertheless, it did not burn. Thus, Ulysses was unlikely to realize that it was not the amber he sought.

"You would not present the *real* amber with such little fanfare. It ought to be something you kept for when you had run out of options. Now that I know it is here, there is nothing preventing me from killing you at once."

"On the contrary, you have yet to test whether it is the genuine article. The only method you have of doing so is to release the banshee's seal here and now."

"And what comes next in *your* scheme once I have done that?"

"With her memories unsealed, the banshee will know her true master. As shall we. Suppose she identifies *me* as the Blue Knight Earl?"

"Suppose hell freezes over."

"Then let us make our wager. Should the banshee choose you, you may kill me or deliver me to the Prince as you see fit. Should she choose me, I shall become the true Blue Knight Earl. Leaving this place shouldn't prove very difficult after that. You and the Prince may twiddle your thumbs and wait for your destruction."

Ulysses fell silent. The tiny hint of uneasiness on his face did not escape Edgar's notice. Although he was primarily bluffing, it seemed that the Blue Knight Earl would prove a powerful presence once he had the full backing of Ibrazel. Ulysses probably didn't know what exactly Gladys had entrusted the banshee with either. No doubt he wanted to exercise caution in removing the fairy's seal.

"Things won't go your way as you presume. Even if the banshee does choose you, you won't be granted control over fairy magic," Ulysses said, although he seemed to want to convince himself.

"In that case, you ought to be champing at the bit to accept my wager."

Edgar would not allow the Blue Knight Earl's powers to fall into the Prince's hands under any circumstances. He would prevent it for the sake of Raven, Scarlet Moon, and Lydia: the girl who adored fairies and would want him to do this for the members of the Seelie Court. This amber wasn't even that which Ulysses

wanted. There was no seal to break, and Edgar had no intention of making any wagers.

Ulysses summoned Jimmy, who had been waiting outside the room, then issued a curt order to fetch the banshee.

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The fairy path led Lydia and Paul to a room inside an estate. Everything about the building and its furnishing were of the human world. However, a glance outside the window revealed the existence of two slender crescent moons. These moons weren't the only curiosity of the outside world: there was nothing else there apart from the night sky. No ground beneath; just darkness as far as the eye could see. It was probable that this was a place of endless night where dawn never broke.

"Do you suppose Ulysses created this place as he did before?" Paul asked. He was referring to the occasion when the boy had linked one of London's buildings to an underground goblin lair.

"Perhaps. However, we are not underground, and there is nothing to suggest that he has taken great time or care to place any enchantments. It seems the magic has been cast outside only, so we shouldn't be at risk of this place collapsing on us like last time."

Ulysses had likely made this a world of eternal night to accommodate his fairies of darkness, who would find it easier to work under such conditions.

Paul gave a sigh of relief. Then he stooped down as something caught his eye. "Miss Carlton, there is amber here." He picked up a bead of it from the floor. The unsteady trail of amber pebbles led through the open door of the next room, from which they could hear sobbing. Peering around the doorway, they saw a girl sitting on the bed, her shoulders trembling: the banshee.

"There you are!" Lydia called. "What's the matter? Are you feeling unwell?"

The banshee turned to her, eyes widening. "It's you…"

"Did Ulysses do anything untoward to you?"

"Mr. Paul! No, I haven't seen Lord Ulysses since he told me to stay in this room. But the boy with him kept saying that you were dead, that he had killed you, and I was sure that it was my fault…"

Tears began streaming down her cheeks again.

Paul approached her. Though he seemed bewildered, there was a comforting tenderness to his gaze. “I am very much in good health, as you can see. So perhaps you would stem your tears for me.”

“All right,” she stammered, hurriedly wiping her lightly flushed face.

Though Lydia picked up on the banshee’s bashfulness, Paul—perhaps predictably—didn’t seem to notice in the least. He ruffled her hair, apparently under the impression that the fairy was more child than adult.

“We are here to escort you out of this place,” Lydia said.

“That’s right.” Paul nodded. “Come with us. We have found the amber that will restore your memories. Lord Ashenbert and the lovely fairy doctor here will put you right. I guarantee it.”

“But…” the banshee mumbled. It seemed that the blood she had sensed within Ulysses held a lot of sway over her. Her trust in Paul was also strong, however, leading to her indecisiveness. Therefore, she might be susceptible to persuasion.

“The merrows bequeathed the sword to Edgar. You may not be able to sense the Blue Knight Earl’s power within him, but Her Majesty the Queen, who possesses authority over the earldom, recognizes him as the Earl of Ibrazel.”

The banshee fell into thought, seeming more confused than ever.

“Your tears produced an amber that does not burn,” Lydia went on, “hence prophesying a death within the family you serve. Rather than Ulysses, this prophecy tells of Edgar’s fate, doesn’t it? The man who has inherited the Ashenbert name.”

Paul gasped. “Miss Carlton! Is that true?”

She hadn’t had the chance to tell him yet. There was no time for a full explanation at present either, and so she merely nodded before turning her attention back to the banshee. “With that being the case, there is no room for doubt that Edgar is the earl. Please recognize that for his sake as well. I would also like to ask for your assistance. Is there any way to render the prophecy powerless?”

The girl didn’t reply at once. It seemed not that she was thinking, but that she was preparing to share unpleasant news. “I do not believe that such a thing is possible. I do not cry these

prophesying tears on purpose. It is rather that my tears happen to hold a deep understanding of my masters' fates."

Though Lydia hadn't expected any different, she didn't want to accept the banshee's response. If Ulysses was in this estate, that meant Edgar must be too. They had the amber. If only the banshee would accept Edgar as the earl, he might be able to turn the tables on Ulysses. Were that to happen, perhaps the prophecy of death on his head could be prevented from coming true.

She had to find a way to contact Edgar, but she didn't have the time to think and come up with an answer. Especially not since there were now footsteps approaching. They sounded like they were coming up the stairs.

"Someone is coming! You must hide! Quickly!" the banshee whispered.

"Banshee. Lord Ulysses is calling for you," a voice came from outside.

The banshee jumped to her feet. "Coming!" she replied nervously. Clearly flustered, she turned to Lydia and Paul. "That was Lord Ulysses's loyal black dog. He is a most fearsome fairy who will kill you should he so much as lay eyes on you! Oh, what now? I must go, but I do not know in whom I should place my trust to fulfill Lady Gladys's wishes."

"In that case, might I ask for your cloak?" Lydia said as soon as the idea struck her.

"Stop dawdling!" snapped the black dog outside the door.

Switching cloaks with the banshee, Lydia pulled the green hood down far over her face.

"What do you intend to do, Miss Carlton?"

Lydia pushed Gladys's painting into Paul's chest. "I am going to search for Edgar. I ask that you take the banshee away from here. As long as you keep hold of this painting, she will be able to lead you through the fairy path without losing sight of you."

"But what is to become of you?"

"I am a fairy doctor. I shall surely find a means to return."

The door opened with a click. The black dog had exhausted his patience. Lydia all but pushed him out of the room with her, pretending to be the banshee.

"That took far too long." The dog, who was in the form of a boy, began to walk. He didn't suspect a thing about the girl with the

hood pulled down over her face.

The building was gloomy, with candlelight as its sole source of illumination. All she could make out of the room she had been led to was that it was occupied by two figures. However, the low light was to her advantage. Combined with her hood, it ensured that everyone took her to be the banshee. Neither person reacted with any suspicion. She stood in place, and one of them approached her.

"It is a relief to see you unharmed. I have come here to rescue you."

Edgar? Only just managing to keep her voice in, Lydia peered up cautiously from under her hood. It was indeed Edgar. There was no mistaking that handsome smile. She hadn't expected to run into him this soon. Relieved as she was, she couldn't afford to break character with Ulysses there.

"You are wasting your time, my lord. The banshee knows that *I* am the only one who carries the Blue Knight Earl's blood."

"And yet, *I* am the title's official holder. Banshee, you are a servant to the earldom. Therefore, you are to come back with me. You understand that, yes?"

"Let our wager commence," Ulysses said.

Edgar ignored him and took the banshee—or rather, Lydia—by the hand. "You recall no master other than Lady Gladys, am I right? Think of her noble spirit. It will soon become clear to you which of us is fit to inherit both it and her title." He didn't hesitate to plant an effortless kiss on her hand, a behavior he was well-versed in. One would be hard-pressed to find a woman who didn't swoon in response, especially when it was combined with his aristocratic beauty and sweet, eloquent whispers. Even Lydia, who knew the tricks he hid up his sleeve, was close to growing flustered. He likely thought his wiles would work on the banshee. She might have been a fairy, but she was still female.

Lydia had no idea how she ought to respond. Things had become strangely awkward.

"That man has not an ounce of noble pride. His heart and mind are as ugly as they come," he said, making her wonder if he was intentionally trying to provoke Ulysses.

The boy approached them, irritated by Edgar's attitude. He took

Lydia by the shoulders and tried to pull her toward himself. “If you are quite finished embarrassing yourself…”

Without warning, Edgar turned on Ulysses. In a flash, he pulled a pistol out from the boy’s breast pocket. The next second, its barrel was pressed to the center of his enemy’s brow. Taken completely off guard, Ulysses could only freeze in place.

“My dear Ulysses II, I wonder, do you have a third body spare? I suppose you are too young to have produced a son who could lend you his.”

“Shoot if you like. Shoot and be confined here for all eternity.”

“I would gladly do so. My desire to see you dead is greater than my desire to escape.”

Lydia realized that Edgar was prepared to die here along with his enemy. It was obvious from the way he showed no hesitation in making to pull the trigger. But just before the gunshot could sound, a shadow slipped in between the two men. The black dog fastened his teeth onto Edgar’s arm, changing the bullet’s trajectory so that it grazed Ulysses’s shoulder.

While Jimmy was distracted by his fallen master, Lydia grabbed Edgar and ran from the room with him in tow.

“Banshee? Where are we going? I need to dispose of Ulysses.”

The moment he did so, he would be killed. But it wasn’t as if Lydia knew how to return to the human realm either. She ran on, sensing their pursuit by a number of fairy dogs that had picked up on the commotion. Jimmy wasn’t the only fairy of the Unseelie Court under Ulysses’s command. But Lydia was a fairy doctor, and her knowledge was her weapon.

“Get down, Edgar!”

The pair dropped to the floor. It was the fastest way to protect oneself when being chased by fairy dogs. The pack had too much momentum and ended up running straight past the humans. Lydia leaped to her feet and dragged Edgar into a nearby room to hide. It was too dark to see anything. She fumbled around to find her way, which was when Edgar grabbed her arm and pulled her back.

“Lydia? Is it you?” Before she could even respond, he had pulled her hood down and touched her hair. “I *knew* I could smell chamomile.”

His voice sounded right by her ear, revealing to her how close

he was. Slightly flustered, she took a step back. It was not as big a step as she would have liked; Edgar was keeping hold of her hair and not letting go.

"Oh, but why did you come here? It's dangerous. Did you come alone?"

"Mr. Firman is with me," she explained, stumbling over her words. "We found the amber, and it led us to the banshee."

"The amber? Really?"

"It was used in the painting of Lady Gladys, which I have given to Mr. Firman. He should be using it to take the banshee away from here."

Edgar fell into a troubled silence for some time, after which he gave a quiet sigh. "I understand, but whatever possessed you to present yourself as the banshee and come to me? How are we to get back now if she and Firman have already left?"

"Master Jimmy came for the banshee. I couldn't let him take her, so we exchanged cloaks on the spur of the moment."

"I shouldn't need to make this clear, but Ulysses wouldn't have done anything to harm the banshee. Had he found *you*, on the other hand... How could you have been so senseless?"

Though he was right, Lydia was incensed. He was making it sound like she had been nothing but a burden.

"So I shouldn't have come, is that it? And pray tell, which of us is the more senseless? You are the one who came to kill Ulysses without even a *word* about the banshee's prophecy to me! Was your intention to throw your life away? Never have I heard of such selfishness!"

Edgar paused. "How did you find out about the prophecy?"

"Kelpie knew all about it. He used it as an excuse to try and spirit me away, saying that my engagement with you was no longer legitimate."

"Meddling horse," Edgar muttered.

She wondered whether he was irritated that Kelpie had divulged the prophecy to her or because he had tried to take her away. The latter seemed harder to believe at present.

"I suppose worrying about you was a waste of my time? Perhaps I should have gone with Kelpie after all, seeing as you were so willing to leave me! I could have forgotten all about you and lived such a peaceful life. I wouldn't have had to suffer for

losing y—" Lydia cut herself off, worried that she was on the cusp of saying something strange. Now that her eyes were growing accustomed to the dark, she could faintly make out Edgar's silhouette—something that made her feel all the more embarrassed. When she tried to turn away, he took her hand this time.

"I'm sorry. I see now why you put the ring back on and came to save me. You chose me over Kelpie." His fingers ran themselves over her ring.



His conceitedness never left him, no matter the situation. Lydia's tongue sharpened, in part to distract her from her embarrassment. "I put this on to be rid of Kelpie and nothing more! I vow never to worry about you again, so please, by all means, do not let me hold you back from doing as you wish!"

"Lydia, you have no idea how overjoyed I was to see you, for I thought we would never meet again. I came alone without uttering a word to you about the prophecy because I did not want to see you dragged into danger."

Edgar sounded sincere, and while she knew he was probably telling the truth and that he hadn't meant to imply she was a burden, it made her all the more aware of how little help she had been. The crushing truth was that Edgar had come alone because he knew that her skills as a fairy doctor didn't come close to Ulysses's.

"My main priority was to prevent Ulysses from winning over the banshee. I could *not* allow her to recognize him as the Blue Knight Earl. I felt that was my duty, even though I am unworthy of my title."

That might have explained why he had tried flirting with the banshee.

"I ought to inform you that you would have no chance seducing a banshee."

"Why, because she already sensed the earl's blood within Ulysses? Is it not true that she used to be a human female? Any woman would pick me over that ruffian."

Again, his conceitedness stared Lydia right in the face.

"Ah, but by no means was it my intention to be unfaithful. You understand that I had no other choice, don't you?"

The mind boggled when one thought that he was prepared to seduce anyone should he have "no other choice."

"I believe that the banshee is enamored with Mr. Firman. She would have regarded anything that you said to her as flippant."

Edgar stayed silent for some time then. It seemed that she had been successful in fighting back against his arrogance. "Ah. Much like yourself."

"That isn't the case for me."

"You would prefer a man such as Firman, who understands little when it comes to romance or the feelings of women, but is as

sincere as they come and entirely devoted to his work. It is little wonder that you won't believe my confessions of love, though I make them time and time again."

"No, I do not believe them, but Mr. Firman is neither here nor there! Quite apart from anything else, we haven't the time to quarrel about this!"

"Indeed. It is desperately cold here. It feels as though there is snow blowing around my ankles."

Lydia could also feel what seemed to be a pile of snow around her feet, but it was too dark to make anything out. "I wonder whether there is a window open. Say, can you see that there is a little more light over there?"

They made their way over hand in hand, with Lydia silently telling herself that they had no choice due to the gloom. It felt as if the snow at their feet was growing deeper the farther they walked. It also became apparent what the light source was: the faintly red, smoldering embers of a hearth. However, even as they drew closer, they couldn't feel a lick of heat from it.

"Are you able to explain this, Lydia?"

Edgar's question prompted her to survey their surroundings. The light of the fire revealed that they seemed to be in a snowy forest. Only the hearth was out of place.

"We must have wandered outside somehow," Edgar said.

"That cannot be so. The building is surrounded by magic. It should not be possible to leave it so easily. The interior must have warped into this. I am sure that we are still in one of the rooms." Lydia snapped a branch and used it to poke the flames, revealing more of their surroundings. However, there was still no indication at all that they were inside. "The door we passed through must be here somewhere."

She made to go and search for it, which was when Edgar let go of her hand. He leaned against a nearby tree as if regaining his balance, then slowly slid to the ground. Lydia rushed over in a panic. There was blood dripping from his right hand, staining the snow red.

"Edgar! Did you hurt yourself? Goodness me, look at all this blood!"

He was staring at the blood as if seeing it for the first time. "Strange. I don't feel the slightest bit of pain." Folding up his

sleeve, he inspected the wound. It seemed to have come from where the black dog had bitten him, and it wasn't especially conspicuous.

Though Lydia wrapped the wound with her handkerchief, it wouldn't stop bleeding. "I wonder if his fang broke off and is stuck in there…"

"Would that be something to worry about?"

It potentially could be.

"The blood won't stop until we return to the human world and expose you to sunlight. This place has remained under nightfall since you arrived, yes? That is so the fairies of the Unseelie Court can use their magic to its full potential."

Lydia still didn't know how they could leave. Escaping this room was their first priority, but she still couldn't see any door no matter where she looked. Though the hearth should have been against a wall, she could walk around it easily without sensing anything of the sort.

"Do you have a knife, Lydia? Mine was taken before I arrived here."

"I do. What will you use it for?"

"I am going to open the wound to remove the fang."

"By yourself?"

"It will be far from the first time."

Although she struggled to believe him, she did know that Edgar had been walking a battlefield of sorts ever since escaping from the Prince. Dealing with wounds and bloodshed was all but an everyday occurrence for him. However, Lydia could not lend him her knife. The black dog's fang would have dissolved by now. Its magic's damage was already done.

Edgar seemed to pick up on the reason for her hesitation. He let out a tired sigh. "Perhaps this is part of the banshee's prophecy. It doesn't hurt in the slightest. It just seems that all my strength has left me."

Lydia shook her head. She didn't want it to be true. "There isn't anything to worry about. You will be fine as soon as we leave this place."

"I cannot move."

The snowfall had become heavier, and the wind had picked up. They were likely to find themselves in a blizzard at this rate. A

numbing cold was gradually seeping into Lydia's limbs.

"Go on alone. If you stay here, you will only freeze with me."

"What nonsense."

"Did you not vow never to worry about me again?"

"That is hardly relevant now! How can I go on and just leave you here? You should *know* that I cannot! You are a devil for telling me to do such a thing in the first place!" Lydia tugged on his arm, determined to get him to his feet. All she achieved was being pulled into his embrace and falling down with him.

"Forgive me. I wished to test whether you still had patience with me."

His embrace brought back the memories of that recent night, and she froze. Unlike then, however, there was very little strength in Edgar's arms. If she wanted to escape, she could likely do it in an instant.

"Are you still angry about that night?"

"Why should I be?" she demanded. "Nothing happened."

"Will you allow me to dispel your misapprehensions? To explain to you why saying that name—whomever it belonged to—was done entirely innocently?"

Lydia's heart stung. So *that* was what he had been referring to. "There is no need to. It is none of my business."

"Whose name was it? It might have belonged to my governess growing up, or a cousin, for example. I do not wish to die while you still doubt me. This matters very much to me."

Lydia couldn't bring herself to respond.

"Ann? Annie? Angie?" He paused. "I ought to have had Raven give me the names in alphabetical order after all."

"The list of possibilities is that long, is it?"

"This is not the only regret I have either."

"You will bring misfortune upon yourself, speaking like that. The black dog's magic will leave you as soon as we find you some sunlight."

It wasn't clear whether he had heard her as he continued. "Did we kiss?"

Though her body stiffened, Lydia managed to push herself away from Edgar, who had been leaning on her. The embarrassment would have been too much to bear had they stayed touching. "No...we didn't."

The smile he gave her had a hint of dejection to it. “So I was unable to steal so much as a kiss from you even when alcohol had freed me from my inhibitions. I must have something wrong with me, don’t you think?”

She had no idea *what* to think.

“I believe I know the cause of it: the love I hold for you.” His ash-mauve eyes flickered in the light of the hearth as he looked at her. It was enough to make her want to cry. She had to remind herself that it hadn’t been *her* kiss that he had sought. His failure to take any action had been because he’d thought he was holding Ermine. “I cannot die like this. At least allow me one kiss.”

Lydia wished he would stop talking about dying. She no longer had any understanding of the emotions in her heart, whether they were embarrassment, irritation, or sadness. However, there was one sentiment at the very center of the chaos that had been there since long before coming here: she didn’t want to lose Edgar.

She felt she had enjoyed her recent period in Scotland away from him. But perhaps happiness was just as much in her grasp working as the earl’s fairy doctor, for he recognized the skills within her that others shunned. At the same time, did she need her work to live a happy, peaceful life among the fairies?

There was still a part of her—a part removed from her mantle as a fairy doctor—that panicked at the thought of losing Edgar. She didn’t know if she was happy when they were together. There certainly wasn’t much of a sense of peace. She was often angry, nervous, or tearful. However, she couldn’t picture being without him anymore. Even if she returned to her trouble-free life in Scotland, she couldn’t help but wonder whether the happiness she used to feel was now forever lost to her.

Just how had this change occurred within her? She certainly hadn’t grown to trust Edgar in any sense of the word.

It took all she had to say, “Once we have arrived home safe and sound.”

He furrowed his brow. “All right,” he murmured at length.

“I wouldn’t want you to feel able to die because you received the kiss you so desired. You will allow me to return you home safely first.”

Leaning against the tree, Edgar rose unsteadily to his feet. He could stand. Lydia wondered whether she had been on the cusp of

being deceived again. The thought only crossed her mind for a second before she saw the blood still dripping from his arm. It couldn't be denied that it was taking him a lot of effort just to walk.

"We need to find a door, yes?"

The snowfall was growing more violent, and it was more difficult than ever to make out what was where.

"Lydia, I see somebody."

She focused her sight beyond the snow and saw the vague outline of a figure. It was gradually moving closer.

"Ermine…" Lydia recognized the short-haired woman but stopped in her tracks. She didn't know how to react to seeing Edgar's servant in Ulysses's estate.

"Lord Ashenbert. Miss Carlton. Are you both all right?"

"I wouldn't go that far."

"You are hurt?" Flustered, Ermine rushed over to her master. Noticing the blood and no doubt sensing the black dog's magic, she frowned deeply. She seemed to be as sincerely worried about Edgar as always.

"Are you here alone, Ermine? Are *you* all right? You haven't had any encounters with our enemies?" Though Edgar had been wary of her, he spoke to her in his usual familiar tone.

"Raven and Mr. Nico accompanied me. We separated to search for you." There was no immediate way of knowing if Ermine was telling the truth. She surveyed the surrounding blizzard. "We must leave as quickly as we can."

"Do you know the way out?" Edgar asked.

"This way."

Lydia was the first to follow her. While it may have been true that Ermine was communicating with Ulysses, the fairy doctor could not believe that she would ever bring Edgar to harm.

"Edgar needs sunlight. We must return to the human world as quickly as possible."

"I see. Then let us not dawdle."

Edgar had started walking too. He covertly handed Ulysses's pistol to Lydia. "You must leave me if it comes to it."

Never had he used such a commanding tone with her. Lydia could only think that he was at his limit trying to walk on his own two feet.

In Exchange for One's Life

"My, it's Lady Gladys!" Enraptured, the banshee stared at the painting Paul held out before her.

"I have been in possession of this painting for a long time. I wonder if you could sense that and were drawn to me because of it."

The girl traced the subject's golden hair with a finger. She must have recognized it for what it was. "My tears—this amber—foretold Lady Gladys's death, didn't it?"

"Her ladyship's death wasn't your fault. And I do believe that without the amber, she might not have come upon the idea of leaving a message for whomever might come to inherit the earldom next."

The banshee still required further persuasion to leave Ulysses. There was no telling how long it would take the boy to realize that Lydia was not the fairy. They could not leave this enchanted estate without the banshee's help, so Paul needed to convince her, find Lydia, and then go and fetch help for Edgar.

"Your memories are sealed away within this amber, aren't they? Are you able to unlock them?" Paul asked.

"Only Lord Ulysses is capable of doing so."

Paul doubted it would convince her were he to suggest that Edgar might have been able to do something, so he held his tongue. There was no doubt in the banshee's mind as to who had inherited the Blue Knight Earl's powers. If Ulysses was the one to break the seal, she would likely recognize him as Lady Gladys's successor and yield whatever it was that she had been entrusted with to him.

"You have no intention of returning to Lord Ashenbert with me, do you?" Paul hung his head.

The banshee gave him an apologetic look. "Mr. Paul, I am sure that your lord is a wonderful gentleman in his own right. However, he is not my—"

Suddenly, the door opened. Paul's head snapped up to see a boy standing there with a foul expression on his face.

Ulysses!

"I had my fairy dogs follow your scent, banshee. I was most surprised to hear that you were still in the estate and had to come and see for myself. So, who was the girl in the green cloak?" Ulysses entered the room, accompanied by a number of fairy dogs behind him. He glared down at Paul. "You again? You do not have the ability to come here alone. I presume the other girl was the fairy doctor, then." He sneered. "Still, I cannot believe that *she* would be able to reach this place by herself either. You have the amber, don't you?"

Panicking, Paul lowered his gaze, which might not have been the correct response after all. He was grabbed by the collar and struck, sending him sprawling to the floor. The painter could hear the banshee screaming, but he didn't even have time to raise his head before he was kicked. He couldn't breathe properly anymore, let alone get to his feet. His attacker was a large man, presumably one of the fairy dogs in human form. Next, Paul was yanked up by the scruff of his neck.

"Where is the amber?" Ulysses pressed. "Tell me or die. These fairy dogs are incapable of leniency."

"Please stop this, Lord Ulysses." The banshee tried to cling to the boy, but Jimmy pulled her away just as Paul received another punch that pushed him back down.

The fairy dog searched Paul's clothing, then turned to his master to report that he hadn't found the amber.

"Perhaps it is with the fairy doctor." Ulysses turned to the banshee, who was still being subdued by Jimmy. "Or did this man give *you* the amber?"

The banshee struggled to answer, but her gaze flickered toward the bed. Jimmy immediately went to search beneath it. She had thrown Gladys's portrait under it on the spur of the moment. It wasn't long until Jimmy found it and handed it to Ulysses.

"What is this?"

The banshee hesitated. "It is a painting I received from Mr. Paul. He brought it for me because he thought I might like it." Her voice wobbled. "Please give it back."

His mind still hazy, Paul wondered why she would lie to Ulysses when she believed him to be her master. He just hoped that the boy would lose interest in the painting and return it.

Indeed, Ulysses did take it to be an ordinary painting. But he didn't return it to the banshee. He threw it into the fireplace instead. "I suppose the fairy doctor must have the amber after all."

"My lord," Jimmy said, "the painting isn't burning."

Ulysses whipped around. The banshee had frozen and, unable to move himself, Paul could only watch in horror. The boy approached the fireplace, gazing intently at how the subject's glowing, pale blonde hair was repelling the flames. Then, he grinned.

"So *that* is where the amber was hidden." He laughed as Jimmy retrieved the painting. Then, his face quickly twisted, and he walked up to the banshee. "You knew and you lied to me. You would defy me, would you?"

"No, I—"

"Of course. You cannot. Because I am the only one capable of breaking the seal. Come. Whatever Gladys entrusted to you, you will be relinquishing it to me soon enough."

As the banshee was dragged from the room, she desperately tried to turn back in Paul's direction. "What will become of Mr. Paul?"

"I shan't kill him so long as you do as you're told."

***

Ermine had led Lydia and Edgar out of the snowy forest. After carefully traversing the corridor and its creaking floorboards, they had finally returned to the room where Lydia had found the banshee. Ermine went in first, then came back to inform them that it seemed to be empty.

"Perhaps Mr. Firman managed to escape with her," Lydia suggested, hoping it was true.

Edgar didn't look convinced. Although he had needed to pause and lean against the wall at certain points to catch his breath, he had been managing to walk unaided. He was still bleeding, though. They had stemmed the flow by wrapping some cloth torn from a curtain around his arm, but even that was gradually getting redder. When he spoke, however, he maintained a surprisingly steady voice.

"It is unthinkable that Firman should have managed to seduce

any woman in such a short span of time."

Especially considering that he wasn't trying to. But Lydia understood his point and cocked her head.

Edgar seemed to notice something then and pressed ahead through the next door into the bedroom. "Firman!" he cried, stopping in one gloomy corner of the room.

There, Lydia spotted Paul on the floor. When Edgar helped him up, the artist regained consciousness, and his eyes slid open.

"My lord? Oh, and Miss Carlton… Thank goodness."

"What happened to you? Where is the banshee?"

Paul had sat up, and now he caught sight of Ermine. He didn't try to hide his shock at seeing her.

"Are you all right, Mr. Firman?"

"Sorry? Oh, um. Yes, yes, I am. Just a little overwhelmed by it all, you see." Taking a deep breath to compose himself, Paul turned on his knees to face Edgar, then lowered his head. "Forgive me, my lord. Ulysses took both the banshee and the amber."

"In that case, it's a simple matter of getting them back," the earl said at once.

We don't have time… Lydia thought. They needed to find Nico and return Edgar to the human world as quickly as possible. And yet, he didn't seem concerned about himself in the least.

"Lydia, you must stay here with Firman."

"I shan't. I am coming with you."

Edgar shot Ermine a glance, and the two of them quickly left the bedroom, closing the door behind them.

"Edgar! Open this door at once!"

"I'm sorry, Lydia, but I vow to find Nico, and I shall tell him to come and take you home."

"Oh no you won't! This place is bewitched! You *need* me!"

"I am not willing to wait here either, my lord! Please open the door!" Paul cried.

The pair banged on the door, and Lydia continued to hurl complaints through it, but it seemed to be locked from the outside. There was no response to be heard from Edgar.

He truly intends to die, doesn't he?

Lydia looked around the room to search for another exit, but there was nothing save for a window. It didn't open, nor did it crack when they struck it. It too was bewitched. Paul peered at the

gap between the door and the wall, considering how they might unlock it.

Lydia gazed outside. The twin moons had not moved. Something had caught her attention when they had first arrived here, and she paused to give it some thought. The magic cast on this place kept the view outside static. It was similar to the magic the merrow had used on Mannan. No matter how powerful a fairy's magic was, it could never be enough to alter a grand force of nature. Hanging an extra moon in the sky was simply impossible, which begged the question: why did it *appear* that there were two of them?

The moon on the right was in a higher position than it had been when they had first come to this room. Meanwhile, the other one did not seem to be moving at all.

I wonder why?

"That's a pistol you are holding there, isn't it, Miss Carlton?"

Paul's question pulled her back to her senses and reminded her of the weapon she had been gripping all this time. "Oh…yes, it is. I wonder whether we can break the lock with it."

"We would risk Ulysses and his fairy dogs hearing the gunshot if we did."

They fell back into thought. It was then that there came a voice from the other side of the door.

"Lydia! Are you in there?" Nico called.

She practically flung herself against the door. "Nico, is that you? You must open up quickly! Edgar is injured, but despite that, he went with Ermine to find Ulysses!"

The lock clicked and the door opened, revealing Raven and the masked fairy cat.

"You say his lordship is injured?" the boy asked, already seething with bloodlust.

"Yes, and Ulysses has taken both the banshee and the amber we were searching for. Edgar is risking his life to ensure that he does not come upon what Lady Gladys left behind."

"Let us make haste." Surprisingly, it was Paul who gave the order.

Everyone left the room obediently. Only Nico shook his head and sighed. "I don't suppose I should even bother to warn them of the danger. They'll never listen."

***

Edgar had returned to Ulysses with only Ermine in tow. The boy had all but led him there. As the pair had been wandering the hallways, a fairy dog had appeared to escort them to the right place.

“Goodness me. It must have slipped my mind that deception is one of your greatest talents.” Ulysses was sitting in the center of the large, drafty hall with his arms folded and his irritation barely concealed. This time, he made no attempt to move any closer to the earl.

“Have you summoned me again so that we might discover the result of our wager?”

“‘Wager’ was never the appropriate term for it. I no longer see the need for any such negotiations at this point.”

The banshee was sitting in the chair beside Ulysses. Her face was downcast, and she seemed to be on the verge of tears, so Edgar said, “There is no need to worry about Firman. He is to be escorted back by an associate of mine.”

“A few of your lackeys may have made an appearance, but it will do nothing for your chances of victory.” Ulysses glanced at Ermine. It wasn’t enough for Edgar to come to any conclusion about whether they were working together. “As such, my lord, I can offer you this: beg for your life, and I shall promise to spare it.”

“My life? Or merely my body, so that it may be possessed by the Prince?”

“You may interpret it as you wish. I, however, long for you to witness the moment that I take Gladys’s inheritance for myself.” Ulysses stood up.

Edgar was careful not to let himself stagger as he drew himself up to his full height. “Obtain what you will, but the noble spirit will remain forever out of your grasp. Never will you possess the qualities required of a descendant of the Ashenberts. You know nothing of the history or significance of earldom in England, nor do you know what it is to have an exalted duty to your people. I can also declare that you are unfamiliar with the concept of a chivalrous heart. And yet, you would attempt to contend with me for the title?”

“Your words are your only weapon. Your life and fate, however,

are under my control.” Despite Ulysses’s confident tone, Edgar was sure that his words had shaken the boy, whose fists were trembling. It was far from easy to obtain a peerage in Great Britain. Even if Ulysses were able to clad himself in his title, his speech and behaviors would betray his common birth in mere seconds. Edgar was not about to let him forget that.

“The same holds true for the Prince. How are we to believe he is royalty, when he is in truth little more than an American rogue? One can only think that he holds the prestigious peerage of this country in contempt.”

Although the Prince spoke with an upper-class British accent, that was neither here nor there. Edgar’s sole objective was to agitate Ulysses. But his enemy did not ignite. It seemed he had learned his lesson.

“That’s enough idle chatter for now. The time has come to break the seal.”

Ulysses placed the small painting of Gladys on the table. Edgar gasped as he ran his finger over her golden hair, realizing it was the amber. Who would have thought it would be used as paint?

“Shall I take it from him, my lord?” Ermine whispered.

Edgar didn’t know whether her offer was sincere, but he doubted she would succeed even if it was. He subtly shook his head.

“There is just one thing that can melt the banshee’s unburnable amber, and you, my lord, do not have it.” Producing a knife, Ulysses nicked his fingertip. He then smeared the resulting blood over Gladys’s hair.

Edgar couldn’t help but frown at the lack of grace and elegance in what should have been a series of highly dramatic movements. But it didn’t seem to matter. Where the blood smeared the painting, it burst into red flame. The amber was burning. The fire began to spread over the entirety of the small canvas.

The banshee had stood up to get a better look at the flames, but now she stumbled and fell. Edgar instinctively made to help her, only for Jimmy to grab his arm and stop him. The black dog was deliberately digging his nails into the wound where his fang had been buried.

“Get your paws off me, you filthy mutt.”

Enraged, Jimmy took on his dog form. Ermine came between

them, and the black dog leaped backward to avoid her knife. Edgar tried to take the opportunity to approach the banshee but quickly found himself surrounded by fairy dogs. One of them jumped at him. Grabbing the candlestand beside him, Edgar knocked the creature out of his way, but another was coming for his back. He didn't have enough balance to react in time. However, the dog was suddenly struck out of the air and slammed into the floor. Edgar spotted a dark-skinned boy then.

"Please forgive my tardiness, my lord." Raven brandished his knife at the fairy dogs around them.

A human could not have posed much of a threat to the devilish creatures. Even the dog that he had cut had quickly risen to its feet again. But though the dark fairies growled, they did not move an inch. It was as if they had caught the scent of the monstrous spirits dwelling within Raven.

Just then, the banshee let out a short cry. Ermine had grabbed the girl and was holding a knife to her throat. Her actions took both Edgar and Ulysses by surprise.

The earl stared. "Ermine? What are you doing?"

"My lord, if the banshee is eliminated, Lady Gladys's inheritance will be lost forever. I possess fairy magic as much as any other. Therefore, I am able to kill her."

"Stop!" Ulysses cried, clearly panicked.

"Raven, take his lordship and leave this place. You must go now, lest his wound become fatal!"

Raven's gaze snapped to Edgar's arm. However, the circle of fairy dogs surrounding the pair had not broken ranks.

"Let them pass," Ermine warned, "or I shall take this girl's life."

Ulysses anguished over the decision as he struggled to identify the selkie's motivations. Edgar wasn't entirely certain of them himself. While he could see that taking advantage of the opportunity she had created for him might save his life, he couldn't bring himself to do so.

He took a deep breath. "Release her, Ermine. I do not intend to sacrifice her life in order to save my own."

The banshee was a member of the earldom that Edgar considered his own, mysterious powers or not. The Blue Knight Earl's sword was all he needed. Lydia had helped him to remember that he was a nobleman. He was proud of the title she had

granted him. He could not, therefore, allow one of his people to come to harm.

Though Ermine gave him a bewildered look, she slowly let go of the banshee, and Ulysses's triumphant laughter filled the air.

Lydia, Paul, and Nico had come to the stairs leading to the drafty hall shortly after Raven had gone in. Presently, they looked down on Edgar, surrounded by the fairy dogs, and Ulysses, who was still laughing.

"Now there's a rather soft turn for a man who has come this far by sacrificing everyone around him," Ulysses remarked.

"This girl is not the same as the companions I lost. Nor is my station the same as it was then."

"Is this what you consider to be your pride as a nobleman? I think I could well do without it if this is the weakness it engenders."

The air in the hall grew tense. Lydia watched the scene from their hiding place, desperately trying to think of a way out of their situation.

"I wonder whether the banshee's seal has been broken," Paul whispered from beside her.

"I think it has," Nico replied. "Those cinders on the table look like fragments of canvas. I would wager that those are the burnt remains of the amber you found."

Paul's face fell. "Oh, but it was a wonderful painting. To think it has been reduced to ashes..." It seemed that he valued the painting much more than the amber.

"Come to me, banshee," Ulysses called. The girl staggered to her feet and approached him. "You should have regained all of your memories by now. Isn't there something you are required to pass on to the Blue Knight Earl's descendant?"

Ulysses cannot be allowed to take it! Lydia thought desperately, although she wasn't sure how to prevent it from happening. She could only watch with bated breath.

The banshee stood before Ulysses and gave a small curtsy, as she would to an aristocrat. "I have a request, Lord Ulysses. Please spare this gentleman's life." The boy frowned at her unexpected words. "Please send him back to where he can be exposed to the sunlight. Only then shall I give you what was left to me by Lady

Gladys."

"You would try to bargain with your master?"

"No, I just…" The banshee began to cry. Her fear of Ulysses and his fairy dogs was making her tremble. But then she glanced in Edgar's direction and, at length, resolutely raised her head. "I cannot believe that you are my master."

Shocked silence dominated the room for some time.

When Ulysses snapped, it became clear that an icy rage had been building up within him since the banshee's declaration. "Then I have no reason *not* to kill him! *I* am your master, and you have no choice but to submit to me." The young man turned to Jimmy and gave him the furious order to kill.

The boy returned to his canine form and made to leap at Edgar. Raven swiped with his knife, but then the other fairy dogs jumped in as one, and confusion reigned.

"Stop!" Lydia cried without thinking and rushed out from her hiding place.

"Lydia?! Stay away!" Edgar shouted.

She hurried down the stairs but, before she knew it, a fairy dog was baring its teeth and leaping at her. She crouched down at once. Although she somehow managed to avoid the creature attacking her, she looked up only to see the jet-black dog kicking off the ground right toward Edgar.

"Edgar! Behind you!"

Whether he saw it or not, his vision must have been growing hazy, because he slumped back against the wall and slid to the floor. That was when a figure fluttered down between him and the dog. The banshee took the brunt of the black dog's bite and tumbled with it to the floor.

"My goodness," Lydia murmured, but she knew now that there was no time to hesitate. She needed to get everyone home. She didn't know if she could do it or if her judgment was sound. But she did know that there was only one possibility open to her. She was his fairy doctor. That was the truth she clung to. Lifting the pistol that Edgar had given her earlier, she raised her voice. "Hear me, fairy dogs! Return to the cemetery where you nest at once! Else I will call sunlight to this place!"

Every dog turned to look in her direction. Though they growled, they also seemed hesitant.

“If you do not wish your eyes to be burned by the sun, you must return to your dens!”

“You are a fairy doctor in name alone and little more than a child,” Ulysses scoffed. “You ought to know what you are and are not capable of.” He gave a mocking, self-assured laugh.

It only made Lydia all the more determined to see her plan through. “You may have surrounded this building with magic to tie it to a constant night, but you have failed to properly conceal the tether: the moon. The moon on the left hasn’t moved, as though it is affixed to the windows. If that is what marks the tether, then it also marks a hole in the magic. If I shoot that moon, this building will return to its natural position under the sun.”

A ripple of fear spread through the fairy dogs, filling Lydia with the hope that her supposition was correct. However, there was another problem that needed addressing.

“While I must applaud you for your magnificent deduction, I would very much like to see if your shot can hit its mark. Just remember that the fairy dogs will bury their teeth into your throat the moment you miss.”

Lydia had never fired a pistol in her life. The moon was positioned on the window high above them. If she missed, all hope of them leaving here would be lost.

“It’s going to be all right, Lydia. I know you can hit it.” Edgar looked up at her from where he sat exhausted against the wall and smiled at her reassuringly. He looked as if he was about to lose consciousness any second.

Suppressing the tremble in her arms, Lydia took aim. *Please, God…*

“That’s it… All you have to do now is shoot.”

Encouraged by Edgar’s voice and praying fervently, she pulled the trigger with all the determination she could muster. The next moment, the superfluous moon had shattered along with the glass.

“Did I hit it?” She was so astounded at herself that she failed to realize that her bullet had missed the window and lodged itself in the wall. So too did she miss Raven’s knife falling from the ceiling, camouflaged among the shards of glass.

A bright light came shining in through the broken window. At the same time, the night beyond every other window in the hall

seemed to melt away to be replaced with the sky at midday. The spell cast upon the estate had broken, and it had returned to its true position in the human world. The panicking fairy dogs vanished one by one as Jimmy, back in human form, opened a door in the corner.

"Lord Ulysses! Please hurry!" It seemed the space beyond the door was still linked to the dark land of the Unseelie Court.

Ulysses paused by the door to give Lydia an irritated glare. Then he turned his gaze to Edgar. "How very fortunate you just so happened to be this day, my lord. However, your fortune will soon run dry. His Royal Highness has departed from America and will land on British soil in short order. You know his methods well. I am sure you are now lamenting the fact that I was not the one to kill you." Leaving those sharp, parting words, he vanished through the door.

Raven rushed to the door and opened it again, but by then, it led only to an empty room.

"Edgar!" Casting the pistol aside, Lydia hurried over to him. "You're going to be all right now!"

He was holding his bitten arm up, watching in wonder as the bloodstains on the cloth vanished before his eyes. "The blood and the wound itself are disappearing..."

"You weren't injured in the usual sense. The sunlight is dispelling the wound along with the wicked fairy magic."

Still seeming slightly weary, Edgar inclined his head. "The banshee's prophecy remains."

"No. I have taken it upon my shoulders," the banshee said. Paul was helping her to stand. "Mr. Paul, I have placed my faith in your lord. Would you carry me to him?"

With a nod, he picked her up and took her to Edgar's side.

The earl smiled at the banshee as she knelt before him. "Your actions saved my life. Does it hurt where the black dog bit you? Worry not, for the sunlight will soon see you right."

"I am a fairy. Thus, I am vulnerable to the magic of other fae. The sun of the mortal world and its power to break spells has no effect on fairies."

"No..." Paul murmured.

Surprised, Edgar looked to Lydia for help, but all she could do was shake her head.

“This is for the best. My lord, I belong to your house. Therefore, my passing will fulfill the prophecy.”

“Why are you doing this? Ulysses unsealed your memories. Why did you turn against him?”

The banshee’s body was growing transparent. She may not have been bleeding, but Lydia could sense that her vitality was slipping away.

“Because I remembered my duty.” She continued at pace. “Although banshees foretell of a family’s bereavement, they possess a single opportunity to sacrifice themselves to prevent that death. I had wanted to do that for Lady Gladys’s sake. She held the final blood ties to the Earl of Ibrazel. She needed to survive in order to give hope to the next generation. However, she had no choice but to give her life to banish the Prince of Calamity from Britain. And so she bequeathed her legacy to me.”

Edgar nodded. He was staring into the banshee’s eyes as though determined not to miss a single word. Perhaps he sensed that Lady Gladys had meant for him to hear this message. Although he was primarily a nobleman interested in amusements, now and then he was capable of showing a level of responsibility more befitting of his position. It was at these times that he, to Lydia, shone the brightest.

“When Lady Gladys passed, the private army she had led from Ibrazel was drained of its might, and the earldom’s history and powers were at risk of being lost for all eternity. However, my mistress decided to leave those things as her inheritance. While she recognized that it risked falling into the wrong hands, she also had hope that a descendant of the earl might still be living in Britain. Believing that such a descendant might one day succeed in retrieving the merrows’ sword and the title of Blue Knight Earl, her ladyship gave me one final duty: to impart to that person the most important function that falls upon the shoulders of the Earl of Ibrazel. Britain was originally a land in which fairy- and mankind coexisted. The Blue Knight Earl used to be the fairy doctor to the kingdom.”

A fairy doctor? Lydia could only imagine that the Blue Knight Earl would have been a far more skillful specialist than she.

“This country is often affected by unusual phenomena, some of them involving fae. It is the earl’s duty to neutralize these

phenomena. To facilitate this, the title may always be conferred when a suitable candidate appears, no matter how many centuries it has been or whether said candidate is a blood successor to the earl."

"The Prince of Calamity. He is one of these fairy-related phenomena, isn't he?"

"Yes."

"And *what* is he, exactly?"

"The blood spilled and the regrets of the Highlanders formed during the Battle of Culloden were transformed into a black magic. The Prince was born from this magic. At least, that is what I have heard."

The Battle of Culloden had been waged in the Scottish Highlands a hundred years ago, sparked by a descendant of James II, who had been exiled from Britain. The descendant had returned in an attempt to win back the throne. It was a great and bloody battle, and every last one of the Highland soldiers who fought on the Jacobite side—that is, the side that wanted James II's descendant to be king—had been killed.

It was Lydia's understanding that the Prince saw himself as a successor to the exiled king.

"Peace came to Britain after her victory in the battle. But even the king himself knew nothing about the Prince of Calamity, and Lady Gladys fought his men alone. That was when she told me that, should someone appear before me who was able to unseal my memories, I was to judge whether he or she was fit to be the new Blue Knight Earl." The banshee looked up at Edgar, studying him like she was seeking confirmation. "I had thought that blood was everything. But I do not believe so anymore. I think Lady Gladys would have approved of the earl I have selected." The banshee respectfully picked up Edgar's hand and held it to her forehead.

"My lord. To you, I shall bequeath the key to Ibrazel. The land belongs to you and your offspring. I ask that you accept this offering. May you also use the powers of Ibrazel to assist the fairies of the Seelie Court who live on these isles, and the humans who would be their kindly neighbors. But also, to put an end to the Prince of Calamity's bloodline."

The banshee's forehead seemed to flash with light. Then, all of

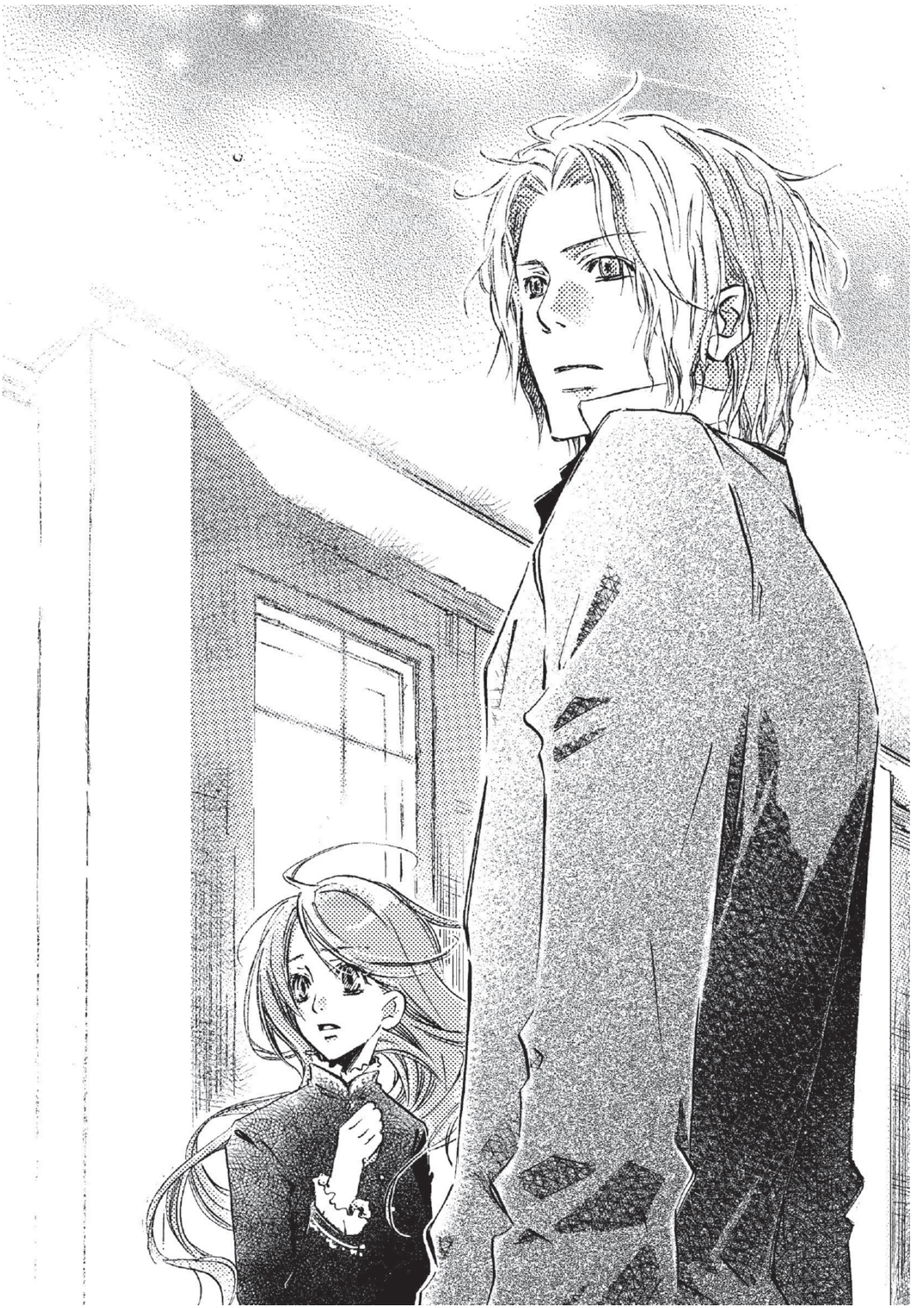
a sudden, her form became so faded as to be almost transparent. She turned to Lydia, her eyes falling on the moonstone on her finger. “Lady Ashenbert’s moonstone… Oh, I am ashamed to say I had forgotten about it. Please forgive my many transgressions, fairy doctor. You are his lordship’s bride, aren’t you?”

“I’m sorry?” Lydia faltered.

The banshee continued anyway. “May the protection of the guardian fairy be forever upon you both.” With a small nod, she rose slowly to her feet and gave Paul a bashful smile. “I also have much to be grateful to you for, Mr. Paul. Meeting you helped me to come to the correct decision. I am at last able to be with Lady Gladys again. Nothing will make me happier than being able to reunite with my human soul and ascending into Heaven.”

The banshee’s form dissolved into the air, leaving just the echoes of her voice. Paul stayed where he was, his gaze traveling to the window as if watching her soul depart.

Nobody said a word for some time. The sunlight illuminated the old, dusty hall and brought the building’s emptiness to the forefront of their attention. It was as if time itself had come to a stop.



Eventually, Edgar stood up listlessly. “The key to Ibrazel? I cannot see or feel anything,” he murmured, opening up the hand the banshee had touched in front of him. “What about you, Lydia?”

“I don’t see anything either. I’m sure the key is something that holds meaning only to the one who accepted it.” She was confident that it could no longer be stolen by Ulysses, nor anyone else. It belonged solely to Edgar: the Blue Knight Earl.

“I cannot see fairies, nor can I see the key. I do not know how to use it either. The banshee gave her life for me to receive it. Is that not a tragic waste?” Despite his words, Edgar closed his hand carefully around what might have been lying in it.

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Edgar had been staring out of the carriage window and thinking for the entire trip back to London so far. Periodically, the thin cloud cover would break to let down a dazzling sunbeam and his eyes would narrow against it.

It transpired that the building had been on the outskirts of a town several miles from London, so they had needed to find a carriage to bring them home. Edgar had wanted Lydia to ride with him so they could talk, but so far he hadn’t said a word, and she had just been sitting next to him warily. She had resolved herself to being as firm as possible should he try anything like he had on that uncomfortable night. She didn’t want to see a repeat of it. Or that was what she told herself as the carriage swayed on, but there was another part of her that worried about how he was doing. She knew the cause of the deep, troubled frown he was wearing.

Edgar had been entrusted with a key that he didn’t possess the means to use. He also had to take on the task left to him by the last survivor to the earldom. Was he struggling with the responsibility?

“Bridget?” he suddenly asked.

“I beg your pardon?”

“I once had a dog named Bridget, you see.”

Lydia sighed.

“Not Bridget, then. Please, Lydia, at least let me know the first letter.”

“Is *that* what you’ve been thinking about this entire time?” she stammered. “And with such a serious look on your face too!”

“Naturally. It’s important.”

The banshee would be appalled if she knew his true nature! Lydia sighed again, this time making sure it was especially deep.

“I shan’t be able to move forward if you do not forgive me, Lydia.”

“You are being overly dramatic.”

He placed an impudent hand over one of the fists that was balled up on her lap. He was peering at her in that arrogant way he did when he was about to seduce her, but his tone was unusually earnest.

“I had always fought intending to enact my revenge against the Prince. Looking back, I am not sure how much importance I ever put on *victory*. I think I simply wanted him to regret attempting to destroy my parents, me, and the entire Sylvanford estate. Therefore, dying was somewhat of a nonissue for me.”

This made sense to Lydia. After learning of the banshee’s prophecy, Edgar’s aim had been to take Ulysses to the grave with him with no regard for his own life.

“I suppose one would call it a strange twist of fate. When I was injured and realized that I really *was* about to die, you were with me. That was when I thought that perhaps I would rather live. If I lost my life, it would allow another man to swoop in and steal you away. But only *I* have the right to whisper sweet nothings in your ear, to lay my hand on yours, and to look into your eyes like this.”

It sounded like quite the groundless statement to Lydia.

“What would horrify me more is a man who would take all the things from you that I have yet to discover.”

Now he was getting ahead of himself.

“Yes, I wanted to live. At least until I was able to get you home safely. Until you fell in love with me.” Edgar paused. “Until I was able to make you truly happy. These desires of mine grew and grew, until I went beyond merely wanting to survive and began to want to fulfill your every wish.”

Although Lydia had shifted herself back to the very edge of the seat, he smoothly closed the gap between them.

“Do you think that you and I can turn over a new leaf, Lydia? I would hate for us to separate.”

He spoke as if they were seriously courting each other.

“I have come to understand something. I cannot fulfill my duties as the Blue Knight Earl alone. Gladys and the banshee’s hope have given me life. I can live up to my title because you are there to support me. Because Firman, Raven, and everyone else around me is there to lend me their strength. And so, I suppose I ought now to turn my thoughts away from those of personal revenge or fighting at the cost of my life.”

Although she wasn’t sure how to feel about the grip of his hand on hers, Lydia had never felt her heart race like this before. Though Edgar kept his tone casual, she could sense the determination running through his words.

“I do not want to lose anything anymore. I want to protect those around me rather than let them die. I see the life and the title that the banshee has granted me as something far more important than tools for revenge; I wish to make full use of them to work toward peace for fae and human beings alike. And I want to do it with you.”

“But I do not possess skills or powers equivalent to the Blue Knight Earl’s. I shall never be as magnificent a fairy doctor as all that.”

“You can leave the magnificence to me. I may not hold any fairy magic, but the banshee herself said that my blood was not important. It is the Blue Knight Earl’s duty to defeat the Prince. Therefore, it is my duty. While I understand that I shall be exposing you to danger, I want to believe that the fight ahead is not a hopeless one. So please, allow me to make just one selfish request of you.” His eyes were sincere as he stared at her without the slightest hint of flippancy. Her heart started to pound at a dizzying pace. “I intend to gather the resolve needed to protect what and whom I ought to protect. So I ask that you stay by my side. Forever.”

“Forever… Well, I can stay until the end of my employment contract…”

“Till death do us part.”

Was he proposing to her for a third time? Lydia felt as though she might just nod if she wasn’t careful. She desperately shook her head the moment the thought struck.

Edgar cast his gaze downward as though her response had

troubled him. “Then perhaps I might hear you say that you hold a fondness for me that exceeds friendship?”

“How utterly conceited you are.” She doubted that she sounded convincing. She was staring at the floor, her face was bright red, and she couldn’t bring herself to shake his hand away.

It was probably why Edgar pushed. “As kindhearted as you are, Lydia, and as much as you wanted to console me, only one who has taken leave of his senses would intrude upon the chamber of a mere friend.”

“You…made me go in.”

“But you stayed, as I so desperately wanted you to.”

“I simply didn’t know what else to do.”

“Knowing your endless generous nature as I do, I daresay that any man riddled with weaknesses would prey on your mind and that you wouldn’t be able to leave him be. I therefore put to you that I would make for your ideal husband.”

He had a real knack for twisting anything into a compelling argument.

“I refuse to believe that my feelings for you are unrequited.”

Lydia hesitated. “I am not going to marry you.”

“But you accept that you love me?”

Unable to think of a response, she held her tongue. If *she* accepted that she loved him, then it would be *her* feelings that were left unrequited. Edgar put his arms around her shoulders and pulled her into an embrace. She felt a hand on her cheek urging her to lift her head, but she kept her gaze glued stubbornly to the floor.

“You won’t go back on your promise of a kiss, will you?”

Oh dear… She had forgotten about that. *I must refuse him. I* must*, else I shall be walking straight into the same situation…*

“There’s no point to it if it is not what your heart truly desires,” he said soothingly. “And so I am willing to wait for the kiss until you are ready to accept my proposal.” His fingers gently traced her lips.

Surprised, she looked up, only to meet his gaze. His ash-mauve eyes crinkled with his gentle smile. All at once, something broke inside Lydia, and her eyes overflowed with tears as she looked back at him. Edgar removed his fingers like he was taken aback, but she could not stop crying as she kept her gaze locked on him.

“I’m sorry. Please don’t cry.”

“What are you apologizing for?”

“I’m not sure. I just feel as though those tears are my fault.”

You are right about that, at least.

“You are hopeless. Whatever you say, whether it is a promise or something else, its function is to see you through a particular difficulty and nothing more.” Despite what she said, crying and burying her face in his chest as he held her made her feel like she really was confessing to loving him.

“I cannot give up, no matter how many times you reject me. For if I do, I know that you will take even the heartfelt words I have just uttered to be false.”

And yet she knew that, one day, he would realize that she wasn’t the woman he needed.

“Ermine really did try to protect you. Perhaps the idea that she was working for Ulysses was a misapprehension.”

Edgar probably thought her sudden change of subject was down to bashfulness. “Perhaps. I shall keep a calm and watchful eye on her.”

Lydia didn’t want Ermine to betray Edgar, for his sake as much as anyone else’s. She wanted to believe in the woman’s innocence. Maybe it was the fairy doctor’s presence that was causing Ermine to suffer and waver after waiting all this time for Edgar to free himself from his past so that he could see her as more than a friend.

After reaching that conclusion, guilt started to weigh on her chest. And it was simply due to being alone with Edgar like this.

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The ripples of the water from the breaking of the ice on the lake’s surface woke Kelpie up at dawn. He had been slumbering on the lakebed in Hyde Park. Someone had encroached on his territory. Dark mane billowing in the water, he began to swim with the intention of chasing them out, hurrying toward the source of the presence. There he found the short-haired, female selkie. She was standing on the lakebed in human form—though she could not take on seal form without her skin anyway—in her usual masculine attire. She turned to Kelpie when he approached.

“What’re ye doin’ here?”

“I am sometimes overcome with the desire to swim.”

“Ye’re in my territory.”

“This is a public park.” It was a very human point of view, which only went to show her lack of development and experience as a selkie. “It was my understanding that you wanted to pursue any means to separate Miss Carlton from Lord Ashenbert.”

“It’s no so easy when the two of them are engaged.”

“In other words, your plan failed.”

“Shut yer potato trap, unless ye want us to eat ye!”

She looked at him warily, but when he didn’t seem to be attacking her, she decided to stay in place. “I come bearing a message for you. Miss Carlton’s involvement in what lies ahead can no longer be changed. There has been a pivotal shift, a large one. On both Lord Ashenbert’s side and the side of the enemy.”

“What shift?”

“The Prince is coming to Britain. Ulysses’s grudge against Lord Ashenbert is so great that he holds little interest in anyone else. He would be satisfied merely with seeing his lordship humiliated at his own hands. The Prince, however, is different. He will start by targeting everyone his lordship holds dear.”

“Whose side are ye on anyhows?”

Ermine continued without answering, maintaining the same indifferent tone as before. “There is just one way to protect Miss Carlton from the Prince. You must join forces with Ulysses.”

“Huh?! Are ye daft? I’m no gonna be some human’s lapdog.” Kelpie was *incensed*. Ulysses made his skin crawl. Why should he join the side of someone like that? It was ridiculous.

“There will come a point when Ulysses will see you as a nuisance to be dealt with. However, with due prudence, you will be able to protect Miss Carlton. I ask that you take your time to consider it.”

Ermine swam up toward the lake surface, eventually vanishing from view.

Afterword

Thank you for your patience. After five months, the next volume of *Earl and Fairy* is here.

As Lydia went home last volume, leaving Edgar at a loss(!), I decided to give all of you readers a bit of a break as you were wondering what was coming next. Wait...did that just make you even *more* impatient?

Anyway, I skipped right ahead to the new year, because there will probably be more opportunities to write scenes in Scotland depending on how the story goes. Plotwise, I think things have moved forward a little bit. What do you think?

Let's talk about the gemstone featured in this volume: amber. This caramel- or honey-colored stone sometimes has ancient insects trapped in it, giving it an extra layer of wonder as a fossil as well as a gem. While we understand it nowadays as hardened ancient tree resin, in the past many believed amber to be mermaid tears. This is because amber was often found on coasts. Ancient strata containing it are eroded by river currents and waves, and the rocks swept into the sea. Because they are lighter than other rocks, they are more likely to wash up on the shore.

Beads of amber are naturally polished by the tossing of waves. If we think of how these translucent, honey-colored beads were often found on the beaches, it makes sense why they were thought to be mermaid tears. I then used some creative license to rewrite amber as banshee tears. Having said that, banshees are found on water's edges and are associated with deep green. The direct translation of banshee is "fairy woman." I thought the mysticism between fairies and amber would remain, even if I changed the type of fairy the amber was linked to.

And so, I leave you on a shorter afterword, with just as much gratitude to my dear readers. May we meet again soon.

Mizue Tani, February 2006

Bonus Translation Notes

Welcome, one and all, to another round of translation notes for *Earl and Fairy*! To think that we're seven volumes in already! The release of volume seven marks the last volume that was adapted for the anime, so from here on out the story is going to be completely new to the English-speaking audience. As always, if there are any topics you would like to see us cover in these notes, just let us know on the J-Novel Club forums. And as usual, please be wary of spoilers for this and previous volumes! Now let's get started!

Kelpie

Here's a topic that's been a long time coming: Kelpie. While the majority of the cast speaks formal English, Kelpie speaks with a Scottish accent. In the Japanese text, he speaks in a highly informal manner, regardless of who he is speaking to. It is often tricky (though not impossible) to convey such speech patterns in English, where they tend to be rendered more subtle. We don't, for example, have levels of politeness baked into our grammar, or a variety of first-person pronouns. Word choice is often one of the few tools we have to compensate for these nuances.

Since he has spent all his life (pre-volume 3!) in the Scottish Highlands, we gave him a Scottish accent to replicate the difference between his speech and other characters'. Our main objective was not to go overboard. Though it's a matter of taste, too much of an accent can hit the reader in the face sometimes. So we keep ourselves a little Kelpie dictionary, where we list some commonly used words and their Scots equivalent. For example, "maybe" becomes "mibbe," while "just" becomes "jist." One that might sometimes cause confusion is "why" becoming "how" (i.e. "How did ye do that?" means "Why did you do that?") Similarly, "not" becomes "no." For example: "I'm no goin' to eat ye" ("I'm not going to eat you"). But we try to keep strictly to this list of words, both so that it doesn't become too much, and so that he remains comprehensible to readers who aren't familiar with Scottish

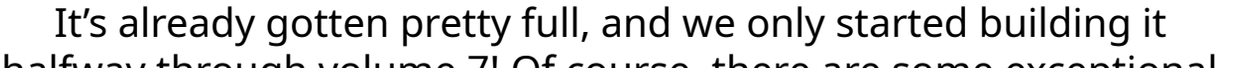
dialects!

In addition, we might be a bit more lenient about Kelpie's use of modern words, to have his speech come across as more casual. We use a similar approach for Lotta, Betty, and Pino, who also have a markedly informal speech pattern in the Japanese text.

Keeping Track...

While we're on the subject of glossaries and dictionaries, let's talk resources! As with every series translated by J-Novel Club, the team keeps a glossary to maintain consistency throughout the volumes. It can contain everything from character names to magic spells to...in our case, fairies! Bearing in mind the length of the *Earl and Fairy* series, we also keep brief notes on certain plot points to skim over as a reminder. This way, we don't have to go diving into previous volumes to remember exactly *how* Edgar is related to Bonnie Prince Charlie, and so on. Japanese as a language relies a lot on context, so trying to translate a new volume without the *Earl and Fairy* lore in mind is liable to lead to mistakes based on faulty assumptions. Having said that, it's going to be a bumper glossary by the end of it all. So far we're at 174 entries and counting!

As we've mentioned in the notes before, the ways in which characters address each other can also differ from the Japanese. It's difficult to keep track of who addresses whom as what, so starting from this volume, we've been making a table. Here's a mini replica:



It's already gotten pretty full, and we only started building it halfway through volume 7! Of course, there are some exceptional circumstances where a character may change how they address another—for example, Edgar may address Lydia as "Miss Carlton" in more polite company. There is also the case at the start of the volume where Edgar purposely refers to Lotta as "Her Royal Highness" in an ironic manner. But for the most part, this will again save us from having to scour previous volumes just to remember if Edgar calls a character "Slade" or "Mr. Slade"! On some occasions, time has been spent searching six volumes just to find out that Character A hadn't ever referred to Character B in the first place...but no more!

Speaking of Addressing…

We've mentioned how Kelpie speaks *less* formally than most of the cast, but there are a few interesting things to note about formality from other characters. In Japanese, verbs can be conjugated to change how polite they are. Loosely speaking, there is "plain" Japanese, "polite" Japanese, and *super*polite Japanese (no, these are not standard terms)!

For the most part, Edgar speaks in plain (or informal) Japanese to most other characters. But, when it comes to Lydia's dad, he will switch into polite Japanese. This is part of the reason he will refer to Lydia as "Miss Carlton" during these conversations, and address her father as "sir."

That might not be so surprising, but something that might give you pause is that Ulysses addresses Edgar in *polite* Japanese. In the English version, he refers to him often as "my lord," (as he does in Japanese), but it is more difficult to get the general polite vibe across when everyone is speaking in such a high register already. The reasons for Ulysses's politeness are up to interpretation, but in the translator's opinion, it is done in a condescending—i.e. sarcastic—way. Ulysses does not respect Edgar and does not believe he is entitled to his position. So he speaks politely to him as a way to mock him. Another possibility is simply to do with Ulysses's age. He is younger than Edgar and should therefore speak to him politely (as is the norm in the Japanese language). Given what is revealed this volume, he might be all the more careful to speak as a boy his age should to keep up pretenses…

A Bit of UK Culture

Set in the UK, *Earl and Fairy* sometimes poses some interesting cultural problems. Our general approach is that we translate the prose into American English but try to keep a British-English vibe for the dialogue (while avoiding Britishisms that are too obscure). Having said that, we're looser with this rule when it comes to Lotta, Pino, and Betty since they mostly grew up in America.

Sometimes, however, we have to bend this rule a little bit. When Lydia comes to Edgar's estate after he goes missing and asks about Paul, Ermine tells her that Paul's room is "on the second

floor." Technically, she should have told Lydia to go to the "first floor." The "first floor" in America and Japan is the "ground floor" in Britain, and *then* you begin counting from the next floor up. In other words, the British "first floor" is the "second floor" in America. However, since this is unlikely to be common knowledge among most of *Earl and Fairy*'s readership, we had Ermine call it the "second floor" to avoid confusion.

Also of note is Edgar's "proposal" to Lydia. Why does he say they need to give three weeks' notice to the parish? Traditionally, this would allow the proposed marriage to be announced at the parish church's Sunday service for three weeks in a row so that people could object to it. Upcoming marriages are still announced in churches to this day.

The alternative that Edgar suggests is to apply for a license, which would have allowed them to skip the three weeks and marry more quickly—but this license came at a higher cost!

Punny Business

To finish up, we have a translation example that we've picked out to dissect.

It concerns Edgar's advice to Paul: "Best practice is to tempt the lady without tempting *malady*."

So far in the series, there haven't been any puns of note, so this came as a bit of a curveball. On the face of it, the pun looked like it wouldn't be much of a problem to translate. Let's take a look: "*atoato mondai ni naru you na* ***misu*** *janakute* ***misesu*** *wo sasou no ga joushiki darou* (emphasis added)." Literally: "It's common sense to seduce/invite the 'Mrs' (i.e., lady) instead of seducing/inviting a mistake that will become problematic later."

The first issue we have here is "*sasou*" which can be both to "invite" and "seduce." i.e., you can *sasou* a woman and a mistake in Japanese, but in English, you can't seduce a mistake, nor can you "invite" a woman and keep the sexual nuance of "seduce." So our first challenge was to come up with a verb that sat somewhere between the meanings of "seduce" and "invite" that could be applied to both a "mistake" and a "lady." We eventually settled on "tempt."

The second issue is the bolded words: *misu* (a mistake) and *misesu* (Mrs./a woman). The Japanese cadence is a bit like, "seduce

the Mrs., not the mistake!" and since mistake and Mrs. start with the same sound in English, we tried to see if we could keep them both in the pun. In the end, however, we couldn't come up with a non-clumsy way to do this (and clumsy wouldn't do for the smooth-talking Edgar!), so we eventually settled on playing with "lady" and "malady" to come up with something similar in spirit. Hence our final translation: "Best practice is to tempt the lady without tempting *malady*."

Puns are especially interesting to translate, because no translation team is likely to translate the same pun in the exact same way! Maybe you could come up with a suggestion of your own?

That's all we've got time for this volume! Thanks for reading, and we'll see you in volume eight!



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