
8
MIZUE TANI
Earl and Fairy
Awaiting a Moonlit Elopement


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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.
LYDIA
A girl who can see and talk to fairies. She works as Edgar's fairy doctor. While his constant flirting bewilders her, perhaps her heart is beginning to stir...
KELPIE
A water-horse fairy from Lydia's hometown in Scotland. Although his appearance is that of a beautiful young man, his nature is innately savage.
EDGAR
The Blue Knight Earl, Lydia's employer, and Lydia's fiancé. Though their engagement is a front, this does not deter him from teasing and flirting with her.
RAVEN
A mysterious boy. He is Edgar's servant. He is skilled with weapons, and his loyalty to his master is flawless.
Earl and Fairy
CHARACTERS

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On the Night of the Silver Moon

“Beware: Fairies. Be careful not to step into any fairy rings.”

Lydia gazed at the paper notice and its large letters. She had just posted it on the fence following a path on the outskirts of the town. “I think that ought to be enough.”

The people snickered and giggled as they passed by. She could hear them whispering that Professor Carlton’s eccentric daughter had “finally lost her mind completely,” but she ignored them as she examined her poster.

“For any fairy-related enquiries, please call at 5, Fir Tree Lane, and ask for Lydia Carlton.”

“I need to work as hard as I possibly can. No one else in this town is capable of solving any problems the fairies might cause!” Lydia murmured to rouse herself.

Having said that, it had only been a month since she had thought to start this work in earnest. Until now, the majority of the townspeople had been unaware that the minor troubles springing up around them were the work of fairies. Whenever Lydia had tried to enlighten them, they had simply snorted at her.

“And when you *do* solve their troubles, they’re all the quicker to brand you a lunatic!” came a voice from up a tree. A fuzzy gray cat was sitting, prim and proper, on a branch. It leaped down to the ground, landing on its hind legs. There was a stylish tie around its neck. “I know that your mother did this kind of work, but that was a long time ago *and* in a place far more accepting. It was rural there, and the people had been living with fairies since time immemorial. It was nothing like this developing town.”

The cat could talk and make himself vanish at will. Of course, he was no cat, but a fairy. He had lived for far longer than Lydia, and had been her friend since she was very young. And he was right: it was halfway through the nineteenth century, and railways and factories were springing up all over Britain, changing the people’s lives considerably. Meanwhile, fewer and fewer people believed in fairies, dismissing them as characters from children’s stories.

“Perhaps you’re right, but even then, this town is home to

countless fairies. And so, Nico, I would ask that you refrain from commenting." Lydia wanted to finish putting up her posters all over town by the end of the day. The summer solstice was approaching, so the fairies were liable to become more mischievous than ever. If she had any hope of being accepted as a fairy doctor, like her mother had been during her lifetime, then she had to spread word of her services *now*.

Though Lydia was just sixteen years old, she was confident that she had a wider knowledge of fairies than anyone else. She had been able to see them since she was an infant, which allowed her to gain firsthand experience with them. In fact, she had more fae acquaintances than human ones. Fairy doctor was the only profession through which she would be able to make full use of her abilities.

Just then, she heard the sound of paper tearing behind her. She spun around to see some children ripping her poster.

"What on earth are you doing? Stop that at once!"

"Oh dear! Miss Carlton has lost her temper! Now she's going to pay us back by making hair grow from our navels!" The children continued to chant their taunts as they raced away.

"Keep misbehaving and I shall have the fairies come and pinch you!" It was remarks such as these that made the children's parents frown disapprovingly at her.

"Do you *really* have the ability to make hair grow?"

"I *do*, and not just from the navel. I can show you, if you'd like." She turned around angrily, sure that it was another mischievous child who had spoken. Instead, she found herself face-to-face with a bewildered young man.

Lydia didn't recognize him. He didn't seem to be from the town at all. He wore a dark frock coat, and carried a leather bag in one hand and an instrument case in the other. From his worn hat and the way he spoke, he seemed to be a typical gentleman of the middle class. Stooping down, he gathered up the discarded pieces of the poster.

"Might you be Miss Lydia Carlton?"

"I am, yes. May I ask that you move out of the way? I would like to mend my poster." She couldn't allow herself to grow discouraged by the destruction of one of her flyers. After all, she had come prepared with several extra posters for this very

eventuality.

"'Beware: fairies,'" the man read. "What does it mean?"

"Precisely what it says. If you hear a fairy speak to you, you must pretend that you cannot hear it. You do not want to know what might happen if you fail to do so."

"Am I to take it that fairies *exist*?"

"Before I answer your question, would you be so kind as to answer mine? Are you asking me these things because you wish to make me out to be a fool?"

"Oh, perish the thought. It is a curious poster. That's all." He seemed sincere.

"Very well." With her composure back in hand, Lydia spread the poster pieces out on the ground and began to brush glue on them. "Unless I am mistaken, you have come from England. Here in Scotland, there are fairies everywhere one looks. They are as common as rats are in London. However, most people cannot see fairies, which is why they will struggle to comprehend my posters."

"Is that right?"

"It is quite all right if you don't believe me."

He had been listening attentively, and yet she still snapped at him. It seemed she still had a lot of training to do before she could develop the same open mind as her mother when helping people.

Lydia was struggling to repair her poster so that it was straight, and she assumed that the young man had left her to it. However, once she had managed it and caught her breath, she heard his voice again.

"Have you finished?"

"What are you doing?!" she stammered.

"I beg your pardon? I was waiting for you." He spoke as though it ought to be quite obvious.

"Is there something else I can help you with?"

"I was wondering whether you know where I might find Mr. Barrett's estate."

"Why, that's common knowledge. I suggest you ask along the high street." Lydia made to leave, at which the man followed her.

"You wouldn't do me the honor of showing me the way?"

"I would advise that you find somebody else, sir. You will be branded an eccentric if you are seen walking the high street with me."

“So be it. I shan’t be in this town longer than three days in any case.”

He didn’t quite seem to be like the hypocrites that Lydia was used to dealing with. The ones who showed her kindness out of pity and reassured her that she was doing no harm and that she wasn’t an eccentric. Rather, it was as though her oddness didn’t *bother* him. He was a rare sort.

“Very well. I was going that way myself anyway.”

“Thank you.” He shot her a lighthearted smile.

The man introduced himself as Ian Reynolds. He was a violinist who had stopped by on his way to Edinburgh. His carriage had gone into a ditch on the town’s outskirts, and he had walked the rest of the way because he had been so close. Mr. Barrett, who was of the gentry, had invited him to perform tomorrow evening.

“Are you well-known as a musician, then?”

Ian laughed at Lydia’s impudence. “My career has only just begun. You are welcome to attend with your suitor.”

“Excuse me?” Her response was automatically defensive, even though she knew he did not mean to offend. She shook her head. “Please forgive me. I suddenly felt the need to defend myself. But you ought to understand that no one would ever wish to court me.” She was grumbling before she knew it, probably because Ian had such a sincere air about him.

“Surely if that is the case, it is purely because you can see fairies?”

“I speak to them. Isn’t that rather unsettling? Besides, people say I am a changeling.”

“A changeling? On what basis do they make these claims?”

“Although she has passed on, my mother was known for her beauty. Her hair was the perfect shade of blonde, and her skin was as unblemished as snow. However, I do not resemble her in the slightest. My hair is this russet shade, and I am not particularly charming either.”

“Do you think so? But your eyes are incredibly striking. Green with flecks of gold.” Ian was suddenly peering at her eyes, catching her off guard.

“It’s all right. You don’t have to humor me,” she said, again without considering her words.

“That wasn’t my intention.”

Lydia wasn’t sure how to disperse the guilt inside her and only ended up more confused. “Oh, I see. Well, you needn’t pay me any compliments. That’s all I meant.” She stopped then. She didn’t want to cause him any further trouble. “The building over there with the red roof is Mr. Barrett’s estate.”

Ian nodded, then pulled a piece of paper from his breast pocket. “A ticket for the concert. I do hope you will attend.”

Lydia was utterly bewildered. He should have realized by now that she was abnormal, so why was he extending her this invitation? “Are you really expecting to have so many empty seats?”

Ian burst out laughing. “I wonder. I only need one audience member in order to call it a concert, after all, and I really would like you to come. I shall endeavor not to pay you any compliments either.”

He left her with a wave, and she found herself muttering under her breath about how strange he was.

“He *is* well-known,” Lydia murmured. After returning home, she had spread the newspaper out on the table and found Ian’s name. He was all the rage in London with his concert Night of the Silver Moon. “He will certainly be seeing more than one audience member!”

There is no need for me to attend at all. And yet, Lydia had emptied out the entire contents of her wardrobe, spread the garments out over her bed, and was holding them up to the mirror.

“Let’s go and have fun elsewhere, Lydia. The fairies of the wild roses are having a ball.”

“Oh, not *them*. They are far too fastidious. Now, Nico, blue or pink, which do you prefer?”

“Have you taken a liking to that English fellow?”

“Come, don’t be silly.”

“Well, why are you in such high spirits?”

“I’m not…”

Now that she thought about it, Ian had probably just had a spare ticket and wanted to thank her for showing him to Mr. Barrett’s estate. Yet here she was, as restless as if he had invited her to lunch. All of a sudden, she felt quite ridiculous. She threw

the dress in her grasp down.

Her reflection in the mirror gave her the same sour look as usual, its golden-green eyes staring at her. They were another way in which her appearance differed from her parents'. They were also partly why people whispered about her having fairy blood or compared her to a witch, but her mother and father had always said they were beautiful.

Lydia's father was her only family. After taking a job in London, he rarely came home. Although he couldn't see fairies, he had always understood and supported Lydia's mother. Together, they had been branded a pair of eccentrics, but Lydia had always considered them the ideal couple. She hoped that one day, she would find a man like her father. But in all her sixteen years of life, she had never met anyone close. The boys her age rarely even spoke to her. It made it difficult for her to take a liking to *anyone*.

Her mother must have been lucky. Recently, Lydia had started to think that such luck was destined to elude her. Ian had been the first person aside from her parents to pay her a compliment. That must have been why her senses had been thrown into mild disarray.

As the sun set, the silver moon climbed into the sky. Lydia sat by her window, listening to the fairies as they started to chatter. The tiny creatures were spilling from the elderberry bush and crossing the garden in a line. They must have been on their way to the wild-rose fairies' ball. Elder trees had a powerful, musky scent, and were traditionally viewed as sinister, said to be related to witches. Fairies were fond of them, perhaps because they were imbued with mysterious power. Maybe that was why Lydia's father had planted so many of them. As a result, the fae loved to gather in the Carltons' garden.

"Have you heard? The Queen of the Wild Roses has come upon something wonderful!"

"Yes, a violinist! I've heard his young soul shines like the finest gemstone!"

As soon as she heard that, Lydia opened the window and leaned out of it. "Forgive me, but is that true?"

"Ah! It's mean old Lydia!" The brown fairies scattered and fled.

I am not *mean,* she thought, irritation prickling at her. Brownies

loved playing practical jokes, like hiding human children or souring liquors, and she often reprimanded them for such behavior. Fairies would struggle to coexist with humans if their pranks crossed too many lines.

There was more to a fairy doctor's work than assisting people for whom the fairies had caused trouble. As Lydia's mother had told her, it was also about deepening people's knowledge of the creatures and making sure both sides could live in harmony. It might have seemed old-fashioned in an age when locomotives had become commonplace, but even though people couldn't see fairies and were starting to forget their existence, it didn't mean that they were gone. Lydia was confident that her skills would remain in demand, at least to some degree. Although people were more likely to regard her with suspicion compared to in previous generations, she remained proud of the abilities she had inherited from her mother. It was why she wanted to put them to good use rather than hiding them out of shame.

"Did you hear that, Nico?"

The talking cat was sprawled out on the mantelpiece. He propped his chin up with a paw and crossed his hind legs before letting out a heavy yawn. It was a pose that made Lydia certain Nico carried the heart of a weary, middle-aged man.

He exhaled. "They love all things beautiful. Including the human souls that give birth to such beauty."

"I am going to the ball."

"Come, now. You can't even be sure that they were referring to the Englishman."

"Is there any other violinist in this town who would appeal to the queen? The 'music' performed by those at the pub is more akin to hysterical screeching!"

"All right. But you know the queen is loath to part with her treasures."

"Nico, I want you to take me to the fairies of the wild roses."

The cat got up begrudgingly. "It's the rath on the windy hill." He jerked his chin, indicating that she should follow him.

The moonlight dyed the hill a pale blue. Lydia followed the fairy cat, who plodded along on two legs, away from the town and through stretches of grassland. Eventually, they came into view of

a pale, squirming mass of light in the distance. The fairies were swarming together. At their center was a humanlike figure.

Lydia rushed ahead of Nico and dived into the illuminated swarm armed with an ash branch. When she waved it around, the panicked fairies scattered like insects. Only Ian, sleeping with his violin in his arms, remained on the moonlit grasses.

"Wake up!" Lydia cried, and he slowly opened his eyes.

He pushed himself up, his smile showing he was unaware of any danger. "Oh, it's you. I was having such a curious dream. I think I was surrounded by fairies…"

"You weren't dreaming."

"No? Where am I, anyway? The moon looked so lovely tonight that I thought I would take a walk on the outskirts of the town."

"You walked into a fairy ring, didn't you?"

"Ah, I suppose I *did* see a glowing circle on the ground. I wondered what it was. It must have been a fairy ring. I've never seen one before."

It seemed that Lydia's posters hadn't made the slightest difference to him either.

"Do you mean to say that I was about to be taken by the fairies?"

"Yes, I do."

"And you rescued me?"

"It is very fortunate that I found you before you were taken to Fairyland." A thought struck her. "Say, are you missing any of your possessions?"

"No, I have my violin here, and both hands. Anything else they may have taken they are welcome to. Oh, I know! May I play you a piece to show my gratitude?" Ian seemed awfully unconcerned for a man who had just been in such danger. Having said that, he probably wouldn't have minded being taken to Fairyland as long as he was still able to play his violin.

The image of him smiling, standing, and readying his instrument was nothing short of beautiful. As he stood up straight in the field, the moonlight seemed to focus on him. It pushed everything but his perfect form into darkness, illuminating him as he gracefully lowered his bow. His violin spun a dreamlike timbre.

Night of the Silver Moon, Lydia thought. Though she had never heard the piece before, the melody fit so seamlessly with the

moonlit night around them that she was sure it was his concert's defining composition. Sitting on the grass and listening with her eyes closed, she could picture the notes glowing with a silver light.

But then, the melody came to an abrupt end. Ian was frowning in confusion.

"Is something the matter?"

"Something...doesn't sound right."

"Doesn't it? It sounded wonderful to me."

"Something is lacking. I'm just not sure what."

"Oh, I know!" Lydia leaped to her feet.

"You do?"

"Something *was* taken from you."

Ian's shoulders slumped. "Does this mean I won't be able to play anymore?"

Lydia could not bear to see him so dispirited. She had come here to save him, but his inability to play rendered her efforts all but useless. The townspeople were looking forward to his concert. Not only that, but there would be many people in Edinburgh and London alike who would be heartbroken to learn that Ian wasn't going to perform anymore.

"You have nothing to worry about, Mr. Reynolds. I shall retrieve what you have lost from the fairies."

"Is that even possible?"

It was, but Lydia would have to bargain with the Queen of the Wild Roses. It would be a heavy burden for her to bear. While she knew the general theory of how to bargain with fairies, she was far from being a real fairy doctor. In the past, it had been a profession respected by the fae themselves, which had facilitated such negotiations.

Despite her misgivings, Lydia did not hesitate for long. If she wasn't able to help someone in need, it would leave her as a mere eccentric who just happened to be able to see fairies. She wouldn't be able to carry on her mother's work.

"I would like to try."

"Miss Carlton, I must ask to what I owe such kindness. I am but a passing traveler." Ian fixed his gaze on her, and her heart started to pound.

I wonder...

Was it because he had complimented her eyes? Or was it

because he didn't treat her as someone to be avoided?

"I wish to undertake the same career as my mother. You will be my first client." With that, she rushed away. She feared that if he questioned her further, she might say something frightfully shameful to him, a man she had only just met.

She hurried in the same direction the fairies had been heading. It wasn't hard to imagine that the fairies of the wild roses would still be enjoying their ball at the rath beyond.

The rath sat under the night sky in total stillness without even a breeze to break the silence. However, the moment Lydia stepped into it, she was surrounded by several fluttering lights. It was the fairies' ball. Flowers were in bloom as far as the eye could see. The entire hill was covered with them, many that shouldn't have been able to blossom in the same seasons.

The fairies wore petals and carried tiny elderberries in their hands as they sang and danced. Lydia suddenly realized that she was the same size as the fairies and had been swept up among them. They were clamoring for her to dance with them. The lights and smells were so intoxicating as to make her forget why she had come here. All she wanted to do now was dance.

"Don't do this, Lydia!"

Her fickle feline companion had vanished after they had found Ian, but now he stood before her once more. Not only that, but he had transformed into a giant. Or rather, *his* size hadn't changed when hers had. He looked more like a monster than a cat to her now.

"You've never bargained with a fairy before, have you? You may know the words that will prevent them from playing pranks, but bargaining with a fairy queen is a whole other kettle of fish!" Nico's voice drew Lydia away from the temptation to dance and rejuvenated her determination.

"I must take a chance and try, else I shall never become a fairy doctor."

Pushing past the twirling and leaping fairies, Lydia began her search for the queen's throne. She found the stone seat covered in moss that shone like velvet, and the queen upon it clad in crimson petals. Her skin and hair were so white as to be almost translucent, and she had a pair of wings that looked like they were

made from delicate glass.

"Your Majesty, I come bearing a request." Lydia knelt before the queen.

"Daughter of the earth, may I presume that this request concerns the violinist? His soul is one capable of producing the finest music, and I have no intention of parting with it."

"I am not asking you to give it to me for nothing, ma'am."

Lydia was confident that no fairy could resist the offer of an exchange. They constantly sought new and interesting things over the objects they already had in their possession. It was less of a habit and more of an instinct. Naturally, the new object still needed to be more tempting than the old. Lydia put her brain to work, trying to think of something she could trade. Her mother would have been able to convince the fairy to accept something relatively useless by making it sound as appealing as possible, but Lydia's skills were not that sophisticated.

As she continued to angst over the matter, the queen spoke again. "Leave this place, Lydia. It is better that I do not return it to you, for your own sake as well."

"Why is that?"

The queen lifted her hand, at which one of her attendants swooped down with something in its arms. It was an envelope so large that the fairy was struggling to hold it. In all likelihood, it would have seemed a normal size if Lydia hadn't been shrunk.

"The violinist dropped this," the queen said.

"Is that the soul that produces such wonderful music?" Lydia asked.

"Yes. A heart which longs for its lover. A well of deep emotions, capable of illuminating the soul and producing the finest works of its craft. This letter was written by the violinist's lover. He keeps it with him wherever he goes, so that she may remain in his heart no matter how great the distance between them. Truly, these things which lie within human beings possess a mysterious beauty. We fairies do not have such things, and so we find them most fascinating."

A letter from his lover?

Lydia's heart stirred. Ian had lost something so precious to him, and yet he had forgotten all about it. He had forgotten too about his lover and his feelings for her, leaving him unable to identify

why his music had been lacking.

"If you are fond of the violinist, Lydia, why not keep him in this town? Where else can he go? He has lost his music."

If Ian stayed, Lydia's daily life would undergo a monumental change. She wanted to learn as much about him as she could, and she even felt as though she might fall in love with him. But it would also mean that he would never be able to play his wonderful music ever again. If she kept him here but he remained without his soul, she would never have the chance to know the *real* him. Would it not invalidate her love for him if she never heard the true music of the man whose playing drew in the moonlight itself?

Lydia faced the Fairy Queen and shook her head. "I wish to hear his music. If it is love that intrigues you, Your Majesty, then I shall offer you the loving heart possessed by my soul. I only ask that you give *his* soul back in return."

As soon as the words were out of her mouth, a stormy wind whipped up around them. The trees howled as grass and flowers were flung up into the air. The fairies cried out in fear as their ball was cut short, and the bright moon was hidden behind clouds. The queen stood up from her throne and set her eyes on Lydia, her hair thrashing in the wind.

"Foolish child. You have offered me an exchange. I have no choice but to answer it. But know this: with the completion of this exchange, you will never be able to fall in love."

Ian's letter was thrown up by the wind and carried far away. Lydia chased after it desperately, but when the fairies' light vanished, everything around her was suddenly plunged into darkness.

"Lydia, you nincompoop! Why go this far for someone you have only just met?" Nico's voice was the only sound she could hear anymore, and she couldn't tell where it was coming from.

"It's all right, Nico. What kind of man would ever fall in love with a changeling anyway? Besides, I feel as though this experience has already taught me what joy love can bring, even if I shall never again be able to grasp that joy for myself."

***

Ian Reynolds gave his concert in the outdoor theater as the moon was climbing into the sky. The town was small, as was the venue, but every seat was occupied. Lydia listened from her seat in the far corner. She felt she might as well attend since she had found the ticket in her room. Mysteriously, she could not remember how the ticket had come into her possession.

Last night, she had woken up in her bed. She could remember leaving for the fairies' ball, but she lacked any memories of what had come after that. She must have had so much fun that she had returned home exhausted.

As she lent her ear to the melodies spun by the violinist's delicate fingers, for some reason she felt very unsettled indeed. The music was unbearably gentle, and it seemed to caress her very heart. She wondered why she wanted to compare the sensation of the soft melody to love, when she had never fallen in love in her entire life.

However, there was an underlying current of frustration with all of this. It ought to have been a truly moving concert, but Lydia felt like she wasn't able to engage with it to the extent it deserved. It was like a part of her heart had frozen over, and no matter how she longed to feel the music on a deeper level, that ice would not stir an inch.

Before she knew it, the piece was over, and the audience had erupted into applause. Young girls rushed to the stage with bouquets in their arms. Lydia remembered that she was holding a rose with a ribbon tied around it. Nico had forced it on her, telling her she must bring it to the concert if she was going to go.

"You must give it to the violinist as a message that his music left a deep impression on you."

"And if it didn't?"

"You can toss it on the ground and stamp on it!"

Lydia had to wonder whether that was very good manners. Nico may have had more extensive knowledge, but because he was a fairy, his common sense could be dubious at times. That said, passing the musician a flower to indicate that he had moved her seemed to make sense.

Presently she found herself faced with a problem. She wasn't sure if she had been moved or not. A deep sense of loss came over her. Her inability to truly appreciate this man's music had left her

unbearably upset. She wasn't sure why she felt this way, but she suspected her heart had failed to respond because she was a contrarian changeling.

I should not have come here. This concert isn't meant for me.

The applause was dying down in preparation for the next piece. Lydia was staring at the ground, so she didn't notice that the violinist on stage was looking intently in her direction.

"I would like to offer the following piece to the Fairy Queen of the Wild Roses," he said. "I hope that you will accept it, Your Majesty, and see fit to return Miss Carlton's soul in return."

Lydia's head snapped up. *Miss Carlton? Does he mean me?*

She was still overcome by surprise as he began to play the dreamlike *Night of the Silver Moon.* Lydia realized she had heard it before. At that moment, her lost memories of Ian came flooding back. He had complimented her eyes. He had given her a ticket, smiled at her in a way that made her heart throb. She had rescued him from the fairy ring. She had bargained with the Fairy Queen for him.

The music permeated the frozen part of her heart and began to warm and thaw it. The next thing she knew, the drops of thawed ice had become tears that fell onto the rose in her lap. She could finally feel it throughout her body. This was how she had *wanted* to hear Ian's music. Both the player and the listener needed their hearts to be whole for these melodies to be understood, and she was finally able to take everything in.

Night of the Silver Moon had the entire audience enraptured. The thunderous applause that followed had a contented smile rising to Ian's face. Lydia, however, suddenly felt anxious. He had offered that piece to the Fairy Queen, something utterly unthinkable. What on earth had possessed him to do it?

A sudden thought struck her then, and she hurried from the venue. She found Nico sprawled beyond some thick shrubbery and rushed over to him.

"Nico, you must tell me something! Why is Mr. Reynolds bargaining with the Queen of the Wild Roses?"

"He came to me and asked how he could save you."

"So *you* put the idea to him! Did... Did you appear before him in the form you're in *now*?"

"Well. I was careful to stand on four legs."

“I hardly see how that makes a difference if you *spoke* to him!”

“Does it really matter? Lydia, after you were thrown out of the Fairy Queen’s ball, *he* escorted you home. I returned his letter to him and he reacted only with mild surprise. After that, I managed to explain everything.”

“But, Nico, with the exchange he made, he won’t be able to play *Night of the Silver Moon* ever again!”



“That is quite all right with me.” Ian appeared from the other side of the stone steps. “I was able to give a truly soulful performance tonight knowing that I needed to please the Fairy Queen. I doubt that I would be able to play *Night of the Silver Moon* that well again in any case. I shall be content so long as it stays within the hearts of those who listened this evening.”

“Mr. Reynolds…”

“Thank you, Miss Carlton. I haven’t lost a thing. In fact, I feel as though I shall be able to give even better performances going forward. So please, keep hold of what you have.”

Ian’s gentle smile had Lydia soaring over the moon, but she also felt a small pain in her chest.

“Oh, that’s right. Please accept this.” Perhaps a little too late, she offered him the rose. “You played wonderfully. I am so glad that your performance was able to reach me. I wonder if you will understand what I mean when I say that this rose doesn’t feel as though it is enough. I would rather give you an armful of elderflowers.” Lydia desperately wanted her feelings to get through as she rubbed her teary eyes, and it looked like she got her wish.

“Thank you. That’s so very kind of you.”

Ian shook her hand and then departed. With the warmth of his touch lingering in her heart, Lydia started on her way home with her feline companion.

“You should know, Lydia, that only *fairies* are fond of elderflowers,” Nico said, walking with her on his hind legs. “You need to educate yourself on human etiquette.”

She must have been in a good mood indeed that evening, because she was able to resist the urge to tread on his bushy tail.



The Tale of the Snow Crystal

"*Open for all consultations regarding fairies.*
Lydia Carlton, Fairy Doctor."

Her client was an elderly woman. She had come alone in the early evening, wearing a fur cape and a saffron-colored dress that was just a little bit gaudy.

"My, you say a fairy *proposed* to you?" Lydia gasped.

The woman nodded, her smile as innocent as a little girl's. "Yes, that's right. I would very much like to accept his proposal, but everyone around me has objected to it. Is it so wrong to be wed to a fairy?"

"No, it is not unheard of when one looks back in time." Lydia hadn't received any proper consultations in a long time, and she eagerly leaned forward in an attempt to seem cordial. "Please, could you tell me more about the fairy in question?"

"As far as appearance goes, he looks like a young and beautiful gentleman, but he has about him an air of mystique. I was not at all surprised to learn that he wasn't human."

In other words, he likely wasn't a run-of-the-mill brownie or hobgoblin.

"Would you be willing to allow me to meet this gentleman, Mrs. Hardy? I can then mediate and attempt to convince your family afterward."

"You would do that? Thank you so much. I am so pleased I came to you."

Lydia's heart felt full as the woman gently squeezed her hand. The tales one heard most commonly were about fairies falling in love at first sight with young women, but the creatures came in all varieties. She could imagine how a fairy might have fallen for this innocent elderly lady if it found her endearing.

"Please wait a moment. I shall go and make some tea, and you can tell me more as we drink."

Lydia lightly got to her feet. She needed to have as good an idea of the full story as possible. This was cause for celebration; it might be the impetus to her being properly recognized as a fairy

doctor. As far as society was concerned, fairies existed solely in tales. It wasn't long ago that one would have been hard-pressed to find somebody who *doubted* their existence, but as the nineteenth century had brought with it a rapid shift in lifestyle, so too had the people of Britain been shockingly quick to forget about their fairy neighbors.

Lydia, however, knew that the fae were everywhere. She saw them constantly and often heard them speak. She wanted to become a fairy doctor like her late mother, one whom people respected and relied upon. Though she was still inexperienced, she had motivation in spades.

"If you ask me, the old hag is senile." The remark came from atop a shelf. There was a single cookie floating in the air that gradually disappeared with a series of crunches. At last, the long-furred, gray cat appeared, licking his lips. He was sitting on the shelf with his hind legs crossed. He looked down at Lydia as his front paws straightened his favorite tie and preened the whiskers of which he was so proud.

"Nico! That is *frightfully* rude!"

"You may be able to see fairies, but you're a poor judge of human beings."

"I ought to understand them better than you, because I *am* one," Lydia shot back as she filled the teapot with hot water.

"What about your previous visitor, who claimed to be an angel? Then there was that 'spirit medium.' You don't even question the delusions of these lunatics, and all you have to show for it is a long list of failures. This woman claims she was proposed to by a handsome young fairy. Now, does that sound like reality to you?"

The gray cat swishing its tail back and forth was Lydia's oldest friend. In truth, he was a fairy, but not an especially charming one. It wasn't exactly motivating to be lectured by a cat who acted nothing like one.

"This lady has come to me with a serious request. There *are* fairies who can take on human form, after all."

Just then, the doorbell rang violently.

"Oh, another visitor? Nico, I shall leave the tea to you to prepare."

"Just because I'm a fairy doesn't make me your errand boy."

Lydia ignored the complaint and left the kitchen in a hurry to

answer the front door. There was a well-built gentleman behind it, who tipped his hat to her.

"I'm afraid my dear aunt has intruded on your peace."

"I see. Are you referring to Mrs. Hardy?"

"Excuse me." The man immediately entered the house. When he came to the reception room and found the elderly woman sitting on the sofa, he yanked her by the arm. "My dear aunt, I implore you to cease this embarrassing farce at once. All this talk of marriage and fairies... You are set to become the laughingstock of our town!"

"Forgive me, but it is too early to come to any conclusions. It isn't uncommon at all for fairies to fall in love with humans," Lydia said, pushing in between them.

The man looked at her and gave an exasperated sigh. "Miss Carlton, I am afraid that you are as eccentric as they say. It is no wonder that you took my senile aunt to be sincere."

"I am *not* senile. And who are you? I should thank you to let go of me!" the woman cried.

"Would you listen to yourself?!"

"Did father put you up to this, whoever you are? He really would rather I marry that banker, wouldn't he?!"

With another weary sigh, the man turned to Lydia. "As I am sure you understand by now, my dear aunt still believes herself to be in the prime of her youth."

"That doesn't mean that her claim to have met a fairy can be disregarded," Lydia replied.

But it seemed the man was intent on escorting Mrs. Hardy from the house. "I am frightfully sorry, Miss Carlton, but any more talk of fairies and I'm afraid I might begin to question *your* sanity."

"But I am a fairy doctor! I am an expert in fairies, so if you could just give me a little more of your time..."

"A fairy doctor? A practitioner of sorcery? I should have known. They say you are a changeling that carries fairy blood. That, I can believe to be true, supposing fairies exist in the first place."

A changeling. A fae infant left in the place of a human one kidnapped by fairies. It was a particularly hurtful rumor for Lydia, who had no reason to believe that she wasn't her parents' natural child, and it had been circulating since she was young. Apparently, it was her golden-green eyes and the slight sharpness of her

features that made her seem otherworldly to some people.

“I would ask that you not drag my dear aunt into your fantasies, lest she becomes unable to discern where reality lies.”

Disheartened, Lydia no longer had the motivation to stop Mrs. Hardy’s nephew from taking her away. Even when people claimed that fairies didn’t exist, sometimes they would insult them like their memories of the creatures had suddenly returned.

The British Empire was a magnet for new marvels and cultures from all around the world. Its people were busy adapting to these changes and throwing out anything with so much as a hint of irrationality about it. But humans and fairies were intrinsically linked, and that was something that couldn’t be changed. Perhaps that was why people unconsciously tried to ignore and forget about their existence.

“She was senile after all, then?” The fairy cat was leaning against the door and standing on his hind legs. He was sipping his freshly brewed tea from the cup he held in one paw.

Lydia wondered vaguely how he could stand to drink such hot liquid when cats were known to have sensitive tongues. She sighed. “I honestly find that difficult to believe. Even if she sees herself as a young woman, why fantasize about taking a fairy as a lover? Why not a handsome *human* man?”

She looked around as she spoke, which was when she noticed something catching the light in the doorway.

“I wonder if Mrs. Hardy dropped this.” It was a small crystal pendant in the shape of a snowflake. When Lydia picked it up, she found it was ice-cold to the touch. “Why, this is a snow crystal!”

It was a fantastical crystal formed at the bottom of deep waters. With the tiny bubbles emitted by freshwater fairies at its core, it grew when particles of starlight built up and crystallized, eventually forming a beautiful six-petaled flower, at least according to what Lydia had heard.

“Is it real?” Nico took it from her and gave it a lick. “Interesting. It tastes like ice.”

“Don’t do that, Nico! It will melt!”

“Snow crystals don’t melt. You can even throw them into fire,” he said, putting the crystal into his cup of tea. The sparkling-clear icy flower floated on the surface.

“If it’s real, that means Mrs. Hardy really did meet a fairy. Only

water-dwelling fairies are supposed to be capable of finding snow crystals. She was telling the truth!"

"A horrifying truth, Lydia. A fairy that takes the form of a handsome man and lives in the water? It has to be a kelpie! They're savage beasts!"

"A kelpie? I don't think so. I've never even seen one around the town."

"It might have come down the river."

A kelpie was a gorgeous horse that lived in freshwater. It was said that people who were captivated by its beauty and approached it would find themselves dragged into the water to be eaten. The next morning, the victim's liver would be found discarded on the water's edge. Kelpies were fearsome fairies indeed.

"Oh, no! Suppose it is trying to lead Mrs. Hardy into the water? Nico, we must go at once!"

"Go where?"

"To investigate whether there is a kelpie in the area."

"No, thank you. I do not wish to be reduced to just my liver." Nico started to make himself transparent, but then Lydia grabbed him by the scruff of his neck. Lifting him up to eye level, she glared at him.

"Do you *have* a liver? You're more fairy than cat."

"Put me down! You're ruining my fur."

"You'll come with me, then?"

"Fine! Honestly, you need to learn to have some patience. It's too dangerous to go at night, so we shall investigate tomorrow, all right?"

When she put him down, he snorted and quickly set about combing down his bushy fur with his paws.

Lydia headed for the town's outskirts first thing the next morning, where the river was shallow and narrow. It looked as desolate as anything. There was no one about, and the skies were overcast, giving the air an ashen hue. She and Nico approached the bank cautiously, keeping an eye out for any unnatural ripples on the water's surface.

"Someone's there, Lydia."

Holding her hair flat against the powerful wind, Lydia squinted into the gray to see a figure standing on the riverbank. It was her

elderly visitor from yesterday.

"Mrs. Hardy! What are you doing here?" Lydia cried, rushing up to her.

The woman, who had been staring intently at the river's surface, turned around. Her white hair was hidden beneath a shawl. "Oh, Miss Carlton! I must apologize for yesterday's palaver. It really would seem that my father is loath to see me marry a fairy."

"Actually, I was hoping to discuss that with you."

"Nevertheless, I am warmed by the kindness you showed me. You are the only person to have believed my story."

"Mrs. Hardy…"

"Would you call me Ruth? I would like for us to be friends."

"Of course."

"I am here to meet with my beloved. This is the perfect opportunity to introduce you."

"The kelp— Your fiancé is coming *here*?"

It was only now that Lydia realized Nico had vanished. As frustrated as she was by his selfishness, it was more important that she get Ruth away from the river, if indeed there was a kelpie on the way.

"The wind is frightfully strong here, Miss…Ruth. Let us take shelter under those trees."

It was as she was trying to lead the older woman away that a voice sounded right by them. "Oi, lassie. Are ye *her*?"

Lydia turned to see a young man standing before her. His hair was a mass of jet-black curls, and he had a sharp, masculine face and a sturdy build. There was a symmetrical beauty to him, and he was so perfect as to appear inhuman.

At present, he was glaring at Lydia at close proximity and giving a thoughtful hum. "Ye're bonnier than I thought ye'd be."

She hesitated. "Thank you."

"Ye've got a nice rump on ye too."

When he ran his hand over the back of her skirt, she reflexively raised her own hands in response.

"What do you think you are doing?!" Her open palm struck his face. As it did so, the wind picked up, sending ripples over the river's surface.

The man transformed before her very eyes into a black horse

that was almost unsettlingly gorgeous.

"A kelpie?!" Lydia stammered. "Miss Ruth, is this your fiancé?"

"No, my fiancé has silver hair," she replied timidly.

Keeping Ruth behind her, Lydia backed away.

"Och, so it wasnae ye. I forgot that humans age quick as anythin'."

"Who are you? Where is Miss Ruth's fiancé?"

"Ah'm here to see what sort of lassie my wee brother is marryin'." The kelpie paced around them slowly.

Trembling, Lydia fumbled for the twig in her pocket.

"He said he was gonna marry a human and leave the family. I telt him it's no' a guid idea, but he wouldnae listen. So I came to see the lassie in question. I was gonna eat her if she didnae look guid enough for him."

"Don't you dare come any closer!" Lydia shouted, thrusting her hawthorn twig at him. "I am a fairy doctor. I refuse to let this woman come to harm!"

"Who's a fairy doctor? Ye're jist a wee lassie. Ye think a wee twig like that is gonna be enough to ward us off?"

The kelpie neighed loudly. The terror Lydia felt as he moved closer rendered her speechless, and she was squeezing her eyes shut before she knew it. That was when she felt something soft caress her cheek.

"Stop this."

She hardly dared to open her eyes, but when she did so, she saw a young man with silver hair standing in front of her. He was facing the black horse, shielding them from it. The softness must have come from his long hair—or rather, his mane.

"Ruth!"

And then he was rushing toward his fiancée, who seemed to have passed out from terror.

***

Half a century ago, Ruth was growing up in the Scottish Highlands, the same region in which kelpies dwelled. In her youth, she met a silver kelpie in his human form, and they fell in love. However, her father had already chosen a fiancé for her, and the fairy feared her disgust should she discover he was a savage beast

that sometimes ate humans, so he eventually disappeared. Years passed, but he couldn't forget about her, and knowing how short human lives were, he recognized that he would soon lose his chance. So he had followed the river to this town.

Ruth had yet to forget about him either. She continued to cherish the snow crystal he had given her. So overjoyed was he by their reunion that he had proposed to her. In the end, however, he had been unable to tell her that he was a kelpie.

The younger, silver kelpie relayed all of this to Lydia. He seemed a quiet and sensitive soul. His build was much slimmer than his brother's, but his looks were just as perfect. Both kelpies were presently sitting in Lydia's reception room. Naturally, they were both in human form, but she still had to stop herself rubbing her eyes in disbelief several times. There they were before her: two gorgeous men, one silver-haired and sitting politely with his hands on his lap, and the other dark-haired and slouching with his legs stretched out.

They are horses*,* she thought to herself bitterly, though she had no reason to feel resentful.

The younger brother had carried Ruth, who remained unconscious, to the house. She was currently resting in a separate room. Meanwhile, Lydia had been quietly listening to the kelpie's story.

"Ah'll be takin' my leave, fairy doctor. I shouldnae have come back after all this time."

"Ye sure ye wanna be goin'?" the older brother interjected.

"Ye didnae want me seein' her in the first place."

"No as yer brother, naw. Humans die in the blink of an eye. Ye could've taken her to the fairy world, but ye couldnae've made her live longer. But ah've seen how torn up ye've been over her this whole time. I don't wanna see ye like that anymore."

"Why, you're kinder than I expected," said Lydia.

"'Course I am. Who do ye think I am?"

"A savage kelpie."

The older kelpie turned to his brother. "Can I eat this saucy lassie?"

"Even I know that a kelpie removed from the water doesn't have that sort of strength. Otherwise, I wouldn't have invited you into my home."

“Ye’re saucy three times over.” He again looked to his brother. “What’s so guid about human females anyhows?”

“Ruth is both graceful and kindhearted.” The younger brother suddenly looked panicked and turned to Lydia. “What I mean to say is that human females come in all sorts.”

“It’s all right. I don’t need to be consoled by a horse.”

“We’re no horses,” the dark brother protested. “We’re mighty kelpies. My brother’s jist a bit of a lost cause. Usually, we have our own territories and live alone. But he’s always clingin’ to us and complainin’ he’s lonely. He *wants* to be with a human *because* he’s a lost cause. Here, ah’ll make ye a promise. A normal kelpie could never have a happy life with a human, but this one could make it work.”

“But your brother has already expressed an intention to leave, and I think that would be for the best. No marriage between a human being and a kelpie could ever be successful.” She looked at the silver fairy. “Miss Ruth fainted at the very sight of you. I am afraid that discovering that her fiancé was a kelpie has caused her quite the shock.”

The older kelpie fell into a sullen silence as though he regretted sharing his thoughts.

“It’s no’ yer fault,” the younger brother assured him. “This is for the best. She was gonna find out eventually anyhows, and ah’m satisfied jist knowin’ that she never forgot about us.”

Lydia nodded and got to her feet, pulling the snow crystal from her skirt pocket. “This is the present you gave to Miss Ruth, isn’t it?”

“How’ve ye got it?”

“Miss Ruth dropped it. Destroying it will prevent you from ever being able to approach her again.”

It was a common method to cut contact with a fairy of the Unseelie Court: destroying something that had been given to you by the fairy you wished to break ties with. The fairy would then lose sight of you.

“Ye don’t hafta to go that far, do ye?” the older brother said.

“It’s awright. Please, destroy it.” The younger brother’s tone was meek but resolute.

These creatures had the spirits of savage beasts, but it was their strong, noble air that attracted humans. Of course, this was

all so that they could capture the humans to eat.

Lydia almost found herself sympathizing. She caught glimpses of how it pained this quiet and thoughtful silver-haired man to withdraw from Ruth, despite how he felt about her. She had to remind herself of the savage blood running through his veins.

"Lydia, do you even know *how* to destroy a snow crystal?" Nico grinned at her from where he lay sprawled over the sofa's armrest. The kelpie brothers had already left.

"Nico! How dare you run away earlier?!"

"I did no such thing. I merely made myself invisible."

"I shall accept your excuse if you tell me about the snow crystal."

"Would that I could, but I don't know either. I only know that it's impossible to break or burn it."

"Is that all? Surely there is no reason to be acting so smug then, is there?"

The cat saved his most unhelpful remarks for the most critical moments. "Ruth might know," he said, jerking his chin toward the doorway.

The older woman was no longer lying down in the next room, but was standing there looking rather bewildered.

"Oh, Miss Ruth, you are awake. How are you feeling?" Lydia rushed up to her and led her by the hand to sit her on the sofa.

The woman looked rather vacant as she rested a strand of her loose, white hair on her finger and studied it as if to make sure it was really hers. "I had forgotten that I had aged so much. How can I be married to him like this?"

Lydia frowned. "Were you not afraid of the kelpie?"

"Kelpie? Oh, I remember the pastor speaking of such fearsome beasts when I was a wee girl. He warned us not to go too close to the water if we were by ourselves. And so, when I met him, I did have the vague sense that he might be something of the sort."

The fairy doctor hesitated. "And you fell in love with him regardless?"

"I wasn't frightened in the least, for he was always so kind to me. So kind, in fact, that he never even took me into the water."

Ruth had *known* that her lover was a kelpie. She had fainted at the threatening sight of the black horse, not at the shock of

discovering the truth about her fiancé. His decision to leave had been based on a misunderstanding.

"After he left, I was filled with regret. I realized that there was a part of me that remained withdrawn from him because he was a kelpie. I lamented that I hadn't been able to trust him completely, even though there must be good and bad kelpies as there are good and bad humans. My regret never faded, even decades after I married and came to this town. I wasn't unhappy by any means, but my husband and I never had children, so his nephew inherited his business. My husband passed away, and ever since, I have felt rather unwelcome in the Hardy household."

"And that was why you decided to marry the kelpie after all?"

"If he would have me…after all this time."

As a fairy doctor, Lydia simply couldn't place her trust in a kelpie. Even if the kelpie in question was a special case, her mother had taught her that it was a fairy doctor's duty to keep people away from wicked fairies. Though it wasn't unheard of for people and fairies to find common ground and maintain good relationships, there were certain areas in which they were, and always would be, completely incompatible. That went doubly so for fairies of the Unseelie Court. They were something of a mystery even to fae experts, so Lydia was reluctant to advise Ruth to marry one.

"It's foolish of me, isn't it? He hasn't changed, but I certainly have. I suppose he was disappointed to see what I have become. Only, he is so kind that he could never bring himself to say so." Ruth looked down at her lap, where Lydia had placed a comforting hand. There, she found the snow crystal pendant in the fairy doctor's grasp and let out a small sigh. "I am sure he must pity me, knowing that I simply could not part with his gift for all these years." Ruth took the pendant from Lydia and removed the chain. Then, she gently brought the crystal to her lips.

"What are you doing?!"

"If I swallow it, it will melt and disappear. Once that happens, he won't be able to see me anymore. I ought to have done this long before he laid eyes on my wizened face."

The snow crystal could be destroyed by swallowing it. Lydia realized something then: by giving Ruth this information, the kelpie had equipped her with the power to cut ties with him. He

knew better than anyone the kind of creature that he was. And so he had done what he could to ensure that Ruth did not fear him for it. To ensure that he would never *see* fear in her eyes. That was his most heartfelt desire.

Humans and kelpies were incompatible. Or, at least, they should be. However...

"Don't do it!" Before she knew what she was doing, Lydia was tearing the crystal from Ruth's hand. She continued before the woman could get over her astonishment. "You cannot resign yourself to *this*! Not yet! He still loves you; it is just that he feared you would spurn him if you knew what he was. Honestly, I believe that both of you have let your anxious imaginations run away with you! If you truly love him, then I implore you to pour your heart out to him and let him do the same!"

"Oh, but..."

"Come, we must make haste lest they leave this town altogether!" Lydia tugged firmly on Ruth's arm.

They made for the riverside, Lydia leading the way, and Ruth seemingly unable to protest as she was pulled along.

They soon came to the windswept embankment. The river's surface reflected the gray clouds, maintaining its usual misty appearance. Lydia weaved her way through sparse thickets and approached the water. She eventually came to a stop and stared at its surface.

"Weren't you supposed to have her *cut ties* with the kelpie, Lydia?" Nico had come chasing after her.

"Yes, perhaps that is what I should have done as a fairy doctor. But I am Miss Ruth's friend. I cannot keep them apart if they are in love." Lydia turned back to the water's surface. "Can you hear me, kelpie? Miss Ruth has declared that she is not afraid of what you are! We have come, therefore, to ask where your feelings lie. Do you still love her, despite her age?"

The gentle current suddenly turned choppy. Up flew a spray of water, preceding the kelpies' appearance. The brothers, one silver and one black, stood still on the river's surface, their manes dotted with rainbow droplets. They seemed to glow with a mysterious, spiritual light that was not of this world.



As frightened as she was of the ethereal sight before her, Lydia spoke clearly and firmly for the sake of her anxious friend, addressing the silver horse. “You are a witless, weak-willed excuse for a man! If you feel love, you must pursue it, whether you are penniless or a water horse!”

“Comparing a penniless man to a kelpie is a bit of a stretch, don’t you think?” Nico commented.

Lydia ignored the smart-alecky remark. “Will you leave? Will it satisfy you to do so? For if you do, Miss Ruth will swallow the crystal!” Though her fairy cat companion often chided her for her lack of patience, she had yet to mend her ways. Irritated, Lydia thrust the crystal at Ruth.

That was when the younger kelpie took several slow steps forward. His appearance changed in a flutter, turning him into a gorgeous, silver-haired man. “Ye haven’t changed at all, Ruth. When I look at ye, I see yer soul. Nothin’ else. If it’s true that ye’re no’ scared…would ye give us the time ye’ve got left?”

Folding her fingers around the snow crystal, Ruth gave an almost imperceptible nod. Then she turned to Lydia and smiled before pulling her into a gentle embrace. “Thank you, Miss Lydia. I couldn’t have asked for a more wonderful friend.”

Ruth let go and stepped away silently before making her way toward her lover. The light surrounding the kelpie reached out for her, transforming her white hair into a bright ginger. Now restored to a young, spirited girl, she was taken into the kelpie’s arms as Lydia watched, her vision growing hazy.

***

“Your first human friend, and you go and send her off to the fairy world.” The gray cat was sitting upright in a chair, whiskers twitching in delight as he inhaled the fragrance from the teacup in his front paws.

“It was in her best interest.”

“I see you have therefore decided to give up on mankind altogether and gain even more fairy companions.” Nico’s gaze narrowed wearily as it fell on the man with dark, curly hair crunching away at a cookie.

“What’s this now? This is no’ gonna fill my stomach.”

Lydia frowned, her hands trembling around the teapot in them. “What are you *doing* here, kelpie?!”

“My brother’s gone off to start a new life with his bride. Guess ah’m bored.”

“That shouldn’t mean that you have to come to *my* house!”

“Ah’ve developed a buddin’ interest in humans.”

“In that case, you might want to choose a different one to observe. Lydia is far from your typical specimen,” Nico warned him.

“And what is *that* supposed to imply?!” she shouted. It would still be some time before she caught wind of the neighborhood rumors: that the strange Carlton girl had loud, one-sided conversations with her cat.



A Welcome Fortune

He loves me, he loves me not. He loves me… He loves me not.

As the final petal fluttered to the ground, she gave a heavy sigh. She had played this game several times with the same result. The flowers seemed to be telling her that she ought not to get her hopes up, and yet she reached for another from her stock anyway.

Just then, a sudden wind caught both the flower and her hat, pulling them away from her. The latter fell at the feet of a young man who was passing by. Retrieving the hat, he approached her and offered it to her with an amicable smile.

"Might you be Miss Sarah, the flower vendor?"

"Yes, I am." Sarah was too distracted by the man's appearance—which was most unsuited to the jumble of the market—to thank him. Strands of golden blond fell from beneath his black top hat. His frame was slender and wrapped in an elegant frock coat, and on his feet he wore boots so well polished that it was like the dirt didn't dare stick to them. Then there was his flawless, handsome face. Sarah was so awestruck that she couldn't help but stare at him, rude though she knew it was.

"Is it true that your flowers possess an almost irrefutable ability to predict the future?" His soothing voice enunciated every word perfectly, which spoke to his high status.

It was extremely rare to see a member of the upper class at the market in the afternoon. They came more often in the evenings, when they would filter into the imposing opera house across the way: the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane. Sarah wondered whether he had come in daylight just to buy her flowers.

"I'm not too sure myself," she said, "but that's what lots of people tell me."

At some point, the rumor had developed that using Sarah's flowers in fortune-telling lent itself to highly accurate results. Such talk drew in both male and female customers with romantic troubles. Since it was to her advantage, she had decided not to go out of her way to deny the rumor when someone asked her about it. It did, however, somewhat surprise her that a man such as this

was seeking divination.

“You don’t look like you need one, sir. I think you could pick any girl you wanted and she’d be interested in you.”

“I wonder about that. Could *you*, for example, fall for me so easily?” The man gave her a mischievous smile. Upper-class men tended to make themselves very difficult to approach, yet his smile made him incredibly approachable.

“I… No, I wouldn’t say so.”

“You already have feelings for someone, don’t you? I saw how intently you were plucking those flowers.”

Embarrassed, Sarah pulled her hat down over her eyes.

“You are a very charming young lady. And yet, you too have troubles of the heart. You no doubt understand that other people do not always feel the way one wishes they would.”

“Yeah… I hope you get the outcome you want.” It was comforting to know that even a man as seemingly blessed as he was shared similar troubles. She offered him a bunch of daisies.

“If not, I shall return to buy some more. If all else fails, at least we may comfort each other over our broken hearts. That is one way to find love, after all.” Chuckling, he took the flowers and gave her a copper coin in return. He certainly said some very odd things. Sarah had never heard of a nobleman attempting to seduce a flower girl.

“A word of advice, sir. If you want your love to work out, you shouldn’t be charming girls at random.”

“I see. Now there’s a fine idea. I am taking even more of a liking to you.” Apparently, he had no intention of taking her advice.

With that, he left. Sarah had been so taken aback by his eccentricity that she had forgotten to give him his change. Though she rushed after him, he had already vanished into the crowds around the market.

Who on earth was he?

“S’pose I can leave it for now. I’ll probably see him again if I hang around the opera house.”

***

“Edgar! Explain yourself!” Lydia had been waiting for the young earl—the master of this estate—to return, and now she charged

into the entrance hall.

"You are most charming even when you are in a foul temper, Lydia. Now, what can I help you with?"

"I thought I had made it very clear that I shall *not* be going to the opera. So why did Miss Harriet see me and ask me to get changed for it?"

"Oh, you said you didn't want to go last week, so I decided we would go today."

As much as she wanted to tell him that it had been a blanket statement, she held her tongue. He would just twist things in his favor like he always did. Besides, she knew he had sprung this on her at the last minute because he didn't intend to hear her objections.

Lydia's temper flared as she followed Edgar into the gentlemen's room. She resented the implication that she would do anything he wanted of her. "I have told you before that I do not like the pomp and circumstance of such places. If you require a female companion to go with you, then why not ask the daughter of a nobleman? I am sure whoever you asked would happily oblige."

Edgar spun around. "But *you* wouldn't?"

"Well, the…the opera isn't even in English! I shan't understand a word."

"It is Rossini's *La Cenerentola*. It may be in Italian, but it is based upon the story of Cinderella, which I am sure you know well. I shall be sitting next to you, so I can explain what is happening. I am certain you will enjoy it."

"But…"

The opera house was the nobility's social hub, and it felt to Lydia like a place she would make her debut into high society—if only she didn't come from the countryside. It seemed like too much to expect of her. And yet, Edgar seemed *eager* to take her into such an environment. While he claimed to want to introduce his contemporaries to his estate's fairy doctor, she had the sense that he simply wanted to show her off as a curiosity.

Edgar Ashenbert was the Earl of Ibrazel. Although it was now the nineteenth century, and there were likely very few people who believed that he *actually* held territory in Fairyland, the fairies who occupied his British territories recognized him as their lord. Edgar

couldn’t see fairies, so he had hired Lydia as his fairy doctor to attend to all manner of business surrounding them. She hadn’t long been his employee, and yet he had already dragged her all over the place, introducing her to aristocrat after aristocrat.

Fairy doctors used to be prolific throughout the United Kingdom. They were knowledgeable about fairies and would work to solve the problems that arose between the creatures and their human neighbors. These days, however, it was almost impossible to find one, and people often struggled to understand the nature of Lydia’s work. Most of them considered her to be as baffling as the fae themselves. She was doubting more and more the need to push herself to appear before other people, which was why she was so reluctant to go to the opera house. However, it didn’t look like Edgar would rest until he had convinced her.

“Is it your intention to see me off by myself? Do you wish for everyone to laugh at me, the man whose companion turned him down? I have no benefactors, no supporters, and yet I need to find my place within London’s aristocracy. Inexperienced as I am, I am agonizing constantly about how I might leave a good impression, and while I have so far failed to find an answer, I do know that your presence equips me with a great confidence. You would leave me to fend for myself, despite that?”

Edgar had a knack for sob stories and coercion. And then there were his princely good looks. In combination, they allowed him to bend any girl or woman to his will. He was bolder than life itself and at the center of attention wherever he went. Lydia could not imagine that he would ever end up the laughingstock at a mere opera house, whether he was alone or not.

“Please say you’ll come,” he pressed her.

Despite knowing his tricks, Lydia found it difficult to refuse when he made the request so earnestly. “I do not know how to conduct myself in a manner befitting noble company.”

“All you will have to do is sit down and smile,” Edgar said before immediately summoning his senior maid. Apparently, he had taken Lydia’s ambiguous response as an agreement. “We still have that tailored lime-green dress, don’t we, Harriet? The one in the same shade as Lydia’s eyes? There is one particular noblewoman who holds quite a bit of influence. It would be best you not wear the same color as her, so I think green is an appropriate choice.”

Lydia hadn't realized just how much consideration needed to go into one's appearance. She wasn't sure whether to be impressed or appalled by how quickly Edgar was able to gather information.

"Does that sound all right to you, Lydia?"

Already resigning herself to her fate, she could only nod in response. Considering it a part of her duties to be towed around by Edgar, she allowed his maids to dress her up in a manner befitting a lady. A doubt sprang to her mind then, one she perhaps ought to have thought of earlier.

"How can you have a tailored dress prepared for me when I have never been measured?"

"The dressmaker at the shop stands about as tall as you."

"And our builds are similar?"

"Well, I also had to ask to have seven inches removed from the waist and bust."

Lydia goggled. "How on earth did you know to be so specific?!"

"Instinct, I suppose."

He spoke as though it was quite a natural thing when it was anything but. His philandering ways might have run deeper than she thought. A strange sensation, something between exasperation and humiliation, left Lydia's head spinning.

Just then, Edgar's loyal servant, a young man with dark skin, entered the room. "My lord, you left this in the carriage." Raven placed the small bouquet of daisies on the table.

"Ah, that's right. I found that flower girl in Covent Garden whose flowers are said to be able to accurately predict one's romantic fortune."

"Then the rumors were true, my lord?"

"More than true, yes."

"So you've used the flowers to divine something already?" Lydia asked.

"No, no, the rumors that she has lovely dark hair and an incredibly sweet disposition."

Was Edgar really more interested in *that* than the predictive power of the girl's flowers?

"Unfortunately, it seems she already holds feelings for somebody else." Edgar passed the bouquet to Lydia, then picked out one of the daisies. "It matters not. I have you, after all."

"I am your fairy doctor, not your whimsical possession."

“And enduringly prickly. I shall put this daisy to the test and find out how you *truly* feel about me.”

Not in the mood to respond, Lydia pointedly turned her face away from him. Meanwhile, he started plucking the white petals from the daisy one by one. However, she couldn’t help but pay attention as he alternated between “she loves me” and “she loves me not,” as childish as she found it.

“She loves me.” Edgar smiled broadly as he plucked off the final petal right in front of her. “Well? Did the daisy succeed in casting its spell on you?”

“It’s a flower.” Lydia made to whip around, but before she could complete the rotation, she felt something squirm against her ankle.

A snake!

She screamed and clung to Edgar at once. “Help! Get rid of it! Do…*something*!”



Though Raven was swift in catching the creature, Lydia remained frozen in fear.

"You're scared of snakes?" Edgar asked.

"What is a snake doing *here*?!"

"It must have lost its way. There's nothing to be frightened of. It's only small."

Lydia started to raise her head, only to see that Raven was standing there with the snake in his grasp. She had to suppress another scream. "What are you doing?! Get *rid* of it!"

"May I get rid of it, my lord?" he obediently asked his master, sounding utterly unconcerned.

Edgar hummed thoughtfully. "I wonder. I don't think there's a need to be *too* hasty."

Only then did Lydia realize that she was clinging to him. But with Raven still standing there and holding the snake, she couldn't move. "This isn't amusing!" she protested.

Finally obtaining Edgar's permission, Raven tossed the snake out of the window. With a sigh of relief, Lydia quickly tried to pull away from the earl. However, he seemed reluctant to let her go and wrapped his arms around her back.

"Perhaps I should have asked for eight inches, not seven," he whispered.

"I beg your pardon?"

"From the waist, I mean."

Though Lydia unleashed her palm, Edgar quickly let go of her, and she missed.

"Miss Carlton, it is time to get ready." The senior maid had returned with the lime-green dress. Lydia responded to Edgar's smirk with a glare as she let herself be escorted from the room.

"We have a guest, Lydia," Nico's hushed voice came from the vicinity of her feet. He was a fairy cat and her companion. Under normal circumstances, he would walk on his hind legs and wear a necktie (he was highly conscious of his appearance). Presently, he was walking on all fours to avoid arousing the maid's suspicion.

"A guest?"

"I saw a fairy come in from outside."

"Did it, perchance, bring that snake with it as a practical joke?"

"Might have done."

That being the case, Lydia wouldn't have been surprised if the

culprit had been a common hobgoblin. They weren't malicious fairies, but she was still incensed that *anyone* would dare let loose a snake in her vicinity.

"Nico, I want you to locate our 'guest' and capture it!"

"No. It's too much of a bother." Nico may have been her companion, but he was only as helpful as he wanted to be. "I already went out of my way to warn you about it. Just keep your wits about you." With that, the fickle fairy cat vanished into thin air.

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As it transpired, Lydia did not get the opportunity to worry about the mischievous fairy guest. The moment she was appropriately dressed, she was whisked away to the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane by Edgar. The pair were shown to a box, and it was only on their arrival that Lydia learned said box was reserved for the Duchess Masefield and company. Though Edgar's failure to disclose this fact angered Lydia, there was little she could do about it now.

The duchess was a respected patron of the opera house, and sitting with her would no doubt lead to superfluous attention from the rest of the audience. For Edgar, who had only recently returned to Britain, it was a perfect opportunity to make his name known to those who shared his status.

Does he ever take any action that isn't *meticulously calculated?*

Overcome with a sudden wave of nerves, it was a wonder that she was able to greet the duchess in the manner she had only just been taught. But her nervousness dissipated in an instant. The duchess was an older woman who exuded elegance, and she treated Lydia like they were already friends.

"I hear that you are able to see fairies," the duchess remarked without an ounce of skepticism.

"The duchess has seen a fairy before," Edgar explained.

The woman smiled tenderly. "I am afraid to say that I did not see it clearly. Rather, I had an inexplicable experience in the past that I look back on and wonder whether a fairy might have been involved."

It had become clearer to Lydia why Edgar had so wanted her to accompany him here: he thought she might help him earn the

duchess's favor. Not only did he attempt to seduce her at every turn, he was incorrigible when it came to his habit of using people to his advantage, which was partly why Lydia found it so difficult to handle him.

Regardless, she found herself intrigued by the opportunity to discuss fairies. After taking a moment to recollect her thoughts, she asked the duchess, "Might I ask you to tell me more, Your Grace?"

"It happened before I was even married. I was spending time at the villa in Somerset, and one of the maids told me that the area was well populated with fairies. She said that if one was to leave milk on the windowsill, some of it would be gone the following morning. And so I did just that, every evening."

The duchess went on to say that she'd had two suitors at the time. The first was, of course, the duke to whom she was now married. At the time, he had far less status as a second son. Her second suitor was a soldier who had just graduated from military academy. After a long period of struggling to pick between them, she caught sight of the daisies blooming in the garden, and she decided to let them choose for her.

She plucked off the petals one by one, whispering both men's names in turn as she went. No matter how many daisies she picked, she always finished on the same name. Daisies were often used for these fortune-telling games because they didn't have a fixed number of petals, and yet she got the same result every time. As she continued, she developed the sense that *something* was fiddling with the petals.

"It was then that I caught a glimpse of a small, green creature in the flower's shadow and I heard a whisper. Of course, it may well have been the wind."

But Lydia was sure it had been a fairy. "Fairies are good at manipulating numbers and order to confuse humans. It must have been a brownie, or a hobgoblin, or another small variety of fae."

"Do you think so? I do find it rather curious that a fairy would lead me to a certain result. I wonder whether it could read the future."

"I would say that is highly unlikely. Those kinds of fairies usually pull pranks to alleviate their boredom. There does not tend to be

any deeper meaning to their actions." Lydia suddenly grew anxious at the insinuation behind her words: that a fairy had interfered with the duchess's future out of sheer boredom. Still, as a fairy doctor, she couldn't give out false information about the creatures. "As much as they enjoy pranks, they do not pull them out of malice. In all likelihood, it didn't understand that you were making such an important decision, and simply wanted to make its presence known to thank you for the milk."

The duchess's eyes glimmered with soft amusement. "I can sense the depths of your adoration for fairies. The tiny souls are unconcerned with human convention and live freely. And you love them for it."

As few as Masefield's words were, Lydia felt within them an appreciation for both her and fairies. Overjoyed and filled with affection, she naturally mirrored the duchess's smile.

"So, madame, did you set your heart on the man the daisies selected for you?" Edgar asked.

"I did, yes. I owe that fairy a great deal of gratitude."

"It does no harm to take stock in such fortune-telling games," Edgar told Lydia, having wasted no time picking up on her improved mood. Apparently he wanted her to recall the success he'd had with the daisy earlier.

Lydia looked away in a huff, for the two cases were in no way alike, but she was sure he knew that she wasn't angry with him anymore. There was a small smile on his lips as he turned to face the stage.

"It seems the opera is about to begin."

"One of my favorite singers is performing tonight," Masefield said.

"Oh, yes? In which role?"

"As one of the chorus. He has yet to secure himself a named role."

"A young talent with great potential, is he?"

"I wonder about that. I am keen on him because he bears a slight resemblance to my husband when he was younger."

"In that case, I am sure that he has boundless potential."

The duchess let out a laugh like a delighted young girl.

It wasn't long before the curtain rose. Although she couldn't understand the lyrics, Lydia quickly found herself engrossed in

what was happening onstage. The prince's pleasant tenor had her spellbound, and her heart skipped a beat when he and Cinderella had their fated encounter. Soon, the chorus of male servants took to the stage. Lydia watched intently, trying to pick out which might have been the singer the duchess had been talking about. It was then that she caught sight of something small darting across the set.

"A fairy?"

She peered through her opera glasses. There was indeed a fairy on the stage, small enough to fit in the palm of her hand. It had ginger hair, a hooked nose, and wore green clothing, all traits that pointed to a pixie. Though it was making no efforts to hide itself, no one else had noticed it, because fairies were invisible to the average human eye.

As Lydia watched on, the fairy approached the male chorus. No sooner had it reached them than it began to clamber up the body of a particularly sturdy man. He was still singing fervently by the time the creature reached the top of his head and suddenly tugged on his hair.

"Oh!" Lydia clasped her hands to her mouth before finishing her cry. Though the singer continued his performance, he kept looking this way and that. He only straightened himself up when he caught his fellow chorus members glaring at him.

When the fairy grew bored of tugging his hair, it sank its teeth into his ear, no doubt making him lose his pitch. Though it was too subtle for Lydia to hear, the other performers were glowering at him again. She felt bad for him. It wasn't his fault, and yet he was sure to be in for a telling off later. At the same time, she wondered why the fairy was picking on him like this. It might have been his size, that he simply made for a bigger target than other people. If, however, he was the duchess's favored singer as Lydia supposed, that might change things.

As she feared, she heard Masefield sighing once the interval came around.

"Your favorite singer, madame... Might it have been the tallest tenor?" Edgar asked. He had also singled out the man who had fallen prey to the fairy's tricks.

"Yes, that was him. I wonder what happened. He is such a hard worker, and every one of his performances up until now has been

nothing short of perfect…”

Though Lydia wanted to put it down to the fairy’s innocent prank, she didn’t quite feel as though that was enough to explain everything.

“Everyone has their bad days,” Edgar replied.

“I suppose,” murmured the duchess.

As Lydia was puzzling over whether to mention the fairy, there came a voice from the other side of the curtain.

“Please, come through,” the duchess called.

The broad-shouldered tenor who had just been on stage appeared before them. He had an angular face with large features, which, combined with his thick eyebrows, made him look rather fierce. His tone of voice, however, was mild, and there was no fault to be found in the bow he gave as a greeting.

“I cannot thank you enough for your presence this evening, Your Grace.”

Lydia studied his earlobe, which was reddening—presumably from the fairy’s bite.

“It is a truly wonderful performance,” the duchess said. “I am eager to see the rest.”

“Ah…yes, thank you so much…” The tenor’s shoulders slumped apologetically. He could not have come purely to thank Masefield. His mind seemed to be elsewhere as the duchess introduced him to Edgar and Lydia.

“Don’t you need to prepare for the second act, Mr. Hogarth?”

Hugh Hogarth was his name, and he had the same red hair as the pixie. He looked even more apologetic as he lowered his head. “I’m afraid to say that I have been removed from the second act for the evening.”

“My, is that so? Don’t be too hard on yourself now. More opportunities will come along.”

“Was there a rat on the stage?” Edgar asked.

“A rat? Perhaps that was it. I cannot claim to be certain of what happened, exactly.”

“I am sure that there were very few members of the audience who noticed your mistake, and your fellow cast members will have forgotten all about it once tomorrow’s *Times* comes out with its usual rave reviews.”

A subtle, relieved smile appeared on Hugh’s lips. However, the

fairy question was still at the forefront of Lydia's mind. That was no rat.

"Excuse me sir, but have you been near any flower beds or thickets recently?" She recognized that it was an odd question to ask out of the blue. Hugh looked puzzled, and even the duchess gave her a slight frown.

"Do you suspect the involvement of fairies?" Edgar inquired.

"Um, well, I did see... I was just wondering whether it might have been enacting revenge rather than pulling a prank."

"Does damaging a flower bed invite the fairies' wrath?" the duchess asked.

"Not quite, madame, but fairies like to nap in such places. If one happens to step inadvertently on a sleeping fairy, for example, one might encounter a turn of bad luck."

"Goodness me," Masefield murmured, turning to the tenor. "Could that be the case?"

The sudden mention of fairies must have perplexed him, but he couldn't leave a question from the duchess unanswered, and now he was trawling through his memories. "I don't believe I have been anywhere like that. What about pulling petals from a flower? I was playing one of those fortune-telling games with a daisy, you see."

"I don't think that would be enough. While trampling on flowers would certainly be a problem, picking them or pulling off their petals shouldn't anger the fairies."

That aside, there was that petal-picking game again. Lydia frowned to herself. Was it really that popular a pastime these days? She was also struck by the uncouth thought that Hugh didn't look the type to be interested in such things.

"What question did you pose the flower?" Edgar asked, seemingly out of a passing fancy. The most common goal of such games was to seek an answer to one's romantic struggles. Though it was undoubtedly in poor taste, perhaps he was curious about the woman Hugh had feelings for.

"Oh, nothing really."

"You possess feelings which are unrequited?"

"Well...yes."

"And what have the flowers been telling you?"

Hugh sighed. "'She loves me not.' Every last time."

"I happen to know a flower girl whose flowers give highly

accurate readings. Would you like me to pass on her details?"

"I already have them. Her flowers are the ones giving me such dismal results."

"Leaving the matter of the flowers aside for now, is your situation really that hopeless?"

"I never get the opportunity for hope. You see, the majority of women are frightened of my appearance the first time they lay eyes on me."

"Come now, Mr. Hogarth, you mustn't think like that," the duchess said. "Your charms are too many to count."

While Hugh looked a little intimidating when he was standing silently, Lydia had the sense that he was more of a sensitive soul than he appeared. He gave Masefield a grateful smile.

"I suppose the difficulty lies in the fact that you don't know who the object of your affections is," she went on. "You met her outside at night, when it was too dark to see her face. All we really know is that she was quite young."

"You were present when they met, madame?" Edgar asked.

"The poor girl was being hounded by a drunkard when Mr. Hogarth stepped in to assist her. However, he suffered some heavy injuries in the process. My carriage was passing the scene when the girl flagged us down in tears. I had no idea what was going on till I found Mr. Hogarth collapsed in an alleyway. The girl vanished without telling me a thing."

"And you fell in love with her?" Edgar looked at Hugh. "Fell in love at first sight…without the sight."

"I have a vague recollection of her tending to my wounds. She used her ribbon to bandage my hand." There was still a faint scar on the hand Hugh dipped into his breast pocket, from which he carefully pulled a red ribbon.

"She sounds like a lovely girl. I would very much like to meet her," Edgar said.

Lydia rolled her eyes covertly.

"She had such a sweet voice too," Masefield said.

"Are there any other clues to go by?" the earl asked. "I would be more than happy to assist in the search."

"Goodness! Mr. Hogarth, I suggest you take Lord Ashenbert up on his offer. He has many female acquaintances."

Lydia doubted that Masefield would be so eager to accept

Edgar's help if she knew the true nature of these "acquaintances." Instead, she would recognize the danger in having him search for a young lady that another man had already set his sights on. No doubt the earl would try to snatch her away from Hugh the moment they found her.

Hugh gave an evasive hum. He may well have sensed that Edgar was something of a philanderer, not least because of his handsome appearance that would leave any girl swooning.

The conversation had well and truly moved on from the matter of the fairy. In any case, Lydia still wasn't sure whether Hugh had been a deliberate target or whether the pixie had simply been in a foul mood. Not wanting to cause him unnecessary concern, she decided it was best not to pursue the issue further.

When the opera came to a close, Lydia was so swept up in the enthusiasm of the curtain call that she nearly forgot all about the fairy. The emotion of the finale remained with her as she left the opera house, and she found herself singing along with the melody that still played in her mind.

"I am so pleased that you enjoyed yourself."

Lydia had let go of the irritation she'd felt at the start of the evening. Everything about the opera had been as wonderful as something from a dream, from the pieces to the performances.

"Let's see another one soon," Edgar said lightly.

"Yes, let's," she replied without thinking before wishing she hadn't. Edgar knew how to make people enjoy themselves. Outings with him could be rather pleasant when she forgot about how he coerced and manipulated her.

He didn't know the meaning of the word "faithful," so it had been her earnest intention to keep some distance between them. However, there was something about him that stopped her from rejecting his invitations outright, and she could see herself gradually spending more time like this with him in the future. That didn't stop her from being frustrated by how her guard around him was starting to slip, though.

"However, I don't appreciate things being sprung on me at the last moment," she told him.

"I shall bear that in mind."

She doubted that he would. When she lifted her gaze to the

carriages lined up in front of the theater, she caught sight of the pixie from earlier on one of the cabs' roofs. Their eyes met, and the fairy's widened in surprise. Then, it hopped off the roof and started fleeing.

"There's the pixie from before!" she cried.

"I'm sorry?"

Determined to catch it, Lydia rushed after it into an alleyway, but eventually, she lost sight of it. She seemed to have ended up behind a market, where crates and handcarts overwhelmed the path. Locating a tiny fairy in a cluttered place like this was bound to be a Herculean task. Just as she was resigning herself to giving up and turning away, a young man stood up from between two carts. Visibly angry, he was approaching her.

"What are you throwin' stones for? That *hurt*!"

She could only assume he was a drunkard or a ruffian if he had been sleeping here. But his forehead was oozing blood, so his claims to have been struck by a stone must have been true.

"I didn't throw it," Lydia said.

"Who else could've?!"

Sensing danger, she made to back away. The man grabbed her arm and pulled her roughly down, leering at her as she fell.

"You're payin' for my medical fees, miss."

"For a tiny graze? I don't think so." Edgar had appeared behind them.

"Huh?! You wanna join me in the hospital, mister?"

The rogue flashed a knife, but Edgar had gotten in first and raised his cane. The man could not have expected a gentleman to fight back; he took the full brunt of the strike and staggered. Edgar then grabbed him and twisted his wrist up to wrench his knife away. The next second, he was thrusting the weapon at his enemy and grinning.

"How much are you after? Name your price—the 'medical fees' you wish to pay—and I shall give you the injuries you require."

Even if it was just a bluff, the cruel look Edgar got in his eyes at times like these sent shivers down Lydia's spine.



Quickly realizing that his opponent was no gentleman at all, the terrified man fled without putting up a fight. Edgar tossed the knife into the gutter then turned to Lydia, looking as though nothing had happened.

“Are you hurt?”

“No…” Though she felt like she ought to be asking the same of him, she took his hand and let him help her to her feet. It was then that she spotted the pixie behind a crate. It held a pebble in its hands, which it threw away before rushing after the man in a panic.

“Why did you run off all of a sudden?” Edgar asked.

“I saw the pixie. It threw a stone at the man to frighten me.”

Lydia then recalled the fairy Nico had mentioned that afternoon after the snake incident. Perhaps that had also been the pixie’s work. It only made her question all the more why it was targeting her.

“What pixie?”

“It’s the fairy that was tormenting Mr. Hogarth on stage. I wonder if it has anything to do with those flower games.” Thinking it through, she murmured, “Yes, Mr. Hogarth mentioned buying his daisies from the same girl you did. I wonder if their ‘high accuracy’ is really down to the pixie…”

“The flowers predicted that you would fall in love with me. Are you saying that this fairy set that man on you in order to have the prediction come true?”

“It could at least have had the grace to choose a less violent manner…”

Quite apart from anything else, the prank it had pulled on Hugh didn’t seem designed to assist in his romantic endeavors. His flowers had given him a consistently negative outlook, so maybe the pixie was working to make sure he *didn’t* find love. However, that didn’t make its actions any less cruel or baffling.

“Curses! Ought I to have let myself be struck when I was protecting you? Would that have made your heart skip a beat?”

Though Lydia was thinking hard, Edgar seemed utterly unconcerned by it all.

“No, it wouldn’t have!” she replied.

“Come and sit down for a moment.”

Why? she thought, until she noticed that the shoe he was

picking up off the ground was one of her own. Only then did she realize that it must have come off when she had fallen.

Edgar had her sit down on some stone steps, then stooped in front of her. “You’re bleeding. Did you cut yourself on a stone?”

“I would hardly call this a wound.”

He said nothing, instead lifting her ankle gently in his hand and wrapping a handkerchief around the injury. Lydia gazed at his blond, downturned eyelashes as he put her shoe back on. Much as she didn’t like to admit it, she felt her pulse quicken. She thought she would be able to appreciate Edgar’s charm if only he wasn’t an incorrigible philanderer who liked to tease and flirt with her. Then again, without those traits, perhaps he wouldn’t be Edgar.

“Isn’t this just like that scene from Cinderella in which the prince finds the owner of the slipper?” He wouldn’t be Edgar if he didn’t spout such lines at every opportunity. “Indeed, you are the young lady I have been searching for.”

“I am not interested in recreating the scene with you.”

“No? What a pity.”

Was he hoping she would refer to him as “Your Royal Highness”? The very idea of it was horribly embarrassing.

Still crouched down, Edgar chuckled and looked up at her. His gaze sent a strange sensation spreading through her, like she really had become a princess. He was looking at her as though she was not Lydia Carlton, but an exceptional girl under a wonderful spell. However, no matter how sweet his words to her were, they were never sincere. She knew that nothing good would come of letting them sweep her away.

“There was no glass slipper or pumpkin carriage in the opera,” Lydia remarked, trying to chase away the restlessness inside her.

Indeed, the prince in the opera had searched for his beloved with one of two bracelets rather than a shoe. It symbolized a promise between them: that he would find her, no matter who she was or what she looked like. This version of Cinderella told of the fulfillment of a destined love, one born of pure and honest devotion without the need for magic.

“It doesn’t do to be led astray by magic, wouldn’t you agree? I wouldn’t want my heart manipulated by a mischievous fairy and its flower games.” Lydia spoke with a harsher tone than necessary to protect herself against the tender atmosphere. “And if the pixie is

interfering with Mr. Hogarth's endeavors, I must do something to help him!"

She was a fairy doctor. It was her job to assist anyone with fairy-related troubles.

"And what of my endeavors?"

"First, I must find that pixie and capture it."

Unfortunately, fairies were nimble and difficult to trap. When it came to fae, Lydia was apt to drown everything else out. Totally forgetting about what might have passed between her and Edgar, she fell into the depths of thought. Resigned, Edgar got to his feet. His gaze flicked upward as it caught something.

"It seems Nico has graced us with his company."

The gray cat was walking atop the brick wall on his hind legs. Normally, he would pretend to be an ordinary cat when out in public, but he presently appeared to be in a pleasant state of tipsiness. When he saw the pair, he stopped and sat down on the wall with one leg crossed over the other.

"I must say, your pet cat is rather peculiar." Though Edgar had witnessed Nico walking on his hind legs on a few occasions, he seemed to interpret it as a learned trick.

"Lovely night, isn't it, Lydia? Just look at the moon."

Lydia sighed in exasperation. Although Edgar was probably only hearing mews in place of words, she did wish that Nico would be more careful about keeping up appearances. He had likely been drinking with some fairy friends at a pub somewhere. If anyone should notice there was a talking cat among them, not only would it cause quite a stir, but he risked getting sold to a circus. And she had no inclination to help him should that happen. Though he was normally fastidious about his appearance and liked to consider himself a gentleman, his love of liquor had turned him into a tired old drunkard who yawned without covering his mouth and didn't give a second thought to his crooked necktie.

Lydia got to her feet. There was much she wanted to mull over, and she didn't have time to liaise with a drunken cat. "Let us return home, Edgar."

"What about Nico? Do you not need to take him with you?"

"He will make his own way back."

"Oi, Lydia, I meant to tell you: that fairy I saw at the earl's place

this afternoon was a pixie."

She froze. "A pixie?"

"Yeah. The hobgoblin I met at the pub told me it's in love with that flower girl. Apparently, whenever one of her customers takes too much of a shine to her, it does whatever it can to turn that man's attention to a different girl."

Meaning that Edgar had flirted with the flower girl. Lydia shot him a glance. If that was why the pixie was targeting her, then it was all because of him.

"The hobgoblin also said that this pixie clings to the daisies and pulls all sorts of nonsense. It was over there with the flower girl earlier, and there was another girl playing this fortune-telling game with one of the daisies. Only, it was pulling petals off to manipulate the result."

"What a sneak! Where was it?"

Lydia was off as soon as Nico pointed. Naturally, Edgar followed.

"Where are you going, Lydia?"

"I'm going to find the pixie. As I suspected, it has been interfering with those petal-picking games, and that includes yours and Mr. Hogarth's!"

"I wish you would spare me even half the passion you hold for your work."

Lydia disregarded his remark. It was irrelevant, after all. She came to a stop just before they were back on the high street. "See? Over there."

She caught sight of the flower girl almost at once, sitting between the columns of the opera house. There were only a few people dotted here and there now; the majority of the patrons that evening had already gone home. She had beside her a basket of daisies, and she must have been plucking their white petals this entire time, because the ground at her feet was littered with them. The pixie was sitting in her lap, but it was unlikely that she was aware of it. It, too, was tearing off petals from the flower in her hand, and when she reached the final one, she let out a dejected sigh.

"That's her, isn't it? The flower girl whose daisies are said to be exceedingly accurate in their predictions?"

"Indeed. So, there is a fairy among her flowers?"

“Yes. It is in love with her, and so it interferes with the games to create the results it wants. Having said that, I’m not sure why it should want Mr. Hogarth’s outcome to be negative.”

“Could it not be that the subject of Mr. Hogarth’s games is the flower girl herself?”

“I beg your pardon? Do you mean to say that the flower girl…”

“Is the object of his affection? I think she is.”

“Do you really? But he didn’t even see her face. And how would you know, anyway?”

“I saw her wearing the same red ribbon that Mr. Hogarth had. The wind caught her hat, and I could see that her hair was tied up in two pigtails, one with such a ribbon, and the other with twine. I knew as soon as Mr. Hogarth produced it at the opera house who his beloved was.”

“If that is the case, you ought to have told him!”

“It is much more amusing to observe from afar as two lovers struggle to find each other.”

Lydia stared at him, utterly exasperated.

“That was in jest, of course.”

“I am not entirely convinced that it was.”

Edgar raised a surprised eyebrow. “In any case, I do believe that Mr. Hogarth is already aware of whom he has fallen for. He is a singer. Though he cannot recall her face, he *does* recall her voice. Furthermore, all of his flower games ended with ‘she loves me not.’ ‘She’ being one girl in particular, of course.”

“Why not come forward and speak to her, then?” Lydia asked.

“He is afraid of her reaction. Mr. Hogarth is already aware of how he comes across to women, and the daisies have been telling him that his situation is hopeless. Naturally, this has all drained him of his courage.”

“I see. And the flower girl herself seems to be brooding over somebody. She must already have feelings for another man.”

“Another man or Mr. Hogarth himself.”

Lydia hadn’t thought of that. She looked up at Edgar. It *did* make sense for a girl to fall in love with the man who had braved danger to protect her from a drunkard.

“Would that mean that Mr. Hogarth’s love is not unrequited after all? Oh, but the flower girl doesn’t know who he is or anything of his appearance.”

“I cannot say for certain that she holds the same feelings for him, but Mr. Hogarth has been buying her flowers regularly, and I think that she likely suspects he is the man who saved her. Remember that scar on his hand from the injury she bandaged with her ribbon? Should she have caught sight of it also, I daresay she would have been struck by the possibility that the two men are one and the same.”

“If she also suspects as much and hasn’t said anything, then I suppose she must be as devoid of courage as he is.” Otherwise, why not simply ask him whether he was the man in question so that she could thank him?

“She still wore the other red ribbon, and yet she concealed it beneath her hat. From that, I have the sense that she is torn between her anxieties and wanting Mr. Hogarth to realize who she is.”

If so, then all that was required was a spark of courage from one of them to ignite what might well become a successful courtship. The pixie’s interference had cost both sides their confidence. Mr. Hogarth and the flower girl faced a sole obstacle in the form of a fairy, and as a fairy doctor, it was Lydia’s duty to remove it for them.

“I must stop the pixie from pulling any more of its tricks.” Lydia stepped out of the alleyway and approached the flower girl. She ignored the pixie, which vanished at once. “Excuse me, but I suggest that you take no stock in those flower games. There is a fairy interfering with them.”

The flower girl frowned. “A fairy?”

Lydia faltered slightly but pressed on. “You get the same result no matter how many times you play, isn’t that right? Don’t you find that curious?”

“Who are you?”

“I am a fairy doctor. There is a fairy—a pixie—that is following you around. It appears to be in love with you and determined to place itself between you and any man you should fall for.”

“What’s a fairy doctor?”

“An expert on fairykind. This young lady can see fairies and knows how to handle them.” Edgar had appeared behind Lydia.

“Hey, you’re the gentleman from this afternoon! I forgot to give you your change.”

“Worry not, Miss Sarah, for thanks to your flowers, I was able to spend a wonderful day with Miss Carlton here.”

The flower girl—Sarah—shot Lydia a curious glance. “Well, she looks pretty enough. Shame she isn’t the most intelligent. Still, it’s a real bother tryin’ to tell someone how you feel about them, isn’t it?”

“Pardon me, but there is nothing to find fault with when it comes to my intelligence! I am here to offer you my assistance. Pixies are relatively easy to get rid of. You simply need to give it something you are wearing.”

Sarah got to her feet, looking most displeased. “You’re mocking me, aren’t you?!”

“Not at all. I am being sincere.”

“Even if you are, you’re stickin’ your nose into my business! This fairy that’s in love with me… It’s using the flowers to tell me to give up on my feelings, isn’t it? I have to give up anyway, so it’ll be easier if I can blame it on the daisies…”

“Give up? But you don’t even know if your love is requited!” Lydia snatched away Sarah’s flower basket to stop her from plucking any more petals.

“I already said it’s none of your business! I’m gonna stop selling flowers and move back to the country.”

“You say you’ve given up on the object of your affections. Does that mean I might have a chance?”

“Edgar! This is neither the place nor the time!”

“You’d rather court this fairy woman, though, wouldn’t you, sir?” Sarah asked.

“Yes, but she behaves as though she is disinterested. However, I might be able to spark some envy within her by spending time with you.”

“You have taken leave of your senses!” cried Lydia.

“You’d just be using me, then.”

Sarah’s remark did nothing to deter Edgar.

“How about a visit to the opera house? We can have you transformed into a most spectacular lady and force the gentleman you have feelings for to regret passing you over.”

What could he be scheming now? Lydia tugged on Edgar’s jacket and led him away from Sarah.

“You intend to parade her around in front of Mr. Hogarth? That’s

going to ruin everything!"

"Ah, I see that you are envious after all."

"I am *not*!"

"Mr. Hogarth holds just as little hope of his affections being requited as Miss Sarah does. As such, I fail to see what harm my idea can do."

"They would both have hope if not for the pixie. What you are suggesting risks depleting what little confidence Mr. Hogarth still has!"

The man's self-esteem wasn't particularly high to start with. Once he realized that the girl on Edgar's arm was the same girl he had feelings for, he was unlikely to ever recover.

"Mr. Hogarth's lack of confidence is neither the fairy's fault nor mine."

Lydia supposed she should have expected such a response.

"Did you mean to take me *inside* the opera house?" Sarah interjected suddenly. She seemed frightfully eager.

Edgar turned to her with a cheerful smile. "Of course."

"Then I'd gladly go."

"Excellent."

Lydia was flabbergasted. The pixie's pranks were no longer her biggest problem. Edgar was far more wicked than the fairy was. Sarah probably just wanted a chance to see Hugh perform, but the way the earl was taking advantage of that left Lydia's blood boiling and her mind muddled.

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The evening was wearing on, and Sarah stood beneath the streetlamps, gazing at the figures slipping out from the opera house's staff entrance.

"Forgive me, miss, but I was wondering whether you had any of those flowers left?"

She recognized his voice immediately. Heart pounding, she turned to face him.

"I do," she said, offering him a daisy.

The man who took it looked even more frightening when set against the white, delicate flower. When he smiled, however, he was rather charming, and he had a gentle voice. The pair rarely

exchanged anything more than a “thank you” and a “good night,” but this evening, Sarah pushed herself to ask him a single question.

“Is that flower a present for your beloved?”

“No, it isn’t. I live alone. I simply thought it could keep me company on the walk back.”

“Oh…” Sarah wasn’t sure how to continue the conversation, and he had also fallen silent. Regretting having asked her question in the first place, she made to leave. “Good night, then…”

“You wear that hat of yours even at night, don’t you?” he said suddenly.

A possibility flashed through Sarah’s mind: that he was curious to see whether she wore a red ribbon beneath her hat. But it was a far-fetched thought; were that the case, he could have simply asked her outright. He hadn’t realized that she was the same girl from that fateful night, and even if he had, he probably wouldn’t be interested in her. His days were spent in the company of the brilliant men and women of the aristocracy.

“My hair isn’t tied up very neatly,” she explained.

“Forgive me. I didn’t mean to pry.”

“I don’t feel that you’re prying.”

“Mm. Well, good night.” He left at pace, as though he felt just as awkward as she did.

Sarah gave a deep sigh. It wouldn’t be long before they would cease to see each other again anyway. In time, she would likely forget about him altogether.

She looked up at the magnificent opera house before her. There would be no greater blessing than seeing him sing on that stage before she left.

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To lock one’s feelings away in one’s heart and give up on them, even though they might be requited… It was utterly tragic. Not only that, but for Edgar to interfere on a mere whim! Lydia was not prepared to sit back and watch the potentially disastrous consequences. Unfortunately, she wasn’t sure how to convince Hugh to confess to Sarah, especially when the earl’s presence was bound to cause confusion. That Sarah felt the same way was only

conjecture at this point, and Lydia wasn't friendly enough with Hugh to make such an irresponsible suggestion to him herself. If nothing else, she hoped that she could somehow help him gain confidence in himself rather than focusing on the fixed flower games he had been playing.

With that objective in mind, Lydia decided to pay him a visit the next day. He came out to see her during a break in his rehearsals, and she told him about the pixie's attachment to the flower girl, and how it was manipulating his petal-picking game. Though he looked a little suspicious when she started talking about fairies again, he didn't interrupt. No doubt he didn't want to be rude to one of the duchess's acquaintances. People thought Lydia eccentric when she spoke about fairies with a straight face. She was used to it. And it would not put her off sharing her information when necessary.

"I understand, Miss Carlton. What, then, do you suggest I do?"

"I believe it is premature to dismiss your affections as unrequited. I think you ought to forget about these flower games…or if you cannot do that, acquire your daisies elsewhere. As long as you keep the pixie away, you will sometimes be granted the positive result you are hoping for."

"Elsewhere? You mean to say I shouldn't use the daisies I buy from the flower girl?"

"Exactly. In fact, I have some here." Lydia held out a bunch of daisies she had purchased from another vendor. She was certain that the pixie wasn't anywhere nearby to interfere with the game.

Hugh took the bunch in silence, then pulled out a single daisy and began to chant, "She loves me, she loves me not." When he took off the final petal on a "she loves me," Lydia's chest flooded with relief.

"There, you see? The fairy was playing tricks on you! You mustn't let it mislead your judgment."

However, Hugh still looked downcast. "Miss Carlton, are you aware that it is said the vast majority of daisies have an odd number of petals? Beginning with 'she loves me' will usually ensure a successful result at the end of the game."

Not catching on immediately, Lydia started counting on her fingers. She realized then that an odd number of petals would result in "she loves me," whereas an even number would result in

“she loves me not,” considering that it was customary to begin with “she loves me.”

“I have always started with ‘she loves me not.’ My poor results are not the fairy’s fault. It is rather that I have never come across a daisy with an even number of petals. I have started to consider such daisies a symbol of good fortune, much like many people consider four-leaf clovers to be lucky.”

Lydia realized that Hugh had been taking *relief* in the unfavorable outcomes of his games. As a singer, he spent his days vying for competitive roles, which perhaps didn’t give him time for romance. Then there was the fact that women were intimidated by him on their first meeting, which likely convinced him to rule out the idea of confessing his feelings to *anyone*. The negative results of his petal-picking games meant he didn’t need to fret over confessions or potential rejection. Lydia suspected that the fairy’s interference had simply embedded the negative opinions he had of himself deeper within him. She wouldn’t be surprised if he *had* come across an even-petaled daisy before but had been prevented from recognizing it.

“Of course, even if I did find a daisy with an even number of petals, it would mean very little if she had already left.”

“I’m sorry, but what do you mean by that?”

“Oh… Nothing. I was speaking hypothetically.”

Unable to say anything more, Lydia had no reason to stop Hugh from going back to his rehearsal.

“Is something the matter, Miss Carlton?”

Lydia had been standing stock-still when Masefield’s face appeared in the carriage window.

“I saw you speaking with Mr. Hogarth from the road.”

The duchess let her into the carriage. There, Lydia relayed the tale of Hugh and how he had shared his affections for the flower girl with a fairy that was trying to keep them apart. How he still believed he could never be with her, despite Lydia having explained everything, and how he purposely started the petal-picking rhyme the wrong way around to end up with an unfavorable outcome due to his low self-esteem.

Lydia’s explanation was laden with sighs. The duchess offered her a gentle smile.

“A person’s actions are not dictated by games or fairies or the

words of others. Everyone must decide for himself what he wishes to do, and that is all that he *can* do."

"Does that not mean that Mr. Hogarth will give up on his feelings?"

The duchess gazed off into the distance. "I told you how I used a flower game to decide which man to marry, didn't I? However, the answer I kept coming upon—due to the fairy's interference—was that I ought to marry the soldier."

Lydia blinked. "The soldier? Then what led you to marry His Grace, madame?"

"I realized something as I played the game: that I dearly *wanted* the flowers to tell me I should marry the duke."

No game or fairy could alter what truly lay within a person's heart. Knowing that, what was Lydia to do? Did this mean her hands were tied? Was she just supposed to accept that the pixie was playing tricks on Hugh?

"Miss Carlton, you told me that a fairy doctor is one who helps those who are having problems with fairies. Therefore, you need not feel dispirited if you are unable to solve a matter of the heart. It is all right to let the chips fall where they may."

"I wonder..."

The older woman chuckled gently, her gaze softening. "Mr. Hogarth will be performing again the day after tomorrow. Would you like to come and watch with me?"

Lydia wasn't worldly enough to be able to refuse the duchess's invitation. That said, as she recalled, the day after tomorrow was also when Edgar was due to take Sarah to the opera house. If nothing else, it wouldn't go amiss to keep an eye on both meddlers: the pixie and the earl. She wanted to make sure the fairy didn't interrupt Hugh's performance again, and that Edgar didn't lead Sarah astray. Determination started to take root within her.

"Thank you, madame, for your most gracious invitation. I would be delighted."

When the day of the performance came around, Lydia asked the duchess to equip Hugh with a hawthorn berry as a ward against fairies. Masefield had apparently told him it was a good-luck charm for his performance and to keep it on him until the end

of the show. With that, there would be no need to worry about the pixie causing trouble again.

That was one thing, but presently Lydia was scanning the box seats on either side of the stage. Though the hall was filling up, there was still no sign of Edgar and Sarah.

"Are you concerned about his lordship? You needn't be."

Lydia turned to the duchess in surprise. She hadn't told Masefield that Edgar had invited the object of Hugh's affections to the opera this evening because she thought it best not to ruin his name by outing him as a philanderer. However, it seemed the duchess knew all about it already.

"He asked me to bring you to tonight's performance," Masefield continued.

"He did?! Oh, but he…he's…"

"He is going to be escorting the young lady Mr. Hogarth assisted, isn't he? His lordship mentioned that you might believe him to be a frivolous philanderer, and if so, that he hopes you will see him in a more flattering light."

It wasn't a matter of belief but of indisputable fact.

"His lordship has taken the woman Mr. Hogarth admires in order to seduce her. I struggle to grasp how I might see him in 'a more flattering light,' given the circumstances," Lydia huffed. "The moment he becomes aware of a woman with even a hint of charm about her, he is overcome with the urge to dress her in fine clothing and parade her around."

"Is *that* why he took you to the opera the other evening?" Masefield chuckled.

"I… There is nothing charming about me. I just happened to be close at hand."

"I wonder about that. Perhaps his lordship *would* have shown no hesitation in flirting with Mr. Hogarth's beloved had you not been about."

Lydia followed the duchess's gaze to one of the boxes, where a familiar blond man had appeared. The way he wore his gray evening coat was beyond reproach, and he stood out at once, even in such a crowded location. The eye was then naturally drawn to his female companion.

Sarah wore a red dress that lent her a dignified charm without taking away from her cheerful demeanor. Edgar never lost his

confidence that, whichever woman he escorted, she would be the finest lady in the establishment. And that confidence was not unfounded: Lydia doubted that a single person here would suspect Sarah of being a destitute flower girl. From where the fairy doctor was sitting, it was obvious that Edgar's companion was garnering a lot of attention from the other patrons. Lydia could hardly fathom how she herself had tolerated being on the earl's arm on so many occasions. At the same time, she found herself growing envious of Sarah. It was a *hint* of envy, she told herself, and nothing more.

"Do you see how her hair is arranged?" the duchess prompted.

Lydia studied Sarah's dark glossy hair then and noticed the red ribbon that adorned it. That was all, however, and though it was perhaps a little *too* plain of a hairstyle, it was conspicuous for the very same reasons.

Until now, Sarah had hidden that ribbon beneath a hat, fearing Hugh might catch sight of it. No doubt Edgar had done a fine job of talking her into wearing it openly, but that still wasn't enough to convince Lydia that the earl had the pair's best interests in mind. Though Hugh might notice the ribbon, would it do anything to alter his negative mindset toward his romantic pursuits? After all, he had been exceedingly stubborn about entertaining the idea that his love was requited.



“Come, Miss Carlton. Let us listen to the songs that tell of a destined love.”

La Cenerentola would not wait for Lydia’s anxieties to clear; the opera was set to begin. Forced to work like a maid for her older sisters, Cinderella fell in love after a chance encounter with a prince. However, she had yet to learn of his true status. As far as she knew, he was nothing more than a servant. Now that Lydia thought about it, Sarah and Hugh had been unaware of each other’s identities during their first encounter too. The opera’s story was beginning to remind her of them.

It wasn’t long until Hugh’s chorus took to the stage. The performance went smoothly without any interference from the pixie, and he sang with skill and obvious enthusiasm. Sarah seemed unable to take her eyes off him. He must have noticed, as he kept stealing glances at the box she was occupying.

The story reached the scene in the royal court. Cinderella came on stage, dressed so splendidly that even her stepsisters didn’t recognize her. When she was stopped by the fake prince, she confessed that she was in love with his servant. The servant in question was, of course, the real prince, and when he arrived, Cinderella took off one of her bracelets. She asked him to seek her out, saying that she would be wearing an identical one. If he still loved her after discovering who she truly was, she would gladly be joined to him.

During the performance, Edgar leaned in to whisper something to Sarah, and she softly brought her hand to the red ribbon in her hair. That ribbon was just like Cinderella’s bracelet. Just like the glass slipper. It was a symbol of fate, something that would pull the two strangers together once more, a silent plea for Hugh to find her. Lydia was sure that both of them must have realized it at the same time she did.

The next aria to ring out through the hall was the prince’s declaration: “Yes, I swear I shall find her.”

Hugh’s and Sarah’s eyes seemed to meet for a fraction of a second. Lydia wondered if it was enough for them to realize how they felt about each other. She sincerely hoped so, and it was then that she finally understood what Edgar had been thinking. He had drawn them both into the story of Cinderella. Their hearts had come together with the moving melodies, transforming them into

Cinderella and the prince. This was the beginning of a new love story, one that went beyond the stage.

During the finale, Sarah suddenly rose to her feet and announced she was leaving. Edgar rushed after her as she slipped out of the box.

"What's the matter? You need to stay here and await your prince."

She turned to him for a moment in confusion, but then made off again at pace. "I don't need to do anything."

She would not listen to Edgar's attempts to stop her and left the theater altogether. Still, he pursued her, finally managing to block her path as she was crossing the road.

"Are you afraid that he might not come for you? I daresay he will be rather hurt if he does come and you are not there."

"You're afraid of being hurt or troubled yourself, sir. That's why you're only playful in your flirting with *her* and leave your true feelings unclear."

"Unclear? I have done nothing but express exactly how I feel."

"The way you complimented me was just as half-hearted. I can't believe that you've done this just to make her jealous."

"My feelings and behaviors are irrelevant. My concern in all of this lies with you."

"I'm telling you you're not convincin' anyone."

"And you are rather stubborn."

"Let me be stubborn, then, and move out of my way."

"I refuse to discard the one chance I have for Lydia to have a higher opinion of me."

"That's not my problem."

Just then, there came a cry: one that was clearly distressed and belonged to Lydia. "Edgar!"

Lydia had come outside after seeing that Edgar and Sarah had left their seats. It was then she had spotted the pixie pursuing them. Worried that it was up to no good, she kept her eye on it as it approached the carriages lined up on the road and took the reins off one of the horses. Edgar and Sarah were right in the animal's line of sight. The pixie yanked the horse's mane, and by the time Lydia had cried out, it was already too late: the animal

had spooked and set off at a gallop.

“Edgar! Behind you!” Lydia dashed impulsively into the road. As she was trying to make her way to him, she noticed the horse turning so that it was coming straight for her. The pixie was still on its back.

Ah… Now that she thought about it, the fairy had been pulling all sorts of pranks on her too, in an effort to separate Edgar from Sarah. It must have thought that the earl would pause in his apparent efforts to seduce the flower girl if he saw that Lydia was in danger. Perhaps the fairy had even predicted that she would rush out after the horse.

What a foolish creature.

It didn’t know that Edgar wouldn’t bat an eyelid if she came to harm. At the same time, she despaired at her lack of foresight as a fairy doctor. A thousand thoughts hit her in that split second, centering on the theme that she’d had this coming. As the horse closed in on her, she found herself rooted to the spot, simply gazing at it.

Suddenly, someone grabbed her by the shoulders. She was pulled into an embrace and pushed up against a lamppost. The horse seemed to skim past her, and she struggled to understand what had happened to her, even long after everything had fallen silent. Only when she heard Edgar’s voice right by her ear did she realize that he had rescued her.

“Thank God I made it.”

Lydia was clinging tightly to his arm, and though she felt she ought to let go, his embrace was so soothing that she couldn’t summon the strength. Whenever he was close, she felt wrought with nerves and wariness, and yet in that moment, simply leaning against him calmed her.

She wanted to stay like this for a little while longer. There must have been something wrong with her. She decided to blame it on her legs, which were shaking so much that she couldn’t stand by herself.

“It wasn’t you who was in danger, but me,” she murmured.

“Perhaps, but it was only because your concern for me was genuine that I was able to move so quickly and make it to you in time.”

“I wouldn’t call it concern. I shouted for you without thinking.”

Realizing that Sarah was approaching, Lydia raised her head slightly.

"I take back what I said, sir," Sarah told Edgar. "Your words might be cheap, but you really do cherish her. And I think she gets that."

She had it wrong; Lydia had ended up in his embrace by mere accident. But that did nothing to relieve her embarrassment or racing heart. Somehow, she managed to gather the strength needed in her legs to stand by herself and let go of Edgar.

"In that case, perhaps you will see fit to reconsider my earlier words," the earl said.

Sarah's brow furrowed slightly. "I'm jealous of you both. Jumping into danger without a second thought…" Then, she smiled. "When that drunk was pestering me and that man came to save me, I was so scared that all I could do was hide in the shadows and watch the ruffian beat him. I wanted that man to find me, but I don't deserve to see him again. Still, it doesn't make it fair for me to run away either, does it? Whether he's actually looking for me or not…"

People were starting to fill the high street outside the opera house. The curtain call must have ended. Sarah untied the red ribbon from her hair and offered it to Lydia.

"Can I leave the fairy to you? You said I needed to give it something I was wearing."

"You are willing to believe me about the fairy?"

Sarah gave a solemn nod. "When I came out here to work on my own and got lonely, I always felt like there was something with me. I'd never seen it, though. When you came and spoke to me about it, I was kind of happy to know I wasn't imagining things…and surprised when I realized I might actually believe you. But if it really was there, I'm grateful to it. I want it to know that I'm fine now, so it can go back to its own land."

Having left the ribbon with Lydia, Sarah set off for the opera house at a determined pace to meet Hugh. Just then, there came the sound of song. Someone was singing one of the arias from the opera.

"That's the prince's aria, 'Yes, I Swear I Shall Find Her,'" said Edgar.

Hugh's voice rang out through the night. His song, however,

was not meant for Cinderella, but for Sarah. He was putting everything he had into the performance, desperate for his feelings to reach her wherever she was in the crowd. And Sarah set off at a run, drawn by his voice.

"What a brilliant way to confess one's feelings! As much as I hate to admit it, I would be hard-pressed to replicate such a feat." A cheerful smile was on Edgar's face.

"He is a wonderful prince indeed," Lydia said, listening to the song with a smile of her own. "Although perhaps it would be more fitting to compare their story to *Beauty and the Beast* rather than *Cinderella*."

Either way, they had found their happy ending. Before long, Hugh's aria came to an abrupt end: Sarah must have reached him. There would be nothing left for them to say, nor would they need to rely on flowers to tell their fortunes.

"Shall we take our leave?" Edgar suggested. "A curtain call after a finale like this would be rather tasteless, don't you think?"

Lydia nodded.

"Incidentally, Lydia, I wonder whether you might have a more favorable impression of me now?"

"And what impression am I to have of you after witnessing Miss Sarah turn you down so unambiguously?" Her biting tone might well have been borne of the embarrassment about how she had clung to him so needily.

"Perhaps you might pity me and decide to console me," Edgar suggested, sounding every bit as unaffected by her venom as he always did.

She couldn't begin to imagine how he expected her to *pity* him. Having said that, she also couldn't deny that her impression of him *had* changed, even if only a little. As much as Lydia knew about fairies, she had never had many human relationships, so she was somewhat ill-informed when it came to romance. She had naively thought that taking the fairy out of the picture would lead to a happy ending for Hugh and Sarah all by itself. Edgar, however, had known that human emotions were not as simple as all that, and that was when Lydia found she was able to see him in a new light. His familiarity with and fondness for women had proven helpful, and she now believed that his frivolity was only skin-deep.

"How would you like me to console you?" Lydia asked.

“Preferably with a kiss.”

“I can offer you a punch.”

As usual, he was teasing her for his own amusement. At that moment, however, she didn’t particularly mind.



“That reminds me. My work isn’t over yet.” Lydia stopped in her tracks, the ribbon in her grasp. She looked around. “Pixie, are you there? I have something for you from Miss Sarah.”

The small, ginger-haired figure appeared in a tree beside a streetlamp. It made no move to flee when Lydia approached it this time. It gave her a slightly lonely, curious gaze before taking Sarah’s ribbon and vanishing.

“Is it gone?” Edgar asked.

“Yes. It won’t be interfering with any flower games anymore.”

“Let’s hold hands.”

“I’m sorry?”

“You were asking how you might console me.”

Lydia had thought *that* topic of conversation had passed along with the fairy matter. Edgar took her hand anyway and started to walk. She didn’t protest, as she was already feeling more amicable toward him. She had forgotten that he was very much the type to take a mile when given an inch.

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Edgar entered Lydia’s office at his estate almost as soon as she arrived for work.

“Let’s go to see the Boat Race on the Thames, Lydia,” he said as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

“How many times must I tell you that I am here to work and nothing more?”

“You know what they say about all work and no play.”

“It rather seems as though it has been the other way around for me lately!” In a single instant, Lydia’s spirits had plummeted. Not that she had done nearly enough to deter Edgar.

“Why don’t we ask the daisies for their advice?”

“Not again! You *do* know that flowers do not possess magic, don’t you?”

“That only makes the method all the more fair.” He plucked a daisy from a nearby vase. “Depending on the result, either you will have to do whatever I say for the rest of the day, or *I* shall have to do whatever *you* say for the rest of the day. How is that?” Edgar’s grin exuded confidence.

Lydia suddenly recalled what Hugh had said about daisies

usually having an odd number of petals. She wouldn't have been surprised if Edgar knew that too.

"Very well. But *I* get to pick the petals."

To her surprise, he offered the daisy to her without complaint. "Be my guest."

Very deliberately, she began with "you must do as I say," only for the final petal to land on "I must do as you say."

Why does it have an even number of petals?

"Edgar! Did you do something to this flower?!"

"Perish the thought."

"You pulled off a petal before passing it to me, didn't you?!"

"If that's what you think, you are welcome to try again."

Lydia left the room. There was a stand in the hallway with a vase on it, from which she took a new daisy. She plucked its petals again, only to fall on the same result. Growing desperate, she repeated the game using flowers from different rooms. Inexplicably, they all had an even number of petals.

Stepping in front of her to finally stop her darting from room to room, Edgar chuckled. "I see the answer is not changing. So, Lydia, you must do as I say. Isn't that wonderful?"

"It is *baffling*, not wonderful! How can all these flowers have an even number of petals when there are no fairies to interfere anymore?"

"Are you referring to the phenomenon whereby daisies generally have an odd number of petals? Mr. Hogarth mentioned that, didn't he? The duchess told me. I was aware of it beforehand, but it is a common myth, and you ought not to pay heed to it. When I had the petals of these daisies counted, it was more or less a perfect split between odd and even petals."

When he had... What?!

"Edgar. The daisies on your estate—"

"—all have an even number of petals. You may repeat your game on any of them, but the result will always be the same."

He must have had his servants working since the crack of dawn.

Is there no greater mystery than the inner workings of this man's mind?!

"The daisy is a fair flower. The results they give are also fair. Come, Lydia, we are going out."

"It is not the flowers whose fairness I doubt, but *yours*!" she

shouted, though she knew it was pointless. This day, too, would be wasted on Edgar’s every whim.



Awaiting a Moonlit Elopement

Their fate had been sealed the moment they met, and now nothing could destroy the love between them. Not the difference in their statuses, nor the objections of those around them.

"Will you marry me?" he asked.

She simply nodded.

The pair set off on a journey to a strange, distant land, where they would be able to have their clandestine wedding. The only thing to see them off was the sphere of the moon, which lit the path for their carriage.

"Could I ask for your thoughts on this, Lord Ashenbert? So obsessed is my daughter with this popular novel that she now claims she intends to elope herself! And with that...*gentleman* who is anything but!" Nervous, Mr. Browser sucked his portly stomach in slightly as he made his case to the young earl in front of him.

Said earl was flicking through the book that Browser had given him. The men sat in the mansion's small reception room, bordered by the finest furnishings and fittings. Only when he had finished did the earl run his fingertips through his brilliant golden hair and answer.

"You mentioned that it was this gentleman who proposed to your daughter that they elope, yes?"

The young man possessed an elegant demeanor and a tender smile, as well as looks dashing enough to charm men and women alike. It was no surprise, then, that he was known for successfully wooing a different woman every day of the week, which meant his name was lent to numerous scandals. On this occasion, however, Browser could not afford to let such rumors deter him. His was a problem that required the help of a specialist.

"Recently, they say there has been an increase in insolent men approaching upper-class girls with marriage in their sights. Once the couple is wed, whether they elope or otherwise, there is no longer anything the girl's mother and father can do. There is no doubt in my mind that this...gentleman is targeting my daughter

for the sake of obtaining my fortune!”

The Browser family was of the landed gentry, possessing land in the countryside. Though that didn’t make them nobility, they were still from the upper class. Naturally, this meant that they intended for their daughter to marry a man of certain status who had received a proper education.

“What is it that you wish me to do?” the handsome earl asked, flicking through some more of the book. It seemed he had taken an interest. With the way his lip curled ever so slightly, Browser wondered whether he had found something that amused him.

He brushed the thought aside, sensing it would be best to forge ahead to the topic at hand while the earl remained in a helpful mood. “My lord, I wonder whether you would be so kind as to meet with my daughter. Her name is Norma Browser, and she has so far lacked opportunities to converse with young gentlemen. As such, she does not know how a real gentleman behaves and believes the man she has met to be ‘kindhearted.’ And that isn’t all! She has been influenced by that novel to believe that marrying outside one’s class and *elopement* are romantic! Though I have been introducing her to several fine young men from among my acquaintances, she barely spares them a second glance. Your lordship, however…”

“You would like me to win your daughter over, as it were.” There was a hint of joviality to the earl’s tone. For Browser’s part, however, he would be more than overjoyed if his daughter were to be wed to a man of Lord Ashenbert’s status.

“She is not the most beautiful,” said Browser, “but should your lordship take a liking to her, I would be able to offer a most generous dowry…” Realizing that he was jumping the gun a bit, he cut himself off. He didn’t want the earl to think his request for assistance was a thinly veiled plot to attach his daughter to a noble husband. *Should* it happen, it would merely be an added bonus.

Browser looked up to try to gauge what the earl was thinking. There was a subtle smile on the man’s lips, but apart from that, there was no way to tell whether he was interested in his guest’s daughter or not.

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“What are you reading there, Lydia?”

The sudden question caught her by surprise, and she snapped the book shut. The lord of the estate, one Edgar Ashenbert, was standing right beside her. She hadn’t even noticed him come into her office. Lydia was a fairy doctor, employed by this man, who had recently acquired the title of Earl of Ibrazel. He knew nothing about fairies, and she had moved from rural Scotland to London some months ago to help him, using her knowledge to ensure that the fairies and humans who occupied his territories lived in harmony.

Lydia quickly hid the book behind her back; the saccharine grin on his face was making her wary. “I wasn’t reading anything,” she stammered.

However, Edgar had already darted forward and snatched it away from her. “A romance novel? I didn’t realize that you read such things.”

“It isn’t mine. I simply happened upon it. One of the maids dropped it.”

Society considered it improper for an unmarried girl to hold too much interest in the opposite sex. Lydia was well aware that reading stories such as this, which focused on romance, was liable to invite the frowns of sensible adults. However, she also knew that these books currently enjoyed a high level of popularity among girls. Thus far, she had never had the opportunity to read one, as she spent more time with fairies than humans. It only made her feel even more ashamed to have been caught reading such a thing.

“Are you enjoying it?” Edgar asked.

“I beg your pardon? Oh, um…I couldn’t possibly say. I only opened it on a whim. Ah! Really, I ought to pass it on to Mr. Tompkins so that it can be reunited with its owner.” Snatching the book back from Edgar, Lydia made to leave the room.

“You aren’t at all curious to see whether their elopement was successful?”

She froze in her tracks. Of *course* she was curious. She had read up to the scene where they had at last exchanged a determined promise to elope. The novel had engrossed her so deeply that she hadn’t even noticed Edgar coming into the room.

Why does he know so much about the story?

“Such a drastic step to take, elopement. A couple must choose their love above the family and friends who object to it. It speaks to the strength of the bond between them.”

Edgar was dressed in a perfectly tailored frock coat and a silk necktie secured with a stylish citrine. His ash-mauve eyes softened as they regarded Lydia. His brilliant blond hair hung over his forehead like satin. He was as handsome as a nobleman ought to be, and Lydia wished her heart wouldn’t race when he smiled at her like that.

“Doesn’t your heart just long to experience a romance like that?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Seeing an elopement through is no mean feat. The couple is bound to face trials even more trying than what they have been through so far. And if they should fail…”

“If they should fail?”

“Well, *I* am sure I would succeed in their position. I would be happy to recreate this narrative with you to prove it.”

Lydia suddenly realized that his arm was around her shoulders, and she came back to her senses. “You seem to know an awful lot about that novel. Don’t tell me that *you* were the one who ‘dropped’ it.”

“I wanted to foster an interest in romance within you, so that you might come to understand how deeply I long for you.”

Her jaw dropped. Even knowing how unseemly it was, she couldn’t bring herself to close it.

“Keep reading. You might well find you wish to elope yourself once you have seen their passionate love through to the end.”

“You are the last man with whom I would elope!” Lydia pinched the hand on her shoulder with all her might.

Edgar’s playful attitude was nothing new in the slightest. He liked to pretend that he and Lydia were lovers and tried to seduce her at every opportunity, and she had long started to think of it as a bad habit of his. It was part of his personality. Whenever there was a woman nearby, he couldn’t help but attempt to woo her, and it didn’t matter who she was. In truth, Lydia was nothing special to him. Though she knew this, he somehow still managed to manipulate her with his words and actions.

How deeply he longs for me? Poppycock!

The novel's protagonist was a sincere and determined man. He was nothing at all like Edgar. Afterward, Lydia had returned the book to him and reprimanded him for teasing her.

It's a bit of a shame I didn't get to read to the end, though…

In any case, today was Sunday. Lydia wasn't required at work, and that meant a whole Edgar-free day. She would have hoped, however, that their conversation wouldn't have been sticking in her mind even after she'd come home. She got to her feet in a hollow effort to push his face from her thoughts. That was when she spotted Nico coming in through the window.

Nico was a fairy that took the form of a cat, and he was Lydia's closest friend. He hopped down onto the floor and stood on his hind legs with his paws on his hips as he looked up at her. "There's something strange loitering outside the house, Lydia." He beckoned with his gray bushy tail rather than his paw.

Lydia went to peer down from her window. There was a crouched figure leaning against the front of the building. That wasn't what Nico had been referring to, however. A second figure was crouched immediately beside the first. It was a girl, and everything about her—from her long hair, which reached the ground, to her attire—had a whitish translucence to it. She was tracing the cheek of the huddled man with a fingertip that could only be described as colorless.

"Is that a fairy?" Lydia's golden-green eyes were capable of perceiving even the fairies that most humans struggled to see.

When she leaned over the window for a better look, the girl suddenly vanished. Lydia flew from her room, darted down the stairs, and rushed out of the house. Once outside, she approached the crouching man. He was young, and his skin was covered in a cold sweat that told of his pain.

"Excuse me, but are you all right?"

The man cracked his eyes open and groaned quietly. "Oh…yes. Just a sudden…dizzy spell…"

Though his attire—not least his deep-red frock coat—was somewhat gaudy, his androgynous features had a gentleness to them that spared him from being off-putting.

"This is my house," Lydia said. "You are welcome to come inside and rest. That cold pavement can only be doing you more harm."

He hesitated before nodding and using the wall to support his

weight as he stood.



The young man introduced himself as Lloyd. Lydia brought him some mint tea, which seemed to settle him at last. He gave a relieved sigh.

“Thank you so much. I was very fortunate to run into such a kindhearted young lady.”

“Not at all. I am sure someone else would have come along to help if I hadn’t. Is it not natural to want to help one’s fellow human beings?”

“Not in London. Every stranger is initially treated with suspicion, no matter the state of their health.”

Now that he pointed it out, Lydia realized she had perhaps been a little careless. Her father, a mineralogist, wasn’t around. Though it was Sunday, he was on a faraway excursion collecting rocks. That said, Lloyd didn’t quite seem ready to get up, and his quiet smile gave a very harmless impression. Lydia couldn’t believe that he was dangerous in any way.

“I wonder whether these dizzy spells have been a frequent occurrence for you as of late?” she asked.

He looked at her strangely. “Why, yes, indeed they have. How did you know?”

Now Lydia was sure it was down to the fleeting fairy. At least she could be confident that the hobgoblin who lived in this house wouldn’t let in any unfamiliar fae. It was likely that Lloyd’s countenance was looking better now because he had been separated from the cause of his illness. But Lydia was hesitant to come out and say that there was a fairy tailing him. What if he thought her mad?

Fairies lived among humans just as they always had. However, it was now midway through the nineteenth century, and the number of people who believed in them had been waning. As a fairy doctor, though, it was Lydia’s job to solve the problems that arose between humans and fairies, and that was why she had no choice but to tell Lloyd the truth.

“There is a fairy feeding on your vitality.” It was not Lydia who spoke, but Nico, who was lying on the sofa and pretending to be nothing more than a cat.

Lloyd gazed at him like he wanted to believe he was hearing things, so the fairy cat pointedly sat up. Folding one leg over the other like a human, Nico leaned back and smiled complacently at

Lloyd as he straightened his necktie with his front paws.

"Your cat...speaks?"

"I'm not a cat."

"Nico is a fairy," Lydia cut in. "Um, you see—"

"You were able to recognize my speech at once. That's because of the fairy that's stalking you. You've got one foot in that world already. You've got a link with fairykind, is what I mean."

"I have a fairy stalker?" As confused as Lloyd seemed, he wasn't objecting to Nico's suggestion.

"A beautiful female fairy," Lydia said. "Have you any recollection of something like that?"

All of a sudden, he clasped his hands over his face. "You know... Oh, but I thought it was just a dream. I have this recurring dream, you see, of a beautiful woman standing next to me and gently speaking of her love for me..."

"It must be the Lhiannan-Shee, a fairy who takes a human to be its lover and gradually drains their vitality."

"What does that mean for me?"

Lydia hesitated. She didn't want to tell him that he might not have long left. The Lhiannan-Shee was said to grant the man she had chosen an artistic afflatus. Lydia was sure that these fairies must have been involved in many cases of artists who had died young but left behind works that were nothing short of masterful. For a man who had no interest in the arts, however, having such a fairy for a lover was sure to be a nuisance.

"You must've accepted the Lhiannan-Shee's love," Nico went on, "else it would have left by now."

"I might have done, but it was only a dream. A gorgeous woman was flirting with me, so naturally, I... Well, it was very comforting is what I mean to say."

It sounded like he had indeed been receptive to the Lhiannan-Shee's advances. But then, it was difficult for an ordinary human to resist a fairy's temptations.

"Why not make her your wife? It'll be a short life, but at least you can spend it with a gorgeous fairy by your side," said Nico.

The color drained from Lloyd's face, and he hung his head, exhausted. However, this was a man who was dealing with fairy-related troubles, and Lydia was not prepared to leave him alone. As inexperienced as she was, she still presented herself as a fairy

doctor. It was her duty to do something.

"If I may, the situation isn't hopeless," she offered.

"Don't, Lydia! You'll get yourself in trouble!" Nico tugged frantically on her sleeve to no avail.

"I may not look it, but I happen to be an expert on fairies. I shall help you."

"Truly?" Lloyd might not have understood the finer details of his situation, but it was clear that he could feel his vitality slipping. He grabbed Lydia's hand like a man clutching at straws. "You'll get rid of this fairy for me?"

The sudden clutch of a man's hand took her aback. Only Edgar touched her so casually.

"You must be an angel!" he continued.

Like Edgar, he must have been used to speaking with women to utter such words so naturally. However, his slight frailty and more amiable impression didn't set Lydia's nerves taut. Instead, she almost found him charming.

"Please, my lord, wait!" came the housekeeper's flustered plea. "If you have a message for Miss Carlton, I would be more than happy to pass it on, but—"

"No need. I am well enough acquainted with the Carltons to forgo such formalities."

What is Edgar *doing here?* Quite apart from anything else, it was awful timing. Lloyd would be in trouble if the earl saw him here. Edgar had a childish desire to keep Lydia all to himself, and he was constantly watchful of any bachelor who might get too close to her.

Not only did Edgar have the looks to secure any young woman of his choosing, he also had his title. Meanwhile, Lydia wasn't especially beautiful, nor was she of noble birth. As such, she suspected that he found sport in treating her like his lover to try to make her fall for him. That was also why he was ruthless in getting rid of anyone he considered to be in the way: it was all a game to him.

After hurriedly shaking off Lloyd's hand, Lydia rushed from the parlor. Edgar was right outside in the hallway, and she almost crashed into him.

"Hello, Lydia. I was just passing by when I found myself wanting to drop in and see you." Taking off his hat, he pulled her in and

planted his usual kiss on her hand.

“You couldn’t have waited for the housekeeper to come and fetch me?” Lydia asked, shaking off his grip and closing the parlor door in a panic.

“Why? I can come and go as I please, can’t I?”

“You will have to enlighten me as to what on earth gave you that impression.”

“I have your father’s express permission. I was asking Professor Carlton about mineralogy when he said I was free to use the library here whenever I liked. In fact, I thought I might borrow a book after I finished speaking to you.”

As a university professor, her father’s studies were his sole obsession. Though he wasn’t well pleased with how Edgar flirted so frivolously with his daughter, the moment the earl showed the slightest interest in mineralogy, he treated him like a dear student. A comment might be made about her father’s lack of common sense: while cautioning her to be wary of Edgar, he had also given the earl permission to visit the house freely.

“My father is not at home, and you know it. It’s not very gentlemanly of you to force a visit on me despite that.”

“Nor is it very sensible of you to invite an unfamiliar gentleman into your home.” Edgar glanced at the door Lydia had just closed. Never had she met anyone more perceptive.

“Mr. Lloyd fell ill in front of the house.”

“Ill? Is that why he held your hand and called you an angel, despite never having met you before?”

Edgar saw that too?

“You cannot tell me that *you* would not behave in the exact same manner.”

“So he *did* hold your hand? I do believe this calls for an introduction.”

“Edgar, wait!”

Paying no heed to her objections, he opened the door and stepped into the parlor.

“Mr. Lloyd,” Lydia began, feeling she had no other choice, “this is Lord Ashenbert…”

His apologetic state of panic somehow gave Lloyd the strength to stand and give a stiff bow. “I am very honored to meet you, my lord.”

“Please, do not feel you must stand on my account. I hear that you are under the weather.” Despite Edgar’s gentle smile, Lydia noted that there was no kindness in his gaze.

“I didn’t realize you had company,” Lloyd said.

“It’s all right,” Lydia answered, not wanting him to feel guilty. “His lordship has dropped by unexpectedly.”

“There is little more precious than having companions with whom one’s relationship is such that one may visit at a moment’s notice,” Edgar said emphatically. He then turned to Lloyd. “How are you feeling?” Behind his perfect smile was a pair of eyes that were studying the other man closely.

“Much better than before. Thank you, my lord. I have the wonderful Miss Carlton to thank, of course.” Lloyd shot her a smile, apparently oblivious to Edgar’s gaze.

It was obvious to Lydia that Edgar was irritated, but perhaps Lloyd was a little insensitive when it came to such things.

“Is your home nearby? I would be more than happy to call for a carriage for you.”

It was a clear message for Lloyd to leave, and Edgar summoned his servant without waiting for a response. The dark-skinned boy arrived at once, heeded his master’s whisper with a nod, then approached Lloyd.

“I shall escort you home, sir.”

“Oh, I think I should rest for—”

“I shall escort you home, sir.”

Lloyd hesitated for a moment more. “Thank you.”

He might well have sensed the bloodlust in the servant’s gaze, perhaps because of his encounters with the Lhiannan-Shee and her magic. Raven’s loyalty was absolute and reserved for Edgar. He seemed to lack human emotion for the most part and was prepared to kill anyone who so much as inconvenienced his master. As oblivious as Lloyd had been to Edgar’s contempt, the sight of Raven had his shoulders shaking, and he was obeying the boy as though he had been coerced. The servant had recently come to understand that he mustn’t attack people without good reason anymore, but Lydia found herself slightly concerned about Lloyd’s safety even so.

Conversely, Edgar broke into a relieved smile the moment the other man was gone.

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“He works at a tobacco shop on Kingsway. There is no doubt that he is the man attempting to court Miss Norma Browser.”

Edgar’s brow creased. He was now at home and hearing Raven’s report after having had his servant escort Lloyd back. As soon as Lydia had mentioned the man’s name, Browser’s request had risen to Edgar’s mind, and he had been overcome with a sinister premonition. Lloyd and Norma had met because the man had fallen ill outside her house. It was exactly the same as Lydia’s story. The Carltons weren’t especially wealthy, but they were affluent enough to live more than comfortably relative to the world at large. Lloyd seemed to be seeking marriage to a well-off woman. It was quite possible that Lydia was his next target should things fall through with Browser’s daughter.

“Thank God I happened to call at Lydia’s house. That must have been the cause of my pressing desire to see her: I must have sensed that she was in danger.”

“Yes, my lord,” Raven replied impassively. However, he knew that the Carltons rather saw *Edgar* as a danger to their household. Between a man feigning illness and a man who called when the master of the house wasn’t home, perhaps the latter was the one to be more wary of. While Edgar had been enjoying his brief conversation with Lydia in the parlor, the housekeeper had come to check on them strangely often.

“Raven, did you properly inform this Mr. Lloyd of my presence in Lydia’s life?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“I would also like you to tell Lydia not to associate with him further, just in case.”

“You will not tell her yourself, my lord?”

“She won’t take me seriously if I do. She will think me jealous.”

“My lord, are you *not* jealous?” As underdeveloped as Raven’s own emotions were, he could be awfully perceptive at times.

“Raven, it appears you are yet unable to distinguish between jealousy and the sort of deep love that can give rise to such concern.”

The servant agreed vocally, for he was as ever unable to tell when his master was being serious and when he was speaking in

jest.

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On arriving at Edgar's estate the next day and hearing that he was out, Lydia was able to spend the morning peacefully. She never got any work done when he was around, and it was even worse if he didn't have anything to keep him busy. He was liable to take Lydia out on the town for the entire day when that happened. What she didn't know was that these weren't his quiet days, but rather days that he kept his schedule clear specifically so he could spend them with her. In any case, he was presently absent, and that suited her perfectly.

Raven had just arrived with some tea for her.

"Raven, seeing as you escorted Mr. Lloyd to his home yesterday, I was wondering whether you might tell me where he lives."

The Lhiannan-Shee would still be hanging around him, and she couldn't help but worry for the man. She suspected that Raven had said something to Lloyd on Edgar's orders that meant he would not come to see her again, which in turn meant that she couldn't help him.

"I'm afraid I cannot do that," Raven replied firmly. No doubt Edgar had instructed him on this point too.

"And why not? We are not strangers; I helped him yesterday."

"I think it best that you try not to associate with him. If one is to believe the rumors surrounding him, he is no friend to women."

Lydia could not deny that Lloyd had both an appearance and personality that would endear him to most women. That was not the point that she wished to argue.

"Do explain how your master of all people has earned himself the right to criticize another man over such rumors. Besides, my interest in him lies not in my position as a woman but my position as a fairy doctor. There is a fairy that won't leave him be!"

"Lord Ashenbert's orders are born of a deep love that leaves him reluctant to expose you to danger, Miss Carlton."

So confident was Raven's declaration that Lydia knew he must be reciting what Edgar had told him word for word. She already knew it was a cheap excuse, and it was enough to make her snap.

"Edgar is not capable of such love! Why, I daresay he left at the

crack of dawn to go and see yet another woman, given that you aren't with him!"

She must have been right, for Raven remained in an impassive silence for a moment. Then he gave a rushed explanation: "I had other matters to attend to." He was Edgar's valet. There shouldn't be any "matters" more important than staying at his master's side.

"Why on earth is he so opposed to the idea that I should be acquainted with another man? I do not *belong* to him! Far from it!"

"Please excuse me." The boy left in a hurry, no doubt worried that his lingering would only make matters worse.

I suppose that means he truly is *with a woman,* Lydia thought, growing all the more irritated. Lloyd was being shadowed by a fairy. He deserved compassion. *I shan't let you interfere, Edgar!*

To Lydia's surprise, Lloyd came to her house again, though whether it was because he had somehow sensed her intense resolve was unclear.

"You were absolutely right, Miss Carlton! I saw the fairy!" he declared the moment he stepped through the door. He seemed rather agitated, as though he had rushed over as soon as he had finished work.

"Perhaps you ought to take a moment to compose yourself. But please, do come in." Lydia showed him to the parlor. His steps were steadier than they had been on his previous visit, but his pale face and air of exhaustion hadn't improved. "Ah, yes, please accept my apologies regarding Lord Ashenbert's servant. I believed he might have said something rather threatening to you?"

Lloyd inclined his head slightly. Far from seeming scared, it was like he had forgotten about the incident altogether. "Oh? Oh, I remember! He warned me that my head would be stuffed and displayed at the British Museum should I attempt to seduce you. Lord Ashenbert has a wonderful sense of humor, doesn't he?"

Lydia would have loved to agree, if only she hadn't known that it wasn't an entirely empty threat.

"His lordship is rather fond of you, yes? But just because you do not treat him as warmly as he wishes is no reason for him to be jealous of *me*." It didn't sound like he was joking, so either he was outrageously audacious or he was just insensitive. Edgar would probably go further than a simple beheading if he had overheard.

But it didn't matter what sort of threats Lloyd was subject to. He had accepted that his problem was one related to fairies, and that left Lydia the only person he could rely on. This was no time to worry about incurring Edgar's wrath.

Lloyd returned to the subject of the fairy as soon as he was through the parlor door, without even the patience to take a seat. "Anyway, Miss Carlton, about this fairy. Yesterday, I attempted to stay awake, but she appeared before me anyway. I fled into the wardrobe, and she passed through the door." He paused. "I begged her to stay back, but she didn't. What do you suppose I ought to have done?"

Since he was apparently unable to tolerate small talk at the moment, Lydia didn't trouble either of them with it. "I have carefully considered your situation, and I do believe that the best way to get rid of the Lhiannan-Shee is for you to marry. You are currently unwed, aren't you?"

"Well, yes, but…marriage?" The desperation in Lloyd's gaze was tinged with bewilderment.

Though Lydia already knew it was the only way, her thoughts were growing anxious and she let out a sigh. Marriage wasn't something that could be arranged on the spur of the moment.

"Is that the only way to get rid of it?" Lloyd asked.

"There are cases of Lhiannan-Shee losing interest in one man and moving to another, but that would require time that you do not necessarily have. All I can say for certain is that they never choose married men."

He hung his head and fell into thought.

"The question is whether you have a wife in mind."

"There *is* a woman with whom I am in love. However, her family objects to our union…"

"On what grounds?"

"Our different standings. Her house is highly prestigious, and I am… Well." Lloyd looked up then and began to defend himself. "She really is a lovely girl, you understand. She has always loved me despite my lack of status, and she even said she would elope with me if her parents were opposed to our relationship."

The mention of an elopement reminded Lydia of the novel she had yet to finish. Her heart started to pound, even though she was not the one who would be eloping. Naturally, it would be

irresponsible to suggest Lloyd elope purely on the basis that it was romantic, but his life was on the line.

"Am I right to presume that you do not wish to marry any woman other than her?"

"Very much so. I cannot bear the thought of marrying another, even if to do so would save my life."

Such wonderful devotion! Lydia could only be exasperated with Edgar. He had ordered Raven to imply that Lloyd was a philanderer, but clearly that had been another one of his outrageous falsehoods.

"Then I should think the solution is clear."

Lloyd paused to think again, only to give a heavy sigh. "This is not to say that I doubt her feelings, but she can be rather fanciful at times…as though she is in love with the *idea* of love. When she spoke of eloping, she reminded me of the female protagonist from a romance novel. But Gretna Green is over three hundred miles away, and all that time in a carriage… I fear she would grow tired of the whole idea midway through."

Three hundred miles in a carriage? Though taken aback at first, Lydia supposed she had never really thought about the logistics of a successful elopement. Perhaps it was all described in the novel she hadn't finished. Lydia could well imagine that a sheltered girl would find the idea of running away with Lloyd—especially under such desperate circumstances—romantic, but there was one thing she just couldn't understand.

"Where is Gretna Green?" she asked.

Lloyd seemed surprised for a moment. "Scotland. It's a town just on the border."

In other words, it really would be a long journey.

"Is that where you come from?"

"No, I was born in London."

"Really? Then why travel so far? Why not marry in secret in a closer town? No one will be able to do a thing about it once it is done."

Elopement might not have been ideal, but no one would be able to question the bride's honor if she had been married officially. Even her parents would be forced to accept it. It was a far sight better than a couple living together unwed or divorcing, for example.

Lydia's suggestion had set a troubled frown on Lloyd's face. "I suppose you haven't been in London long, Miss Carlton."

"No, I haven't. I have lived in Scotland for most of my life."

He nodded in sudden understanding. "In England, a marriage can only be recognized if it has been arranged via the proper procedures and takes place in a church. The law differs in Scotland. Not only does one not need to marry at a church, but one only needs to make their declarations before two witnesses for the union to be deemed lawful. Scotland is the only place where it is possible to get married without either procedure or third parties posing a problem."

It made sense, and Lydia had never had reason to research English marital law before. England and Scotland were once separate nations, and even now that they had formed the United Kingdom together, they still had different laws in place. That was how a wedding that would be illegal in England could be legitimate in Scotland.

"Gretna Green is just over the border, and one can have the ceremony as soon as they cross. It is a holy land of sorts for Englishmen wishing to elope."

"Oh, I didn't realize. Might a train not be faster than traveling by carriage?"

"The couple in the book she likes eloped by carriage. She wants our elopement to go just as it did in the novel and, if we do go ahead with this, I want to do things according to her wishes."

Lydia responded with a hearty nod. She could really feel how much this man treasured his beloved. "It sounds to me as though you have already discussed your plans with her in depth. All you require now is the resolve to see them through. While she may have been influenced by a story, I do think that this woman must be serious about you if she is willing to elope."

"Do you really?"

"Why not bring it up with her again?"

For a moment Lloyd remained hunched in on himself and looking at her anxiously. Eventually, however, he straightened up. "I suppose I could… It would certainly be more productive than worrying. Yes, I shall talk to her."

"Do be sure that any discussion about the elopement takes place during the day. You do not want the Lhiannan-Shee to know

you are trying to be rid of her."

Lloyd's eyes suddenly darted around the room in a panic.

"It's all right; she isn't here. However, you should assume that she will generally stay in your vicinity. She will appear at evening, night, or on dark, rainy days, so do keep your wits about you."

"Thank you. You truly are so very kind. I cannot express my gratitude enough."

Lydia couldn't help but want to extend a helping hand whenever she saw a frail smile like his. Despite his age, she found he was endearing in a rather childlike way. Simply put, she liked him.

"Forgive me after everything you've done for me already, but I wonder whether I might ask something else of you."

"Of course. What is it?"

"Might I borrow your name? I wish to send my lover a letter so that we can meet, but I doubt it will ever reach her if I sign it with my own name."

As far as Lydia was concerned, it wasn't an inconvenient request in the least. She gave her assent without delay, and Lloyd was in higher spirits when he left, encouraged and determined by her assistance.

***

Browser was completely content as he saw his daughter off. She was to spend the day out with Lord Ashenbert, and she seemed to be looking forward to it. Norma was a reserved girl, and horseback riding was her sole interest. She must have recognized that a nobleman would be able to join her in her hobby. Lloyd, on the other hand, had probably never ridden a horse in his life.

As far as Browser could tell, Norma was gradually growing fonder of the earl. And who could blame her? A nobleman suited her much better than a man like Lloyd, whose lowly birth didn't even bear thinking about.

"Do you happen to know what his lordship thinks of Norma?" Browser asked his daughter's governess, who had appeared with impeccable timing.

"His lordship has referred to her as honest and pure, sir."

“Might that be a good sign?”

The governess puffed out her chest. “I have raised Miss Norma myself. The very idea of a gentleman who dislikes her is unthinkable.”

Browser had expected nothing else. “I have heard that Lord Ashenbert has a great number of female acquaintances.”

“Casual acquaintances and nothing more. It does not appear as though he sees any of them as candidates for marriage.” Pausing for a moment, the governess lowered her voice and spoke solemnly. “There is *one* young woman—of the same age as Miss Norma—whom his lordship seems to be endeavoring to court.”

“Is that so? Or is it nothing more than gossip?”

“They are rumors, yes, but one tabloid reported that Lord Ashenbert has his eyes set on the daughter of a scholar whom he greatly admires. I would not take such gossip seriously, however, for the scholar in question is not even of the upper class.”

Though the governess seemed unconcerned, Browser had become anxious the moment he had heard this girl was around the same age as Norma. Lord Ashenbert had returned to Britain just recently, and it seemed that his long time abroad had influenced him not to put so much stock into the social status of his potential wife. Aristocracy or not, if this young woman came from a family that associated with the earl, their status couldn’t have been *that* low. In other words, marriage was not out of the question.

“Do you know the name of this young lady?” Browser asked.

“I believe she is one Miss Carlton.”

A sudden bolt of realization made Browser lower his gaze to the table beside him. Any correspondence addressed to Norma was first passed on to him, so that he could remove anything sent by Lloyd. Today’s letters had included one signed by an unfamiliar name. It was a feminine name, and the penmanship itself seemed quite feminine, so Browser had assumed that it was from a new friend of Norma’s. Presently, he picked up the letter to examine it anew. It was indeed signed Lydia Carlton. He opened the seal without hesitation. Inside was a letter from Lloyd asking Norma to meet.

“What in heaven’s name…”

Had Lloyd approached this friend of the earl’s with unseemly

motives, just as he had Norma? If only he would give up on Norma and elope with this girl instead! Browser started to tear up the letter, but then he froze. This might be a perfect opportunity. A fresh idea in mind, he decided that he would meet Lloyd at the place stipulated in the letter.

***

It wasn't long before Lloyd came to tell Lydia that his elopement was to go ahead, confirming her belief that his letter had reached Norma safely. The fairy had been draining his vitality all the while, and at this point, he could not get married quickly enough. She was relieved to hear that he would set out the following night. All that was left was for her to pray that the elopement succeeded, and if she was required for anything else, she would take action. Lloyd considered her help to be indispensable, and she wanted to live up to his expectations.

An idea had come to Lydia that day, driving her to sneak into Edgar's study. She wanted to hunt down the novel he had taken from her, believing that it might assist her in making Lloyd and Norma's elopement a success. Starting at one end of the bookshelves, she came across the familiar blue spine almost at once. Relieved, she pulled on it, only for every other book on the same shelf to come avalanching down.

Letting out a shriek, Lydia stepped backward. There was now a small mountain of books at her feet. Before she could recover from her shock, she heard a most unwelcome voice.

"How kind of you to pay me a visit in my study." Edgar had been out. Apparently he was now back.

"I'm... I'm sorry!" Lydia stuttered, fumbling to excuse her trespass. "I only brushed against the shelf, and...well, your door was open, so..."

"You are more than welcome to visit my study, or indeed my chamber, whenever you wish." Edgar had come to stand right by her. It was impossible that he hadn't noticed the book in her iron grip. A suggestive smile spread across his face. "That book was set with a trap. Taking it out would cause all the other books to fall."

She stared at him. "Whatever for?"

"I suspected that should you develop an interest in the idea of

eloping, you would feel compelled to read the rest of the novel."

"Have you taken leave of your senses?!"

"I heard the books fall, I came to investigate, and lo and behold, you had fallen into my trap."

His trap?! She felt like a pigeon that had been caught in a cage. As Edgar came closer, she tried to back away, only to knock into the bookshelf behind her.

"Who have you been fantasizing about eloping with?" he whispered, playing with a lock of her russet hair. "I shan't lend you the book unless you say it is me."

"I haven't any interest in eloping whatsoever," she stuttered. "An acquaintance of mine is considering it, and I want to help!"

Edgar's expression suddenly turned stern. "Did you see Mr. Lloyd again?"

How does he know?

"And what if I did? I have decided to endorse his marriage. Yes, that's right. He is presently courting someone. Whatever you were saying about him being a philanderer was utter rubbish!"

"Claiming one already has a lover is a good way to make a young woman let her guard down. A man may then claim that there is strife in his relationship so that he can meet with that woman alone under the pretext of seeking her advice. You mustn't fall into that trap."

"Only *you* are capable of such wiles!"

"I must say, I am deeply concerned. You are kind and generous, and I worry a wicked man might take advantage of that."

Personally, Lydia could not think of a man more wicked than Edgar himself. "Perhaps *you* should see fit to stop taking advantage of women."

"I haven't taken advantage of anyone."

"Then I suppose you will soon be marrying the young lady you have been seeing so much of lately? You have my most heartfelt congratulations!" With that, Lydia tried to slip past him, only for him to grab her arm in a panic.

"Wait a moment. I have no idea who told you about that, but I can assure you that marriage has not so much as been discussed."

"Your maids were gossiping about it. Apparently, a fine gentleman paid you a visit and asked you to marry his daughter, offering a handsome dowry in the process. And now you are

seeing her on a near daily basis."

"The maids are misinformed. The gentleman merely asked me to help lift the spirits of that young lady, who is an acquaintance of his. I made it quite clear that I am already courting somebody else."

"Oh you *are*, are you?"

"Lydia..."

Rarely had she seen him look so perturbed. She took it as proof that she had won their dispute. "Claiming you already have a lover is a powerful means of seduction, isn't it? I wish you the best of luck."

She was used to being cornered in their arguments, and she felt she had done well to fight back this time. Slamming the study door shut behind her, she was awash with relief as she returned to her office.

The moment she stepped into the room, however, irritation bubbled in her gut. Edgar truly was a philanderer through and through...although Lydia had to wonder whether the part about him marrying this girl was true. Now that he was an earl, it would make sense for him to have a number of potential wives in mind. As much as he flirted with her, she could not believe that she possessed the charm to rival a nobleman's daughter.

For some reason, the farther she strayed down that path of thought, the more despondent she grew rather than feeling relieved. More importantly, she ought to have been doing her research on elopements. She opened the book quietly.

The couple sneaked out of their houses on a moonlit night to meet at the starting point of their long, runaway journey. Their carriage hurtled down the main road, pulled by four horses. How many more miles to Scotland? The pursuing coach that threatened their separation was drawing closer by the hour.

Engrossed in the story, Lydia soon forgot all about her despondency.

***

"Assisting with an elopement? That goes beyond generosity and into foolishness," Nico muttered to himself as he ducked under the fence. Dropping onto all fours to pass as an ordinary cat, he

crossed the lane and swiftly approached the brick-colored building beyond. This estate was where Lloyd's lover was supposed to live. Keeping an eye on his surroundings, Nico clambered up to the window. "Are they really leaving tonight? It all seems a bit sudden to me."

Apparently, they would be waiting for the moon to come out and had promised to meet at a secluded spot on the outskirts of London. Lloyd had asked Lydia to accompany him there. He was under surveillance because of this business with Norma, and there was a good chance that taking a carriage out of central London alone would raise suspicion that they were about to elope. However, if Lydia was with him, no one would suspect he was about to elope, for why would he take a second girl with them?

Meanwhile, Nico's role was to confirm whether Norma had managed to leave her estate undetected. Lydia had made a casual request that he assist the girl should anything untoward happen, but Nico suspected any potential trouble might prove a little more complicated than that. Personally, he had decided just to pray that she didn't blunder.

"This is *not* how I'd prefer to spend my evening," he grumbled.

He peered through the window. The lights were on, and there was a gathering of lively people inside, chatting away with one another. It might well have been the beginnings of a dinner party. Though there were a number of young women, Nico recognized Norma immediately. There was a reserved air about her, and she was answering questions with a bashful expression. While she was dressed for the occasion, she seemed distinctly out of place at the lavish gathering. Perhaps because she was so unremarkable, or perhaps because they simply weren't interested in her, the younger men were passing right by her even though she was their host's daughter. If this was what she experienced at an average dinner party, it was no wonder Lloyd seemed special to her. That said, she was doing nothing but sitting still in her seat. She would need to leave soon or she wouldn't make it, but there was no indication that she was even the least bit fretful.

"Hm?" Nico pressed himself closer to the glass. A young blond man had just approached Norma. "Isn't that the earl?"

With a reassuring demeanor and an infallible smile, the man leaned in to whisper something in the girl's ear. There was no

mistaking him as the philanderous nobleman any longer. Edgar was already famous among London's high society, and this family seemed well-to-do, so it wasn't so unexpected that he should have been invited to their party. However, Nico could foresee that Norma would struggle to leave the house if the earl decided to take an interest in her and attached himself to her for the evening.

"For goodness' sake! This is all I need!" Taking a roundabout path to the terrace, Nico slipped in through an open window. As he made his way to the hall, he picked up a set of voices coming from another room.

"Did Mr. Lloyd really promise to leave her alone, sir?"

"Who can say? He didn't say as much, but I am confident the message got through."

Nico guessed that the man being referred to as "sir" was likely Browser, the master of the estate. The woman with him might have been Norma's governess: she didn't seem to be an average servant, at least.

"He thought he would be meeting with Norma. Instead, he found himself faced with a surprise: me."

Nico cocked his head. Had this man opened the letter to call out his daughter?

"I told him that Norma showed me the letter herself, that she now had a suitor beyond her wildest dreams: Lord Ashenbert, with whom she was utterly absorbed, and that she therefore had no more time for Mr. Lloyd."

"Did he believe you?"

"I showed him from afar what Norma was doing at that very moment. His lordship had invited her to ride on Rotten Row, you see. Mr. Lloyd would have seen that elated smile on her face and known he no longer had a chance."

But wasn't Lloyd supposed to be meeting and eloping with Norma tonight*?*

"Thank God. He was only after the money in any case. I pray that he has lost hope to the extent that he stops hounding her."

The money? Nico strained his ears further.

"Indeed," Browser muttered bitterly. "These fraudsters have always existed: they target the daughters of wealthy gentlemen and offer to elope with them, hoping to live comfortable lives on the dowry or inheritance…but never did I imagine that my Norma

would almost fall victim to such deceit!”

“Now that I think of it, do you know about the girl involved in those rumors surrounding Lord Ashenbert? Mr. Lloyd approached her too.”

“Oh, yes? Well, let him elope with whomever he likes, as long as he stays away from Norma,” Browser said flippantly, the corners of his lips curling slightly.

Do they mean Lydia? Nico stood up on his hind paws, folded his forelegs, and fell into deep thought.

Lloyd had told Lydia that Norma had agreed to elope. Why would he have lied? Why was he presently traveling with her to London's outskirts, *knowing* that Norma wouldn't be there? Unless he was planning to take Lydia to Scotland instead.

Lloyd needed to marry someone quickly or the Lhiannan-Shee would absorb the rest of his vitality. The Carltons weren't as rich as the Browsers, but what did money matter when his life was in danger?

"That's it! I *thought* he was suspiciously friendly! He's turned to Lydia—who's too soft for her own good—because Norma's off the table. I'm wasting my time here!"

Nico spun around to slip out through the crack in the door. Before he could, however, something pressed down on the scruff of his neck, and he was lifted into the air.

"Found you, mangy cat! Knock over the pudding, will ya?!" The kitchen maid marched off with Nico in her grip.

"Don't be daft! I didn't touch your precious pudding!"

The maid was unperturbed by Nico's floundering.

"I'm no cat either! Unhand me at once! You're ruining my fur!"

But it seemed that all she heard was the wild wailing of a cat. "Why, I ought to throw you in the washing boiler!"

"D-Don't!" Panicking, Nico looked around for help. That was when he spotted Edgar on the staircase landing. He must have left the hall with Norma so they could be alone and he could flirt with her to his heart's content. He was holding her hand and whispering something to the flushed-cheeked girl.

"Oi, earl! Lend me a hand!"

Without moving, Edgar shot a glance in Nico's direction. But he ignored the fairy's plight and turned back to the girl in front of him, placing a casual hand on her shoulder.

"Oh, yes! I suppose your girlfriend is much more important! You *scoundrel*! *Philanderer!* Ignore me, then, and whatever happens to Lydia will be *your* fault!"

That was when Nico heard Edgar call out to stop the maid. "Excuse me. That cat is my pet. I do hope he isn't causing any problems?"

As much as he resented being called a pet, Nico had to admit some measure of relief when the maid released him and hurried away sheepishly.

“Did something happen to Lydia?” Edgar immediately lifted him up again.

“Put me down!”

“Well?” The earl was as self-righteous as anything, and he wouldn’t heed Nico’s request while Lydia was in danger.

With nothing else for it, Nico resigned himself to the humiliation of being carried like a cat, and began to explain. “Lloyd asked for Lydia’s help, saying that he had an arrangement with the daughter of this family to elope tonight. She was more than happy to oblige, because there is a fairy shadowing him, and he’ll die if he doesn’t marry someone and get rid of it. I’m fairly sure that the two of them are on their way to the outskirts of London, where he claimed he was meeting Norma.”

“They are eloping tonight? But Miss Browser doesn’t seem as though she is in a hurry to go anywhere, and the food is about to be served.”

“Yes, because Lloyd is *deceiving* Lydia! It doesn’t look like he’ll be marrying Norma, so I’d wager his plan is to convince Lydia to marry him inste—” Nico suddenly found himself tossed to the floor as, offering his apologies to a dazed Norma, Edgar hurried for the entrance hall, the fairy cat hot on his heels.

The carriage carrying Lydia and Lloyd pulled away from the streets of London and continued along a wooded road. The full moon was just visible between the trees as it climbed higher into the sky. Lydia watched it curiously, noting that this felt just like the elopement scene in that romance novel. It seemed that Norma was in for the idealistic romantic journey she had longed for.

“I wonder whether she was able to slip away from her home.”

The tension on Lloyd’s face had been obvious the entire way. He continued to stare out of the window without responding. If they followed the road, they would apparently come across a place with two tall, conspicuous trees. That, too, was the same as in the novel: the spot where the lovers would meet. Lydia would see them off there before returning to London.

“How are you feeling?” she asked her companion.

“Fine, at the moment. The fairy is still with me, though, isn’t she?”

“She isn’t coming into the carriage…” Lydia lowered her voice.

“She may try to interfere if she hears you are planning to elope. So you mustn’t mention it, not even when you meet with Miss Browser.”

Lloyd nodded and looked back at her intently. Then, suddenly, his expression crumbled. “Miss Carlton, I’m afraid I must apologize to you.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Miss Browser is not coming.”

Surprised, Lydia leaned forward. “She isn’t? Then…”

“She ought to find happiness with a man who suits her. When I realized that, I decided that it was best I give up on her.”

“But that means you won’t be able to get rid of the Lhiannan-Shee.”

“I have come to accept that. I would rather that Miss Browser is happy.” His expression was one of steadfast determination.

But if that was his decision, why had he told Lydia that he would be going through with the elopement? Surely there was no point in leaving London with her anymore? These suspicions were only just rising to the forefront of Lydia’s mind when Lloyd grabbed her by the arm.

“Miss Carlton, I ask that you give up on your relationship with Lord Ashenbert. Please.”

“My… I beg your pardon?”

“It seems that Miss Browser’s father is arranging to have her marry his lordship. She seems to be interested in him too: I saw them riding together happily. I have never seen her look that happy in my company.”

Lydia could hardly believe it, but it seemed that the woman Edgar had been seeing was in fact Norma.

“Though Mr. Browser claims I only wish to marry his daughter for her fortune, my affections for her are sincere. I begged him to believe that much, so he set me a task to prove myself: he asked me to take you away, to separate you from his lordship for Miss Browser’s sake.”

“But Lord Ashenbert and I are not—”

“I know. His lordship has only been flirting with you. But that is precisely why I want to believe that these actions of mine won’t offend you. Should his lordship lose interest in you, it is more likely that he and Miss Browser will be married.”

Lydia had no idea what Edgar's intentions were in approaching Norma. She also didn't know whether he liked the girl enough to be considering marriage. She felt as though she would rather his interest in Norma was purely casual but, that aside, she wanted to be able to think rationally.

Lydia took a deep breath. "What are your intentions with me?"

"I want you to accompany me just a little farther. That is all. I have no intention of causing you any harm." It seemed he was looking to fake an elopement.

It probably wouldn't be long until the servant Browser had surveilling Lloyd reported that the commoner had escorted Lydia away in a carriage. Involved in the marriage talks as he was, word would likely spread to Edgar. And if he heard that Lloyd, who had originally intended to elope with Norma, was now targeting Lydia, he would no doubt believe it. Browser must have been hoping that Edgar, like any earl should, would lose interest in a girl if he learned that she had tried to elope with another man. Indeed, Lydia suspected Edgar might be disappointed, to say the least. To him, it would seem she had ignored his warnings and let her heart be swayed by a man who was only after her money.

Lloyd's motivations did not lie in greed. They were quite pure, and that was exactly why Lydia found herself in this unfortunate situation.

Unfortunate?

What was unfortunate? The only thing at risk was Edgar's interest in her.

"We shall alight at the next town. There, we can take the train back to London."

Doing so would prevent any damaging rumors about Lydia's involvement in a failed elopement, and as far as Edgar was concerned, the pair would only have attempted to flee for a few hours at most. Lloyd probably thought this was the best way to protect Lydia's feelings. Edgar's behavior toward her would change and nothing more. What did that matter? It would only go to prove what she already knew: that he was irrevocably frivolous. She chose to focus her attention on that rather than the stinging sensation in her chest. She was a fairy doctor and she wanted to help Lloyd. She would *not* regret her decision. Even if she hadn't been able to solve his fairy problem, she was happy to assist in

getting Browser to understand the sincerity of his feelings. That, she decided, would be her new perspective on the matter.

"Did I perhaps make an error in judgment?" Lloyd was suddenly peering at her. He seemed slightly panicked.

"I'm sorry?"

"What I mean to say, is...Miss Carlton, please don't cry."

Cry? Lydia quickly rubbed her eyes.

"Do you perhaps have your heart set on somebody in London?" Lloyd paused. "Oh, it's his lordship! You really do—"

"No, I don't! Of course I don't!" Having said that, she didn't know why she *was* so discomposed.

"I never intended to hurt you. I'm so sorry." Flustered, Lloyd held his head in his hands for just a moment before looking up again. "Let us go back. It was wrong of me to drag you into my predicament."

"No, it's all right. Please, let's—"

Suddenly, the carriage gave a mighty sway. The horses whinnied, and the passengers' bodies jolted. Lydia's shoulder collided with the wall, and she struggled to endure the pain until the vehicle came to a complete stop.

"What was that?" she stammered, forcing herself to sit up.

Peering through the window, she could see that the coachman was slumped over, apparently unconscious. Outside, she could see trees illuminated by moonlight and a horse that did not belong to their carriage. It was wearing a saddle, meaning someone had ridden it there. They were at a junction, so perhaps they had just narrowly avoided a crash. However, there was no one on the ground, which Lydia would have expected if the rider had fallen from the horse. Just as she was going to turn to Lloyd, the window glass behind him cracked. An arm pushed through and curled itself around his neck. Then it applied pressure, strangling him. At the same time, the side door was yanked open, and Lydia was dragged out of the carriage before she could so much as scream.

"Release me at once! Thief! We don't even have money!"

"It's me, Lydia." A calm, familiar voice sounded in her ear, and she looked up to see a pair of ash-mauve eyes in close proximity.

"Edgar?"

"Thank God I made it in time. I shudder to think what might have happened otherwise," he said, cradling her head against his

chest. He was stroking her hair over and over with relief, and she let herself lean into him, reassuring herself that his behavior toward her had not changed after all. It had purely been her imagination. “You must have been awfully frightened. But it’s over now. Your captor is already starting to regret his misdeeds.” He held her even tighter, and Lydia quickly returned to her senses. “Drag him out, Raven.”

Edgar’s faithful servant shoved Lloyd from the carriage. When Lydia saw him tumble, she tried to rush over, but Edgar strengthened his grip and wouldn’t let her go.

“Please don’t hurt him!”

“He tried to abduct you.”

“Abduct me? Were you not told that we were eloping?”

“I am confident that I am the only man in your heart.”

Your confidence has no basis in reality.

“Either way, the situation is more complicated than you assume!”

“This man attempted to damage the honor of the woman I hold dear. That is all I need to know.” Edgar showed no sign of backing down. He must have been utterly infuriated, which only made Lydia all the more indignant.

“This wouldn’t have happened if *you* hadn’t tried to seduce Mr. Lloyd’s lover!”

“I did no such thing. Mr. Browser simply asked me to help foster an interest in proper gentlemen within his daughter.”

Even supposing that were true, Lydia would wager that he had thoroughly enjoyed the process. “And in doing so, you made Mr. Browser believe that you were interested in marrying Miss Browser! That is why he arranged for Mr. Lloyd to escort me away, so that you would lose interest in me.”

“I beg your pardon?”

Lydia’s intention had been to calm Edgar down. Instead, she might have been inadvertently adding fuel to the fire.

“You say he was not only attempting to disgrace my lover, but take her away from me? Why, that man is as cunning as a fox! I had no intention of marrying his daughter, and yet he would conspire with Mr. Lloyd…”

“My Lloyd is innocent…”

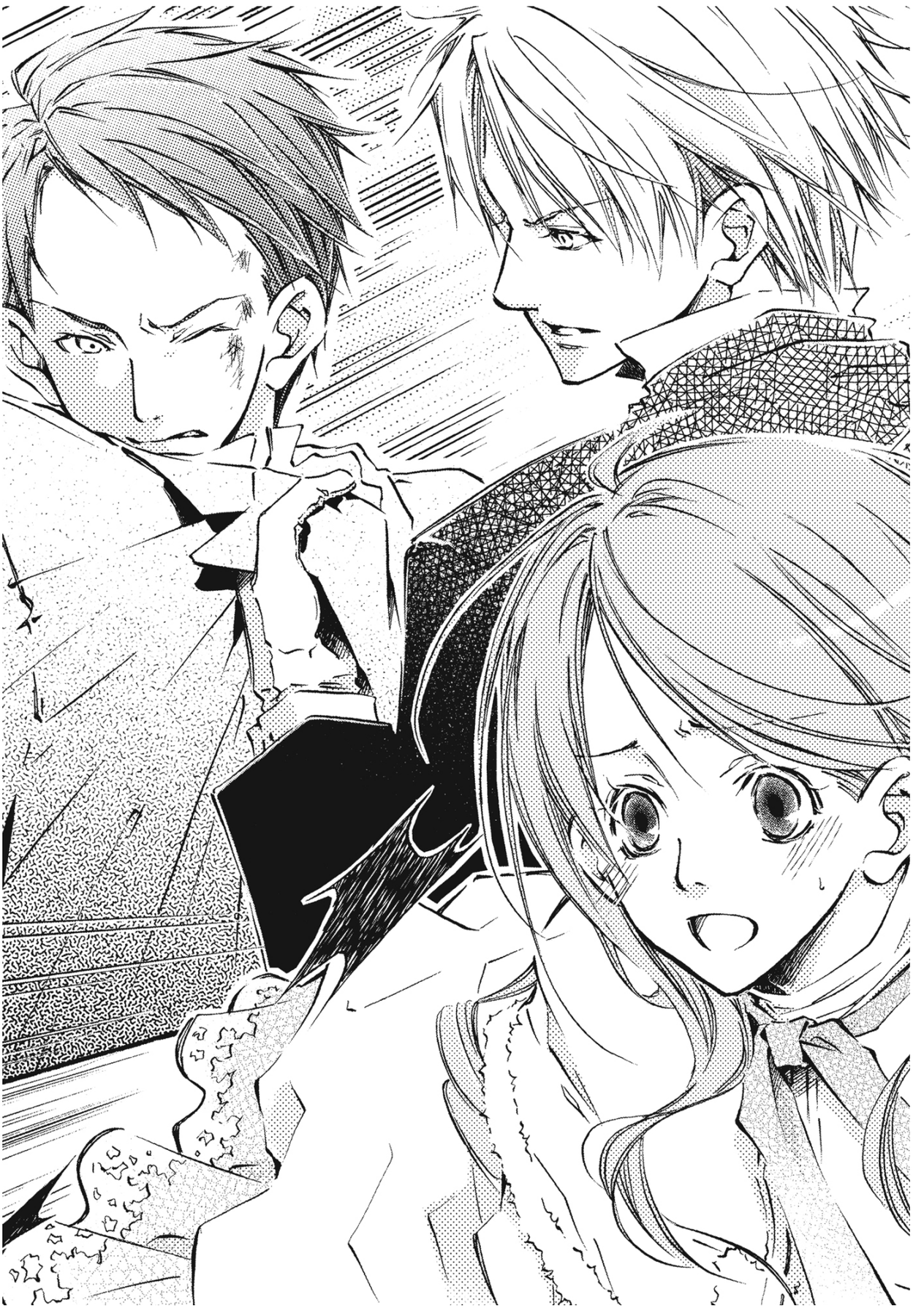
“If he thought *this* would change my mind, he is gravely

mistaken! Lydia, I know better than any man that your heart is not easily swayed. After much thought, I have decided that I shall never give up on you, no matter what comes to pass. If I hadn't been able to catch up with you and you had been married, I was ready to do whatever it took to undo it all. I would even have bribed bishops."

"What?" Confused, Lydia looked up. There was a sincere, heartfelt sheen to Edgar's gaze as he looked back at her. She wondered if he would go so far if she *had* wished to marry Lloyd. Completely taken aback, she wasn't sure how to respond. Was he simply speaking on the spur of the moment? Despite wanting to assume so, her cheeks felt like they were aflame. Bribery and coercion, though... How very like Edgar to suggest such things.

Apparently taking her silence as acceptance, Edgar approached Lloyd, who was being restrained by Raven. "While Lydia seems highly sympathetic to your plight, I am not nearly so generous. If money was your motive, there were plenty of victims you could have chosen from. You will learn that choosing Lydia was a mistake."

When he grabbed Lloyd by the collar, Lydia clung to him. "*Don't*, Edgar! Mr. Lloyd is in love with Miss Browser! He said he would give up on her as she had fallen in love with you and only followed Mr. Browser's instructions for her sake!"



“Lydia! The Lhiannan-Shee!” Nico’s cry interrupted them. He must have come with Edgar. Presently, he was standing on the roof of the carriage and pointing up at the sky.

There floated a woman, her back to the glowing moon and her long, white hair fluttering in the wind. She *must* have heard the talk of marriage and elopement. She was purposeful in making sure they could all see her, and then she came down to stand before Lloyd. Her skin was so white that it seemed luminescent, and her robe was so thin as to appear transparent. She was beautiful and bewitching.

Lloyd was frozen to the spot, captured by those eyes that were as clear as any spring. Edgar had let go of him and was standing motionless, completely in awe at the sudden appearance of this otherworldly being. The Lhiannan-Shee slowly reached out for Lloyd as if preparing to embrace him.

“Stop!” Lydia cried. The fairy was attempting to steal his freedom and spirit him away somewhere. Somewhere he couldn’t betray her. “Mr. Lloyd, you mustn’t look at her!”

But Lloyd, unable to resist the fairy’s spell, slowly raised a hand.

“Wait! Please don’t take him away!” A young woman suddenly jumped out from the trees. It seemed she had ridden her horse there alone, and Lydia wondered how long she had been watching. The woman grabbed Lloyd’s raised hand before it could make contact with the Lhiannan-Shee and stood between them. Though trembling, she did not let go of him, and it was clear from the determination in her eyes that she was not prepared to let the fairy have him. “Shadowing this man is fruitless! He is my fiancé!” she stammered.

“Miss Browser…” Lloyd murmured weakly.

“I was very surprised when I overheard his lordship talking to a cat! I couldn’t believe a cat could speak, but it *did*. And more than that, I was shocked to hear that a fairy was haunting you and pushing you to the brink of death, so I approached father! I had him tell me everything, and then came as quickly as I could.”

“I thought you had forgotten about me, such was the amusement you found with his lordship…”

“You disbelieve me? I told his lordship immediately upon meeting him that I was in love with another man. He advised me to look as though I were enjoying myself in order to fool father. In

fact, he lent me a listening ear whenever I wanted to talk or seek advice about you."

Edgar had only done so to fool *Norma*. Had she known the awful things he had said about Lloyd, she would never have agreed to help him. However, this was no time to make disparaging remarks about the earl. The Lhiannan-Shee had forced her hand onto Lloyd's shoulder. Norma clung to him firmly.

"Don't touch me!" Lloyd warned, his mind finally made up. "I am in love with Miss Browser and I am going to marry her!"

A powerful wind whipped up around them. The fairy's long hair wrapped around Lloyd like tentacles, and it looked like his hands would slip away from Norma at any moment.

"Heed my words, Lhiannan-Shee!" Lydia shouted. "Let this man go! Wouldn't you rather find a man who has given his soul over to the arts?" The wind was making her stagger, but she continued. "You deserve a man who longs for you as his muse rather than one who longs for another woman!"

She had the sense, then, that the fairy had turned slightly to look in her direction. The tautness in its magic loosened and, feeling that it had heard her, Lydia relaxed slightly.

Until Edgar whispered, "She's gorgeous."

"Keep such foolish thoughts to yourself!" Lydia said, panicking, for the wind had died down and the Lhiannan-Shee had turned to look at Edgar. She could feel a cold sweat forming on her skin. The fairy hadn't *actually* set her sights on him, had she?

Just as she feared, the Lhiannan-Shee slowly turned her body and made to approach the pair. Lydia grabbed Edgar's arm at once.

"No! Stay back! Not an inch closer, whatever you do! This man is my..."

The foliage around them started to rustle violently once more as wind dominated their surroundings. Bracing herself for the gust, Lydia strengthened her grip on Edgar, determined not to let go. The very moment she felt a pair of protective arms wrapping around her, everything fell completely silent. The Lhiannan-Shee had vanished from the dark, wooded crossroads.

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Moonbeams pulled and stretched the horse's silhouette along the path. Edgar had one arm wrapped around Lydia's waist, and she was closer to him than she had ever even imagined being. As much as she wanted to, she couldn't push him away because they were riding the horse. Lloyd and Norma had taken the carriage. The coachman had been roused and was now driving them to Scotland. Lydia's only option had been to go home with Edgar and Raven, and since she couldn't ride a horse by herself, she was stuck riding it with the earl. Another horse followed behind them carrying Nico and Raven. Lydia wondered whether she shouldn't have asked to ride with Edgar's servant, but she doubted she would have been permitted to do so in any case.

"I wonder whether they will make it to Scotland in time," Lydia said, simply because the silence was too awkward to bear.

"I shall put in a polite request with Mr. Browser not to pursue them." Edgar's devious tone suggested he had yet to forgive the man for convincing Lloyd to steal away with Lydia. Meanwhile, though he had been asked to keep Norma away from Lloyd, he was likely undisturbed by the fact that he had instead ended up assisting their elopement. If anything, *he* would probably be demanding an apology from Browser. "Incidentally, Lydia, might I ask you to complete your earlier sentence?"

Lydia jumped. Edgar's sudden whisper had been ticklish against her hair. "I'm sorry?" she said, pretending she didn't already know what he was talking about.

"When you were defending me from the fairy, you were going to say that I was your…what? Your lover?"

She hesitated. "My employer."

A discontented frown rose to Edgar's face, and he quickly hurried the horse along. Unused to riding, the increase in speed caught Lydia off guard, and she strengthened her grip on his jacket.

"Slow down! We're going to fall off!"

"I shall be glad to do so when you admit the truth."

Though they likely weren't going all that fast, it felt to Lydia as though they were galloping at a great speed. "My… My words were meant to get rid of the Lhiannan-Shee and nothing more!"

"Oh, yes? In that case, you might wish to hang onto me even tighter than that."

“You scoundrel!”

Chuckling, Edgar reaffirmed his hold on her. The horse hadn’t slowed, but the extra stability meant Lydia no longer feared the risk of falling. “Since you take me for a scoundrel anyway, perhaps I shall ride this horse with you all the way to Scotland. What would you say if I were to suggest a wedding in your hometown?”

“I would say that you have lost your senses!” Lydia replied frantically. She knew from experience that while he appeared to make the suggestion in jest, he might just go through with it. When the possibility struck, she noted that they seemed to be following a different path from the journey there. She quickly looked up. The London townscape, transformed into shadows by the moonlight, was approaching them. Relieved as she was, there was a subtle, hollow sensation within her as she realized their arrival wasn’t far off. She wouldn’t have minded continuing their trip under the full moon for a little while longer.



The Magic That Connects Us

1: Something Best Forgotten

The London Choir

The children’s Christmas carols rang out through the park, which was currently surrounded by the bare trees of winter. The boys and girls were singing with all the enthusiasm they could muster, all dressed in new, matching coats. They had practiced just for this day, and while their abilities were questionable, it was difficult not to smile as their voices reached the overcast skies. The children had been singing below the fir tree at the center of the square since morning, performing for the ladies and gentlemen who had arrived just as early to listen.

“Lord Ashenbert.”

Upon hearing his name, Edgar turned around. He smiled softly as he caught sight of the approaching woman wearing a fox stole and pearl brooch. She was seemingly dazzled when she raised her gaze to his blond hair, and her cheeks flushed. She averted her gaze bashfully, though a smile rose to her lips, and she put her hands together in an utterly endearing manner.

“I came to thank you for your generous donation. It will allow the children at the orphanage to spend their Christmas in warmth and safety.”

The children who were singing their hearts out were all orphans. The adults who had come to listen were those who had donated to the orphanage’s Christmas fund.

Today was Christmas Day. Charities worked harder to solicit donations at a time when people seemed to feel remorse over their habitual sins, and even the hedonistic members of the upper class saw fit to loosen their purse strings slightly to lighten their consciences. Not that this was a bad thing. Everyone deserved a comfortable Christmas.

“I am delighted to have been of service, Miss Postner. If anything, I am far more impressed by the steadfast devotion you

display in your charitable work."

"You flatter me, my lord. These children deserve so much more than I give them. All I do is pay them the occasional visit and read to them. They are so very grateful to me for that alone, and it inspired me to do something more."

"Truly, you are a saint." The earl's ash-mauve eyes softened, making it seem to Emily Postner as though she had deeply impressed him. Her cheeks only turned all the redder.

Edgar knew very well how other people perceived him. Blessed with good looks, he had adopted a manner of speech that gave him the air of an educated aristocrat. He doubted that he had ever left a woman with an unfavorable impression on their first meeting, and conducting himself to make it so was not difficult in the slightest. For example, it hadn't been long since he had first met Emily, and yet she already seemed besotted with him. This did not displease him in the slightest, and so he saw no reason not to encourage her feelings.

She hesitated. "Can I expect to see you at the tea party later? There will be entertainment."

"You certainly can."

His immediate response had her face lighting up with a bright, innocent smile. The more defenseless a woman was, the better. She would act in accordance with his wishes, and he would be left in high spirits. She was a sheltered girl who had been taught not to spare so much as a glance for a man from a different class. But when faced with an aristocrat, she immediately lowered her guard. It was both amusing and endearing to Edgar. After all, she hadn't the slightest clue about his activities in America.

"My, if it isn't Lord Ashenbert! I didn't know you had an interest in helping unfortunate children."

The intrusion on their conversation left Emily looking as though she had suddenly awoken from a dream. They had been joined by a glamorous marchioness who smelled strongly of roses. She was somewhat of a rose herself, her radiant beauty drawing the eye even against a backdrop of winter-bare trees. Confronted by such a woman, the younger Emily lost her nerve and lowered her gaze. She gave a small curtsy and hurried away.

"I have always been fond of children," Edgar said.

"Even the boys?"

“Please, Lady Brunwick, I was speaking entirely innocently. Seeing as it is Christmas, perhaps a more generous interpretation of my words would have sufficed?”

“If your love of children is pure, then you must be eager to marry.”

“Indeed I am. All I need is to decide on a wife.”

“In that case, I must apologize for interrupting. Did you perhaps have an eye on that young lady just now?”

“Perhaps.”

The marchioness brought her slender, white-gloved fingers to her red lips and chortled. Even her most casual of gestures drew the gaze of every man in her vicinity, and it was always so. Here she was now, in conversation with a dashing young earl who was constantly at the center of scandals involving women. It was no wonder all eyes were on them.

The attention vanished once the children finished singing, and the audience was required to applaud. That was when the pair slipped away and began to walk together.

“That was Miss Emily Postner you were speaking to, wasn’t it? She is very much devoted to her charity work and righteous to a scrupulous degree. I daresay she wouldn’t forgive a vice such as infidelity.”

“Infidelity? No, I simply wish to inspire jealousy. I would be equally discontent with a wife who is *too* forgiving.”

“I think you might be running the risk of inspiring a little more than jealousy.”

“Indeed.” Edgar knew that Emily was presently following them with an anxious gaze. Pretending not to have noticed, he offered the marchioness a relaxed smile.

Halting beside a thick growth of shrubs, she turned to him. “What say you we put your intentions to the test? It will only take a second to ascertain whether her infatuation will run cold or whether she is already so deeply in love with you that jealousy will result.” She brought her face close to his and whispered like he was her lover. “Alternatively, if you are *not* interested in Miss Postner, would it not be kinder to let her know as soon as possible that her hopes are misplaced?”

“For my sake? Or for yours? You are looking to drive away that young lover of yours, for you have lost your patience with him. Or

am I mistaken?”

Edgar had sensed another gaze on them that wasn’t Emily’s. A young man, recently rumored to be involved with Lady Brunwick, was watching them from one corner of the park. While the animated children were delighting in their presents and the warm, milky tea being served in the center of the square, he alone looked desperately forlorn.

“Is that so wrong?”

Edgar didn’t mind playing along like this with a married noblewoman like her, who saw love as little more than a game. All it would take was a small show of intimacy between them and perhaps a kiss, and the poor man would recognize that he had lost the marchioness’s affection. It was an amusing game indeed, and Lady Brunwick was clearly asking him to participate. Should he accept, he could guarantee he would not be spending the night in tedium. A single night in the arms of a gorgeous woman, completely consequence-free. It didn’t sound like a bad deal at all.

Until it struck him that, should he continue in this manner, Lydia might elect not to return to London. She was his fiancée—or, at least, the girl he would like to marry—but she never believed him when he swore to be faithful to her. Requesting a Christmas holiday, she had returned to her home in rural Scotland. He wondered what she might be doing at that very moment. As much as he tried not to dwell on it, his mind inevitably returned there.

“While I appreciate the sentiment, my lady, I am afraid that I must disappoint you on this occasion.”

“Oh, dear. Such a pity,” she said, sounding anything but disappointed. “Well, Lord Ashenbert, I’m sure it won’t be long until you and I cross paths again.”

Her lack of concern was exactly why Edgar was wont to consider such encounters too casual to amount to infidelity, but he knew that Lydia would not have seen it that way.

Scotland: The Fairies’ Rock

Behind the rectory of a small town south of Edinburgh sat a large rock that had been there since ancient times. It was right next to the church, and Lydia used to play there all the time as a child. Lone rocks such as this one, said to be a prehistoric relic and

located in the middle of the field, could also be found on the town's outskirts and hills. This one, however, was the closest to Lydia's house and had therefore served as the perfect place for her to play.

There were always a number of little fairies gathered around the rock. This place was home to a mysterious force that linked the human and fairy worlds, and it seemed the rock did much to mitigate the distortions birthed by such a force. Lydia liked to think that, long ago, someone had noticed the rock's effect and moved it here for that very reason. It reassured her to know that people like her had not been as uncommon as they were now. It allowed her to believe that fairy doctors—people who could see the otherworldly creatures and communicate with them—were indispensable to human society.

Before she'd learned that the people who could see fairies were few and far between, Lydia had played and frolicked with them without a second thought. When she did so, it seemed that she inadvertently slipped into their world and became invisible to the human eye. She would often hear from her father how he had searched so desperately but been unable to find her. As a child, she had thought it strange that he struggled to locate her when her mother had been able to do so almost at once.

It wasn't until a few years after her mother—a fairy doctor herself—had passed that Lydia had gained enough wisdom to recognize that the world they saw was invisible to her father and the townspeople. Those memories had come back to her recently, and Lydia had decided to visit the rock for the first time in a while. It was Christmas morning, and she and her father had attended the service at the church before dropping by the rectory, making for a perfect opportunity.

She couldn't spot any of the tiny fairies when she first arrived. Either they were still asleep or they were hiding themselves away because it was Christmas. Lydia walked around to the other side of the rock and gently leaned against it. It truly did have a calming effect on her. Being here made her feel like the world accepted her. The big, wide world, encompassing both the human and fairy realms, was embracing her, and it made her troubles seem trivial.

Speaking of her troubles, she couldn't help but look down at the source of them: the moonstone engagement ring on her finger. As

much as she wanted to ignore it, it always seemed to catch her attention. Edgar had decided she would be his fiancée on little more than a whim, and now she was unable to remove it. Though a fae spell ensured that no one else would be able to see it, she wished that it applied to her as well.

I am not *his lover.*

Working as his fairy doctor in London, she had very much felt that her profession was respected and recognized by the world. So much so that she had even forgotten about this rock. And yet now, she wanted to forget all about her employment in the city and what it had meant to her.

"I can't see anyone."

A sudden voice made Lydia look round. Two older boys were standing on the other side of the rock. She hadn't noticed their approach, and it seemed they couldn't see her from their position. That, or she had slipped into the boundary between worlds without realizing it.

"That's strange. Professor Carlton said she should be here when he asked us to fetch her."

Lydia frowned. She didn't recognize these boys. It sounded like her father had tasked them with finding her, but she hadn't seen them in town before. Her father should still have been at the rectory. He and the reverend were friends, and once they had started talking, their brief visit had become anything but. That was why Lydia had gone out for a walk.

"What's this Miss Carlton like, anyway? Is she pretty?"

With that, she no longer felt able to announce herself.

The other man hummed thoughtfully. "I don't think so."

Lydia's brow knitted unconsciously. Still, if this young man had an opinion on her looks, then he must know her. Careful to remain discreet, she took another look.

"You haven't seen her in years, though, have you, Millers? Wouldn't one hope that a girl one was friends with in childhood would have in fact grown up to become exceptionally pretty?"

Millers? He must have been one of the reverend's sons.

"We weren't close. Not enough to be considered friends."

Having narrowed down his identity and looking more closely, Lydia realized that she recognized his perpetually disinterested countenance and the staccato rhythm of his speech. It was Andy

Millers, the reverend's third-youngest son. As she understood it, he had been sent to a distant boarding school, so it had been some time since she'd seen him around town. He probably came home for Christmas every year, but the two had never been close enough for them to have met up again.

"She's a bit of a lunatic. She didn't play much with the other children in the town."

"A lunatic in what sense?" The unfamiliar man, who seemed curious about her, had prominent facial features and looked like an energetic soul.

"She *insists* that she can see fairies. Her mother was from somewhere very remote. Miss Carlton used to say she was a witch."

No, I said she was a fairy doctor!

"Suppose she has become pretty."

"What are you getting at?"

"We'll be at that boarding school for a while yet, and we only have the opportunity to meet with girls during the holidays. I liked the look of some of the girls at the service, but they were all engaged. It doesn't matter where one goes, the pretty girls get courted in an instant. But if this Miss Carlton is as strange as you say, she is probably yet to be claimed. If you're not interested in her, Millers, then perhaps you might introduce her to me. Just don't tell her that my interest in her is purely dependent upon her physical features."

"Nash. Have you been listening to what I'm saying?"

"I can accept a slight lack of intellect if she is attractive enough."

"It isn't just that. She is incredibly brash."

"A brash dullard? She sounds more and more interesting the more you talk about her."

"It's worse than you think. One of the families in the town was suffering a string of misfortunes. She claimed it was because they felled the tree outside their house. Doesn't that make you feel ill at ease? The landlord didn't say anything because the Carltons are well respected, but that's just one example of the kind of trouble she causes."

Angered by their exchange, Lydia could keep her silence no longer. She leaped out from behind the rock. "Master Millers! If I may, I do not recall causing *you* any specific trouble!" The boys

looked at her in surprise. While mainly glaring at Andy, Lydia ensured that his companion was not spared her hard stare either. “I might also point out that I am not a dullard!”

2. Something Best Remembered

London: Christmas Crackers

“What a peaceful Christmas we are having. Wouldn’t you agree, Raven?” Edgar asked quietly, staring out of the carriage window as they traveled to the Postners’ residence.

“Yes, my lord.” His young, dark-skinned servant, who was seated next to him, replied as impassively as ever.

The houses on the corner were decorated with holly and mistletoe. The shop windows on the high street gave off a more joyful air than usual, as did the smiling passersby who stopped now and then to peer inside. Edgar hadn’t experienced a Christmas like this since his parents were murdered nine years ago. From his last holiday season in Britain, he could remember a huge tree and the accompanying sparkling decorations in the hall of the family’s country house. On it were countless flickering candles, and beneath its base sat a mountain of presents, each fabulously wrapped with ribbons and flowers. Ginger cookies, mince pies, roast turkey, and Christmas pudding. A large crystal bowl filled with a fragrant punch made from stewed fruit. The smiling faces of family and friends as they sat around the feast. As Edgar recalled, even his usually fastidious father had worn a smile for the occasion.

He could arrange for even the most extravagant parts of it all to be repeated, from the orchestra to the puppet show. However, not one of the people who sat around that table remained. Edgar was the only one who remembered the Christmas spent at that house.

“Last Christmas was horrendous,” he remarked.

“Indeed, my lord.”

Edgar had been imprisoned and on the cusp of execution while Raven had been making every effort to extract him. Of all the companions he had escaped with, Raven and Ermine had been the sole survivors at that time.

“When I think back, I can scarcely believe that what I see before me now is reality.” He suspected that he wouldn’t be feeling this way had Lydia been with him. She had helped him to obtain his earldom, but her absence made it seem like a mere dream. “Does Lydia truly even exist? What if the time we spent together was nothing more than delusion on my part?”

“It was not, my lord. It really happened.”

The decisiveness in Raven’s tone reassured him somewhat. However, Edgar was more concerned with the possibility that Lydia might not return to him. If she stayed in Scotland, there was no risk of her getting involved in the strife that shadowed him. She could stay out of his fight with his long-standing foe and therefore out of danger. He ought to relieve her of her position of fairy doctor to the Ashenbert estate. Lydia probably wouldn’t complain that she had been dismissed unfairly or anything along those lines, since she hadn’t been hired willingly in the first place. For some time now, Edgar had been ruminating over finding the conviction to let her go.

“Say, Raven, you think Miss Postner is interested in me, don’t you?” Edgar asked, attempting to change the subject despite the fact that his thoughts were still stuck on Lydia.

“I couldn’t say, my lord.”

“But she has a rather endearing smile, wouldn’t you agree?”

Though Raven’s face remained expressionless as he regarded his master, it seemed he was considerably bewildered. The boy had been born with exceptional combat capabilities and molded into a killing machine. He still struggled not only to understand his own emotions, but to express them. However, when one looked closely, it was possible to catch some very subtle changes in his countenance.

“She is a very kind young lady and not at all haughty, despite her noble birth,” Edgar continued.

“If you have taken to her, my lord, then it is not my place to comment.”

“But I cannot accept a woman into my family whom you dislike.”

“Does your lordship mean by way of marriage?”

“For instance, yes. Raven, I do not think there is any harm in you cultivating a more discerning eye when it comes to women. There are plenty out there, and we shall meet too many of them to

count. It is highly likely that I shall one day be married. I may well seek your opinion when the time comes."

Though it was a recent development, one occasionally saw glimpses of an innocent boy in Raven. Presently, for example, it seemed that Edgar's flippancy was causing him offense.

"In that case, I would like to suggest Miss Carlton."

Edgar suspected that Raven wanted to ask why they were not going to Scotland to retrieve her but his loyalty to his master prevented him from speaking further on the subject. Lydia could see fairies, so she possessed an understanding of the spirits that had been passed down through the boy's blood. She was the first person he had accepted apart from Edgar, and he might well have been lamenting her absence.

"I daresay she would seriously consider accepting a proposal from you." The earl could only react with humor, but it seemed this response had genuinely angered Raven.

"I would be happy to serve Miss Carlton. That is what I meant."

"I know what you meant."

The carriage had just stopped in front of the Postners' estate. Seemingly sullen, though he always gave that impression, Raven opened the door and helped Edgar down.

"Please enjoy yourself, my lord."

He didn't try to meet his master's gaze. He really must have been angry.

When one love faded, another sparked to life. Whether such relationships ended in unexpected conflict, dissipating feelings, or a string of smaller difficulties, there were always plenty of other women to choose from. As long as Edgar had access to charming ladies with whom he could enjoy himself, he was able to distract himself from Lydia's absence. Eventually, perhaps he would come to see her as a friend and nothing more. Such an outcome might be in her best interests too. That was why he had been determined to enjoy this tea party as much as possible.

He lent his ear to the pianist's performance between bouts of friendly conversation and exchanged opinions on the poet's reading of his new Christmas work while surrounded by the fragrance of expensive tea. Within that lively circle was Emily's cousin, a talented woman with whom Edgar got on tremendously,

something that raised his spirits quite naturally.

At some point, Emily herself made an appearance. “Lord Ashenbert, we shall be pulling crackers in a moment. Would you like to join us?”

Edgar couldn’t help but smile. It was incredibly obvious that she had been hemming and hawing about asking, and that to do so had taken tremendous courage on her part. Truthfully, he loved it when women grew desperate to draw his attention to them. Not that he expected any man to dislike it, but he doubted that many of them were lucky enough to experience it so often. As such, what was wrong with indulging in such opportunities?

“Are you *still* playing that childish game, Emily? His lordship could not possibly be interested in *that*.”

At her cousin’s rebuke, Emily puffed up her reddening cheeks. “We don’t have enough people. That is all!”

“I would be happy to participate, Miss Postner. What is a Christmas party without pulling a cracker or two?”

A bashful smile of relief on her face, Emily led him into the next room. There were a number of young men and women being handed crackers wrapped in colorful paper. Everyone took the end of a cracker offered by a neighbor and then pulled them with a cry of “Merry Christmas!” filling the room with snaps. The broken crackers each had a piece of hard candy inside. A man and a woman who had the same color candy would pair up and hide one of their sweets somewhere in the room. Once all the candies were hidden, everyone would begin to search, and the couple whose candy remained unfound the longest would win. It was an utterly absurd little game—on the face of it, at least.

“That’s cherry red you’ve got there, isn’t it, Miss Postner? Now, which gentleman has drawn the same color?”

Edgar stepped forward at once and smiled at her. “Let us hide our sweets well.”

Emily let out a surprised squeal. He had never seen her so joyful. His eyes happened upon another young man who looked like he wanted to object. He was probably the one who had pulled cherry red, but he resigned himself to silence when Edgar gave him a hard stare. He seemed to understand that the earl was asking to be allowed to pair up with Emily. After all, who would want to be the one to deliberately set a downcast look upon a

lady's face when she was so clearly elated?

Likely unbeknownst to the women, such tricks were not uncommon between men when playing this particular game.

"The pair who formed first can start, and we shall carry on in that order. Please hide your sweets wherever you like in the drawing room at the end of the hallway."

Taking Emily by the hand, Edgar led her out into the hallway. He whispered into her ear the moment they were alone. "It would seem that I am very lucky. I was hoping that I would be paired up with you."

"As was I." She paused. "Hence my surprise. I am usually rather unlucky."

"Oh? I wonder with whom you have hoped to pair with in the past."

"Oh, well…it was some years ago now. And it was nothing more than a childish infatuation."

"You have yet to experience love?"

"I…" She looked up at him, fluttering her eyelids slightly.

"You expect to experience it soon?"

"Perhaps I do."

Now that they were alone, Emily wasn't trying to hide her affections. As far as Edgar was concerned, it was an open invitation to do whatever he liked. The candy-hiding portion of the game was a pretext for a man and woman to be able to spend some time alone together. That was why it was popular.

The door to the drawing room was decorated with holly and mistletoe just like the others.

Edgar stepped inside. "Did you know that, on Christmas night, one cannot refuse a kiss requested under the mistletoe?"

Emily hesitated bashfully. "I did know that, but night is still far off."

When the earl stopped walking, so did she. They stared at each other in silence. He reached out for her cheek, and she closed her eyes.

This really is quite easy.

Or rather, this was how easy it was supposed to be. Lydia was just difficult. With that sudden thought, Edgar's mind turned to his fairy doctor once more. Who might *she* be meeting under the mistletoe tonight? It certainly wouldn't be him. He was all the way

in London. That said, she had claimed not to have any close friends in her hometown. She would be spending Christmas with her father and the fairies. There oughtn't be anyone who would steal a kiss from her. But there was still a chance that a man might approach her playfully in the same way that Edgar had found himself a convenient young lady who happened to be close at hand.

"Where shall we hide our sweet?" he whispered into Emily's ear as if he had been teasing her.

She opened her eyes, and while she initially seemed bemused, she quickly broke into a smile as she picked up on his intention. "You are a devious gentleman to tease me like that!"

"I didn't think it appropriate to yield to such vices on this holy day."

She must have really thought him a gentleman, for she seemed to take his words at face value. For his part, Edgar had to wonder what the point was of resisting her. Whichever hypothetical man was with Lydia today wouldn't squander *his* opportunity, after all. But as foolish as he knew he was being, he no longer felt any thrill at the prospect of playing lovers with Emily. He was a liar through and through. Neither his title, his background, nor his gentlemanly demeanor were genuine. This girl didn't realize that. Nor did she realize that his interest in her was superficial. If she knew who he truly was, she would likely be so frightened that she'd run away. It wasn't easy for other people to sense the pain, the suffering, and everything else Edgar had been burdened with up to this point in life.

Lydia was the only person to have learned the truth and stuck by him, and the only one to have come into direct contact with his pain. Even after learning that he had deceived her, the purehearted fairy doctor had still done all she could to pull him back from the brink of destruction. She was the only one he wanted by his side at this very moment. She knew the real him and she knew he was a liar. That was precisely why no one but she could doubt that his wish to marry her was genuine.

Scotland: The Christmas Tree

As it happened, Guy Nash was Andy's roommate at his

boarding school. Though Lydia had no way of knowing why he had come to spend Christmas with a friend rather than with his family, she heard from her father later that day that his home situation was a complicated affair. She failed to see how that excused him insulting her intelligence.

Lydia was still in a foul mood when she carried a wrapped goose to the river a small distance from the town. As she approached, ripples suddenly spread across the water, preceding the appearance of a jet-black horse.

"What a ruddy day," Kelpie muttered, only lifting his head above the water.

"It's Christmas Day. A wonderful day as far as we humans are concerned."

"Well, ah'm no' human, and I say it's a bloody terrible day. There's no peace and quiet to be had with those bells goin' off all the time, and I cannae get close to the town 'cause of all the mistletoe and holly." It seemed that Kelpie, as a fairy of the Unseelie Court, was feeling anything but jubilant.

"Oh, but I've brought you a Christmas present." Lydia held out the goose to him.

Kelpie took on his human form and climbed ashore, where he took the package without so much as hesitating. "It's dead. I would've liked to eat it when it was still alive."

"Show some gratitude."

"Awright, ah'll take it. See ye later."

He was unusually quick to return to the river. His complaints about Christmas must have run deeper than Lydia realized, and she was a little disappointed. She had hoped that they could have spoken, if only for a short while. Alone once again, she started on her way home.

Christmas Day *was* wonderful. However, it was a day when fairies tended to keep to themselves, and so Lydia also found it to be somewhat lonely. Even the fae of the Seelie Court didn't leave their homes if they could help it.

She had hoped to feel a little better by the time she returned home, but she was in the same dark mood as when she had left. She went in through the back and passed by the kitchen, where a delicious-smelling pie was baking. The cook was rushing this way and that to prepare the Carltons' Christmas dinner. The pot with

the pudding in it was emitting plumes of steam that were filling the kitchen with thick, white mist.

The Carlton residence was usually empty, so the housekeeper and cook had only been coming by for the past few days. The cook was making dinner not just for them, but for her own family and that of the housekeeper, which was why she was cooking far more food than seemed suitable for just a father and daughter. By the mere look of things, it looked as though the Carltons were hosting a huge party.

Delicious smells had the mysterious effect of calming a person down. As simple a thing as it was, Lydia suddenly felt like her spirits *could* pick up.

"Lydia? Is that you?" her father called, drawing her to the reception room.

"Yes, father—"

She froze in the doorway. There was an unexpected guest in the room: Guy. He was the source of her displeasure, but his "hullo," was decidedly lighthearted.

"What are you doing here?"

"Master Nash kindly brought in the Christmas tree for us." Her father pointed to the center of the room, where a large fir tree was coming very close to brushing the ceiling.

"I heard that Professor Carlton had only a lone daughter and that there might be some manual labor—such as putting the tree up—that still needed doing. This one was going spare at the rectory."

Guy was right in that the Carltons hadn't had a Christmas tree in some years. Lydia couldn't manage it by herself, and her father had only finished work and returned from London two days ago.

"We'd best get to it, else Christmas will be over. Give me a hand with the decorations, Miss Carlton."

The tree might have been something to be grateful for, but who did he think he was, *demanding* that she help him?

"I can't remember how many years it's been since we've had a tree. This is going to be a splendid Christmas, Lydia. Be sure to say thank you, now."

Despite her father's cheerful remark, Lydia was still indignant.

"Oh, there's no need for thanks," the young man said.

"The decorations should be in the storage shed. I shall go and

see if I can find them. Lydia, do make Master Nash some tea."

No doubt her father thought there wasn't a man in this town who would approach her with impure intentions. It was a fair assumption; she was known to be eccentric, and no one had ever tried to seduce her here. That was why he seemed to be encouraging Guy to get along with her, because she had never made any firm friends in Scotland.

She stayed rooted to the spot in a huff after her father left. Guy smiled at her like he wanted to placate her.

"I apologize for earlier. It wasn't my intention to insult you. I was hoping that the tree might make things up to you."

"Thank you for the tree. I shall decorate it myself. You are a guest of the Millerses, and it wouldn't do to keep you here for too long."

"I *have* offended you, haven't I? But it was Millers who said the worst of it, not me. I had no idea what you were like. Everything I said was purely for the sake of conversation."

He *did* have a bit of a point.

"I never thought that Millers had a good eye when it came to women, and I suppose he must have been the same when he was a boy. A lovely girl like you living in the same town, and he never made the effort to get close to you? The word 'foolish' springs to mind."

Guy seemed to be getting ahead of himself in a way that was *awfully* familiar.

"You aren't going to believe what Master Millers told you? Are you sure you want to associate with a potential lunatic?"

"That is *why* I am interested. I want to see exactly why he thinks you a lunatic."

"I am under no obligation to satisfy your curiosity. There are zoos full of giraffes and elephants if you wish to gawk at curious beings."

"I didn't mean to… Crumbs, now I really am in a fix." A subtle frown appeared on his face. His troubled reaction made him just a touch more endearing than a cunning man who thought himself able to seduce anyone with a few words. "I want to know what sort of girl you are, and I don't want to take Millers's word for it. That's all."

"Most of what Master Millers said is true."

“You mean that you are able to see fairies? I think a vibrant imagination is a wonderful thing.”

It was anything but her imagination.

“Ah, don’t take another step,” she warned him as he tried to approach her, and he stopped in surprise. “There’s a knothole there that the fairies use to come in and out of the house.”

“Oh,” Guy said after a pause. He seemed unsure how to respond, just as she had suspected. It didn’t matter what he said. He would have to be a very special sort to be able to accept Lydia for who she was. But she knew that wasn’t his fault, and she would feel bad keeping up her sullen mood for much longer, so she offered him a seat.

“This town is lovely and peaceful, isn’t it?” he said, as if trying to forget his blunder. “Will you be attending the party with the landlord tomorrow?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I dislike parties.” As she spoke, Lydia recalled the various parties Edgar had taken her to in London. He had tended to ensure that she enjoyed herself. There were doubtless several members of the upper class who would feel it debased them to speak with an upper-middle-class girl, but the atmosphere Edgar created meant that everyone treated her with kindness. However, when Lydia had returned to her hometown, she felt like Cinderella after the spell had worn off. She had no business going to parties.

“Because people think you’re strange? Why not go together, then? I’m an outsider, so I was balking a bit at going to a party where everyone else already knows each other. Allow me to be your escort.”

“They will treat you as an eccentric as they do me.”

“But if that doesn’t bother me, you’ll come with me?”

Lydia found herself at a loss. She had never thought she’d be invited to a party by a man other than Edgar.

“You will, won’t you?” he pressed.

What *would* the earl think of this if he knew? *I must be quite mad to be worrying about* his *opinion.* And yet her mind was still going around in circles as she struggled to make a decision.

“Master Nash! I have come to fetch you because you are taking far too long!” A cheerful voice bounced through the house,

bringing the fairy doctor back to her senses. Andy's sister, a girl one year Lydia's junior, had rushed in to join them. "You said you were only going to drop off the tree, so why are you engaged in lengthy conversation?"

"Ah, my apologies. I'm afraid I kept him," Lydia's father said, coming in right after the newcomer.

"Oh, Professor Carlton, I'm in an awful fix! Master Nash and I were playing chess before lunch and we have yet to finish our game!"

"*You're* in a fix? I was close to losing, so I fled here." Guy put a hand to his forehead, at which the girl tugged on his arm to get him to leave…but not without shooting a defiant glance at Lydia first.

Lydia sighed inwardly. Why had Guy been asking her to the party when there was a perfectly normal girl he could be inviting instead? She could have kicked herself for getting even slightly upset about it as she had. She got to her feet, hoping it would encourage him to leave.

"Goodbye, Master Nash, and Merry Christmas."

He opened his mouth as if to say something, but Lydia turned away before he could. Andy's sister tugged on his arm, forcing him to leave in a hurry.

Lydia's father chuckled. "Oh, to be a handsome young man."

"Handsome? Do you think so?"

"I would advise you not to compare Master Nash to Lord Ashenbert, Lydia."

"I wasn't!" she replied, flustered, though perhaps he had a point. Perhaps she was so used to Edgar that she struggled to see other men as attractive. That said, it didn't matter how handsome a man was if he was as philanderous as the earl.

I could never abide such a man, she thought. She had told herself the exact same thing several times since coming back from London. She didn't want to admit that she might be on the cusp of falling for Edgar, so she was determinedly sealing away the burgeoning sense that she wanted to place a little faith in him.

"Did you fetch the decorations for the tree, father?"

"Yes, I have them here. They might make you a bit misty-eyed. I wonder if you remember them."

Her father placed the box on the table, and Lydia opened it

carefully. It was filled with intricate decorations made with white lace. There were snow crystals, stars, and holly, to name just a few.

"Yes, I remember these. Mother made them."

She could remember the white of the delicate lace strewn carefully over the dense green of the fir tree like snow. It wouldn't blow the viewer away, but the tender love that went into them had been palpable. The flickering candles had been the finishing touch on the magically gorgeous tree. Lydia would gaze upon it, transfixed, from atop her mother's lap.

They seemed set to have a wonderful Christmas this year, and it was all thanks to Guy and his tree. Lydia decided that she ought to find him tomorrow and thank him properly.

"I must apologize for my sister's behavior. It was very rude of her."

Andy had come to see them a little while after Guy's departure.

"Not at all. I was keeping Master Nash, and I apologize for that."

While her father dealt with their visitor, Lydia was kneeling down to bury the fairies' Christmas presents under the window. The fence by the front of the house was probably blocking her from the men's view. She could hear their rambling conversation as she used a spade to dig a small hole between some plants in silence. She then pushed silver coins and walnuts into the soft dirt. Many Christmas traditions involved elements that fairies hated and tried to stay away from. Lydia's gifts were a message to them that these were simply customary and that the humans were not doing it out of spite.

"Do you smell that, Lydia? It smells so appetizing." At some point, a gray, long-furred cat had come to join her, standing on its hind legs. She hadn't seen him all day but, predictably, he had returned in time for food.

"Hello, Nico. The turkey will be ready soon."

"I cannot *wait* for the mince pies. I can have as many as I want, can't I?"

"Of course."



Nico's eyes narrowed contentedly. Although he was a fairy, his bottomless appetite led him to love Christmas and the plentiful treats it had to offer. He was probably the only one of his kind to participate in the celebrations. His company meant that Lydia and her father could experience a livelier Christmas than they would with just the two of them. However, it did make it difficult to invite any guests when there would be a cat sitting at the table gripping a knife and fork. Not that either of them particularly minded. Lydia never felt the need to invite anyone even when her father was absent, and he preferred quieter mealtimes anyway.

"The reverend's son is a curious one, isn't he?" Nico said, his ears swiveling as he picked up on the men's voices.

"Why do you say that?"

"He told his sister that this 'Guy' fellow was probably here to make eyes at you, and that she ought to come and fetch him posthaste."

"Have you been eavesdropping, Nico?"

His gray tail swished from side to side, and he folded his front legs in front of his chest defensively. "Not deliberately! But people tend to say all sorts of things in our presence, on account of being unable to see us."

Lydia couldn't exactly blame him for that. "Master Nash's interest in me stems from pure curiosity. I am sure that Master Millers had him called back both for his own sake and for the sake of his sister."

"Why did he come to apologize for his sister's behavior, then?"

"To keep in favor with my father, surely?"

Andy had a real knack for making every adult around him believe that he was a well-behaved boy, and he had possessed that skill ever since he was a child.

"I don't know about that. I think he dislikes you to a certain degree. But he's worse than the people who are openly unkind to you, because he keeps that dislike to himself around your father and other adults. He always has done. Meanwhile, he's happy to wax lyrical about how much of a lunatic you are behind your back when he has an audience his own age."

Nico had always shared such things with Lydia when he learned of them, and it was part of the reason she had come to dislike Andy herself. Otherwise, she probably would have believed that he

was one of those people who was indifferent to her instead of being aware that he didn't like her.

Their first encounter had been disastrous. Ever since Andy was young, he'd had an almost obsessive fear of sin, depravity, and demonic temptation. It was something that seemed to be borne more of his personality rather than the pious environment in which he'd grown up. One time, when his parents had been close to finding out about some childish prank he had pulled, he got stuck between the guilt of lying to them and the temptation of avoiding punishment. Tormented, he had gone to the field beyond his back garden and approached the rocky relic. That was apparently where he had found Lydia, who—according to him—had tried to curse him for his naughtiness with a terrifying look on her face.

From her point of view, Andy had intruded on the spot where she played with the fairies. He had broken up their circle of dance, and in retaliation, they had started to climb up his body and pinch him wherever they could reach. Lydia remembered how she had scolded them. Still a child, it seemed that not only had Andy felt the pain of the fairies' pinches, but he had even claimed to have seen brownish shadows flitting around Lydia. Believing her to be a witch, he had been overcome with fear and run home crying, begging God to forgive him.

Lydia didn't know for how many years after that he thought her a witch, but given that he was known by the grown-ups around him as a composed and courteous boy, perhaps he found the fact that he had been frightened off by a girl his own age difficult to swallow. In short, he might have preferred that she *were* a witch. Meanwhile, convincing himself that she was a lunatic allayed him of his fear of any magic she might otherwise cast on him. That was why he didn't like the idea of his friends approaching her and had spread all kinds of rumors about her lack of sanity to prevent it. It seemed that Andy had been the one to encourage a friend of his to write Lydia that fake love letter.

"Either way, he dislikes me, and there is little I can do about that." Lydia stood up. The voices had stopped, and she had heard the door close. Andy must have gone home.

Except he was standing right there on the other side of the thicket and frowning at her as she filled the dirt back in. "Are you

casting some sort of spell?"

"Yes, that's right."

Andy's frown was so deep that Lydia expected him to draw a cross over his chest at any moment. "You were speaking with someone just now, weren't you?"

"A fairy. Does that offend you?" she responded, despairing at the way Nico had dropped onto four paws like an ordinary cat and scampered off somewhere.

The young man's eyes held a mixture of pity and disdain. "A fairy? I see you remain as childish as ever."

"And you still speak so rudely of others."

Perhaps she had upset him, because he fell silent for a moment. Lydia was close to making her escape until he quickly opened his mouth again. "You shouldn't take anything Nash says too seriously. He lets himself get carried away. He's like that with everyone."

"You may wish to direct that advice to your sister rather than me."

He paused. "I will. I just thought you needed warning because you probably aren't used to that sort of thing."

Did he mean that she wasn't used to men displaying an interest in her and that she would therefore take Guy seriously? Lydia stared at Andy. She wasn't angry so much as she was flabbergasted. Why did *he* feel the need to "warn" her about his friend? Having said that, his assumptions weren't entirely incorrect. She wasn't used to male interest. That was why Edgar found it so easy to manipulate her. But she *did* know not to take a man's flirtatious words at face value. She didn't need Andy to tell her that. It was because she feared taking Edgar seriously that she had declared a leave of absence and fled back to Scotland.

Edgar took her hand like it was nothing. He kissed her hair, whispered sweet nothings into her ear, smiled at her tenderly, and, if she let her guard down enough, even tried to embrace her. Had Guy gone *that* far, perhaps she would have started to believe he was interested, but the pair had done little more than exchange a few words. Lydia wasn't conceited enough to think it meant anything. She couldn't imagine there were many people she would want to open her heart to, even for a second. Perhaps Edgar really was the only exception.

Lydia's gaze dropped unconsciously to the moonstone ring on her finger. Edgar had placed it there, turning it into an engagement ring that only he could remove. Its faint glow was a constant reminder that he was a part of her life that couldn't be erased, no matter how far apart they were.

"You needn't concern yourself with me. I am being courted by another gentleman."

Andy's eyes widened, his mouth hanging open. For a second, she couldn't work out why he looked so surprised...until her words replayed in her mind and she felt her face turn red in an instant.

"I didn't mean I am *being* courted," she said quickly, "only that I have been *asked*..."

"Really?" Andy seemed to have regained his composure in the face of Lydia's panic. He seemed to suspect she had made up her suitor on the spot.

"Um, yes, really! I met him in London. He's a villain—I mean, he's real!"

Andy was only looking more disbelieving by the second. "You sound like you are trying to puff yourself up."

He really is a nasty sort.

"I am being quite truthful!" Lydia had lost hold of her temper. Edgar's intentions aside, the fact that he had proposed to her remained.

"Then you have my sincerest congratulations. I suppose I ought to let Nash know." His tone made it evident that he didn't believe her in the slightest.

She watched him leave, nothing but wretchedness remaining in her chest. Though she hadn't lied, she *had* been trying to make herself look good. Edgar wasn't her lover. There was a good chance that he had only flirted with her and proposed to her so that he could forget about the woman he *truly* loved. Lydia knew that well and she was appalled at herself for using him as a shield despite that.

3: Something to Wish For

London: Christmas Dinner

“Your guests have arrived, my lord,” the butler announced. It was two in the afternoon, and he had come to his master’s study.

Edgar wasn’t content with the letter he was writing anyway, so he crumpled it up and discarded it before raising his head.

“Dinner is ready to be served at your lordship’s convenience.”

“Say, Tompkins, you think that Lydia is an objectively charming girl, don’t you?”

The butler wasn’t the least bit bewildered. He was used to his master throwing out sudden questions or statements related to some woman or another. Drawing his stout body up to its full, lacking height, he kept a perfect posture as he responded. “Yes, my lord.”

“She believes herself utterly unattractive. I couldn’t disagree more.”

“Quite, my lord.”

“She has spoken at length about how she is seen as an eccentric in her hometown, but I would be willing to wager that there may have been one or two boys who secretly harbored affections for her.”

“That could well be the case, my lord.”

“If so, then perhaps the reason no one has displayed an open interest in her before is because one of the boys in her town has been working to prevent it.”

“In the same way as yourself, my lord?”

“I’m afraid you’ll have to elaborate.”

“An acquaintance of Miss Carlton’s gave you a Christmas card to pass on to her in the park. I couldn’t help but notice that you seemed to have ‘misplaced’ it.”

“Ah, I didn’t misplace it. A mischievous wind just so happened to pull it from my grip and drop it in a nearby puddle. Unfortunately, the ink is no longer legible by any stretch of the imagination.”

“I see, my lord.”

“In any case, Tompkins, I do not think it is within the realm of fantasy that a young Scottish scoundrel should find his feelings reignited upon seeing Lydia again and develop the whim to confess them to her.”

Edgar had been considering including some casual queries within his letter to her: “Has anyone tried to flirt with you, perchance?” or “Has anybody tried to lure you beneath the

mistletoe?" However, he had given up. It would be impossible to ask such things without giving an impression of jealousy and possessiveness. He knew that speaking to Tompkins would do nothing to solve his concerns, but the possibility that had just sprung to his mind was not something he wanted to shoulder alone.

"How do you suppose Lydia would respond? I would be left utterly heartbroken should she agree to the courtship. Not only that, but Raven might decide to abandon me."

"Raven, my lord? Why do you think so?"

"He expressed a desire to serve Lydia."

"I'm afraid I share that sentiment."

"Oh, yes? In that case, could not you and Raven work to persuade her to marry me?"

"My lord, across all the generations the Tompkins clan has been serving the earldom, there is one principle we have faithfully abided by: our master's orders are never to be refused. Should I be presented with an order that is impossible to fulfill, I'm afraid I shall have no choice but to resign from my position." Tompkins's tone was deathly serious. He must have truly believed that Lydia would not be persuaded.

Edgar had no choice but to withdraw his suggestion. "That was in jest, Tompkins."

"Of course, my lord." The butler gave a gentle laugh, indicating that he had decided to take it as such.

Pushing his fingers through his bright blond hair, Edgar slumped against the backrest of his chair. He chuckled to himself, feeling oddly amused. Lydia was all the way in Scotland. What use was it thinking about her or imagining what she might be doing? He had yet to find the resolve to keep her at a safe distance, so anything that would result in a decisive rejection of his proposal might be the push he needed to give up on her. There was no way for him to prevent or interfere with something that was happening so many miles away, after all.

"Let's make a start on that Christmas dinner, shall we?" Edgar said, getting to his feet. At the end of the day, he didn't know if he was ready to keep Lydia by his side or if he would rather she lost all patience with him.

Christmas dinner began with lunch. The guests at the Ashenbert estate were all unmarried men and women with too much time on their hands this holy day. They were people without family, people *with* family from whom they were estranged, or lone foreign nobles. They were the outcasts of the upper-class society that Edgar associated closely with on a daily basis. Though not of such status himself, Paul Firman, a painter friend of the earl, was also in attendance.

Edgar was well acquainted with each and every one of them, and once the meal got underway, the gathering gradually took on the atmosphere of a lighthearted party rather than a formal dinner. A good number of wine bottles had already been uncorked when the time came to carve the turkey, and when its juices poured out accompanied by soft roast nuts and dried fruits, the guests around the table cheered like children. An unsolvable dispute broke out over whether gravy or cranberry sauce was the proper addition to roast turkey.

The traditional Christmas dishes brought back memories of Edgar's childhood. He had always believed that he would be coming back to the same foods laden on the same table, year after year.

"Let's have Christmas at *my* estate next year!"

"Ah, but Lord Ashenbert, *our* cook is really quite something."

"You both intend to remain bachelors for another full year, I see," Edgar remarked.

"Of course! I'd invite you to marry if you'd like. You'll find one is no longer able to attend lighthearted parties such as this. They will instead be held at the wife's family home, where one has to restrain oneself. Simply unthinkable!"

"The solution is to marry a woman who has no family to speak of," one of the ladies said.

"A woman such as yourself?" Edgar asked.

"Madame, if you wish to marry me, you have only to ask," said one of the men.

"I was addressing Lord Ashenbert," replied the lady.

"Goodness, I suppose I'm out of luck. What do you say, Lord Ashenbert?"

"That sounds like a marvelous idea, but I'm afraid your son is grimacing at me."

“My son? Oh, but I don’t remember giving birth to him. Besides, he is six years my senior.”

“Allow me to clarify: your son-*in-law*.”

Everyone erupted into laughter. Only Paul, who was seated next to Edgar, seemed confused. The earl whispered an explanation: that the pair were lovers. However, it appeared the painter was too intoxicated to think particularly deeply into the joke, so he merely replied with a chuckle and an “Oh, yes? Very good.”

Soon it was time for the main event: the Christmas pudding. It was doused with a generous dose of brandy and set alight. The sweet-smelling mound, enveloped by blue flames, was then placed on the table. This sent the guests into a rigorous uproar. Edgar decided the time was right to send the servants who were attending to the dinner home early. Christmas was a special day for everyone, and the servants would likely go now and hold their own party in a corner of the estate.

“Incidentally, Ashenbert, I hear there were quite a few homes that were eager to have you over for dinner today. Why did you refuse their invitations?”

By the time the party had moved from the dining room to the reception room, every guest was as relaxed as though they were in their own home, some of them even smoking cigars. The dishes and desserts that had been too plentiful to finish would no doubt vanish over the course of the night as the alcohol continued to flow.

“They were all families with daughters of marriageable age,” Edgar replied. “It would have been unfair of me to single any one of them out.”

“Ah, so a single earl with no family will find that other households are champing at the bit to have him join theirs.”

“Well then, my lord, who *have* you set your sights on? Am I to presume she is not from one of the families from whom you received an invitation?”

“In the interests of honesty, we have a wager, Ashenbert. It seems you have cut loose your casual female acquaintances and cleaned up your act. We have all been placing bets on which woman it was who has set you on the straight and narrow.”

Edgar gave a curious hum. “Oh? Might I ask which names have come up?”

“We couldn’t divulge that to *you* now, could we? Ah, Firman! Why not join our little wager?”

“Oh, um. No, thank you.”

“No? You only need to add a pound to the pot. We already have more than twenty participants. You might earn yourself a tidy sum.”

Paul knew the winning answer, but he also knew that Edgar’s relationship with her was unlikely to come to fruition. It was no wonder he wanted to avoid throwing his money away on such a wager.

“Then allow me to place a bet on Firman’s behalf. One pound on Miss Lydia Carlton.” Edgar tossed a sovereign onto the table.

“I can’t say I’ve heard of her.”

“Did anyone else bet on her?”

“No, nobody.”

“Is this Miss Carlton the girl who has stolen your heart, Ashenbert?”

“Now let us not get ahead of ourselves. This is Lord Ashenbert we are dealing with. This must be a scheme to throw our little wager into disarray. You are ever so fond of befuddling others, aren’t you, my lord?”

Edgar stood up, a forced smile on his lips. “Would you all excuse me for a moment? I am just going to drop in on the servants’ party.”

As irresponsible as it was, he found himself toying with the idea of giving twenty pounds to *each* participant should he win the wager.

The servants’ party was being held in the butler’s modest private room. The first thing Edgar heard was the cook playing an out-of-tune harmony on the violin. There was song, clapping, and the light stepping of dancing, sounds one commonly heard in the less affluent areas of London.

Ermine noticed Edgar’s approach and came to meet him. He could tell that she was enjoying herself, a side of her that he rarely saw.

“Have a seat, my lord, so you may observe the dance.”

“Thank you. Where is Raven? He appears to be absent.”

“He was disinclined to join us and has retired to his room.”

Although he would do anything Edgar asked of him, it seemed Raven didn't feel the need to form stronger bonds with his work colleagues.

"Would you like me to fetch him, my lord?"

"No, that's all right. Everyone deserves to be where they are most comfortable today."

"Yes, I agree."

Edgar gazed at her carefree smile. Never in his wildest dreams had he imagined he would be spending another Christmas with her. That smile might not have been heartfelt, as she had taken her own life once. However, he sincerely hoped that she would never have to go through such suffering ever again. He intended to do everything in his power to make it so.

"Dance with me, Ermine." Edgar took her by the hand and led her to the room's center.

The parties in the American slums had been just like this one. Edgar had a fondness for this style of dance, which was considered improper in the eyes of the upper class. The other servants cheered as he and Ermine performed a flawless common dance together. The tempo of the cook's violin increased. Everyone was joining in one after the other, from the youngest maids to the senior staff. The floor was so packed that it was getting harder to move, but it didn't bother anyone in the slightest, even when they were close to spinning into each other or stepping on each other's toes.

After a while, Edgar managed to slip away from the festivities and descended a flight of the estate's grand staircase. With that, all of his Christmas business was complete. But the day had felt lacking, and it was all down to Lydia's absence.

There was nothing he could do about it, yet he still found himself taking up his coat and opening the front door. London's night had fully descended. All that dancing and socializing had left a sheen of sweat on Edgar's forehead, but the thin fog descending on the city was frightfully cold and cooled him down in an instant. Adjusting the collar of his coat, he hurried toward the street and hailed a carriage to take him to the Carltons' residence, which wasn't far from University College.

Both Lydia and Professor Carlton were in Scotland. Edgar couldn't help but visit the house despite knowing that no one was

there. He alighted at a corner just before their residence and walked the short rest of the way, spotting the house at once. It was the only one without any lights on. Their live-in housekeeper must have taken leave and gone home for the holidays.

Lydia's bedroom window was pitch-black, and Edgar's chest tightened as he wondered whether it would ever bear light again. That was how terrified he was of losing her. And yet he couldn't go to Scotland to bring her back either. He feared her suffering—or worse, losing her life—because of him more than he feared her absence. Despite that, he still couldn't completely quash his desire to have her by his side.

Edgar approached the stone steps that led up to the entrance. The mistletoe wreath hanging above the door stirred in the slight breeze.

Scotland: The Christmas Wreath

Though the sun had completely sunk, the candles on the Christmas tree splashed their light over the room while the fireplace lent it a fiery warmth. After an enjoyable dinner with Nico and her father, Lydia listened to the latter reading a book as she sat in her mother's favorite rocking chair. Nico, who had cleared his plates and emptied several glasses of spirits, was lying in front of the hearth. He didn't look at all refined with his mouth hanging open, but while he liked to act the gentleman, he had a tendency to let his guard down now and then. That was just who he was. Occasionally, his whiskers would twitch, and he would swipe his tongue over his lips. It seemed he was still eating even in his dream, and the peaceful look on his face lulled Lydia into drowsiness. The gentle rocking of her chair was ever so comforting, and it reminded her that her mother used to doze off in it too. Lydia was filled with a sense of calm like she was sitting in her mother's lap. When she closed her eyes, she was sent back to her childhood.

Back then, it would take her father no time at all to notice that her mother was drifting off, and he would softly place a blanket over her. Sometimes, she would only pretend to be asleep and wait for him to put the blanket on her. After Lydia's father left the room as quietly as possible, her mother would slowly open her

eyes. Lydia had once asked her why.

"I like to be sure that he loves me more than his rare minerals."

As obsessed as Lydia's father was with his rocks, she doubted he had ever placed a blanket over them out of fear that they might catch a cold. Confused by the image in her head, she had inclined her head at her mother, who had worn a bright smile on her face. It seemed she felt so secure in their marriage that her husband's passion for his research was the only thing that might come between them.

"Have you fallen in love, Lydia?"

Surprised, Lydia looked up at her mother from where she was seated on her lap. She was still very young, but her mother began to speak to her like she was addressing a grown-up daughter.

"I wonder what kind of gentleman he is, the one who is courting you. It is a real pity that I was never able to meet him. However, I am sure that he is just as kind and considerate as your father. You chose him, after all."

Her mother took the young girl's tiny hand in hers. On it was a familiar moonstone ring. Though fairy magic made it invisible to other people, Lydia had the vague sense that her mother knew it was there.

"You have nothing to fear. Listen to your heart, place your trust in him, and follow him."

But mother, I don't...

She was still only a child. She wouldn't need to think about love or marriage for a long while yet. She still wanted to stay with her mother and father.

"It seems we have a visitor, Lydia. He must have been missing you and came to see you."

Little Lydia obediently climbed down from her mother's comfortable lap and headed for the front door. She didn't know who her mother thought had come to visit, so she tried to imagine him. What color were his hair and eyes? Was he tall? Did he have a nice smile?

By the time Lydia reached the door, she was all grown up. Though she assumed she must have been dreaming, she still had a sense that her future lover might be standing on the other side. Edgar, with his golden hair and ash-mauve eyes, came to mind. But what if it wasn't him? In fact, she was fairly certain that it

couldn't be him. And yet she could think of no other possible candidate.

The door opened slowly before Lydia could touch it. Though she watched with bated breath, she saw nothing. There was no one on the other side.

Does this mean I shall be alone forever? Dejected, she stepped into the darkness outside. Tiny snowflakes flitted around her, riding on the wind. Her moonstone was glowing, but she wasn't sure why. She raised her head, which was when she happened to catch sight of a figure illuminated by the gatepost's lantern. She hurried over to it.

He was sitting on the ground, eyes closed, and slumped back against the brick gatepost. His golden hair seemed to shine even more brightly than the lantern, enhancing his perfectly straight nose and well-defined features. It didn't matter where he was or what he was doing. His beauty was consistently flawless.

"Edgar! Can you hear me? What's the matter?!"

When Lydia shook him, his eyes flew open in surprise. It seemed he had just been sleeping. "Lydia? What are you doing here? Have you come back to London?"

"London? This is Scotland."

"No, it isn't. We are outside your home in London."

He sounded so certain that Lydia put her doubts to one side and raised her head to check. They were on a street lined with stone houses, built without gaps between them. And indeed, directly before them sat the Carltons' London residence.

"I don't believe it! I was just in my garden and came to the gate… Edgar, try coming this way." Lydia beckoned to Edgar, who had gotten to his feet.

He had only taken a single step toward her when his eyes flew open. "Is this truly Scotland?"

"This is the garden in front of my house."

"Your house? You were brought up in that house there?" It was just an average, two-story home, but the windows glowed with an inviting light. Edgar gazed at it thoughtfully. "We must be in a dream."

"Yes, I'm sure of it. It is a selfish dream of mine." It must have been borne of her fleeting desire to see Edgar.

"No, this is *my* dream. I sat down in front of your house and

drifted off." The lantern's golden glow was reflected in his ash-mauve eyes, setting them alight with a flame that was even more passionate than usual. But perhaps that was simply because he was a figment of Lydia's imagination.

Even though she knew this was all fantasy, she couldn't help but ask, "Why did you go to my house?"

"I missed you dreadfully and wanted nothing more than to see you." His words were far more tender than anything Lydia's imagination could conjure up. It was like she was speaking to the real Edgar.

Her face burning, she averted her gaze before withdrawing behind the shrubbery as if to escape the lantern's light. Then she realized it was the same action that a woman embarrassed by her lover's affection would take.

Edgar closed the gap between them very suddenly, coming close enough that their shoulders were brushing. "This is an evening that should be spent with whomever is most dear to us. I do enjoy a bustling party with my friends, and yet I felt lonely…because the one person with whom I wanted to spend Christmas was absent."

"If it is true that you drifted off outside, you're going to be freezing cold. You need to wake up and return home," Lydia said. The direction of his words was making her anxious, and she wanted to change the course of the conversation. She always grew hesitant when it came to such things, but this time Edgar also hesitated. The hand he had started to extend toward her was hanging in the air. He was being strangely mild-mannered, and it only served to confuse her.

"You want me to leave at once?"

"I'm concerned about your health," she stammered.

"You don't wish to waste your precious time on me. Not even in your dreams."

"That isn't what I said."

"So you *have* been missing me?"

Lydia didn't respond.

"I need you to give me a clear answer. Without you by my side, I am growing cowardly."

Lydia could not think of a person less deserving of being called cowardly. However, she could see no trace of his usual coercive

nature as he waited in earnest for her response. That was why she felt more willing to be honest with him than she ordinarily would have.

"Yes. I've missed you."

It was all right. She was only dreaming. This wasn't reality. Her feelings were the only thing that existed in that moment. It didn't matter to her right now that the real Edgar might have been in love with somebody else or might only have been using her.

"Thank God." He truly seemed to be relieved from the depths of his heart. He touched Lydia's hair, then cupped her face in his hands.

Lydia looked up and beyond his tranquil smile at the arch that straddled the gate posts. On it hung a mistletoe wreath.

"Close your eyes, Lydia."

Kissing under the mistletoe on Christmas Day was said to bring blessings.

"Oh, but…" The thought of it made her so bashful that she couldn't do it.

"You won't push me away," Edgar whispered, "not if this is *my* dream."

"And if it is mine?"

"Then what happens next is your prerogative."

Lydia began to consider what sort of dream she wanted this to be. As she did so, she felt his soft lips graze her cheek before they traveled to her mouth. She felt almost nothing save for a fleeting trace of heat. Only in her dream could a kiss seem so ephemeral, for how could she dream of something she had never experienced?

She thought back to when their lips had touched for the briefest of seconds and tried to use the memory to stabilize the sensation of the kiss. She had barely started when her heart began to pound so hard that it nearly threw her into a panic. Their kiss was shallow, childish, and it would not evolve into anything more because this was all that Lydia's imagination could conjure up.

However, it was lasting too long for something born of *her* dream. And the way Edgar sucked gently on her upper lip just before he finally pulled away was also beyond her powers of imagination.

Perhaps this isn't just my dream, and Edgar is having it too.

The moonstone ring on the hand he held in his seemed to be glowing with a stronger light than usual.

"Is it the ring's magic, I wonder, that has brought us together on this holy night?"

It may well be…

Edgar regarded her with a joyous smile. Lydia looked back at him with a gaze far softer than she usually wore.

"Oh, I really am so deeply in love with you," he sighed.

At that moment, she dearly wanted to believe him. As long as he was being sincere. And she wanted to believe that, in this space, all that existed were the raw feelings they held for each other.

In the real world, Lydia struggled to comprehend what lay in other people's hearts. Lacking confidence and afraid of being hurt, she tended to keep herself emotionally closed off. The spell cast over this dream was a fleeting one that would vanish as soon as they awoke.

However, at this moment, I am in love.



***

“My lord.”

Raven’s call lured Edgar from his shallow sleep. He opened his eyes to see that he was sitting on the stone steps in front of the Carltons’ London residence. His dark-haired servant was peering at him anxiously.

“Are you all right, my lord?”

“Raven… You came to fetch me?” The cold had seeped deep into Edgar’s body despite the thickness of his coat. His limbs seemed to creak as he stood up. He counted the number of tolls of the church bells and discovered that he had not been there long. However, the despair that had led him there in the first place had mysteriously vanished. “I am impressed that you knew where to find me.”

“My lord, I shall be content to serve whomever you may choose.”

Raven’s sudden declaration made Edgar wonder how pitiful he must have appeared to the boy. After all, he had been so tormented that he had come to Lydia’s empty house to grapple with his thoughts. A bitter smile rose to his lips at the thought that Raven was sympathizing. His servant had been disgruntled with his cowardice: his inability to visit Lydia or to bring her back, and his attempt to distract himself from his supposed true love with another woman. However, Raven was now making it clear that he would forgive his pitiful master, even if Lydia never returned.

“I had a dream. I think it was about Lydia. I may have tried to kiss her.”

“Did she strike you?”

“I wonder. I cannot remember the dream exactly, even though I have only just woken up.”

He had seen Lydia’s golden-green eyes right in front of him. She might not have struck him, but he also had the sense that she hadn’t closed her eyes for him. She was true to herself to the very last, even in his dreams.

As they left the Carlton residence behind, Edgar fell into thought. Raven had promised to accept it should Lydia leave him. However, the earl was starting to feel as though he would find it

very difficult to accept such an eventuality—more than Raven would, and even more than he himself had thought he would.

"As much as I like defenseless women, I adore those who keep their guard up just as much."

***

Lydia checked the postbox to find that it contained yet another letter from Edgar. They had been arriving almost daily since she had taken her leave of absence, and while she was impressed that he had not yet tired of writing to her, she was also secretly relieved that he hadn't forgotten about her. Letter in hand, her eyes wandered to the arch over the gateposts. Though it was now Boxing Day—the day after Christmas—the mistletoe wreath was still hanging there. As she gazed at it, her heart gave a mysterious murmur and began to thump. She didn't know why, since the memories of her dream had long since vanished, but the sight of it also filled her with a tender peace.

"Hullo, Miss Carlton."

She turned. Guy was waving to her from the other side of the fence.

"Oh, hello. Thank you very much for the tree yesterday. It made for a wonderful Christmas."

Though he looked surprised by her honesty, he also smiled. "I hear someone is courting you."

She could only mumble something vague in response. It seemed the lie she had told Andy had indeed been passed on.

"Millers told me he's a fine gentleman indeed, with lovely blond hair, and that I don't have a chance with you."

"Oh?"

"You know, *he* was the one who wanted to bring that tree to your house."

Lydia blinked at Guy in confusion.

"Apparently, he cuts down one extra Christmas tree every year. Reverend Millers asked him why there's always one spare, and he said it was because he knows that your family isn't able to set one up yourselves. It seems he's never been able to deliver that spare tree to you, even after all these years."

"But Master Millers wants nothing to do with me. He has gone

to great lengths to paint me as an eccentric."

"That's where Millers is unfortunately a little eccentric himself. He missed his chance to be your friend when you were children, so I reckon he didn't like the idea of anyone else getting close to you either. I think he was secretly offended by the way I was treating you too. Last night, though, he said he was going for a walk and wouldn't let anyone come with him. I thought he was going to apologize to you, but then he came back a little too quickly for that. That was when he told me that you were unavailable."

"I see..." Lydia said dubiously. The image she had of Andy was a young man who seemed suspicious of her and bored by everything else. With that in mind, it was difficult to accept Guy's words at face value.

"He's a strange one, and I think it will be difficult for him to change. But the way I see it, he's now on the lookout for anyone who might come between you and your suitor, including me. So I hope you won't hold anything against him." Guy seemed satisfied as he went on his way.

"Did I mention the color of Edgar's hair to Master Millers?" Lydia frowned, pulling her shawl closer around her shoulders against the cold wind. She then turned to go back inside.

A line of small fairies was walking out from the roots of an evergreen tree that grew among the shrubbery. In their hands they carried the coins and walnuts that Lydia had buried yesterday, laughing merrily as they headed for the fields. Their voices resembled the rustling of leaves and became lost among the wind. By the time the sound reached Lydia's ears, it had faded to nothing more than the stirring of the mistletoe wreath.

Afterword

This volume is a collection of short stories. There is a whole range of them, including one that comes from before the series even had its title of *Earl and Fairy*. I tried to order them in the vein of a full-course meal, so I hope you'll relish them in the same way!

The first story is the appetizer: "On the Night of the Silver Moon." This was a thirty-page story I wrote as an introduction of sorts to the series. I wrote it when I was on a bit of a roll and before I even had a clear idea of what I wanted *Earl and Fairy* to be. At that point, I was only vaguely thinking about including an earl at all. But when I tried to put him in the story, I could suddenly see the very conclusion of the first volume! So this story just features Lydia and Nico. I decided that it would be a simple fairy tale featuring a fairy doctor and some fae. It's got a slightly different feeling to it compared to the main volumes, but I hope you'll enjoy it all the same. Still, I never even imagined at the time that the earl would end up as the type of character that he did... Speaking of Lydia and Nico, they didn't change much from their first appearance. She was already a softhearted klutz, and he was just as selfish as ever, but they're thick as thieves even now.

Next up is the soup—"The Tale of the Snow Crystal"—the flavorsome Kelpie (it doesn't sound very appetizing...). This is where Kelpie first meets Lydia. It's a must-read for Kelpie fans!

Now, the first main dish is "A Welcome Fortune." I'm sure that the idea of a flower girl in Covent Garden would have quite a few readers immediately thinking of *My Fair Lady*. I love that movie, and Audrey Hepburn is absolutely gorgeous. That's why I decided to set this story at the opera house in Covent Garden. And of course, flowers play no small role either. Once I had those elements pinned down, the real problem when it came to writing concerned petals and their numbers. I've heard that daisies are perfect for petal-picking games because they don't have a fixed number. That's why I decided to include them in this story! But then I started to wonder if what I'd heard was actually true. After all, I've also heard that daisies have an odd number of petals...or is

it an even number?

I couldn't remember what was right anymore, so I decided to see for myself. That's right: I bought several bunches of daisies from a florist and counted their petals one by one. I bought around a hundred flowers in total. The results are included in the story. I guess I ended up going through the same struggles as Edgar's servants lol.

The second main dish is "Awaiting a Moonlit Elopement," which became the subtitle for this volume. British elopements (at that time) were a little different from what we imagine when we think of elopements in Japan, aren't they? Those fascinating differences helped to shape the story. Speaking of which, Lydia's parents eloped too, but since they are both Scottish, they could have a "normal" elopement—by which I mean that I doubt they faced the same hurdles as eloping couples from England.

The last dish is the dessert, so of course I made it sweet: "The Magic That Connects Us." This story was written specially for this collection. I know it's out of season, but I think that's okay. The collection contains stories from several times of year, after all. I wanted to write a story that spanned Christmas Day from morning till night. I wanted it to be like a British Christmas pudding, which I've heard is bursting with sweetness. Please enjoy!

And that's the menu in its entirety. Did I manage to satisfy you all? As a collection of short stories, I hope it might serve as a nice starting point for people interested in the series. If you liked it, please do check out the other volumes. As always, I am hugely grateful to Asako Takaboshi-sama for taking on the illustrations for these stories even when she is so busy. It's really worth seeing her pictures in the magazine versions at their bigger size, but then the volume covers are in full color. Isn't it such a joy to be able to enjoy her illustrations twice?

It seems that I've run out of pages. I pray that we'll have the chance to meet in the next volume.

Mizue Tani, May 2006

Bonus Translation Notes

Hello, and welcome to another round of bonus content for *Earl and Fairy*! This volume is an interesting one: it is made up of short stories that were originally published in *Cobalt* magazine, where *Earl and Fairy* was first serialized. The final story, *The Magic That Connects Us*, was written specially for this collection. There are a few more volumes like this one down the line, and they act as nice little breathers from the drama of the main plotline.

This time around, we'll be looking in depth at some of the British cultural aspects that come up in the stories. There are quite a few of them, so hopefully if there was anything you were unfamiliar with, it'll be explained here. A quick reminder that these notes will contain spoilers for the volume, so proceed with caution!

Christmas

The last story covers a lot of British Christmas traditions that aren't necessarily shared by the rest of the world. Let's take a look at some of them!

First up, we have Christmas crackers. The team was surprised to learn that they date back to Victorian times, because they're a solid holiday tradition in the UK and Commonwealth countries today. A cracker is made from a cardboard tube with two twisted ends that are pulled by one person on each side. There's a small piece of paper inside that snaps when it's pulled apart. During the Victorian era (as in *Earl and Fairy*), they also used to contain sweets. These days, they usually contain a small toy (some examples being a plastic whistle, a notepad, a keyring puzzle, etc.), a paper crown, and a piece of paper with a joke written on it. The cracker is usually pulled at the Christmas dinner table, after which everyone (who is willing) will put on their paper crown and read the jokes out loud. The jokes are known for being famously awful, by the way!

Edgar serves a Christmas pudding at his dinner. This is a type of fruit cake that can be baked with brandy or other alcohol, which

gives it a shelf-life of a year or more! However, the puddings are not as popular as they once were. While you'll still find them in some households, tastes have changed in recent years and a lot of people don't care for it anymore.

As well as setting fire to the pudding (a traditional party trick), it used to be common to put a silver coin inside. It was supposed to be lucky if you found the coin in your piece of pudding. Both of these traditions are less common nowadays, especially the latter. It's probably not considered entirely hygienic to bake currency into a cake anymore…

One last note about Christmas: the last story in this collection ends on Boxing Day, which falls on December 26th in the UK and Commonwealth countries and is observed as a public holiday. These days, it's mostly associated with Boxing Day sales, where stores offer dramatic discounts, sometimes all the way up to New Year's Day. Presumably, this helps to get rid of stock that failed to sell in the run-up to Christmas!

The High Street

There are a few terms that appeared this volume that we'd like to give some background on. The first is the use of the term "high street," which came up a couple of times. Loosely speaking, a high street is the British equivalent of the American "main street," i.e., the street with most of the major stores and establishments in a town or city. In times gone by, this would include the post office, greengrocer's, bank, butchers, and so on. Many high streets have been pedestrianized and closed to traffic in modern times, and you hear a lot about them being on the decline because of internet shopping and services.

Theatre Royal, Drury Lane

The Theatre Royal, Drury Lane (yes, that is its full title!) features in *A Welcome Fortune*. Like almost all the locations used in *Earl and Fairy*, the theater exists in the real world and is located in Covent Garden. In fact, it is known as London's oldest active theater. Although in the book it is often referred to as an opera house, its shows weren't strictly limited to opera in the real world, even

during Victorian times. It has also hosted performances of *My Fair Lady* in the past!

Incidentally, you may notice that “Theatre Royal” uses a different spelling of “theater” than you might be used to. “Theatre” is the British spelling of the word, and while *Earl and Fairy* is translated into American English for the most part, The Theatre Royal maintains its British spelling because it is part of a name.

Gretna Green

A super quick geography lesson before we begin! As you may already know, the United Kingdom is split into four countries: England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. At present, they are ruled by the same government, although Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland also have a devolved government of their own, meaning some laws differ between the nations. When someone describes something as “English,” it technically only refers to the country of England, whereas “British” refers to the people, culture, and so on of the United Kingdom as a whole. The political situation was slightly different during Victorian times (or *Earl and Fairy* times if you wish to think of it that way). The United Kingdom included the whole of Ireland before it became two distinct countries (Northern Ireland and Ireland; the latter is not a part of the UK today). Perhaps most relevant to *Earl and Fairy* is that before 1707, Scotland and England were two separate kingdoms. Even when they united at that time, they became one kingdom but two countries, and they each had a different legal system in place. Which leads us to elopement…

In *Awaiting a Moonlit Elopement*, Lloyd speaks of his plan to elope to Gretna Green in Scotland. In fact, the connection between the parish and elopement described in the novel is all true, including the reasons Englishman would choose to marry in Scotland. English legislation passed in 1753 (Lord Hardwicke’s Marriage Act) meant the bride and groom required parental consent to marry if they were under twenty-one years old. This law only applied to England and Wales, not Scotland. So if you were a young couple with difficult parents, you could travel up to Scotland to be married without their interference. It might be of interest to know that Gretna Green is (as of this writing) even mentioned on

the Japanese Wikipedia article for elopement (駆け落ち), which is otherwise a relatively short article.

Bits and Bobs

Here are a couple of smaller “Britishisms” that might require a bit of explanation. The first is Rotten Row, where Edgar invited Norma to ride. If you paused and thought, “Why would Edgar take a woman to a place called ‘rotten’?!” you’re not alone!

Rotten Row is a track that runs along the side of Hyde Park in London, and in Victorian times it was popular for horse riding. According to the Royal Parks website, its name is believed to be a corruption of the French: Route du Roi (or the Road of the King), which has almost the opposite meaning. It still exists to this day of course, and though not as busy as it used to be, people still ride their horses down it sometimes.

A quick note about the sovereign! At his Christmas dinner, Edgar places a bet of one pound on Lydia being the girl who stole his heart. But then he places a “sovereign” on the table. While we have “pound coins” in the UK nowadays, in Victorian times the “sovereign” was the name of the coin that was worth a pound. Naturally, a pound was worth a whole lot more than it is today. The value of Edgar’s bet as of July 2024 would have been around £112.76 (or $145.95), if we assume the bet was made in 1850 (we know *Earl and Fairy* is set in the mid-nineteenth century, but we don’t have a specific year). This is according to the Bank of England’s inflation calculator.

Finally, since we’ve got a bit of space left, let’s take a little bonus TL note that you might not have thought about before. In *On the Night of the Silver Moon*, Lydia says that fairies are “as common as rats in London.” Did you know that Japanese doesn’t distinguish between rats and mice? They both come under the word “nezumi.” What this means is that, during translation, you always need to pause and study the context to figure out whether to translate “nezumi” as rat or mouse. For example, if we’re talking about the city of London or a ship, “rat” might be more appropriate. But if the creature in question has a fondness for cheese, we’ll be more likely to swing toward “mouse!”

That’s all the space we have for now! Hopefully you found this look into British culture both interesting and helpful. We hope you’ll keep enjoying *Earl and Fairy*, and we’ll see you again soon!



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