
9
MIZUE TANI
Earl and Fairy
Requiem for a Goddess


9
MIZUE TANI
Earl and Fairy
Requiem for a Goddess


Earl and Fairy
CHARACTERS
KELPIE
An old fairy friend of Lydia's. He is gentle with her alone, even though he is savage by nature.
ERMINE
Edgar's servant and Raven's older sister. After losing her life, she was reborn as a selkie.
EDGAR
Originally born to a noble family, he was kidnapped by a shady organization led by the Prince. After years of suffering, he obtained the title of Blue Knight Earl with Lydia's assistance. While half his time is spent plotting a ruthless revenge against his former captor, he spends the other half whispering sweet nothings into Lydia's ear.
LYDIA
A girl who can see and talk to fairies. She works as Edgar's fairy doctor. After helping Edgar to secure his earldom, she ended up in an engagement of convenience with him. Unsure what he truly wants, her feelings continue to waver. But as his confrontation with the Prince draws ever closer, her desire to help him only grows.
ULYA
A student of Lydia's father, Professor Carlton, who gets too close to Lydia, leading to a quarrel with Edgar.
RAVEN
A mysterious boy employed as Edgar's servant. He is skilled with weapons, and his loyalty to his master is seemingly flawless...
NICO
A fairy that takes on the form of a cat. He has been Lydia's friend and partner since her childhood. In spite of his coarse nature, he is fussy about his food and attire, and very much acts like a gentleman.

Table of Contents

Cover
Characters
That Which Slinks in the City of Darkness
The Object of His Affections
The Nightmare at London Bridge
The Queen and the Spirits
An Unstoppable Heart
The Dwelling Place of the Two Shadows
The Party Commences
Afterword
About J-Novel Club
Copyright

That Which Slinks in the City of Darkness

Lately, London had been host to a spate of horrific murders. The scene of these killings had been London Bridge, one of the city's most famous sights. It stretched over the winding River Thames that snaked through Greater London and had once been a stronghold that protected the city. Not only did it prevent enemy ships from sailing up the river, it acted as a platform that allowed for the loosing of stones and arrows. It was said that the bridge had been spectacularly pulled down by an ancient king seeking to win the city back from the clutches of Danish Vikings, and that the felling of the bridge had cinched his victory. Though almost a thousand years had passed, those events were etched into the citizenry's memories through a well-known nursery rhyme.

That morning marked the sixth victim to be found hanging from London Bridge. Presently, Edgar Ashenbert, the Earl of Ibrazel, was reading about it in *The Times* with a grim expression on his face. These murders were shaking London to its core, and while the victims varied in their ages and backgrounds, there was one commonality between the killings: they had all been found hanging from a rope tied to the bridge's balustrade.

At first, these cases had been reported as suicides. There had been witnesses to the victims tying the ropes around their necks and jumping from the bridge. However, some testimonies said differently, saying they saw a figure beside the victim, with some even going so far as to say it looked more like a terrifying demon than a human being.

"My lord, it would seem that this latest victim was not British, though he took the very British-sounding name of Mr. Michael Caan and was married to the lady mentioned here. It also seemed he came from a tribe of Ceylon," Paul explained under his breath.

Paul Firman was a novice painter and he was currently with Edgar in the earl's gentlemen's room. He was Edgar's friend and a member of Scarlet Moon, a secret society that shared a common enemy with the aristocrat. Paul had come to report on the society's investigation.

“It appears he belonged to the family of the tribe’s chief, and that the tribe in question created a small nation known as Hadiya before Britain colonized Ceylon.”

“Hadiya?”

“That’s right. However, this information comes from what the deceased disclosed to a close friend of his. Such a place doesn’t exist in any British records.”

“Naturally. Colonizers have a tendency to redivide and rename lands, as well as drive out the native people. Having said that, Firman, the name ‘Hadiya’ is not unfamiliar to me.”

Paul’s eyes widened in surprise. Edgar placed the folded newspaper on the desk and gazed at the cup of tea brought to him by his young servant earlier.

“I know of a brother and sister who were taken from their birthplace and sold into slavery when they were very young. They never knew where on this Earth their native land was located, only that they spent a long time crossing oceans, passed from ship to ship. However, they did know the name of their homeland in their native tongue: Hadiya.”

Edgar had tried before to look into Hadiya’s location based on the siblings’ memories. All he had come away with was that it was a British colony, which barely narrowed it down. His investigation had reached a dead end there, and he had never imagined that he would be hearing of the land again in connection with such a grim series of incidents.

“Ceylon… God.” Could this be a fleeting glimpse of his looming enemy’s tail? Even if it was, he didn’t have enough information to reach out and grab it. “I should like to know more about the killings, Firman.”

“My lord, the police are keeping information on this case very close to their chest. Neither the newspaper companies nor the information brokers say they have anything to sell.”

Finding a nearby piece of paper, Edgar ran his pen over it. “Try this gentleman. You may tell him I sent you.”

Paul took it from him, the frown yet to leave his face. “My lord, do you truly believe these incidents might have connections to the Prince?”

“More than ever. The brother and sister I just told you about were slaves of his.”

“Oh… Do you mean—”

“Hadiya is Raven and Ermine’s birthplace.”

Raven was Edgar’s most loyal servant. His sister, Ermine, also served the earl, but there remained the possibility that she was spying for the enemy. Hadiya’s people had been displaced, and yet someone related to their chief had just died in London under mysterious circumstances. Edgar could not believe that it was mere coincidence.

***

The sun was peeking out between the clouds at last, and the fields were enveloped in a pale green, as though the vegetation were hurrying to bring forth new growth. A church sat upon the gentle hill on the outskirts of London, its bells pealing jubilantly. The couple who had just been wed and the guests surrounding them were overflowing with smiles and laughter.

Lydia stood at the edge of the group, unaware of the quiet frown on her own face. Perhaps not long ago, she would have regarded the majestic ceremony and the bride’s snow-white dress with an awe-filled longing. Now, however, she couldn’t discern how she felt about any of it. She was coming up with superfluous questions, such as why the couple had decided to marry in the first place, or whether either of them had harbored any doubts in the lead-up. It didn’t help that the bridegroom was only her father’s pupil, so she didn’t know the couple very well. The long and short of it was that she still wasn’t sure what she wanted to do about her own engagement, so even at the wedding of a relative stranger, she couldn’t help but compare her situation to the bride and groom’s.

Lydia tried to imagine herself in place of the bride, who was standing in front of the church and gazing at the flower petals dancing joyfully around her and her new husband. Would she be just as happy standing beside *him*? The white petals fluttered around the man in her imagination, but he was staring off into the distance. He wasn’t looking at Lydia by his side, nor the attending noblewomen with whom he was well acquainted. Instead, he was looking at his servants, who were quietly watching the proceedings from afar, and searching for one particular face.

While she accepted that she was just imagining things, she had to wonder whether he would truly be happy married to her.

"Say, father, how did you propose to mother?" Lydia asked her father, who was next to her. "Did mother accept immediately?"

Her father scratched crudely at his head, apparently unsure how to respond. His hair had been uncharacteristically neat up until that point, when he pushed it out of shape without even noticing. "Oh, well...it was all so long ago that I'm not sure I recall exactly."

He had never put much effort into his appearance and barely knew how to deal with women, to whom he was inattentive to start with. All he was interested in was his research into natural history. Lydia had always wondered how a man like him had succeeded in winning over her mother, but she had failed to extract the answer from him no matter how many times she asked. Her mother could no longer provide the answer either, as she had passed away when Lydia was very young.

"Look, Lydia!" her father said abruptly, "they are taking a photo."

"I don't want to be in it. I shall go and wait on the bench underneath that tree."

Though her father was never good at the standing still that was required when being photographed, he nodded and set off in a hurry.

"Father, your hair..." Lydia trailed off, deciding it wasn't worth the effort to warn him. He was bound to move by mistake anyway, and his portion of the photograph would end up blurry.

Turning away from the cobblestone path in front of the church, Lydia made for the bench beneath the tree and sat down. She could see sheep in a far-off field, little more than white specks from this distance. Now that she was somewhere quieter, she could hear the chattering of the fairies that were observing her from the stems and roots of the grass and trees. The view before her was endlessly tranquil, and she gave a sigh of relief.

In her lap, Lydia held on to some sweets wrapped in a lace paper doily. They had been handed out to the guests a short while ago. Taking one of the sweets, she placed it gently by her feet. Though she watched it for a moment, none of the fairies came for it, so she closed her eyes. When she opened them a short time later, the sweet seemed to have vanished into thin air. She couldn't

help but break into a smile when she heard the fairies' chatter transform into joyous cheers. Connecting with fairies never failed to offer her a small slice of happiness.

"Enjoying ourselves, are we?"

Lydia's head shot up, though she recognized the newcomer from his voice alone. It was a young, blond man she knew very well. His slender frame was wrapped in the finest clothing, and his cane was hooked casually on his arm. He smiled at Lydia as he approached.

"I have come to fetch you, my fairy." He stopped in front of her and took his top hat off in one smooth motion. His hair, the same color as the springtime sunlight, fluttered softly. He knew very well that his looks had the power to charm anyone in an instant. Along with his exceptional smile, the burning passion in his eyes seemed to signal to Lydia that said smile belonged to her alone. He was Edgar Ashenbert: her employer and the man who—for reasons best known to himself—was constantly hounding her to marry him.

"Edgar? What are you doing here?"

"I came thinking the ceremony would be close to finishing by now."

"I mean, how did you *know* to come here?"

"I know everything when it comes to you." If only Edgar's behavior were as impeccable as his wit. "I came to fetch you because I heard you would otherwise be leaving alone."

Lydia sighed. Nico must have told him everything again. The fairy cat was a selfish sort who was more than happy to trade information for food, something that Edgar had been taking advantage of more and more recently.

"Are there fairies about?" Ignoring her sigh, Edgar dropped his gaze to the patch of grass that she had just been gazing at.

"Mm? Oh. Yes, there are."

"May I have a sweet?" Edgar sat down next to her and picked up one of the rose-shaped sweets. He then placed it on top of a small stone. "Will they come and take it?"

"They are staring at us. But these fairies are incredibly shy, so we will need to close our eyes. Are you ready? You can open them again after counting to three." Lydia closed her eyes with him. Just as she had finished silently counting to three, she felt the press of

lips against her forehead, and her eyes flew open. “What was that for?!”

“I didn’t want to waste the opportunity when you closed your eyes so willingly.”

“Why… Why you!”

“Look, the sweet has gone. I wonder if the fairies liked it.” Edgar’s boyish smile put a damper on her indignation.



“Yes, they seem happy.” Lydia wasn’t sure whether she should overlook the kiss or not, given that they weren’t lovers. She was inclined to do so, but then she wondered what that might mean about her morality.

There was one thing that struck her as odd, however. She had always wanted to meet someone who took the way she connected with the fairies completely in stride. Edgar claimed that he knew everything about her, but did he recognize that earnest wish within her? She had never shared it with anybody, after all. He had a history of bringing to fruition promises he had made on the spur of the moment, so while she didn’t believe his words in the slightest, she often found herself *wanting* to believe them. For example, his claims that she was the only one occupying his heart.

“Say, Lydia, I spotted a gentleman with long black hair. Who is he?” Edgar’s tone had suddenly hardened. The most probable reason a philanderer like him would be asking about a man and not a woman was if he felt animosity toward the subject.

As unnerved as Lydia was, she didn’t want him to read into any attempt to dodge his question, so she answered honestly. “I suppose you mean Mr. Ulya? He is one of father’s students. He entered the University of London around a month ago after coming from abroad.”

Ulya had a slender frame and an androgynous face, as well as dark skin and waist-long black hair that he kept tied. These features naturally drew the eye toward him, and Lydia had heard that he came from India. He had lost his parents and been taken in by an Englishman living in India, which was why he now spoke fluent English. When his adoptive father returned to Britain, Ulya had come with him. That was about everything that Lydia was able to share with Edgar.

“What is his full name?” Edgar asked.

“I was told at one point, but it was a little difficult for me to remember. It seems that everyone just refers to him as Mr. Ulya. Why the interest in him?”

“He hasn’t stopped staring at you.”

Lydia blinked. “When did *you* arrive and how long have you been watching? That’s frightfully uncouth.”

“Come, now. I arrived earlier than intended and had little to do but gaze out of my carriage window while I waited. His eyes have

been fixed on you from the moment everyone came out of the church."

"Perhaps I ought to have done something else with my hair," she stammered, suddenly feeling self-conscious.

"Lydia, you are utterly charming. It is only natural that gentlemen should take an interest in you."

His words were all the more embarrassing when he looked at her with such an earnest expression. Besides, Lydia reminded herself, Edgar was the only man to have told her she was charming.

"I am sure he continues to watch you at this very moment, wherever he might be."

"Fiddlesticks."

"Perhaps we should find out for certain." Without warning, Edgar put his arms around Lydia's shoulders and pulled her into an embrace.

"Stop it!" Though she squirmed, he wouldn't let go. "I said, *stop it*!"

She wasn't just panicked, but frightened. It felt like she couldn't gather any strength in her arms, even as she tried to push him away. She always insisted that she wouldn't marry him, but lately, she had stopped being able to determine whether she disliked his touch. The thought that she might be losing her mind was enough to drive her to the brink of tears.

"Let go of her." It was at that moment that Lydia spotted Ulya over Edgar's shoulder. "Can't you see that she's uncomfortable?"

"And what gives you the right to interfere?" Though Edgar let go of her then, he kept a firm grip on her hand as he shot Ulya a combative glare.

"The right, you say?"

"Lydia is *my* lover."

Ulya looked at her, suspicion lingering in his expression. Not wanting him to see the tears in her eyes, Lydia redirected her gaze to the ground. "Is that so, Miss Carlton?"

"Um, well…"

"It seems you have been keeping a very close eye on her. Indeed, you were watching us just now from the other side of those shrubs. I do believe it is I who ought to be asking you about *your* intentions."

“I wasn’t… I was just having a quick smoke over there.”

Edgar would not have missed the way Ulya’s eyes flicked to the side for a fraction of a second. He was on his feet in a flash, grabbing the other man’s collar and pulling him forward.

“You do not smell of tobacco. You are a poor liar.” When he started to tighten his grip on the man’s collar, Lydia panicked.

“Edgar, stop it!”

The earl shoved Ulya back, making him stumble and fall onto his rear. However, the man still seemed to find the resolve to look up and glare at Edgar.

“I’m so sorry, Mr. Ulya! Are you hurt?” Lydia tried to run up to him, but Edgar pulled her back by the arm.

“Leave him be, Lydia.”

“Don’t you dare boss me around!”

Ulya chuckled as he got to his feet. “You certainly do not *behave* like lovers. In fact, it all seems rather one-sided to me.”

Now he’s done it, thought Lydia. She could *feel* Edgar’s murderous aura washing over her skin.

“Oh, father! Over here!” she cried as she spotted him. The photography must have finished, and with perfect timing.

It seemed that not even Edgar was willing to commit violence in front of her father. Lydia was relieved to see his fists unclench. Ulya also wound down his temper, greeting his professor with a nod and then leaving them to it.

“Why, Lord Ashenbert! I didn’t expect to see you here.”

“Hello, Professor. You are off to Cambridge after this, yes? The Royal Society is hosting a research conference, as I understand it.” Edgar was smiling cordially as though he hadn’t been rife with violent urges not two moments ago.

The professor was suspicious of Edgar, and Lydia knew that the earl grasped every opportunity he could to improve her father’s opinion of him. Her father must have realized by now that Edgar held a particular fondness for his daughter but was instead choosing to trust Lydia when she insisted that they were nothing more than a fairy doctor and her employer. Quite apart from anything else, he must have been dubious that a nobleman would hold a genuine interest in a girl from the upper-middle class.

Lydia could only imagine the state her father would get himself into should he learn that Edgar had proposed to her. Worried that

the earl might start dropping deliberate hints, she focused her attention on their conversation.

Her father frowned. “You seem to be well-informed.”

“I have heard that it is set to be a very high-level conference indeed, a cumulation of years of Britain’s study into natural history. Professor Carlton, one would be hard-pressed to find a scholar as learned in mineralogy as you. I thought it only natural that you would have been chosen to attend.”

“You flatter me, my lord.” Baffled, Lydia’s father scratched his head. Lydia knew, however, that everything Edgar had said was true. Mr. Langley, her father’s assistant, had told her all about it.

“You will be required to sojourn in Cambridge for the next month, won’t you? I daresay you must be anxious about leaving Miss Carlton behind in London by herself.”

“Slightly, although she is used to living apart from me.”

Despite his words, Lydia’s father had suggested she stay with him in Cambridge. He must have been concerned about London’s recent spate of mysterious killings. However, Lydia still had her responsibilities as the earl’s fairy doctor to see to. There was a high chance that Edgar’s long-standing enemy, against whom he had sworn revenge, had recently arrived in Britain, and at the moment, there was no telling what might happen or when. Lydia didn’t think she could leave his side under such circumstances, not least because his adversary was well-versed in fairy magic, and she was the only person on Edgar’s side who had knowledge of fairies herself.

“To be perfectly honest with you, Professor, I came to speak with you on the matter. Would you mind terribly were Miss Carlton to stay at my estate during your absence?”

Lydia’s brow immediately jolted into a frown. Her father’s mouth hung open, and he had to push his spectacles up his nose being they slipped off completely.

“London has been hit by a plague of indiscriminate murders. I am concerned for Miss Carlton’s welfare, and she has already agreed to the suggestion, contingent upon your permission.”

“I said nothing of the sort!” Staying at Edgar’s estate was the last thing she wanted to do.

“Yes, you did. You said you didn’t want to leave me, but that you would also be frightened to stay at your house without your

father, given recent events."

"I said I didn't want to leave *London*, despite the danger, because I feel a responsibility toward my *work*."

Now that she recalled the conversation in question, she did remember Edgar making a whimsical remark about her staying at the estate. She had outright spurned the idea, saying that she would never dream of bringing such a suggestion to her father.

"You are unmarried and, as such, you were right to be hesitant in asking your father for permission to spend a month away from home. That is why I have made the decision to ask Professor Carlton formally, and to make it known that my request is borne from my station as your concerned employer." He had deliberately misconstrued her words to make it sound like this was what she wanted. "I am grateful that you declined your father's invitation to go to Cambridge for my sake, but that also means that it becomes my responsibility to keep you safe in his absence."

Somehow, he even knew that her father had asked her to go with him. And now it would sound as though she had told him *everything* and requested his counsel, even though the true culprit had to be Nico. Lydia was feeling incredibly resentful toward her fairy cat companion right now.

Edgar continued before she could object. "Unless I am mistaken, Professor, one of the victims didn't live that far away from your home. A young, upper-middle class woman of Miss Carlton's age. She had no business being out late at night, and yet she was found hanging from London Bridge in the early hours of the morning in a most frightful state. I would be tremendously worried about leaving Miss Carlton at home alone."

His description of the gory details reported in the papers seemed to succeed in making her father second-guess himself anxiously.

"My lord, just so that we are clear: you are making this proposal as Lydia's employer, aren't you?"

"Of course. Miss Carlton wishes to remain in London because of the responsibility she feels toward her job. Therefore, as her employer, it is *my* responsibility to ensure that she can carry out that work without fear."

"She is unmarried. If anything were to…happen…"

"There is nothing to worry about. I shall be with her."

That is precisely why we should all be worried!

Edgar had tried to lay his hands on her once before. Just because he had been intoxicated at the time didn't mean that Lydia would feel safe living under his roof.

"I shall be perfectly all right by myself!" she insisted.

"I know you like to put on a bold front, Miss Carlton, but that will no longer be necessary. You are not alone anymore," Edgar pressed, his gaze tender. "Didn't I say that I wished for you to rely on me, even for the smallest of matters? Perhaps the time has come to tell your father the truth."

"The truth?" her father queried.

"Pay his words no mind, father! Lord Ashenbert simply means that…that I really *would* be anxious by myself."

If Edgar said anything about their engagement to her father *now*, it was liable to have a negative effect on his performance at the conference. Though she was inwardly cursing him for his deviousness, she couldn't think of any other way to redirect the conversation.

"You'd like to stay at his lordship's estate?" her father asked.

"Um," she began, "yes."

"If you would feel safer there, I do not think I ought to stop you." Her father put a hand on her shoulder before turning to Edgar. "Do take care of her, my lord."

"I certainly shall." The earl smiled, unabashedly pleased that things had gone his way.

Lydia's father had been invited to the wedding reception and would be leaving for Cambridge immediately afterward. She therefore had no choice but to return to London with Edgar. After telling her father to fix his hair and exchanging a hug with him, she followed the earl to the carriage as something akin to resignation weighed on her chest.

"What in heaven's name were you thinking?" Lydia snapped. She had stopped trying to conceal her foul mood the moment they were alone in the carriage together.

"I would have discussed it with you beforehand if I'd had the time."

"I should like to make it clear that I shall *not* be going to your estate."

“I’m afraid I must insist. Your father has given his permission, and I shall take you there by force if I have to.”

Though Lydia glared at him, there wasn’t a hint of amusement in his countenance. He was being entirely serious.

“There is a real possibility that the Prince had a hand in these murders.”

Edgar had been born to a prestigious duke and duchess, and the Prince was the man who had taken his family, his home, and everything else away from him. Apparently, he carried the blood of the British monarchy and had links to occult fairy magic, with designs to use that power to spark rebellion in Britain. It was to that end that he wished for Edgar, who also had royal lineage, to join his cause.

However, Edgar had escaped his clutches and gained the title of the Earl of Ibrazel. As a result, the Prince’s side now wanted him dead. For his part, Edgar was aware that taking on his mysterious title—through which he had inherited another name: the Blue Knight Earl—came with the responsibility of burying the Prince once and for all.

“The Prince is murdering people at random?” Lydia asked.

“The victims may seem unconnected, but it is too early to say for certain. The killings might be linked to some variety of occult ritual, for example. Furthermore, one of the victims came from the same country as Raven.”

Raven was Edgar’s servant, a foreign boy with dark skin. He was somewhat abnormal, in the sense that his human emotions were underdeveloped due to the murderous spirits that had been dwelling within him since birth. Although Lydia could see fairies, she had never seen Raven’s spirits. That said, now and then she sensed something supernatural from his peculiar aura. To hear that someone else from that mysterious, far-off land, where people lived alongside spirits, had been killed here in London was unsettling to say the least.

“Not only that, but he was related to his tribe’s chief. In essence, he was royalty. The spirits that dwell within Raven are not just tribal gods; they belong to the royal family. The Prince was and still is researching all kinds of sorcery, which led him to become interested in Raven’s spirits. Who is to say that he wouldn’t hunt down this survivor of the royal family and kill him to obtain the

secrets of the tribe's spirits and magic?"

"It may be pure coincidence."

"Perhaps, but I cannot help but wonder. The Prince is working to torment me to my very last breath. I can see that he might try to target Raven, one of the only companions who escaped from his clutches with me and lived to tell the tale."

Edgar knew the Prince very well and might have been more assured in his conjecture than he was able to express. As he turned to look out of the window, Lydia could almost swear he was wearing a small smile. It was the face of a leader who had decided to fight and would keep his weaknesses to himself from now on. Gazing at that expression, Lydia felt a slight sense of rejection. It must have been difficult to maintain a brave face at all times, and she wished he would at least be more open when no one else was around. Like now, for instance—the two were alone together. There was no need for him to act tough right this minute.

"You mentioned to my father that one of the victims was a young woman. I don't suppose she had any connection to the Prince, did she?" Lydia broached the topic hoping it would afford Edgar some relief.

"Oh, I made that one up."

What?!

"It was rather effective on the professor, no?"

"You *scoundrel*!"

Edgar turned suddenly and firmly took her hand in his. "I know that you feel you cannot trust me because I am a liar. I am trying to earn your trust, but I shan't pretend that I am an honest man." He brought her hand to his lips as he usually did when greeting a woman. However, the kiss he placed upon it was far too passionate for a mere greeting.

Unable to shake him off, Lydia froze, her face reddening. And then came the familiar self-loathing. Why did she allow this man, whom she had no intention of marrying, to touch her like this? *He* probably found it amusing, and she really ought to have struck him. It was what she would have done before, but it seemed she was no longer able to. There must have been something wrong with her. Meanwhile, Edgar was perfectly capable of kissing the hand of any woman he felt like. The thought made Lydia's chest crumble in on itself, and all she wanted was to disappear.

“You only ever think of yourself. Remember the mischief you made just to show off to Mr. Ulya?”

“I maintain a constant desire to hold you and do not act for the purposes of mischief or ‘showing off.’”

Edgar had finally let go of her hand, and she withdrew it as if to hide it from him. It took everything she had to spurn him at last. “I do not want you to hold me or touch me in any way. Stop this carriage at once.”

“I cannot do that.”

“Then I shall jump from it.”

Edgar smiled, his tone laced with amusement as though he were placating a child throwing a tantrum. “I am no kidnapper. There is no need to be so afraid of me.” Even if he wasn’t, he was certainly toeing the line. “How about this? I shan’t touch you if you promise to stay at my estate.”

“Do I have your word?”

“Yes. Temporarily, at least.”

“You will not touch me *at all* while I am at your estate!”

Edgar looked fretful for a while until he eventually murmured, “All right.” Speaking more clearly, he said, “Lydia, I have steeled my resolve. While I do not know whether you will fall in love with me or not, there is one thing of which I am certain: there will be no opportunity for you to run from me.” His words were selfish, even threatening. Yet the touch of pain in his eyes as he looked at her made Lydia feel like she was making him suffer. “I shall do whatever it takes to protect you and keep you by my side until the end of time itself,” he whispered.

It was a presumptuous remark, uttered at a proximity so close that the pair were almost touching.

***

It had become commonplace to see guards sent from Scarlet Moon at the Ashenbert estate. Apparently, it had been Slade, one of the organization’s senior members, who had determined that the mansion needed to be under heightened security. His theory was that it would set a bad example if their leader’s estate appeared to be understaffed, and Edgar was already forced to deal with the stubborn man on a near-daily basis, so it seemed he

had acquiesced on this occasion. As for the members of Scarlet Moon, they had been gathering in the society's multiple hideaways, wary of an enemy who could appear at any moment.

Lydia had been told that she would be provided with an escort whenever she left the premises. It was only when she had absentmindedly looked out of a window and spotted a pair of heavyset twins patrolling the building's surroundings that it truly struck her how much extra effort was going into defending the estate. She had been introduced to them yesterday. A pair of sculptors, they had been put in charge of the mansion's security. One was Jack and the other Lewis, though she was unable to identify which was which. She was certain that Edgar hadn't been sure either.

The earl had been pleased to receive the twin sculptors, because he had been able to task them with repairing the ornaments on his roof. So perhaps they weren't patrolling, but instead scoping out the problem. Lydia could never tell whether Edgar was feeling desperate or completely at ease. He liked to befuddle his allies as much as he did his enemies. It followed that she never knew how he felt in any situation.

These were the thoughts that occupied her mind after her first reluctant night in the estate's guest room.

"You decided to stay here after all, did you?" Nico asked with an interested hum. The gray fairy cat slipped in through the window. He must have been out amusing himself.

Lydia had a long list of things she wanted to say to him, and though she had waited, he hadn't shown himself last night. It seemed he had chosen this morning to finally make an appearance. He didn't even spare her a glance, instead taking an evaluative turn of the room on his hind legs before spotting a leather chair that he promptly sprang onto and tested with his paws.

"Yes, this is a fine room indeed. I shall be sleeping here starting tonight, so do make sure you leave the window open for me," he purred.

Lydia went to stand in front of him to ensure he would receive the full force of her frown and placed her hands on her hips. "Nico, you spoke too freely to Edgar again, didn't you?"

"Perhaps, but what is wrong with that? It is far safer for you to

be here than in your home by yourself. Besides, the food is excellent and the bedroom far more comfortable."

"*You* might find it comfortable, but *I* do not! I have to keep my wits about me at all hours."

"Is that right, my lady? I thought you slept perfectly peacefully last night." The interjection came from the coblynau in the pointed hat that was sitting atop a chest.

Perhaps she had, but that was only because of her exhaustion from attending a busy wedding.

"Anyway, my lady, I am so pleased to see you have been given this opportunity to live under the earl's roof at last!" With a heartfelt nod to itself, the coblynau stroked its long, tangled beard. "You have become the Blue Knight Earl's bride utterly and completely!"

"I am *not* his bride, neither utterly nor completely! I am here as his guest," Lydia protested.

The coblynau was always quick to jump to conclusions, and it wasn't clear whether it had taken her words in as it took a leisurely puff from its pipe. The fairy wanted nothing more than to see Lydia and Edgar brought together. An expert on gems, it had been steward to the moonstone for generations. The stone, imbued with fairy magic, had originally been worn by the first Blue Knight Earl's bride. Thanks to the coblynau, it was presently stuck on Lydia's finger to represent her apparent engagement to Edgar.

Ignoring the grimace on her face, the fairy began to speak to the stone as though it were its own child. "Have no fear, Bow. Your wearer will soon become the bride proper. The earl being who he is, I am sure he will make it so now that they are living in the same abode."

"He can *try*!" However high Lydia's temper flared, fairies invariably marched to the beat of their own drum. The coblynau took another slow puff of its pipe as Nico gave an impressive yawn from his chair.

"Hmm, now that I think of it, I haven't seen Kelpie in a while."

Only when Nico pointed it out did Lydia realize he was right. That said, the water horse was as fickle as any other fae, and given that he was a member of the Unseelie Court who ate people and possessed powerful magic, it was difficult to imagine him being in any sort of danger. As savage a beast as he was, he was an

abnormal fairy in the sense that he had developed a fondness for Lydia. However, it was something far more superficial than human love, so she hadn't been too concerned by his absence.

"Personally, I do believe it is better that he stay away. Hopefully he doesn't see fit to interfere with your ladyship's marriage…" The coblynau glanced anxiously at the window as it spoke. The black horse had a tendency to appear out of nowhere and in a temper whenever anyone spoke poorly of him, but there was still no sign of him now.

"I wasn't speaking out of concern for him. I just hope that he isn't *scheming* anything," said Nico.

"What would Kelpie be 'scheming'?" Lydia asked.

"You think I understand the inner workings of a water horse's mind? Anyway, I shall go and have a walk to digest."

"You've had breakfast, Nico?"

"I was hungry, so I had it prepared early." It wasn't even his house. The cat's cheek knew no bounds. "I'll be off now, Lydia. Make sure you call for me if the earl looks like he's about to try anything funny."

"I would if I thought you'd come." For as long as she had known Nico, she couldn't recall him coming to her rescue even once.

"I will if I'm within earshot."

The fairy cat vanished just as there came a knock at the door. It was Ermine announcing that breakfast was ready.

"Please make your way to the morning room."

Her short hair only just reached her shoulders and she wore simple men's attire in the form of a black tie and jacket. Lydia believed that Ermine was the woman whom Edgar cherished above all others. He cherished her so much that, even as fond of women as he was, and even as much as he understood her feelings for him, he wouldn't lay a finger on her. They had fought together and supported each other during the most trying period of their lives. There existed a powerful bond between them, one that Lydia would never be able to fully understand or replicate.

It was with a heavy heart that she contemplated the possibility that Ermine was betraying Edgar's trust again despite all of that. Lydia believed that it might even be her own fault for helping him to gain his title and becoming his personal fairy doctor. While on the run, Ermine had fostered the desire to occupy Edgar's heart.

Lydia, though not deliberately, had put a stop to that with her arrival.

"Will Edgar be in the morning room too?" she asked hesitantly. Every time she looked at Ermine, she could not help but note how apparent the servant's gorgeous face and figure were despite her modest masculine attire.

"Yes."

She and Edgar would make a flawlessly gorgeous couple. The thought made Lydia's spirits fall even further. While Edgar had been more coercive than ever lately, she had been unable to stand up to him like she used to. That was why she wanted to avoid him as much as she could.

"I wonder whether I might be permitted to take my breakfast here."

"Of course," Ermine said, although she looked slightly conflicted. With that, she left the room.

Lydia barely had time to feel relieved before Raven appeared. "Miss Carlton, it would be very much appreciated if you were to take your breakfast in the morning room." His tone was firm, and it made her wonder whether he was angry. That said, he was wearing the same impassive expression as always, so maybe his request was something a bit more heartfelt.

She hesitated before answering. "I understand that, Raven, but…"

"I can assure you that Lord Ashenbert has not taken any drink or substances this morning and that it will therefore be safe for you to be in his presence."

That wasn't the cause of Lydia's concern. Quite apart from anything else, she didn't consider Edgar safe even when sober. However, Raven showed no sign of leaving. Perhaps he felt somewhat responsible for her growing stubbornness toward Edgar. After all, he had been the one to take her to Edgar's chamber when his master was intoxicated.

"You truly think the world of your lord, don't you? Did Edgar tell you to make me go with you come hell or high water?"

"No, Miss Carlton, but I fear that if I tell his lordship that you insist on taking breakfast in your chamber, he will come here instead. I believe it would be safer were you to come to the morning room."

Lydia swept her gaze over the guest room. It had been perfected as a relaxing environment and was without a hint of pretension. In essence, it had been given to her as a private space where she could spend time with those in whose presence she felt most comfortable. Conversely, the morning room was a place for socialization that required all who sat there to be away from the havens of their chambers. Aristocrats tended to separate private and personal matters even within their own homes. It was just another reason Edgar forcing himself into this room would pose such a problem.

Legs heavy as lead, Lydia reluctantly got to her feet.

Lydia arrived at the morning room to find Edgar already seated at the table. He stood up and approached her in greeting, a pleased smile on his face. “Good morning, Lydia. Did you sleep well?”

“I suppose…”

“I do hope you have already made yourself at home.”

She would despair to consider this place “home.” Despite how guarded she was already, Edgar showed no hesitation in scooping up a lock of her hair and pressing his lips to it.

“Are you satisfied with the maid I assigned to your room? I told her that everything about you is precious to me, from your caramel hair to your mystical golden-green gaze, and that she should therefore treat you with due courtesy.”

“You told her something so mortifying?!”

“There is nothing mortifying about the truth.”

Perhaps not to you*!*

“In any case, as long as you are staying here, you need not put yourself out for politeness’s sake. If anything is lacking, you have only to ask for it.”

She wondered if Edgar would hold his tongue if she requested it. As she pouted at him, she suddenly noticed that they had company in the form of a middle-aged man. Hurriedly forcing a smile, she backed away from the earl.

“You didn’t tell me you had a guest, Edgar.”

“Ah, yes, I was just about to introduce you.”

Realizing that his antics had been witnessed by a third party, Lydia only felt all the more embarrassed. He, on the other hand, seemed completely unaffected.

“This is Inspector Gordon from the City of London Police.”

With his neat mustache and hair smoothed down to perfection, the inspector gave off an impression of one who was highly strung. It looked like he had been standing stock-still beside the table for some time, but when his eyes met Lydia’s, he gave a stiff nod.

“I beg you pardon the intrusion so early in the morning.”

“Inspector Gordon is here regarding the London Bridge murders.”

Edgar took Lydia by the hand and guided her to the table. The inspector waited for her to take the seat Raven pulled out for her before sitting down himself. He must have thought she was nobility too, given where he was, and he hadn’t so much as raised an eyebrow at Edgar’s sickening behavior toward her. The earl might well have told him in advance that she was his fiancée, a claim he liked to make whenever opportunity struck.

It didn’t seem like Lydia would be afforded the chance to correct the inspector’s misapprehensions. He was no longer paying attention to her, probably due to a lack of interest in Edgar’s guests. The thought relieved her of her embarrassment somewhat, which allowed her to wonder what about the murders had brought him here. She found herself studying him. Perhaps it was to do with the victim from Raven’s homeland.

“Since you are here, Inspector, would you care for some breakfast?” Edgar really must have been in high spirits. He didn’t seem at all concerned about a visit from the police.

“No, thank you, but please do continue. I shan’t dawdle.”

“Very well. In that case, please tell us what brings you here.” Edgar spread his napkin over his lap, which Raven seemed to take as his cue to serve breakfast.

Thanks to the unexpected guest, Lydia wouldn’t have to talk to the earl one-on-one. Relieved, she began to add plenty of sugar to her freshly brewed milky tea.

“To be perfectly honest, we have very few leads in relation to the case. Ignoring for now all this talk of demonic activity, our most promising clues only number two,” Inspector Gordon began matter-of-factly. “The first is the testimony we have received regarding a suspicious person staring at one of the hanging victims. The person tried to flee as soon as they were confronted.

Having heard about the murders already, the witness gave chase, partly because they suspected they had stumbled upon the culprit and partly out of curiosity. There was a struggle, but ultimately, the suspect got away."

"Was your witness able to give you any information on the person's appearance or build?"

"Not in much detail, as it was too dark. However, they did say that it was a woman in man's clothing."

Lydia nearly spilled her tea. Edgar, however, sounded perfectly calm as he asked, "I suppose your witness gleaned that information from their struggle?"

"Yes, my lord. Perhaps she had disguised herself as a man to protect herself against the risk of being seen. If so, the likelihood of her involvement is high, whether she is the murderer herself or an accomplice."

If this woman was disguised, it would preclude someone who wore masculine clothing on a day-to-day basis. Now feeling sorry that Ermine had sprung to mind, Lydia let out a quiet sigh of relief and glanced at Raven. He was placing a casserole in front of her and didn't seem to be paying attention to the particulars of the conversation.

"And what is your second lead?" Edgar seemed to have become the one asking the questions. Still, it didn't look like Lydia was going to be able to contribute to the conversation, so she decided not to wait and inserted her knife into the buttery omelet in front of her.

"Something akin to a green shard of glass was found in the mouth of the latest victim, the one killed just a few days ago."

"Mr. Michael Caan from Ceylon, yes?"

"According to his wife, it was part of a stone about the size of an almond that had some sort of symbol inscribed on its surface. She told us that it was a highly prized possession of Mr. Caan's that never left his side. We studied the fragment and found that it was made of diopside."

"Now there is a mineral that one doesn't hear much about."

"One certainly doesn't see it very often on the gemstone market, or so I am told. They are apparently very fragile and difficult to cut."

"What was the fragment doing in the victim's mouth?"

“Our theory is that he was attempting to swallow it to prevent it from being stolen.”

“While his attacker took it by force, causing it to break inside his mouth?”

“Indeed, my lord.”

“Meaning that the murderer is currently in possession of the stone.”

“We believe so.”

There came a clink. Raven appeared to have knocked the jam jar against the glass next to it as he was setting it down. Edgar shot him a glance, eliciting a quiet apology. Certainly, it was unlike Raven to make a mistake like that, but Lydia couldn’t see why it should be cause to glower at the boy.

“Is that truly the extent of the police’s knowledge?” The earl was quick to return his attention to the inspector.

“As you see, we are in a fix. We have little information that is worth hiding, and yet the press are fanning the flames of public interest with their claims that too many of the details are being kept secret.”

“For the sake of the police’s reputation, I should think it best that the public believes as much rather than discovering you have almost no information to speak of.”

“You’re right, of course.”

After a brief pause, the mustachioed inspector got to his feet. Edgar called for Tompkins, his butler. He appeared immediately, as though he had been waiting by the door.

“Excuse me, Inspector, but do you not have any questions for his lordship?” Lydia asked, finding it strange that he seemed to be leaving so soon.

“Questions? I do not generally like to step outside my remit.”

Lydia watched vacantly as the inspector picked up the envelope that Tompkins had placed on the table and put it into his jacket pocket. She still didn’t quite understand what was going on.

“It has been an honor, my lord.”

“The pleasure is all mine. When I next require your assistance, I shall be in touch.”

Once they had seen the inspector off, Lydia turned her gaze to Edgar. She watched him continue to eat like nothing had happened for a while, until the reality of what had just happened

struck her.

"Edgar! You *bribed* that policeman!" she cried.

He looked at her, put down his knife and fork, and began to explain in an uncharacteristically subdued manner. "Lydia, the things that one *truly* wants in life cannot be bought, even for all the money in the world. For example, the things that I have lost." He paused. "That is why I use my money to its full potential wherever such potential exists. After all, I built up my wealth for the express purpose of besting my adversaries."

She hemmed and hawed for a moment. "But you tempted the inspector into doing something wicked."

"Something wicked? He may have contravened a rule or two, but what harm has that done to his institution? The police won't be able to solve these murders by themselves in any case."

"While I can sympathize with your reasoning, and I understand that you deem the information he gave you indispensable, bribery is wrong regardless of the 'harm' it does or doesn't cause," she said firmly.

To her surprise, Edgar nodded. "Yes, you're right."

"I don't mean to reprimand you, but..." She trailed off, struggling to put her thoughts into words.

"Although my wicked ways may be partly responsible for the distance between us, they are my weapon. I require them to protect what is most dear to me, and I refuse to set them down."

This was Edgar's ruthless side. It had brought him this far, and it was still too soon for him to be able to rein it in. To hesitate could mean putting the lives of Raven and his companions from Scarlet Moon at risk, even if the alternative was skirting the law.

"You and I think about and experience things differently in all that we do. Be that as it may, I fell for you because you possess what I do not. Is that so wrong, I wonder?"

If Lydia were able to bring herself to condemn his wickedness, his lies, his cruelty, she would have left him long ago. The aloof smile he wore to mask his pain as he continued to fight was what stopped her. Was it nothing more than pity that kept her here? But it couldn't be—they had worked together and overcome danger after danger. She had started to think too deeply, and now she wasn't sure what to say.

"I do not expect an immediate answer. I shall simply continue to

trust that you will give me one in time and that it will bring everything together." With that, Edgar suddenly turned his gaze to Raven, who had finished his work and was on the cusp of leaving. "Raven. You heard my discussion with the inspector, yes?"

"Yes, my lord."

"What are your thoughts?" It seemed Edgar had wanted his servant to be privy to the conversation, which was why he had invited the inspector to the breakfast table that Raven would be waiting on.

The boy paused to think for a moment, then said, "I have nothing to say, my lord."

"One of the victims was related to the tribal chief you were meant to serve."

"I have never met him."

"I wondered whether the spirits that dwell in your blood reacted in any way."

"You are my sole master, no matter what may come to pass. I only ask that you believe me." Raven was invariably composed, or at least he didn't allow his emotions to show. Presently, however, he appeared to be just a little irate.

"Of course. I have never doubted your loyalty."

At that, the boy even seemed relieved.

"What do you think, Lydia?" Edgar asked, gazing at the door Raven had left through.

"About what?"

"About what Raven is hiding."

"Hiding? He just reaffirmed that you are his sole master."

"I don't doubt it, but the fact that he went out of his way to say so means that he is hiding something."

"Raven would never keep secrets from you."

Edgar's instruction was equal to the voice of God as far as Raven was concerned. If he knew something, he would have shared it with his master.

"I have no qualms about him keeping secrets. I would rather he be his own master and that I come second." Giving up on his breakfast, Edgar got to his feet. "As things stand, however, I cannot let him be. Whatever is burdening him, he is not yet strong enough to carry it alone."

The Object of His Affections

Lydia went with Edgar up the servants' stairs behind the estate's kitchen. They came out into a dimly lit corridor, which they followed to a small room that stored unneeded furniture. It was something of a maze, and there were doors lined up irregularly on the walls. These led to the servants' private chamber, and as Edgar watched Raven disappear behind one, he let out a resigned sigh.

"That's Ermine's chamber."

The servants were busy at this hour, and there was no one else about. Raven should have been aware that his sister wouldn't be in her room, so what reason could he have for sneaking into it?

"Come." Edgar approached the door, then suddenly pushed it open without even listening for what might be going on inside. Had he done so, it was highly likely that Raven would have noticed him sooner.

Raven was standing by a small desk and immediately turned and put himself on guard. Lydia couldn't tell from his ever-unchanging expression whether he was shocked to see Edgar there or not. Either way, he didn't move a single muscle after laying eyes on his master.

"I believe there is something you neglected to tell me, Raven," Edgar said darkly, approaching him.

The boy still didn't move, as though he was at a loss for words. The earl reached out and swiftly grabbed his wrist. Raven's arm was slender, a feature that gave away his youth. It was an arm capable of snapping a neck in a single second, and yet Edgar lifted it up without exerting much effort at all.

"You must not bear this burden by yourself. I have already gathered a wealth of information."

The tension suddenly drained from Raven's body, and he dipped his head in relief. "Forgive me, my lord." He didn't shake Edgar off, but instead held out the small wooden box gripped in his caught hand.

The earl took it and opened it to reveal a deep-green stone. As rich as the color was, the stone remained translucent. The rough

lines scraped across its surface made it look like a piece of cheap glass.

“You discovered this here, in this room? When?”

“Three days ago.”

“The day of Mr. Caan’s murder.”

“It was midnight, and the window was open. The lamps were off, so I grew curious. I saw my sister in the dark, staring at the contents of this box. She seemed frightfully anxious.”



Raven went on to explain that he had approached her, lamp in hand, and that she had only returned to her senses when he'd reached her side. She had panicked and closed the box, putting it in a drawer as if to conceal it from her brother. He had caught a glimpse of what seemed to be a green bead of glass but had assumed that it was nothing more than an ornament of some description. Apparently, it was not uncommon for Ermine to receive such gifts from men unsolicited. The way Raven spoke, it sounded like she would rather those men did not offer such gifts, so perhaps it was no wonder he hadn't questioned the way she had hidden the box from him. However, upon overhearing Edgar's discussion with the inspector, he had remembered the object and come to check.

Edgar passed the stone to Lydia. It was chipped, which was in line with what the policeman had said, split along a cleavage as if with a blade. The face that was newly exposed to the outside air was a deep green, like there was murky swamp water trapped within it. Holding it up to the light made little difference. Lydia turned the stone over. She noticed something scratched onto its surface, which must have been the symbol that the inspector had mentioned. Drawn with straight lines, it struck her as vaguely familiar.

"My sister is still working for the Prince, isn't she, my lord?"

"I shall make that judgment myself, Raven. You just keep on as normal."

"But my lord, it was I who begged you to forgive her when she returned as a selkie. I promised to keep an eye on her." Raven took a knee. "This is my responsibility. Please, my lord, allow me to put an end to her betrayal."

"It is *not* your responsibility."

"I made a vow to you, my lord. I promised to kill her with my own hands should it transpire that she was betraying you again."

There was nothing Lydia could do but watch their exchange in agitated silence. Suddenly, she felt a presence behind her and tried to turn around. Her arm was seized before she could.

"Ermine…"

The woman's dark brown eyes were studying her evenly. As usual, her expression was free of hostility, but the grip with which she twisted Lydia's arm up was powerful. Though she loosened

that grip once she had retrieved the mineral, she did not let go and looked at Edgar and Raven.

"My lord, Raven is not to blame. *I* am. For all of it."

"You possess no desire to excuse your actions?"

"I thought that now was the opportune time to reveal my deceit."

"It was you who stole the Freya at Wallcave, wasn't it?"

"So you *did* realize it, my lord."

"You did so on the Prince's orders? What does he need it for?" Edgar asked, stepping up to her.

"You will find out soon enough."

Perhaps he hadn't expected her to answer in the first place. "Let Lydia go," he whispered.

"As much as I would like to, I require a means of protecting myself." Ermine's knife was brushing against Lydia's back. Raven was staring daggers at his sister and slowly reaching for his waist, where he presumably had a weapon.

"I have your seal-skin," Edgar said. "You may flee to the Prince, but I still hold your life in my hands."

"I need only the time to take this stone to him and nothing more. You may do with my skin as you please."

"Then you may go, but I shan't permit you to harm Lydia."

Ermine likely wasn't planning to hurt the fairy doctor anyway, but she nevertheless kept her guard up and did not move the knife away. That was when Raven suddenly made his move. He seemed to be charging straight for Lydia, who Edgar then pushed to get her away from Ermine. Lydia stumbled and fell to the floor. Edgar must have pulled Ermine down at the same time, because Raven's knife slashed through empty air. Without hesitation, the boy turned to attempt a second attack on Ermine, but she had taken the minuscule opening to jump from the window.

Raven made to rush after her, but Edgar stood in his way. "She has my permission to go. Do not pursue her."

"Whatever she intends to do, it will only benefit the Prince."

"I have given you an order, Raven."

The servant's shoulders released their tension as his master's words drained him of the will to fight.

Edgar held out his hand to Lydia. "Are you all right, Lydia?"

She almost took his hand until she thought better of it. She had

told him not to touch her, and if she set a contradictory precedent—even by accepting such a minor gesture—he was liable to consider his promise void. She stood up by herself, and Edgar stepped back, dispirited.

"Forgive me. I only wanted to distance you from Ermine's knife, and yet I did so in such a violent manner."

"I'm fine." As Lydia smoothed down her skirt, it struck her that he had been trying to protect Ermine at the same time. He had put himself between her and the murderous Raven to give her the chance to escape. She was betraying him, but he was still defending her.

"My lord, the duty I adhere to above all others is to eliminate anything that could cause you harm. I cannot abide her running free."

Ermine was Raven's sole surviving family, which was why he had chosen to place his trust in her once more. Her betrayal was enough to make him question his master, something he rarely ever did.

However, Edgar was not prepared to acquiesce either. "I am the only one permitted to kill her. It is with that knowledge that Ermine has betrayed me, the one who holds her seal-skin, and fled."

He really did cherish her. More than anybody else.

Lydia slipped quietly from the room and holed herself up in her office, devoting herself to drawing a recreation of the stone's symbol and pushing out all other thoughts.

***

Edgar used to have this dream all the time. Although he had escaped from the Prince in the waking world, he would open his eyes to find himself still confined within those four dismal walls. It was a room of opulence. Edgar had been born to a duke, and the room here was filled with oak furniture just as majestic as that which could be found in the country house he had once lived in. However, beyond the silk curtains, there were iron lattices fitted over every last window. There was nothing to see outside except a high stone wall. Constant screaming and groaning could be heard from the building's other rooms.

The Prince only put in appearances at night. He knew that the

sliver of light that parted the darkness made for a more imposing entrance and inspired awe in those who witnessed it. He was a man who used every means available to him to torment Edgar. The most devastating of his methods was to snuff out every tiny ray of hope that the boy came across. Once, a kitten had found its way in through the gaps in the window lattice. Three days later, it had lost its head. The first servant Edgar had been assigned had had his tongue cut out for making idle conversation with him.

The majority of people in Edgar's vicinity had been loyal to the Prince, and it was quite possible that the villain had purposely allowed a dissenter or two among them. Anyone who found themselves sympathizing with Edgar would be subject to punishment so severe that their only recourse would be to stay away from him completely.

The same had held true for Ermine. The pair of them had essentially lived as slaves, and she had suffered for it the moment they began to find strength in one another. The budding sentiment that Edgar had begun to harbor for her was ruined, but the bond that was borne from their determination to fight for their freedom remained. Though Edgar's presence must have been a constant reminder of her humiliation, it seemed that Ermine had worked to seal those memories away in order to save her brother. Edgar hadn't wanted her to regret a thing, so he had set about crafting the most meticulous escape plan possible. He'd forced himself to gather more information about the Prince's methods, using them to his advantage to covertly gain more allies.

And now, Edgar had made a successful return to the United Kingdom. He had obtained both a peerage and a comfortable lifestyle. However, that dream had returned. He dreamed of the boy who had been shown time and time again that resistance and rebellion resulted in nothing more than fruitless suffering. The only way to avoid further suffering was to possess and wish for nothing. All he needed to do was exist in vacuity. The Prince appeared in the gloom and told him he would one day learn that the world held nothing but despair. So too would he learn how tranquil such a world was. The lesson would come at the moment the Prince stole everything from him and granted him the most delectable taste of despair he had ever experienced.

“Why the long face, Earl?”

Edgar had come out onto the courtyard-facing terrace. A fluffy, gray cat was sprawled out on the rattan chair, enjoying the sun. The earl walked up to the chair and grabbed Nico by the scruff of his neck, lifting him up and putting him to one side.

“Oi! What do you think you’re doing?!”

“You are occupying my seat.” Edgar sat down and opened the letter that had just been delivered.

“I do not yet have any new significant information on our subject.”

The investigators he had hired were proving utterly useless. He had asked for updates every other day, and yet he still had no evidence that the Prince had entered the country, let alone any clues as to where his enemy might be staying. Edgar tossed the letter away with a sigh, only for it to land on a grumbling Nico’s face. The cat tore it off and trampled on it, kicking the earl’s leg in anger. Without warning, Edgar reached out to pick him up again, eliciting a panicked cry.

“I didn’t mean anything by it! I didn’t even kick you! My paw barely touched you! You have no reason to lose your temper!” Nico only panicked all the more when the earl’s face came closer. “Control yourself, Earl! I’m not Lydia! I’m not even female!”

“Are you suggesting that I would struggle to discern between Lydia and a ball of fluff? Nico, you *smell* like her.”

The fairy cat’s chamomile scent must have come from constantly being by her side. Edgar was overcome with a maddening jealousy. With a grin, he pulled the cat, stiff with shock, into his chest and embraced him tightly.

Nico caterwauled. “Let go!”

“Lydia told me not to touch her for as long as she was here.”

“That doesn’t mean you may use me as a replacement!”

“She has locked the door to her office and keeps insisting that she is busy.”

“Can’t you see that she despises you?!”

“I do not believe it. And yet, she still refuses to marry me. How can that be?”

“It’s because you’re nothing more than a philanderer!”

“No longer. Lydia is the only one for me now.”

The nightmares of his past had vanished after he had met her, such was the extent of the hope she instilled within him. It was

that which had prevented him from distancing himself from her and led him to vow to protect her to the very last. He had separated from every last lover and relinquished every last doubt. But now he was growing anxious once more. That was why he was having the dream again. In fact, he suspected that he wasn't just anxious, but scared. If he gained that which was irreplaceable, the Prince was liable to identify it as his weakness.

"You aren't fooling anyone. Not when you called her by the wrong name."

The strength suddenly drained from Edgar's grip, allowing Nico to slip free. The cat stopped where he was out of reach and punched the air in a display of anger before quickly straightening his misshapen necktie.

"That has really been preying on her mind, hasn't it?"

"I should think that much was obvious!"

Edgar sighed. It was impossible for him to defend himself when he had no memory of the event. He did, however, have an idea as to the cause of his mistake. In that moment, he had longed for Lydia to an unbearable degree. He was certain he would have called any other woman by *her* name. He had wanted Lydia in his arms, her warmth against his body. There was just one thing, one outside thought, that might have been in his mind at the time.

"No..."

"No?"

Edgar could not voice his thoughts out loud. He had wanted Lydia, but he had also been grappling with the guilt from the pressures he might have placed on the other woman.

"Do you have a moment, my lord?"

The earl cut off his train of thought and looked up to see his butler quietly studying him. "What is it, Tompkins?"

"Women sometimes have the tendency to act in unfathomable ways."

"I know. What of it?"

"It is at such times that a gentleman must remain calm and collected, else he is no gentleman at all."

"Get to the point."

Taking a moment to prepare himself, Tompkins replied, "Miss Carlton is missing."

Edgar shot to his feet, all but slamming his palms down on the

table in front of him.

Lydia had left Edgar's estate to come home, where she had taken her mother's notebook from her bookshelf and was presently flicking through it.

"Here it is."

Upon remembering the notebook and that it might hold some clue about the writing she was investigating, she had immediately come to fetch it. She hadn't told anyone, because someone would have been assigned to escort her. In the worst-case scenario, Edgar would have come with her himself. She had wanted to come alone, and it wasn't as though she would be gone long in any case. And there was one more thing she wished to do by herself.

With the notebook in hand, she hailed a cab to take her toward the Thames. She alighted near Westminster Bridge and followed the riverside path under the swaying willow trees. As she walked, she pulled out a small pendant from around her neck. It was an heirloom from her mother: an aquamarine that symbolized a friendship with the selkies that would last for generations to come. Said to be a selkie's heart, Lydia had yet to fully grasp the gem's power, but she was confident it would allow her to summon the fairy she sought. Though Ermine had been reborn as a selkie, she didn't yet recognize herself as such. However, she was still a fairy, so she ought to be sensitive to the magic that was imperceptible to the naked eye.

"I must speak with you, Ermine. Please, respond to the friendship that dwells within this selkie's heart."

Selkies called the sea their home, and that was exactly where this river led. Lydia hoped that her voice would be able to ride the ocean wind that blew through the city of London. She stopped where she was and waited. Suddenly, there came the subtle scent of water. It was not the smell of the polluted river water and seemed to come from something purer and colder, like the northerly sea breeze. At the same time, Lydia spotted a figure approaching. It kept slipping out of view behind the tree branches lining the river, and she had to strain her eyes.

"Ermine…"

Lydia made to run up to her, but then the selkie stopped her approach and shook her head, her shoulder-length hair fluttering

in the wind.

“I am a traitor. You mustn’t approach me thoughtlessly.”

“You would do nothing that would cause me harm.”

“It is also dangerous to place excessive trust in others. Now, please tell me why you have summoned me.”

Naturally, it was not for the sake of pleasant conversation. Ermine looked like she was ready to leave at a moment’s notice, so Lydia was quick to respond.

“Why are you betraying Edgar? Do you not care for him?”

Ermine didn’t say anything.

“Or is it something more complicated than that?”

“I have no intention of telling you anything. If that is why you wanted to speak to me, then I shall take my leave now.”

“Wait! Edgar cherishes you more than anybody else. I believe that once his confrontation with the Prince is over, the pair of you will be able to forget about your past and find true happiness. You may be a fairy, but it is not unheard of for selkies to marry humans.”

“Lord Ashenbert has asked for *your* hand in marriage.”

“I struggle to comprehend the intent behind his words. I fear that I might have come between you, and for that, I sincerely apologize…”

“Are you refusing his courtship for my sake? Well, I suppose that is of your concern more than it is mine.”

Lydia was flooded with shame at how easily Ermine had seen through her. When the possibility had struck her that Edgar loved Ermine and Ermine alone, Lydia had grown afraid of the direction of her feelings for him. There would be no outcome more tragic than if her presence prevented Ermine and the earl from finding happiness. Meanwhile, Edgar insisted on trying to court her, and she was finding it difficult to reject him outright.

She didn’t know what to do, so she was trying to verify Ermine’s feelings. She was hoping that if it was made clear to her that Edgar’s love was reciprocated, she would be able to push him away again like she used to.

“Miss Carlton, Lord Ashenbert was born to a duke. He has been thoroughly taught from a young age about the qualities he should seek in a suitable wife. There is no reality in which he would harbor feelings for a woman from the lower classes.” Ermine’s

tone had softened. Perhaps she pitied Lydia.

“But I am not nobility either!” she stammered. “And Edgar has spent his time in the company of all manner of women.”

“A lord is free to spend his time with whomever he likes, but marriage is a separate matter entirely. A well-to-do gentleman would understand that any affection he holds for a socially inferior woman is to be expressed in the protection he grants her as her generous master.”

If that was true, then that ought to have been how Edgar expressed his affection toward Ermine. But was that affection truly confined to his station as her master? Lydia couldn’t believe that social class was enough to limit human emotion. After all, Ermine was well aware of her position and had fallen in love with Edgar regardless.

“You are beautiful, and Edgar does not consider mere friendship with women to be viable. He simply cannot be blind to your charms. Perhaps he has been suppressing his feelings, but I cannot believe that he feels no romantic inclination toward you.”

Ermine’s eyes took on a vacant, distant expression. “Had such inclination ever existed, there would remain no trace of it anymore. I have continued to love him, but I understand now that my feelings were only able to survive because of the distance he has maintained from me. I was incapable of quashing them, despite knowing that their fulfillment would lead only to our destruction. Lord Ashenbert did what I could not and rejected them consistently.”

“Because he feels for you too.”

“No.” Ermine spoke with enough certainty as to perplex Lydia. “Lord Ashenbert maintained the composure that was required of the master whose duty it was to protect me. Had you ever experienced true love, you would understand that there is nothing in this world that can stand in its way.”

In that case, Lydia supposed she didn’t know what true love was. She couldn’t imagine herself harboring such intense emotions, not toward Edgar or anybody else.

“Then why are you distancing yourself from him? You say the fulfillment of your feelings would lead to your mutual destruction, but how? Would you not be able to find healing in one another?” Lydia wondered whether Ermine thought her meddlesome. Or

perhaps the selkie simply thought these questions irksome when they came from the girl who had the upper hand in engaging Edgar's attention. "Forgive me, for I realize I am putting you in a difficult position. However, I believe that Edgar still wants you by his side more than he does anyone else."

Ermine had been staring at Lydia fixedly until her gaze suddenly dropped to her own hands. The wind blowing around her was once again tinged with remnants of the sea. She must have been mindful of her selkie self, allowing the ocean's power that resonated with her soul to be drawn into her with each breath.

"The Prince ordered that I was to be given to Lord Ashenbert as his female companion. Understanding his intentions, his lordship chose not to lay his hands on me, but instead to treat me like any other girl. However, the Prince soon learned of this and so defiled me before his lordship's very eyes."

Ermine spoke as though it were nothing, preventing Lydia from immediately grasping what she was saying. She continued just as impassively while the fairy doctor's mind ticked on vaguely.

"I can barely stand to be in his lordship's presence, but neither can I fully suppress my feelings, and I find myself wanting him to lie with me. However, were he to do so, a part of me feels that I would be so tormented by what the Prince did to me that I would come to resent the man I love. I suspect that his lordship would also feel as though he were emulating the Prince's brutality against me. That is why he will never lay his hands on me, no matter what should come to pass. I have always known it, and yet I never stopped wishing for it to be otherwise, even until the moment I lost my human life."

At last, it was beginning to sink in, and Lydia felt herself trembling. Ermine's expression, however, was strangely tranquil.

"As powerful as my feelings for him were, they are fading away, perhaps because I am no longer human. I did not experience the envy I had expected upon realizing that his lordship was falling for you. I am able to divulge everything to you because the human who experienced it all no longer lives."

"That being the case, is there no way for you to stay with Edgar?" Could she not continue her peaceful life as his servant?

"There are certain feelings that have persisted into this second

life of mine. It is unlikely that we shall be able to meet in this manner again." Ermine slowly turned her back to Lydia. It didn't seem as though she was willing to elaborate on what those feelings were or whether she truly meant to continue as Edgar's enemy.

Lydia was still shaking, and she quickly ran her palms over her cheeks when she realized they were wet. It frightened her to think that such cruelty had been allowed to happen. Her vague knowledge of what Edgar had been through had been horrifying enough, but there was still so much that was beyond even the powers of her imagination. She doubted she would ever fully understand him and Ermine no matter how much time passed. The thought was devastatingly isolating.

A thought seemed to strike Ermine then, and she spoke without turning around. "Miss Carlton, you are empowered by your friendship with the selkies, so I would like to make a request. Please do not let Raven come into contact with the diopside." It must have been critical for Ermine to be asking such a thing of Lydia despite having taken the mineral away herself. "Fortunately, it seems he did not touch the stone that I was so careless with, but it is not the only one of its kind. Touching it will strengthen the power of his spirits, and he may lose his loyalty to Lord Ashenbert. Please remain watchful."

Leaving only those hurried words, she vanished among the riverside trees.

Tompkins appeared the moment Lydia returned to the estate and took her to Edgar's office.

"Hello, Lydia." The earl was sitting in the armchair in front of the desk and smiling at her, but it was incredibly obvious that he was *not* happy.

Lydia stayed frozen in the doorway and glanced at Tompkins, who was trying to encourage her into the room. She recalled the helpful piece of advice he had given her moments ago.

"Listen well, Miss Carlton. If you wish to calm his lordship's temper, there is one very easy way to do so. You must rush up to him and cling to his hand as though you have been longing for his touch, apologizing all the while."

She had told him that it was not, in fact, as easy as he claimed,

upon which he had advised her to at least remember it, just in case. She didn't see why she should, given that she would never make use of it.

Knowing that she couldn't stay in the doorway forever, Lydia stepped forward. While she didn't follow Tompkins's advice, she did keep her head lowered. "I only went home to fetch a notebook. My house is so close that I didn't think anything of it."

"Indeed, it is a relief to see you safe and sound."

"And because I did, I was able to find out about the symbol engraved into the diopside. It's a rune. Take a look: my mother has the same symbol in her notes." Lydia held up the open notebook in her hands to show him. She had other ways of abating Edgar's anger that didn't involve holding his hand. Certain that this would improve his mood, she gave him a cheerful smile.

The earl gave a quiet sigh and got to his feet. He pulled out a chair beside the table and motioned for her to sit before taking his own seat across from her.

"Look," she said. "You remember this one, don't you?" Lydia pointed at a symbol that was made up of two vertical lines with an *x*-like shape between them. "This is equivalent to an *M*. The two runes next to it are *C* and *H*."

"MCH… Is it an abbreviation?"

"I think it is a word spelled out with only its consonants. I believe it refers to the spirit, Macha. She is a goddess of war who appears in ancient Irish legends."

According to one tradition, fairies were ancient gods who had lost their powers, gradually grown smaller in size, and ended up living underground or in the shadows of plants. Even those who had once employed their fearsome strength to combat human heroes were now merely confined to stories. Though it was a fairy doctor's job to connect with the creatures, it was quite probable that poets and literary scholars were better informed on the subject of these gods even though they were ancestors to the modern fae.

"So the stone was engraved with the name of an Irish spirit in Northern European runes. What would a minor Ceylon royal be doing with something like that?"

"I am sure I do not know." Worried that her discovery hadn't been of much use after all, Lydia lowered her face again, trying to

catch a covert glimpse of Edgar's reaction. But his ash-mauve eyes were fixated on her, and their gazes inevitably met.

"This seems highly significant, Lydia, and I am incredibly grateful that you would go out of your way to look into it. However, during the thirty minutes Tompkins suggested that I wait for your return, I could have perished from worry. Do you believe that to be a lie, I wonder?"

Perhaps not a lie, but it certainly sounded like a slight overreaction.

"I'm sorry…"

"Does it displease you that much to announce where you are going or to take an escort with you?"

It didn't sound like his mood had improved at all.

"I am not used to such things, so I did not stop to think…"

"Do you feel as if I am stifling you?"

That was part of it. He *had* convinced her father to have her stay at his estate with no room for objection from her. The more he treated her like a possession, the more she wanted to fight back. She wasn't Ermine, and she resented him seeing her as the other woman's replacement. That said, Edgar *was* keeping his promise not to touch her. Ordinarily, he would have taken advantage of her mistake and been all over her. She had the sense that he was trying to make a show of his sincerity, and it almost made her feel guilty about her sullen attitude.

"You know, there are also the spirits Neamhan and Morrigu, two other goddesses of war," Lydia said, trying to return to the original subject. "Together, the three of them make up the most powerful goddess of war, Badb. That's why I think that diopside wasn't the only one of its kind. There must be one each for Neamhan and Morrigu as well."

"There are other stones with the names of those goddesses carved into them, you mean? I can understand the logic, but have you got any evidence?"

"Ermine told me as much herself. She warned me that Raven mustn't come into contact with the other stones."

"You spoke to Ermine?"

It was too late by the time Lydia realized that she shouldn't have said anything.

"You met her by yourself? Ermine is a traitor. What were you

thinking, speaking with our enemy?"

"But she had no intention of harming me. She was more concerned about Raven than anything else, because if he touches the diopside, his spirits could strengthen, and he might lose his obedience to you. I believe that is why she took the stone and left the estate."

Edgar stood up, folding his arms irritably as he approached the desk. "That is all very well and good, but you have a serious lack of self-preservation."

It suddenly struck Lydia that his entire attitude since she'd come in was an attempt to scold her. While she felt bad for worrying him, there was no reason for her to obey his every whim. She was allowed to go where and do as she pleased.

"Indeed I don't, for I have never met the Prince, and even after hearing about all the atrocities he has committed, I struggle to imagine them played out in practice."

"It is for the best that you don't."

"Just in case I need to make this clear, I do not accept commands from anyone other than my father, and he is a fraction as overbearing as you are. He holds a great respect for my volition. If you are looking for a girl who does exactly as she is told, you would have done better to keep Ermine by your side. By turning a blind eye to her feelings and flirting with anyone *but* her, you have—"

"I have never ignored her feelings."

The assertiveness of his tone cut to her core, leaving her speechless. Did that mean he really did love Ermine more than anybody else? Lydia couldn't tell if he was speaking from his station as an affectionate master, just as Ermine had alluded to by the Thames. Either way, there wasn't a shadow of a doubt that Edgar's servant held a special place in his heart.

With a pained expression on his face, the earl averted his gaze from Lydia and summoned Tompkins. "Lydia's maid *does* know to inform me should she ever leave the estate, yes?"

"Yes, my lord. In this instance, while she noticed that Miss Carlton was not in the office, she simply assumed that she was elsewhere in the building."

It was no wonder, as Lydia had left with the intention of going unnoticed. The maid who had been assigned to her to assist with

everyday matters during her stay was quite young. She was an earnest sort who, believing that Lydia really was engaged to be married to Edgar, seemed to see her as some sort of divine being she dared not speak to.

"Have her dismissed should this ever happen again," Edgar said.

"Wait a moment, Edgar, it isn't *her* fault! Please don't punish her."

"I shan't have to as long as you stop acting so recklessly."

Fists curling at his threat, Lydia got to her feet. "Such dastardliness! You would harm others just to keep me under your thumb? Is that not something the *Prince* would do?"

Thus far, Edgar had fought with the methods he had learned from his captor, casting aside any sense of morality or sentiment. At the same time, Lydia knew he was determined to be different, and had always worked to protect his companions to the last. Nevertheless, the majority of them had been lost, and she was confident that he had no rebuttal against his comparison to the tyrannical despot that was the Prince. The Prince, after all, had harmed Ermine to punish Edgar, and now the earl was doing the same.

With a start, Lydia realized that perhaps *she* was the dastardly one. She shouldn't have said what she had. Fortunately, Edgar seemed unscathed by her words.

"Did I not tell you that I would do everything within my power to protect you?" He even shot her an arrogant smile.

It was enough to set Lydia's temper ablaze once more. "And you think I shall simply accept it if you tell me it is all for *my* sake? Dismiss that maid and you will earn my contempt!"

"Why the obstinance?"

"If it offends you, then you may drive me from the estate instead."

"I shan't! I love you, despite the fact that you do not listen to a word I say. *Despite* the fact that you anger me so." Even though he had lost his temper, he continued to try to flirt with her.

Lydia immediately lost the will to fight back. She sighed, her shoulders drooping. She had told Edgar everything she could about the diopside and there was no need to say anything more, so she turned to leave.

“Lydia.”

“What else could you possibly have to say to me?”

“A letter came for you. Someone from your home was kind enough to pass it on.”

When she reached out for it, he immediately yanked it away. “It isn’t signed. Would you open it here for me?”

Though she understood why he would be wary, his request still made something unpleasant twinge inside her. She could well see him confiscating the letter if she refused to do as asked. She nodded, and he passed it over to her. It was embarrassing to have to read private correspondence in front of someone else and unnerving to know that her reaction was being evaluated.

Having read it through once, she said, “It’s from Miss Lotta.”

One of Lydia’s few human friends and an old acquaintance of Edgar’s, Lotta had gone to the Netherlands with her grandfather. In her letter, she wrote that she would soon be returning to London. It had nothing to do with the Prince after all.

“What does she say?”

“Surely I’m under no obligation to divulge that much.”

“I am sure she has written some ghastly things about me.”

He wasn’t entirely wrong, but his prying was making Lydia irritated all over again. “You would make for the most unpleasant husband imaginable!” With that, she fled from his study.

“Raven. Would I make for an unpleasant husband?”

The boy had come into his master’s office only to be asked the question out of the blue. He blinked in confusion.

“No, I am sure that I would. But she wasn’t supposed to realize it *before* our wedding.”

“Does this regard something Miss Carlton has said to you?”

Looking out over the street from his window, Edgar could see the members of Scarlet Moon tasked with guarding the estate. All of them had had loved ones killed at the hands of the Prince’s organization and were baying for revenge. They were fighting for themselves and their companions.

Lydia was different. She had no reason to fight; she was just a girl Edgar had dragged into his own mess. As a fairy doctor, she might have taken umbrage at people misusing the creatures’ magic, but that still didn’t grant her any greater incentive than her

sense of righteousness. Even then, Edgar wanted her by his side and couldn't bear to let her go. That was why he had made the decision to protect her no matter what. His resolve led to strife because Lydia did not consider him a man worthy of her trust. It was less a problem of her self-preservation and more one of her perceiving the safeguards he was trying to implement as restrictions.

"Perhaps I really have come to the end of the road," Edgar murmured as he continued gazing out of the window. "Perhaps Lydia truly will be the one woman I am never able to seduce."

"My lord, I have never heard you sound so resigned."

"I have been facing a deluge of new experiences recently."

For example, Lydia was the first girl whose presence was the only thing Edgar required to feel at ease and with whom he could truly imagine a future. She was desperately important to him now, and he almost hadn't noticed it happening.

"I have no other choice but to protect her, hopeless though it may be."

He turned around. Raven's large eyes contained not a hint of doubt as he looked back at his master. The loyal boy had done so much to support Edgar over the years. Even in the midst of Ermine's absence and Lydia's rejection, Raven was there to give him the courage to fight.

"I dragged her into this. It is my duty to defend her future, even if she refuses to see me again after all of this is over, whether that comes about as a direct result of my actions or not." Edgar needed to secure her survival, even in the event of the Prince's victory. "Raven, will you continue to follow me, even knowing how wretched I am? Even if everyone else should abandon me?"

"Of course, my lord."

Edgar recalled Lydia's warning not to allow Raven to come into contact with the diopside. Nevertheless, he found encouragement in the boy's response.

"Come."

"Where are we going, my lord?"

"I wish to know more about the Ceylonese diopside. As tempted as I am to depart for Cambridge, the professor is no doubt busy, and I do believe there was that impressive student of his at the University of London."

“Is your lordship referring to Mr. Langley?”
“Ah, yes. That *was* his name.”

The Nightmare at London Bridge

Lydia couldn’t help but be relieved upon hearing that Edgar had left the estate, since he had lost his temper when she had told him about her meeting with Ermine. It made sense, given the implications about the Prince’s machinations, but Lydia worried that the earl was in fact even more agitated than he was letting on. When he had first learned of Ermine’s suspicious behavior, he had been deeply hurt and turned to Lydia for comfort. Although he might have been prepared for Ermine to join the enemy’s side ever since, it didn’t make it any less unbearable now that she was gone.

However, Edgar was currently doing his best to prevent Lydia from perceiving any weaknesses in him, and it bothered her slightly. Even if he only allowed her a fraction, she wanted him to share what he was thinking with her. When he had nearly forced himself on her, she had been hurt and driven to tears, exasperated by her own wretchedness. However, Edgar’s display of agonizing pain and desperation to seek solace in another had been completely genuine. That was why she found herself wanting to help him.

Even if she wasn’t the woman he longed for, it was difficult to think badly of his urgent words and the strength in his arms as he had embraced her after she had seen his pain in its rawest form. Though Lydia tried to ignore the fact that she hadn’t entirely disliked how he had treated her, his present unwillingness to be open with her was getting on her nerves.

“Miss Carlton, you’ve got a visitor.”

Lydia raised her head from her office desk to see her maid standing in the doorway. “A visitor? Who?”

“He said you would know who I meant if I gave you the name ‘Ulya.’ May I let him in?”

“Oh? Yes, please do.” Half of her was relieved that Edgar was out while the other half was curious to know what Ulya could want with her.

He came into the room in a hurry and immediately began at a

rapid pace. “Miss Carlton, there is word that Professor Carlton—that your father has been in an accident in Cambridge.”

She was on her feet at once, beside herself. “An accident?! What sort of… Is father—”

“The telegram we received at the college didn’t contain any further details. You ought to come with me there. I’m certain that more word will be along soon, and if there is a need to go to Cambridge, some of the staff will be able to accompany you.”

Lydia nodded, her fingers curling tightly around the pen in her grip. What did she need to bring with her? She suddenly couldn’t think. The maid next to her was quick to perform her duties correctly this time. She must have called for Tompkins, because he promptly went to fetch Lydia’s shawl and hat. However, he first insisted that she take a seat.

“Please retain your composure, Miss Carlton. May I suggest that you wait for his lordship’s return? It is advisable for one to have company in situations such as these.”

“I shall accompany her,” Ulya said.

“Lord Ashenbert has just set out for University College himself. It is quite possible that the news will soon reach him, in which case I believe he will return to the estate posthaste.”

“In that case, would it not be better to go to the college and meet his lordship there?”

“You might miss each other.”

“Mr. Tompkins,” Lydia said, “I shall go with Mr. Ulya.” She didn’t want to waste another second quarreling about what they should or should not do. She wanted to know what her father’s condition was as soon as possible, and that information might have already reached the college.

“Then I shall find someone from the estate to escort you.”

“The carriage only seats two,” Ulya said.

“I shall prepare another carriage.”

“Do you find me to be suspicious? Do you not trust me to escort Miss Carlton to the college without the presence of a third party?”

“I made no such insinuation.”

“Then let us make haste, Miss Carlton.”

Lydia nodded. This was an emergency concerning her father. Why shouldn’t she be allowed to act without hesitation? With that in mind, it seemed unreasonable to her that Tompkins should

mistrust Ulya. No doubt he was under orders from Edgar not to allow her near other men, but Ulya was her father's student. While this might have been the first time the estate's staff had met him, that didn't make it right for them to treat him with suspicion.

"Please do not worry, Mr. Tompkins. This is a personal matter," Lydia said, getting to her feet.

Though the butler looked anxious, he refrained from raising any further objections.

"Diopside from Ceylon? Why, yes. The island is something of a treasure trove, with a wide variety of precious stones to be found."

Langley had very kindly invited Edgar into Professor Carlton's office. As cluttered a space as ever, it was impossible to tell where or what anything was. However, his prime student was able to navigate the dusty floor without stepping on so much as one of the pebbles that was scattered about. Though Edgar had no idea whether those stones were of any academic interest, there was something mysterious about the way that everything in this room seemed like it could be a new and exciting scientific discovery, regardless of whether it was on the floor or was marked with footprints.

"I am not a romanticist like Professor Carlton, so I am not particularly interested in legends. However, I can tell you that your stone is highly fascinating, my lord."

"In what sense?"

"If one were to split a small piece from it and place it over, say, where the symbols are positioned, those symbols would appear to form a second layer."

"Hence its Greek etymology: diopside, two faces."

"Your lordship is well-informed. Professor Carlton spoke of the breadth of your education. You must have had some distinguished teachers yourself."

Distinguished? Edgar wouldn't know. His "teachers" had been those who had worked to instill the entirety of the Prince's knowledge into him. It was ironic that it was now bolstering his image as a well-educated earl. He recalled how Lydia had compared him to the Prince, and a powerful wave of disgust crashed over him as he wondered just how deep his enemy's influence ran.

“Might I ask you to come over here, my lord?” Langley went into a storage area set far behind a partition. Though he had expressed a disinterest in legends, he showed prowess in navigating Professor Carlton’s vast collection of documents concerning minerals and the folktales surrounding them. “Diopside was only given its name very recently, and although similar stones appear in older records, it is, for the most part, difficult to say whether they are diopside with any level of certainty. If there exist any legends concerning the stones you are searching for, they will be in here.”

Langley pointed out a shelf laden with documents. “Ah, but the diopside you are after is Ceylonese, yes? We have yet to gather much documentation on tales from India, so I’m afraid the information we do hold is rather lacking.”

“I am not sure whether Indian folklore will be relevant.”

“Indeed. I understand that Buddhism and Hinduism are the island’s primary religions, but before Britain colonized it, it was under the rule of Portugal and then the Netherlands. And it had a multiethnic population even before that. If we do hold anything relating to Ceylon, it will be around here.”

Ultimately, Langley pulled out only a single file. It was, however, a rather thick document, and Edgar took it over to the window and flipped through it in search of anything relevant. There were supposedly three diopside stones, each bearing the name of one of the goddess of war’s avatars. However, one had been found on the person of a man descended from a Ceylonese tribal chief. Edgar couldn’t see that there would be a connection with an Irish goddess. If these stones had links to royalty, it was likely that they would feature in legend, or at least an occult folktale or two. That they numbered three also had to be significant in some way. The naturalist, Professor Carlton, collected documentation on such legends and included fascinating additions on each mineral’s classification. If Edgar was to find any pertinent clues, he would find them here.

As he continued to read, he eventually came upon an interesting heading: “The Three-Headed Snake.”

“Eons ago, that blessed isle was ruled by a Rakshasa king with three serpentine heads. Try as they might, the gods could not slay the Rakshasa, who committed every kind of atrocity. The gods had

previously pledged that they would never be able to take the Rakshasa's life, and so it was that their attempts to do so ended in failure. They concluded that only the race that had not made such a pledge, the race that was known for its fragility, would be able to slay the Rakshasa. This race was mankind."

Edgar continued to read. The legend told of the birth and adventures of a superhuman with divine blood. It then followed the standard pattern of various Greek, Roman, and European myths in which a hero overcomes several trials before eventually smiting the manifestation of evil. More pertinent was the question of how the diopside was involved. Determined not to overlook any detail, Edgar focused on the fine handwriting of Carlton's pen. Toward the end came an exceedingly simple note:

"When the Rakshasa's three snake heads were cut off, each became a deep-green stone. It is said that these stones were passed down through the hero's descendants and contain the Rakshasa's power, giving them the ability to subjugate every spirit that exists in this world."

"Ah, now that is a variety of epic poem that India is known for. The professor took a real interest in it, because it's not often that such texts are associated with gemstones."

"I wonder whether the 'blessed isle' it speaks of might refer to Ceylon."

Langley nodded. "There are similar poems that seem to concern Ceylon, but it is impossible to know for certain."

Supposing this legend originated in the tribal nation of Hadiya, it would mean that the late Caan had possessed one of the Rakshasa's heads. Naturally, that didn't mean that the story was to be taken literally, but if there was one thing that Edgar had learned through his association with Lydia and fairykind, it was that there was a strong link between gemstones and the supernatural. The diopside likely held within it some sort of occult energy. But if all of these details about its history were true, it only mystified the connection to the runes and the goddess further.

"Ah, yes. This story comes from the manuscripts of Brown, a sixteenth century author," Langley said, flipping to another page.

"*F.* Brown?"

He was the man who had put together a biography of the Blue Knight, the founder of the Ashenbert earldom. F. Brown was said

to have become friends with Julius Ashenbert of the court, from whom he heard anecdotes of the Blue Knight that he went on to compile. The stories were awash with fairies and magic, and almost absurd in their accounts of fantastical heroism. While they continued to be enjoyed as fairy tales in modern Britain, there really had existed a "Blue Knight" who had served King Edward I, and Edgar considered these stories vital to understanding the truth behind his title. To think that mention of their author should turn up *now*...

"Brown's manuscripts comprise mysterious foreign tales that were relayed to him by other people. Your lordship's ancestor was in the court at that time. I daresay he would be the type to share such stories."

Though Langley seemed to have made the comment in jest, Edgar couldn't help but feel that this peculiar link was not one to be overlooked. Julius Ashenbert was said to have traveled across several foreign lands, so it was quite possible that he had been to Ceylon. Suppose he had come across Hadiya's chief... Perhaps that was where the connection between the Ceylonese Rakshasa and the fairy goddess lay. A hundred years ago, the Prince's organization had fought against the Ashenbert house, intertwining their fates—and now that same organization sought these stones. The pieces were coming together.

"Pardon me, Lord Ashenbert."

When Raven called for him, Edgar put his thoughts to one side. Careful not to knock over the piles of books, he poked his head out from behind the partition. "What's the matter?"

"One of your staff arrived with a message for you. Miss Carlton is currently on her way to the college in the company of an exchange student named Ulya."

"What is Lydia doing with *him*?!" The very mention of that man's name had Edgar filled to the brim with a desire to lash out, and his fists curled by his side.

"Apparently he came to the estate and told her that Professor Carlton had been in an accident in Cambridge. He then convinced her that they ought to come here to learn the details."

"The professor has been in an accident?" Langley cried.

"Is this the first you are hearing of it?" Edgar asked.

"Um...yes."

“You are the professor’s assistant, but you were not informed. And yet, a mere student such as Ulya *was*?” Edgar’s fleeting suspicion quickly turned into something more horrifying.

“If you would allow me a moment, my lord, I can go and confirm with the office.”

“Wait a moment, Mr. Langley.” The earl paused for a moment. “I have heard that Ulya was…adopted by a British gentleman. Have you ever met him?”

Langley frowned at the unexpected question. “I haven’t spoken with him, though I have *seen* him. I understand that he returned from India after suffering from ill health, and so I suspect he was that gentleman in the wheelchair.”

“A wheelchair? I don’t suppose he had a large burn on his face?”

“Quite possibly. He was wearing a bandage over it.”

It was the Prince.

A shiver ran down Edgar’s spine. Why hadn’t he foreseen this? It had been obvious that Ulya had been watching Lydia, and he had taken an uncouth attitude toward the earl. But that wasn’t how the Prince’s underlings usually behaved. The *Prince’s* men knew how to approach a target without drawing suspicion. That was why Edgar had believed Ulya to be nothing more than an insolent young man. And now it seemed he might have been outwitted as a result. Never had he imagined that his enemy might approach him via Professor Carlton. Edgar was so enraged that he was almost shaking. And that anger was directed not at the Prince, but himself.

Lydia remained silent as she sat beside Ulya in the carriage. Her head was fit to burst with worried thoughts for her father, and she was unbearably restless. She didn’t have much of an appetite for conversation either.

“I am sure that the accident can’t have been very serious.”

Lydia’s head snapped up. Ulya was looking at her with concern in his eyes, and she forced herself to nod back at him. “Yes, me too…”

The man’s hair and eyes were jet black, his skin a deep brown. His appearance alone was enough to make her feel like she was looking at a mystical being. His eyes were like the deep forest at night, the trees so dense that not even the starlight could

penetrate them. Their persistent stare was starting to make her uneasy.

While she knew this was an emergency, she wondered whether she had been careless to allow herself to be alone with a man. She tried to tell herself that it was fine because he was her father's student, but it wasn't a very convincing argument.

Lydia averted her gaze, unconsciously redirecting her attention to the view outside the window. That was when she caught a glimpse of the riverside beyond the buildings.

The Thames? She'd thought that the college was in the opposite direction.

"We are going the wrong way, Mr. Ulya. That's Waterloo Bridge." Before she could turn around to face him, she felt a powerful grip on her hand.

Though it was just like how Edgar might grab her, she couldn't sense a single suggestive or flirtatious inclination from Ulya. The grip on her was cold and tight, interested only in restraining her and without a single thought for her discomfort. A thin smile rose to Ulya's lips.

"What are you doing? Unhand me!" Lydia cried, frightened.

He didn't respond. It was like he had been replaced by an entirely separate person. The depths of his eyes were possessed by an endless, bottomless darkness.

This isn't Mr. Ulya...

She could sense a black shadow emanating from his entire body. A powerful, inhuman magic filled the air around them. Something horrible seemed to be penetrating Lydia's mind, and she was overcome by a wave of nausea.

"No..." she croaked. "Nico...save me!"

Though he had promised to come should she call for him, she knew that he wouldn't be able to hear her. She had no idea where the carriage was heading, and there was no way he would be able to enter it.

What a useless...selfish...cat...

Lydia could no longer move. Her consciousness was being swallowed up by a sinister magic, and she was sinking into a pit of darkness.

It was the Nightmare. The thought came to Lydia amid the sludgy discomfort of her dream. It was the same demon that had

possessed the black diamond, and now it was controlling Ulya. Though the diamond had shattered, the spirit that had grown within it should have still been alive. They believed that it had ended up with Ulysses, the Prince's associate who was well-versed in fairy magic. Had Lydia fallen into his trap?

She mustn't allow herself to become caught in a dream. And yet she couldn't look away when the fragments of the nightmare started coming together to form an image. Within the darkness appeared a naked woman, lying down. It was difficult to look at her body, which was covered in scars and wounds, and Lydia wasn't sure whether she was even alive. She approached her tentatively. The woman's white skin stood out against the black. Her dark hair was disheveled and fell over her pale face. Even then, Lydia vaguely recognized her.

"Ermine…"

The woman didn't respond. Lydia stayed rooted to the spot, staring down at her. That was when she suddenly noticed a second figure. It was Edgar, sitting a short distance away from Ermine with his eyes fixed on her. There was a slight crease between his well-shaped eyebrows, and his ash-mauve irises were burning with rage. It was as though he refused to tear his eyes away from Ermine's pain.

Standing between them, there was nothing that Lydia could say. She closed her eyes, praying that doing so would pull her from this nightmare.

"Do you intend to turn a blind eye to it all?"

Lydia's eyes flew open to see that Ermine was sitting up and looking at her. Edgar was nowhere to be seen.

"Why not open your eyes and admit the truth? You wish you were in my position. You wish to hold a special place in Lord Ashenbert's heart."

Lydia couldn't look away from Ermine's mysteriously red lips. Her gorgeous face was the only part of her that was completely unmarked.

"I would be more than happy to switch places with you."

The woman leaned forward, and Lydia found herself taking a step toward her. Ermine chuckled.

"I…"

"You don't intend to marry him? This dream comes from your heart.

Do you truly believe that such excuses will work here? You must choose. Lord Ashenbert categorizes women two ways: one of those is me. The others are merely temporary lovers he uses to distract himself. If you wish to win his heart, you must become the former."

Her cold hand wrapped around Lydia's wrist. Shivers rushed through her, and she hurriedly brushed it off. But then the woman leaned over her and pushed her down. Her soft skin was pressed against every part of Lydia's body and freezing cold, but even as another woman, her naked form possessed a bewitching beauty that prevented Lydia from pushing her off.

Ermine had what Lydia did not: a strength and beauty that she was desperately envious of. It was something she had recognized since they had spoken by the river. Ermine's strength had provided her the resolve to leave Edgar. Her warning not to allow Raven to touch the stone was likely for her brother's sake. Edgar, too, had accepted her decision. Though a second betrayal from her had hurt, he had chosen not to pursue her, probably because he trusted in the reasoning behind her actions. Even if they were to face each other as enemies and one was to kill the other, there existed between them a persisting love—whatever form it might take.

Lydia was jealous. However, she could be as envious as she liked. It would not change the fact that she had been absent during Edgar's past hardships. That said, she had the sense that she and Ermine could become one, if only within this dream. She didn't want to be one of Edgar's temporary lovers.

Lydia's collar and sleeves tore where Ermine's fingers traced over them. Her skin was cut open, and the wounds oozed blood. The woman's red lips were coming closer. Lydia remained still, accepting the kiss. At the same time, the surrounding darkness seemed to shift slowly, and she watched as the space around them came into view: the carriage ceiling, the windows, and the gloomy scenery outside. In front of Lydia was not Ermine, but Ulya. It must have been him who had kissed her. Either that or she was still dreaming. Her head was woozy, and this still didn't feel real. As she'd expected, the dark eyes locking her in place belonged to the demon possessing Ulya.

"My father..." she began, needing to know he was safe despite her situation.

“That was a lie.”

Lydia was relieved, and speaking had finally started to bring her body back from its sleep.

“I bear no grudge against you, but I am not in control. The demon simply requires feeding in order to grow.” Ulya’s slender fingers ran down her cheek.



It was horribly unpleasant, and Lydia mustered up all her strength just to look away. She was overcome by the pressing urge to run.

"Come, fall back into your slumber. The sun has set at last. The Unseelie Court rules over the night."

Demons such as these fed on nightmares, terror, and death. If she fell asleep again, Lydia would be killed.

"No…"

Closing her eyes so as to escape the demon's gaze, she pushed Ulya away as hard as she could. Without knowing how she had jumped from the carriage, she found herself dashing down a dark lane. The stinking road beneath her feet was slushy from the rain. Buildings closed in on either side as rats raced past her. It was an awful, filthy place. And for whatever reason, it was completely deserted. The demon might have driven everyone else away. Or Lydia might still have been dreaming.

Lydia ran, searching for someone, *anyone*. She splashed through puddles, spraying mud everywhere, but was too panicked to care. Eventually, she came to a wide road. There still wasn't a person in sight, nor were there any carriages. Resisting the frightened urge to scream, she looked around as carefully as she could, which was when she finally caught sight of someone walking beneath a streetlamp. It was a slender man wearing fine clothing, and he was walking away from her.

Relief crashed over her in an instant. "Edgar!" she cried, desperate for his help. However, she stopped in her tracks before she caught up to him. He had turned around, and that was when she had seen the young, unfamiliar woman beside him. The woman put a hand on his arm and leaned into him without displaying a hint of discomfort. "Who is this?"

Edgar merely glanced at Lydia. "You know, I'm not sure I remember." His cold words sent her into shock.

"An old lover of yours?"

"Perish the thought. I have only ever loved you."

"Is that so?"

"It is quite so."

"Well, she *is* in a state. Look at all that mud! She certainly isn't worthy of you."

Chuckling, the couple started to walk off together.

“Do your falsehoods know no bounds?!” This was horrendously cruel behavior even for Edgar. Lydia ran after him and caught his sleeve to stop him. “You’ve said the same to me—that I was the only one for you! You even proposed to me!”

He shook free of her grip. She lost her balance and had to lower herself to the ground.

“Who *is* this girl? Edgar, you’ve mud on your clothes.”

“Oh, dear me,” he said, showing no remorse over having forced Lydia into a puddle.

“Every woman you’ve ever been with has been nothing more than a distraction after all! I was a fool for wanting to trust you!”

She really had wanted to believe him, and deep down, she probably *had* believed that he’d seen her differently from other women, even if she wasn’t the one he was truly in love with. That was why she couldn’t help but to compare herself to Ermine. She might have been second best, but at least she wasn’t part of the horde of faceless women in whom he held no real interest. Hadn’t that meant that there was a chance she could be his favorite one day?

“Lydia.”

She felt the tiniest spark of hope when he called her name, but when she looked up, his eyes were cold.

“You spurned me, then left the estate with Ulya. You kissed him, didn’t you? I did not think that you were of such loose morals.”

Lydia put a hand to her mouth in shock. Edgar must have seen what had happened in the carriage. She was long past the point of being able to separate her dream from reality. Then he walked away with the other woman. Left behind, Lydia noticed Ulya standing beside her. She didn’t have the energy left to run anymore.

The man crouched down to peer at her. “Been abandoned, have we? You poor thing. Fear not, for I am here to bring you salvation.” He roughly grabbed her throat. “The pain will not last long. Then you will forget everything and be at peace. Come with me to the bridge.”

The bridge? London Bridge?

Was this how things had started for all the victims?

Just then, a bright light pierced the sky. Lydia recognized it as lightning at the same time the roar of thunder burst against her

eardrums. Before she knew it, a violent rain was beating down over her body. It was a very real sensation, separate from the dreamworld, and it allowed her to break free from her slumber. She found herself sitting beside the carriage as though she had slipped out of it. A jet-black horse was trying to drag Ulya through the open door and out of the vehicle.

"Kelpie..."

Keeping Ulya still with his front hoof, Kelpie was sinking his sharp fangs into a dark, shadowy mass. It must have been the Nightmare. Overpowered by the savage water horse's magic, it seemed the demon wasn't yet able to maintain a solid form. The shadow's shape was undulating as it thrashed this way and that. When Kelpie tried to stuff it back into Ulya, it suddenly sank its own teeth into the horse's neck.

"Wee basturt!" Kelpie grunted. His fangs fell away from the demon, which immediately launched itself completely free of Ulya's body. It then slipped past the water horse and pelted away with the slickness of a panther.

There was no pursuing the creature, and Kelpie clicked his tongue and shook his head. "'Sno big loss. Ah'll track it down and have it caught again in no time." He removed his hoof from the unconscious Ulya and turned to Lydia. "Ye awright? Ye're awake now, aren't ye?"

"Yes, Kelpie, but how did you know?"

She hadn't seen him in some time. Nico had accused him of scheming something, but that didn't explain why he had shown up here out of the blue. A flash of lightning tore through the sky again as he changed into his human form, becoming a flawlessly beautiful young man with dark curls and an impressive masculine air. He grabbed Lydia's hand and pulled her roughly to her feet, a sign that he hadn't changed in the slightest. The fat raindrops added a vibrancy to his face like he was underwater.

"Ye're soaking wet. Aren't ye cold?"

She was, but that was among the least of her concerns. "Where have you been, Kelpie? What have you been doing?"

"Oh, y'know. Ah've been trainin' that Nightmare."

Lydia had to make sure she hadn't misheard him. While she frowned at him, he took her under some nearby eaves to shelter her from the rain.

“It’s got a lotta strength, but it’s still a newborn. Keeps gettin’ hungry and it doesnae know what’s awright to go after, so it’ll attack humans.” He wiped the rain from Lydia’s face with a forceful palm.

As rough as he was, Lydia knew he was being considerate in his own way. However, she was still grappling with his words. “What do you intend to do with it once you’ve trained it?”

“It’s gonna be a pet.”

“Whose pet?” she stammered.

“Only that Ulysses lad’s gonna wanna keep somethin’ like that. Said he wanted Ulya to be its vessel for now, so ah’ve been trainin’ it to get used to the human form.”

“*Ulysses* had the Nightmare possess Mr. Ulya?”

“Aye. Though looks like he’s been feedin’ it without us knowin’. Thought it was strange how strong it was gettin’, so I followed it but lost sight of it. Never thought ah’d find it attackin’ *you*. Glad I found it, but that had us panickin’.” Unaware that Lydia was trembling with rage, Kelpie continued indifferently. “And now it’s on the loose again. I gotta go get it back afore it attacks anyone else.”

“You’re *assisting* Ulysses?! Why?! You must know that he and his allies are Edgar’s enemies!”

Kelpie’s expression was quickly replaced with something more contemplative as he folded his arms and looked down at her. “Ah’m no doin’ it for him. Ah’m doin’ it for ye.”

“What?”

“Bein’ with the earl means ye’re in danger. Ulysses said I only have to train the Nightmare to obey him, and then he willnae lay a finger on ye.”

In other words, Kelpie had struck a deal with the young villain. Lydia really was beginning to see red now. She shoved him away with both hands. “Have you taken leave of your senses? You cannot trust *anything* that passes through Ulysses’s lips!”

“’S no about trust. We have a contract.”

“Not only does he possess a real understanding of fairy magic, but he is incredibly devious! He will have already thought of a way to render your contract meaningless! I was attacked by the Nightmare, and I can tell you that it was no accident! Either Ulysses or the Prince was behind it!”

Ulysses might have promised *he* would not lay a finger on her, but that didn't preclude him from sending Ulya and the Nightmare after her.

Even Kelpie balked at that. "Ye sure of that? It wasnae jist coincidence?"

"I am quite sure. Mr. Ulya is one of my father's students. He told me that my father was in an accident to lure me away from the estate. You assisted in the plot to have the Nightmare attack me!"

Lydia was realizing that she couldn't trust *anybody*. Ulya and Kelpie had been manipulated by the enemy. Ermine had betrayed Edgar and left him. The Prince had infiltrated them long ago and was trying to destroy them from the inside. She dashed out into the rain.

"Oi, Lydia!"

It seemed that she had taken Kelpie by surprise, because he did not immediately pursue her. She upped her pace, desperate to get home as soon as possible. But where was "home"? Edgar's estate? Thinking of him filled her with a rush of anxiety.

"You kissed him, didn't you? I did not think that you were of such loose morals."

While Lydia knew it had only been a dream, she could still feel Ulya's lips on hers. Tears flooded her eyes. She didn't *want* to cry over this. She knew that Ermine wouldn't. Lydia ran on, her vision clouding...from the rain. She continued at random, and before she knew it, she had come to London Bridge. There wasn't anyone to be seen in this thunderstorm, and the driver of the impressive two-horse carriage ahead seemed blind to her. His vehicle raced past, whipping up waves of muddy water, at least until it suddenly stopped in the center of the bridge. The door opened, and a figure stepped out of it. Lydia couldn't make out any features through the darkness and rain except that the person was using a cane and dragging one foot. Nevertheless, their posture was ruler-straight, and their steps told of shoes that were in perfect condition. This was clearly a member of the upper class.

"Terribly sorry, madame. It seems I have dirtied your dress." He sounded like a middle-aged gentleman. "Might I offer you a lift to your home?"

His words were kind enough, but there was a curious air of intimidation about him that had Lydia backing away from his

approach. Lightning flashed. She caught a fleeting glimpse of his face, which had bandages wrapped around it. The eeriness of his appearance made her gulp. Another piercing flash of lightning gave her a clear view of the carriage driver. It was a young man with pale blond hair. He was grinning.

"Ulysses?" Trembles racking her legs, Lydia took another look at the older man.

Is he…the Prince?

Her mind was screaming at her to run, but her legs wouldn't obey. It was all she could do to step back painfully slowly. The approaching man held a rope in his grip, but now she had the bridge's balustrade against her back and could retreat no further.

"That's Ted's wench," Ulysses said from the driver's seat.

A muffled chuckle emanated from beneath the man's bandages. "I am *slightly* disappointed. Although he did run away from me before I could properly instill in him my preference in women—and how to treat them."

Perhaps his insult would have angered her in any other situation. But the rope was already around her neck. Lydia would be the Prince's next victim: the next corpse to be found hanging from London Bridge. She could escape from the Nightmare, but she couldn't escape the fate that the Prince had chosen for her.

Before she could even think about resisting, she felt his grip on her shoulders. He was about to push her from the balustrade. Her body seemed to float in the air. Just as she accepted that she would fall, his touch vanished.

The man staggered backward, dragged down by the dark figure that had appeared behind him, and somebody grabbed Lydia by the arm. Her body had been leaning over the handrail, and as she was roughly pulled back, she heard her would-be murderer let out a hoarse scream. She slumped to the ground and, finally able to look up, saw Raven standing next to the collapsed man. The boy was armed with a knife.

"The Prince is…dead?"

"That is the Prince's shadow. It is not the man himself," a familiar voice explained from beside her. Edgar carefully untied the rope from around her neck.

"His shadow?"

"The Prince can scarcely walk. When he wishes to venture

outside, he will send a shadow. If need be, they will die in his place."

"I almost forgot! Ulysses was with him!" Lydia snapped her gaze to the carriage, but it had been abandoned. Raven must have checked around it already, because he was standing there and giving Edgar a shake of his head.

It seemed that the danger had passed. But now a separate fear was bubbling up inside Lydia. The Nightmare's vision was at the forefront of her mind again, making it difficult to endure Edgar's gaze. She looked up, and the eyes staring back at her seemed to be as cold as they had been within her dream. She would bet that even a love that had burned for a hundred years would dissipate at the disgusting sight of her covered in mud.

Panicked, she checked over her clothing, which was when she realized that her collar had been torn. In her dream, Ermine—or perhaps Ulya—had touched her. She traced her finger over the exposed area and found a shallow cut. Feeling Edgar's eyes on it, she quickly hid it beneath her hand. She would have fled if only her legs had the strength. In fact, she would have liked for Edgar to leave without another word.

But he didn't. Something warm covered her shoulders, and she raised her head. It was his jacket.

"Take it back, Edgar," she said, hurrying to take it off. "It will get filthy."

He instead pulled it closed over her front like he was trying to cover her up, smiling at her gently. "Filthy? You think such a thing would concern me, given how close we are?"

"Given how close we are...it concerns *me*."

"Are you angry with me, Lydia? After the terror I have just put you through? If only I had been more observant..."

"No, *I* was careless. I lost my senses when I heard that father had been in an accident, and then the Nightmare came out of Mr. Ulya..."

"You can explain it all to me at length later. We discovered Ulya, collapsed, before we reached the bridge. Some of the men from Scarlet Moon are carrying him back to the estate. You need time to recover from the shock. Not to mention you must have your injuries attended to."

"I do not have any injuries. I had a bad dream because of the

Nightmare, that's all. It tried to kill me in a terrifying dream." She doubted that her piecemeal explanation made any sense to Edgar—hence why he had asked her to save it for later—but, unable to stop, she continued at pace. "It truly was frightening. I ran and ran, and then I found you…and even though I asked for your help, you left with another woman."

"How cruel. But then, it was only a dream."

"Yes. And in the dream, you accused me of having loose morals."

"I did?"

"Yes, and you said that you despised me because of it."

Though it had been her dream and he had done nothing wrong, Edgar looked rather perturbed. "Mm, I'm sorry. Might I ask for your forgiveness?"

"A mere apology won't undo what happened. You saw it, didn't you?" Lydia didn't even know what point she was trying to make anymore.

"What do you claim that I saw?"

"Mr. Ulya and I exchanging a kiss."

"Listen, while I am aware that I have a propensity for narrow-mindedness and that I may well make for an unpleasant husband, even I would not find fault with you over something that took place in a dream."

"But I am uncertain!"

"Uncertain of what?"

"I had thought that *this* was also a part of the dream." Lydia picked up fistfuls of her torn collar. The regret of sharing more than she ought to have done was suddenly closing in on her. She desperately wanted to get away, but her legs still didn't have the strength.

Then, she felt Edgar's touch by her ear. He weaved his fingers into her hair and pulled her head into his chest, embracing her. Caught off guard, she tried to wriggle free, only for him to hold on more tightly.

Lydia started to panic as her face burned. "You promised not to touch me!"

"While you were at my estate, yes. But we are not at the estate now." His logic was as nonsensical as ever, and he did not let go of her. Eventually, Lydia found the tension draining from her body.

“Forgive me. Really, I would have liked to have rescued you much sooner.”

The pain in his voice made it even more difficult to push him away. He was being so hard on himself, and she wondered whether it was because of his failure to rescue Ermine in the past. Regardless, the way he was softly stroking her hair seemed to wash away the remnants of her nightmare.

“Oi! How long do you intend to keep up your off-putting displays of affection?”

Nico’s call brought Lydia back to her senses. The gray cat gave a contemptuous snort, his paws on his hips. Beside him stood a stock-still Raven, who seemed prepared to wait for his master despite the pouring rain.

“Nico…you’re here too?” Lydia asked.

“More than that, I was the one who led the earl to you. You called for me to save you, didn’t you?”

“You mean to say you heard me?”

“How could I have? I was helpfully informed by a brownie who *did* hear you. The fairies of London regard me as a leader of sorts. I’m constantly looking out for them, you know.”

“Really? Thank you, Nico. I’m sorry for calling you useless.” Lydia reached for Nico’s paw, completely heartfelt in her gratitude. She even made to embrace him.

“Stop that!” he yowled. “You’re going to get me filthy!” The fairy cat might have been crueler even than Edgar.

Lydia released him with a huff. Still, his laid-back reaction to the whole thing had allowed her to regain some of her composure. But her guard was forced back up again in an instant. Raven had suddenly fallen into a battle-ready stance. The rain had slowed and was turning into a drizzle. The boy’s eyes locked on to a spot in the muggy darkness, and he set off at a run. Leaping onto the handrail, he turned around a stone pillar and lashed out with his knife, which caused a figure to run out from behind it. Whoever it was had managed to evade Raven’s lethal swiftness. And naturally so, for it was someone who knew him very well: Ermine.

“On reconnaissance duties now, are we, Ermine? The Prince always did work his slaves to the bone,” Edgar said.

“I am not here to gather information. I am here to capture the escaped Nightmare. It would appear that Kelpie allowed it to get

away after its attack on Miss Carlton.” Ermine slowly cut across the bridge, distancing herself from Raven.

“I see. Well then, where has the Nightmare gone?”

“It is likely to be nearby, so I ask that you keep your wits about you, my lord. Ulysses has made this its feeding ground. It is probably wandering the area, hoping to fill its belly.”

“You would still pay me such consideration?” Edgar asked, a sarcastic edge to his tone.

It did nothing to lift Ermine’s emotions to the forefront of her expression. She had displayed true willpower in suppressing her emotions when Lydia had spoken to her too. It was impossible to know what she had locked away within her heart. However, it was clear that it was something that she would not compromise on, just as much as she would not compromise on her reason for betraying Edgar.

Meanwhile, her brother possessed an ironclad will of his own. He had declared that he would show no mercy to anyone who would betray his master, even if that traitor was his own sister. Silently finding his opportunity, he charged at her again. She didn’t quite have enough time to evade him. Though she was able to catch his knife with her own, he struck her with his knee, sending her flying into the balustrade.

“Stop, Raven!” Edgar cried.

But the boy kept walking toward his staggered sister.

“Do you not hear me?”

“If I were to stop, my lord, the only path left open to me would be to end my own life and settle matters that way.”

“That’s far-fetched!”

“I brought my sister back to you, my lord. In doing so, I put you in danger. I cannot continue to serve you under these circumstances.”

“Raven, there is no man alive who is utterly perfect. It is all right for you to make mistakes and to falter.”

The servant continued to approach Ermine even as Edgar tried to persuade him. She swung her knife to try and keep him away, but it seemed she still wasn’t at full strength, because he grabbed her wrist easily. Raven twisted her arm upward and pointed his knife against her pale neck. But then he stopped. A dark shadow had begun to surround them, bringing with it an air-crushing

pressure.

Lydia had experienced this same horrible chill not hours before. “The Nightmare!”

The shadow turned even darker, taking on the shape of a black panther, and lunged at her. Edgar threw his arms around her. Just before they fell onto the cobblestones, something warm and reddish, thick with the scent of blood, dashed against her cheek.

It was a demon without a defined form. Even Lydia struggled to make it out properly. However, Edgar must have been able to sense its wicked presence, because he pulled her into him as his eyes focused intently on to where the shadow was darkest.

“My lord!” As Raven called out a warning to his master, his blade shifted away from Ermine’s neck for a fraction of a second. She made no move to run. The Nightmare had reacted to Raven’s voice and changed direction to hurtle at them.

By the time Raven sensed the beast’s approach, the shadowy creature had already sunk its sharp fangs into the woman in front of him. Mustering up her selkie magic, she managed to shake it loose. And then the Nightmare seemed to vanish completely.

“Beware! It is still nearby!” Ermine called out. She had defended Raven from the creature, and now her chest ran with blood.

“Ermine. Your side released this beast.” Raven reaffirmed his grip on the knife. It seemed he was determined for his sister to die by his own hand.

“Get away from here, Raven. You mustn’t touch the Nightmare.”

“You will never have my forgiveness for as long as I live.”

“I know. I wouldn’t have expected otherwise.”

“You claimed that you simply wanted to serve Lord Ashenbert. I believed you.”

“I shan’t stop you from doing as you wish. However—”

“As I *wish*?”

“Please just heed my warning. If you come into contact with the Nightmare, its magic will influence the spirits that—”

“You think I *want* to do this?!” Raven cried out, his knife flashing instantaneously.

Though she feared the worst, Lydia could not tear her gaze away. She felt Edgar’s arms around her stiffen. All they could do was watch with bated breath. But Ermine remained standing. Raven’s knife had only caught her necktie, which fell onto the

cobblestones. His hand slumped to his side, and Ermine began to turn slowly in his direction. It was then that Lydia felt the Nightmare's presence expanding again nearby. She scanned their surroundings to see its shadow on the balustrade, right beside Ermine. It moved before she could even open her mouth. Raven turned to face it as it lunged, but he was thrown back the moment it made contact with him.

"Raven!" Ermine made to leap forward, but a dark figure got there first, tackling the Nightmare before she could reach it. It pulled her to the ground, then glared right at the beast, which had landed on the balustrade opposite.

"Kelpie!" Lydia whispered.

"Get away, selkie," he barked at Ermine, who was trying to get to her feet. "It got outta its cage. This is gonna be a pain…"

Its cage… He must be talking about Mr. Ulya.

While serving as the vessel that would help to tame it, Ulya had also been the Nightmare's prison. He must have had a strong tolerance for magic if he was able to contain it. If the story Lydia had been told about him wasn't true, then who exactly was he? The bridge started to rock violently before she even had time to think about it. The tremors were severe enough that she feared it would collapse. The cause had been Kelpie and the Nightmare colliding head-on. But unlike when the demon had been inside Ulya, the water horse really seemed to be struggling with it.

"The Nightmare's power is at its peak here, Kelpie! You cannot subdue it as you normally do!" Ermine shouted.

"Shut *up*! I know!"

The demon shed its beast-like form, and its silhouette began to grow enormously. At the rate it was spreading, it seemed ready to swallow up everything around it.

Edgar approached his fallen servant to help him up. "Raven, keep your wits about you."

"Get away from him, Earl! His spirits touched the Nightmare! You'll be pulled in!" Nico appeared out of nowhere. He had either been hiding himself or preparing to make his escape.

Edgar had already let go of Raven and was backing away. The boy had risen abruptly and set his murderous glare on his master. Then, he swung his knife. Though Edgar was far enough away to evade, the attack must have taken him by surprise.

Lydia knew that Raven used to struggle to suppress the murderous urges of the spirits within him. He would lose sight of himself and kill everyone in his path. Though it would be difficult for even Edgar to stop him, never had he turned his blade on his master. And yet now it seemed the very sight of the earl offended Raven enough for him to launch a sudden attack. His movements were exaggerated and uncalculated, the very opposite of how he usually operated. Ironically, this gave Edgar plenty of space to evade them.



“Get outta here, Lydia! The Nightmare’s magic’s runnin’ amok! I cannae stop it no more!” Kelpie shouted, grappling with what appeared to be the shadow’s center.

The bridge’s shaking was only getting more intense. Edgar was doing everything he could to stop Raven, but given how the boy was swinging the knife, he was struggling to get close enough.

“Be careful, Edgar!” Lydia cried. She wanted to rush over to him, but the bridge was warping and she couldn’t get to her feet. The structure itself might not even have been moving anymore, but the Nightmare’s magic was violently warping the space around it, leading to the jolting sensation.

“Don’t concern yourself with me, Lydia. But those eyes…they are not Raven’s,” Edgar choked out.

Suddenly, Raven doubled over and collapsed where he stood. A thin knife had pierced his foot, and Lydia looked up to see several figures across the way. One was Ulysses. She couldn’t tell whether the others were human or fairy.

“That’s the only way to calm a raging beast. He ought to be paralyzed now.”

Ulysses’s underlings surrounded Raven to take him away. As much as Edgar must have wanted to stop them, it seemed he had made the decision to distance Lydia from the shaking bridge and the black shadow that twisted around it. He somehow managed to reach her and pull on her arm.

“Which way, Nico?”

“Over here! Quickly!” The fairy cat had identified a path to escape the Nightmare.

With Edgar’s support, Lydia just barely managed to get to her feet.

“Try to run if you’d like, my lord,” Ulysses’s voice sounded from behind them. “I shall take from you everything you hold dear. One piece at a time.”

The Queen and the Spirits

“Spirits dwell within this child. He will be a soldier to His Majesty.”

These words were spoken long ago by an old man who lived deep in the forest. With their utterance, the boy’s sister learned of the secret within the green flicker in his black eyes. The old man was something of a recluse and knew many of the ancient legends associated with this land of Hadiya. The pale-skinned sister would often take her younger, darker-skinned brother to visit him.

Even by the age of five, the brother had never said a word. He had never even smiled. His mother abhorred him. But then, she abhorred his sister too. She had been expelled from the plantation of a British gentleman shortly after becoming pregnant and detested how her first child resembled the man who had played with her heart. Naturally, neither sibling knew their respective father. The sister, however, was aware that her brother was special. He was strong, even at his size.

Once, a man had tried to lay his hands on her. Her brother had attacked him, striking him with a stone again and again until there was no life left within him. She had hidden the body beneath a layer of leaves and discarded the bloody stone in a marsh. Her brother would have been hanged had he been found to have killed someone, so she wanted to cling to the belief that he hadn’t done anything wrong.

That tiny nation didn’t exist anymore. But the power granted by the heavens that was meant to defend it persisted in the form of terrifying spirits. They were said to have been tamed long ago by the ancestors of the country’s royalty and to have sworn to serve its successive leaders from that point on. It was a power meant to protect, and the sister couldn’t see how that was a bad thing.

The forest elder’s words emboldened the young girl. Though her brother did not speak, he had a perfect understanding of what *others* said. He still possessed emotion, even if his expression never changed.

They followed the path out of the forest depths, and when the

sister offered her hand, he accepted it timidly. That was when she made her decision. She swore to herself that she would bring him to meet the king: the man he was meant to serve.

When Ermine came to, she found herself lying beneath the water. Her surroundings were enveloped in an indigo darkness, but her fae eyes allowed her to perceive the schools of tiny fish and the subtly swaying waterweeds within it. The cool, gentle water that rippled around her body soothed her, and she felt it filling her up with the vitality that could be found in all nature. The wound that the Nightmare had inflicted on her no longer hurt. It had stopped bleeding too. She ran her fingertips over the injury as she contemplated where she might be, and it didn't take long for her to come to a probable conclusion: the Serpentine in Hyde Park. It was the lake in which Kelpie had settled after following Lydia to London.

A jet-black horse appeared, tiny bubbles forming as he walked. "Awake?"

Ermine looked up at the elegant creature, recalling that he had saved her in this manner once before. For what was supposed to be a wild beast, he certainly liked to meddle in the affairs of others.

"Since ye're a selkie, ye should keep this in mind: ye heal faster when ye're in the water. Seawater'd do more for ye, but ye willnae find none of that in London."

Naturally, she knew that this kelpie hadn't saved her out of the goodness of his heart. She lifted herself up, slightly cautious. "What happened to the others?"

"Ye mean the earl and his pals? I thought the Prince was yer master. The one who wants to kill him." Kelpie seemed unable to comprehend why Ermine would be worried about the man she had betrayed.

The Prince did not intend to kill Edgar immediately. And, judging by Kelpie's lack of concern, Lydia must have gotten out safely too. So Ermine's concern was reserved for just one person.

"If it's about the raven wean, Ulysses took him." It was far more likely that he had suddenly remembered Raven rather than deduced who the selkie was worried about. "Dunno what he was thinkin' to leave ye there instead, though."

Ulysses didn’t trust Ermine. He put her to use when it suited him purely because the Prince had ordered him to do so. He had given her the dead man’s diopside in order to investigate its influence on Raven without telling her what it really was. However, the old man in the forest had told her of a green stone that could create an illusory extra layer of an object. It was when she made the connection to Hadiya’s royalty and realized that Raven should not go near it that he, Edgar, and Lydia had learned that she had it. That had meant Ermine could not stay at the estate any longer.

Although Ulysses should have done more to prevent Edgar learning of the stone’s existence, he was still openly enraged by the fact that he would no longer be able to test its effects. Fairies were nothing more than tools as far as he was concerned. They were promptly abandoned if they couldn’t fulfill their orders any longer.

“Raven was captured?” Ermine didn’t care about Ulysses’s treatment of her. She was more worried about her brother. She could recall how the Nightmare had raged and that Raven had come into contact with its magic. Then she remembered Kelpie’s arrival. After that, however, she had lost consciousness.

Raven had lost his chance to kill her. Ermine didn’t know whether he had refrained on purpose or because Edgar had ordered him to stop. Nor did she know whether her survival was for the best. The consequences of the path she had chosen were yet to be seen. It might even have been to their advantage had she been killed.

“I must go.”

Ermine was still alive. She couldn’t stay here doing nothing. But when she tried to stand up, the water horse stopped her with a hoof.

“Ye’re no goin’ nowhere yet. I got questions for ye. And stuff to say.”

She had expected as much. Nevertheless, she didn’t try to resist, since she knew he wouldn’t let her go until he was satisfied. Or perhaps she had gravely offended him. What happened to those who incurred a kelpie’s wrath? Half preparing herself for the worst, Ermine avoided looking straight into his pearly black pupils.

“Ulysses was tryin’ to fool us, wasnae he? Lied about no hurtin’ Lydia. Ye *knew*, didnae ye?”

“It was the Prince who gave Ulya those orders, not Ulysses.”

“Ye think ah’ll let ye off with jist that?”

“You want Miss Carlton for yourself, yes? The Prince’s aim is to have Lord Ashenbert thrown into the deepest pits of despair, and while he intends to separate the two of them, that doesn’t necessarily mean that Miss Carlton needs to die. He would be quite content were you to take her to the depths of a Highland lake, for example.”

“Wouldnae hurtin’ Lydia make the earl suffer the most, though?”

“The Prince may well be considering that possibility too.”

In fact, the chances of Lydia suffering a fate worse than death were high.

“Ulysses was sayin’ how he destroyed all the earl’s wummin who came afore Lydia.”

As far as Ermine was aware, Edgar had been careful not to tie himself down to any one woman after fleeing the Prince. More accurately, there had been several women whom he had treated as his lovers simultaneously. He had likely feared that getting too attached to any one of them would make her a target for the Prince. Therefore, when Ulysses spoke of Edgar’s “women,” he was referring to the girls who had been unilaterally gifted to the earl during his captivity. That said, Edgar undoubtedly felt pain whenever anyone connected to him suffered. It was just that, at some point, he had learned to feign composure no matter how horrific the ordeal or how much he cared for the victim. As long as he had continued to do so, the Prince hadn’t bothered using such tactics, because it was the villain’s wish that Edgar become nothing more than a living vessel without a heart. Naturally, the earl had very much kept ahold of his heart as he pretended to undergo the transformation the Prince required of him.

“I accepted his deal ’cause I don’t want Lydia to suffer. But the wee fucker set the Nightmare I trained on her anyhows!” Mane bristling with rage, Kelpie took on his human form before roughly grabbing Ermine by the neck. “Ye want us to sit back while Lydia gets every bone in her body broke, then take her up to Scotland? Ye *knew* what was gonna happen when ye offered us to help Ulysses!”

Ermine struggled in his grip, which would have been enough to

kill her were she still human. It wasn't a lack of oxygen, but Kelpie's nails digging into her skin that were causing her pain. However, she had foreseen his rage and had therefore been ready to endure such retaliation. She had suggested that Kelpie cooperate with Ulysses under the latter's orders. She hadn't tried to disobey because she *wanted* the water horse involved. Naturally, she hadn't been able to predict his course of action, and that suited her fine. She believed that the more unpredictable elements she could inject into Ulysses's plans, the better. It was unlikely that Kelpie would behave how the boy thought he would, as the strength of his magic and his desire to protect Lydia were too great.

Ermine made herself remain still for some time until Kelpie suddenly tossed her away.

"What're ye lookin' like that for? Like ye've given up on everythin'?"

The idea that he had discarded her because she wasn't worth his rage hurt more than the claw marks he had left on her neck. Ermine was overcome by a rush of irrepressible emotion. She hadn't given up on *anything*. That was why she was forcing herself through this crushing solitude. Before she knew it, she was raising her voice.

"You haven't the slightest clue *what* you are talking about! You are of the Unseelie Court. You do not know what it is to value anything or anyone more than yourself. You want Miss Carlton for no other reason than that you find her presence entertaining, don't you? You will never know what it is to desire to protect someone at any cost and the despair that follows when it proves impossible!"

Taken aback, Kelpie peered at her. "Ye talkin' about yer brother? I thought yer head was full of the earl and no one else." Then, he grinned. "Ye're no totally on Ulysses's side after all, are ye?"

"What of it?"

"Nothin'. If ye say ye wanna use us for yer own reasons, ah'll stop kickin' up a fuss. I like me a lass with a strong will."

"I daresay you do." He had, after all, developed a fondness for Lydia.

"But ah'm gonna use ye too. Since it's come to this, I gotta know what those sneaks are up to myself."

“Am I to understand that you wish to form an alliance?”

“Ah’m sayin’ we’ll use each other. Ah’m no formin’ no alliance with one of Ulysses’s lackeys.”

As put out as he sounded, Kelpie dropped a hand onto Ermine’s head. Confused, she glared at him to no avail. The frown didn’t leave his face as he ruffled her hair.

“Y’know, ye’re even more reckless than Lydia. Stay underwater for a while longer, eh? Till those marks ’round yer neck disappear.”

With that, he up and left, and Ermine wondered whether his shift in attitude was supposed to serve as an apology for his rough handling of her. It was the epitome of peculiarity to be at the receiving end of a kelpie’s sympathy. Letting out a sigh, she gently smoothed down the hair he had disheveled. Why had she come out with all those things? Thinking about it, Kelpie was the one figure from whom she didn’t need to conceal what was in her heart. He was no friend to either Edgar or Ulysses, both of whom considered her a traitor. Was his unpredictability truly her sole motivation in involving him? Perhaps she had simply wanted someone to alleviate her desperate solitude, someone who was neither friend nor foe.

***

Raven must have been occupying Edgar’s thoughts. The frown had not left his face for the duration of their journey back to the estate. Lydia had been overwhelmed by all the events that had occurred at once and struggled to process her own emotions, preventing her from finding the right words to say to him. He had stared straight ahead, ignoring the droplets that fell from his damp hair. Anger must have been fueling his composure, his heartlessness. His cheeks had been white as porcelain, an image that had burned itself into Lydia’s mind. She recalled that he hadn’t so much as shivered from the cold and the damp, despite the fact that she still had his jacket. In the end, she hadn’t been able to say anything to him until the carriage stopped in front of the estate and they were just about to alight. Even then, her words had been hollow and clichéd.

“I am certain that Raven is safe and that he will find his way back to you.”

For reasons unbeknownst to her, Edgar had seemed surprised when he looked back at her. He had then taken her hand without warning. “Your hands are so cold. You have been through Hell on my account. And yet you worry for me still.” Perhaps Raven hadn’t been the only reason for his melancholy silence. “Don’t leave me. I can still fight, just as long as you stay with me.”

Though she had been unable to respond at the time, her cheeks were aflame as the memory ran through her mind. Lydia decided it was because her body had warmed up from the cold. She was presently in her dressing room, drying her rain-soaked hair in front of the fireplace with a heavy sigh. She had changed out of her muddy clothes and into a dry chemise.

The Prince was drawing ever closer to Edgar. He had stolen Ermine away a second time, something that no doubt caused the earl great pain. And now he had even kidnapped the ever-reliable Raven. Lydia wasn’t sure if she was as important to Edgar as he claimed. Would he really draw that much strength from her presence now that Raven and Ermine were gone?

It was as that thought was crossing her mind that she picked up on an almost imperceptible noise. Whipping around, she noticed that the door she had closed behind her was now slightly ajar.

“Edgar?” she stammered.

Edgar would have flung the door open, coming up with some excuse as to why it was a perfectly reasonable thing to do in the process. But who else would want to come and see Lydia in her dressing room?

“I am changing! How dare you peep on me!”

No sooner were the sharp words out of her mouth than someone grabbed her from behind and pushed her down. The hair blocking her vision was not Edgar’s blond locks, but long and jet black.

Mr. Ulya…

He was supposed to have been taken back to the estate by Scarlet Moon and confined within one of its rooms. Yet here he was, pinning her down with his hand clamped over her mouth.

“Forgive me, Miss Carlton, but I must insist that you not make a sound. There is something I must tell—”

But she was so frightened that she tried to thrash this way and

that.

“Please listen to me!”

“No! Help!”

“I was used and nothing more!”

Lydia was too panicked to listen. The fear and embarrassment of having nothing to protect her but a thin undergarment was making a mess of her emotions, and she started to cry. “Ed—”

Calling for help was proving futile, and she was even beginning to wish that the intruder *had* just been a Peeping Tom.

“I am not here to assault you. I am a woman.”

Taken aback, Lydia immediately froze, at which point Ulya slowly removed the hand from her mouth. On closer inspection of the person before her, the long, black hair—no longer tied back—and the androgynous facial features could very well belong to a woman. The shoulders and waist were a little slim for a man. That said, Raven had a similar skin tone to Ulya’s, and he was rather slender compared to a British man. When Lydia thought of a woman dressed in men’s clothing, she inevitably pictured Ermine, from whom she had the impression that such attire was not capable of concealing the curves of a female body. Ulya’s figure, however, was difficult to determine as one or the other.

While Lydia lay there, perplexed, she found her hand taken and guided inside Ulya’s jacket. Under the thin shirt was a definite bulge, giving the fairy doctor her answer. Having confirmed that Ulya was a woman, her sense of shame instantly vanished, and her composure returned to her.

“It pains me to have deceived you, Miss Carlton. However, I was not in a position to resist what was commanded of me.”

Lydia couldn’t blame her, for she had been used as the Nightmare’s vessel. What she didn’t understand was the reason for the masculine attire. “Why do you dress like that? Was it part of your plot to approach and deceive me through my father? You wouldn’t have been able to attend the university as a woman.”

“In part, yes, but I have always dressed as a man. It is customary within my family. When no son is born, the eldest daughter becomes the next head. She wears male clothing until she is married.”

“But I heard you were taken in by a British gentleman.”

“Though I was born in Bombay, I have been told that my

ancestry hails from a mountainous region in Ceylon. Apparently, my family once ruled over a tiny portion of the people. Knowing that, I didn't feel able to disregard my heritage despite becoming British."

"Ceylon? Might your family belong to the same royalty as that of the Ceylonese man who was murdered recently?"

"That is correct. My late father told me I had a relative who had gone over to Britain. I wanted to meet this relative, but without the money I needed, I was at a loss as to how to do so. That was when I came across the elderly gentleman."

"Which gentleman?"

"The one who adopted me and brought me to this country. Furthermore, he promised to recapture Hadiya, the land of my ancestors in Ceylon. I am aware of the rumors that he is an American who controls a large illegitimate organization, but it also seems that he is of royal birth. That is why they call him the Prince."

A shiver ran up Lydia's spine as she recalled her encounter on London Bridge. He might not have been the man himself, but it was terrifying to think that the real Prince was nearby.

"I shan't be able to lead as a queen, but I *can* become a landlady. I can retrieve the land of my ancestors. Presently, there exists a British-owned mine there. With its purchase, I can create livelihoods for the native population. These are the things I was offered in return for my cooperation, and I agreed. He also asked for a green stone that belonged to my family."

Could that be the same diopside that Mr. Caan had in his possession?

"A green stone? Was it around the size of an almond with a symbol carved into it?"

Ulya frowned. "Yes, it was…"

"The symbol—the characters—what did they look like?"

Ulya traced them on Lydia's palm. They were the runes for NMM: Neamhan, a Celtic goddess of war and, along with Macha, part of Badb. She fell into thought, but Ulya was more concerned with the previous topic.

"The 'Prince' merely wanted my gem. I was then transformed into a vessel for that demon, and at that point, I could no longer disobey." Still sitting, she clung desperately to Lydia's shoulders. "I

beg you to save me, Miss Carlton. Lord Ashenbert has long been fighting the Prince for supremacy over the underworld, yes?" Her phrasing made it sound as though they were two gangs at odds. "That would make me an enemy spy. I shall be tortured and killed as an example to others."

Lydia could not entirely dismiss the other woman's concerns, despite how hyperbolic they seemed. Edgar could certainly be as merciless as any gangster.

"I have no one to depend upon but you. I ask that you help me flee this place."

There came a knock at the door before the fairy doctor could even decide on a reply. Ulya immediately held her breath as Lydia froze.

"Have you finished changing, Lydia?" Edgar called.

She stammered a panicked response. "Almost!"

"Would you like me to call for the maid?"

Lydia had originally turned down his offer and come up intending to get changed by herself. She hadn't wanted anyone to see her torn clothing or the injury on her chest. Edgar was evidently repeating his offer because he was on the hunt for Ulya. No doubt he had foreseen that "he" might have come to threaten Lydia.

"No, thank you. I shall be out in a moment."

"Are you sure?"

"Quite sure."

The door was flung open the moment the words were out of her mouth. Ulya was still frozen with her hands on Lydia's shoulders and had no time to hide.

"I *did* think it strange that the door wasn't shut completely. Normally you would have lost your temper and accused me of peeping had I tried to address you whilst you were changing. Instead, you said 'thank you.'"

Am I really so quick to lose my temper?

As he approached Ulya, Edgar unsheathed the rapier in his grip. Naturally, Ulya wasn't about to keep still. She knocked over a small nearby table as she tried to dodge the earl's blade. He deftly jumped over it and thrust the point of his sword at her. Lydia screamed, but the rapier only pierced Ulya's jacket sleeve before becoming lodged in the wall. However, it proved too soon to

celebrate. Having pinned Ulya to the wall, Edgar let go of his sword to push her against it, and then struck her with his knee.

"Stop it!" Lydia rushed at Edgar, forgetting that she was wearing nothing but her camisole and three layers of petticoat. "The responsibility for all of this lies with the Prince!"

"He was attempting to lay his hands on my fiancée. I shall cut him to pieces!"

"No, Mister—*Miss* Ulya is a woman! She hasn't done anything to me!"

Edgar fell still with Ulya still in his grip. He swept his gaze up and down her several times, his brows knitting together. "A woman, you say?"

"Yes! Please, you must allow her to explain herself!"

"I wonder..." Edgar glared at her threateningly before suddenly slipping his hand between her legs.

"Edgar! What are you..." Lydia cried out in shock, her face bright red.

However, Edgar was perfectly composed as he took a step back and pulled his rapier from the wall. "I was simply making sure. It is imperative that one does not merely take an adversary at their word."

Drained of her tension, Ulya slipped down to the floor.

"So you see, Lydia, you mustn't be upset that I touched another woman." Though there was amusement in his tone, Edgar did not sheathe his sword. His gaze was sharp as he regarded Ulya from above. "There remain questions that need to be asked. Miss Ulya. Am I to take it that you are a homosexual?"

Lydia was confused by his question, while Ulya frowned and shook her head.

"But you stole a kiss from Lydia?"

"I was under the Nightmare's—the demon's—control."

"It is nevertheless the truth."

"I cannot entirely recall—"

Edgar swung his rapier again, scattering a tuft of Ulya's black hair. "That hair will act as your atonement. You ought to count your blessings that you are not a man and that your hair was all I could cut." Finally sheathing his rapier, he stared down at Lydia. "Lydia, I have yet more questions for Miss Ulya and shall have her escorted to a separate room. Meanwhile, would you mind terribly

repositioning yourself behind the sofa?”

Suddenly realizing how underdressed she was, Lydia hurried to get away from him and do as she was told. As she did so, Edgar called toward the door, at which point the brawny twins from Scarlet Moon immediately entered.

“Forgive us, my lord. We believed our charge to be unconscious, and so we were lax in our security.” Hence how Ulya had managed to escape from her room.

“Please be more careful in future. It has become apparent that Miss Ulya is in fact a woman, so please ensure that you treat her with due *care*.”

Lydia had to wonder about the purpose behind his emphasis.

After looking at Ulya and exchanging a surprised glance, the twins nodded. They saw her out, and Edgar gave a heavy sigh before seating himself in a nearby armchair, his back still turned to the sofa that Lydia was hiding behind.

“Forgive me. I have put you through something so terrifying yet again.” He sounded thoroughly dejected.

“It’s all right. It wasn’t your fault.”

“I made a promise to protect you. I have failed.”

“That is not my view in the slightest.”

“Do you mean that?”

“Edgar, I want to get dressed.” Though she knew he couldn’t see her, she still felt restless talking to him without being fully clothed.

“I shall take my leave in a moment. Just tell me this: did learning that Miss Ulya is a woman relieve you of your earlier agitation? You looked so utterly heartbroken out in the rain. I was cursing myself for it.”

It was too simplistic to say that Lydia felt better because the person who had kissed her was a woman. However, it no longer seemed to weigh so heavily on her. It had to do with how all girls of the middle and upper classes were taught. Anything that occurred between women could be forgiven, but any form of intimacy with a man outside one’s family was seen as most improper. It had been instilled in Lydia to stay away from bad men, and she knew how poorly society looked upon the morally loose women who had failed to keep their purity. At the same time, she had never quite learned what made a man “bad.” Though her father had raised her with a fair amount of leniency relative to

other families, she was confident that this was an area in which he had been just as strict as any other parent.

Regardless, women and girls had to be extremely careful when it came to the opposite sex, and a kiss from a man whom they were not properly courting was considered outrageous. Lydia had to be doubly careful because she hadn't grown up with brothers or had any close male friends as a child. In short, no one would find fault with an affectionate kiss between women, whereas she had known since childhood that such a kiss between a man and a woman had an entirely different implication. While it wasn't as though she and Ulya were close, the sense that she had been defiled had vanished upon learning that the latter was a woman. Suddenly, Lydia wondered whether Edgar saw it that way, and she became anxious.

"Do you consider what happened to be unacceptable? Miss Ulya answers to the Prince, so perhaps you now consider me impure…"

"I have no idea where that notion has come from, but you ought to know that it is utter nonsense."

While the immediacy of his response relieved her, she also became aware of how embarrassing her concern was. "Please do not misunderstand. I am not especially preoccupied with your perception of me." Her reply only served to emphasize the opposite. Offering any further excuses would only make her seem less convincing, so she was left with no choice but to fall silent.

"My only concern is that you are putting too much pressure on yourself to appear resilient."

Edgar stood up, and Lydia's body was suddenly flooded with nerves when she realized he was looking in her direction. Naturally, he couldn't see her, and neither could she see him, but she knew he was facing her.

"Though I realize this might mean little to you, I wish to make it clear nevertheless. No matter what may come to pass, I shall continue to love you, my fairy."

Lydia's heart started to pound, and her body felt so hot as to make her restless. She kept her muscles rigid as she sat with her knees pulled up to her chest. Though Edgar was speaking in impassive tones rather than his usual flirtatious manner, something about his words sounded utterly miserable to her. *Was* he miserable, she wondered.

“Going forward, you may find that *my* actions are unacceptable to *you*. I shan’t ask you to change your perceptions. However, I believe that acting too covertly will only cause you more anguish in the long term.” There was a disquieting undercurrent to his words.

“Could I ask you to elaborate?”

“I would not anticipate another encounter with Miss Ulya if I were you.”

It took a moment for the implication to sink in. Was it Edgar’s intention not to let her live, even after he had extracted the information he sought from her?

“No, Edgar! Miss Ulya needs help!” Before she knew it, Lydia had jumped out from behind the sofa. “She had no choice but to act according to the Prince’s wishes!”

“I can only guess at what she might have told you, but the Prince’s confidence and leniency is limited to those whom he trusts implicitly.”

“She was compelled to do as she was told because of the Nightmare!”

“Oh, yes? She does not appear to be one so easily threatened to me. I have thought so since our very first encounter.”

“Please do not kill her.” Lydia clung desperately to Edgar’s arm, only to be taken aback when he started to stroke her head. It seemed he hadn’t noticed he had broken his promise.

“Do you hold me in contempt?” he asked, his brows coming together to create a sorrowful look.

Contempt? The word hadn’t so much as crossed Lydia’s mind.

“Be that as it may, you are my last remaining hope. As long as you hold some sympathy for me, even to the smallest degree, I ask that you not leave me until everything comes to an end.”

Lydia knew that he had done unspeakable things in the past. He did not know mercy when it came to the Prince’s underlings, but she was aware that the Prince had slaughtered many of *his* companions in ways that were far crueler. As such, it was difficult to outright denounce Edgar’s methods. Never had she held him in contempt. Even if she struggled to fully understand him, they had spent so much time with one another and worked together several times, and he had invariably proven himself a capable commander.

While Lydia only had her expertise and abilities as a fairy doctor, she was the only person who could put such assets to use in order to protect Edgar and his companions. And if the earl had yielded to the same sentiment and compassion that dwelled within Lydia, he would long have lost absolutely everything.

"I do not possess the means to stay your hand, and I have fully accepted that all I can do now is assist you to the last. But I do not want you to become indifferent to enacting such cruelty. I do not want you to lose sight of your conscience." Lydia tightened her grip on his arm.

He pulled her into a comforting embrace. Though she knew they were both making a mockery of his promise not to touch her, she could not bring herself to let go of him. She had expressed to him a most earnest wish. At the same time, she knew that she could not stand to be without him, no matter what he might do. She had known it for a long time—known that she loved Edgar. It hadn't taken the Nightmare's vision for her to know that she wanted him to treasure her more than any other woman. And if there was one thing she would not allow, it was for him to become like the Prince.

"I'm here," she continued, "and I shan't go anywhere. So please, before you hurt anyone, just take a moment to reflect. If it is the Prince's desire that you lose everything and be thrown into despair, then I refuse to let myself be stolen away. I refuse to allow that despair to come for you. I…"

"Will you marry me?"

Lydia hesitated. Her fear was borne of her love for him. If she accepted his proposal, she would want to be the only one in his heart. She wouldn't be able to allow even the slightest sentiment for another woman. And yet she knew she would have no control over the matter. She would suffer for it even more than she did now. As far as Edgar was concerned, if a woman was not Ermine, she was simply a convenient distraction. That is, if the Nightmare's vision was to be believed. Who was to say it wasn't true? Knowing that, could Lydia really marry him?

"You care for me. But you cannot marry me?" he asked.

It was difficult for her to convey the complexity of her feelings. She had put everything she had into her assertion just now, but her silence seemed to have convinced Edgar that it stemmed from

nothing more than her usual sympathy.

“Lydia, if that is the case, then I’m afraid this is all a little too much for me. Though I have not taken any drink or substance, my endurance is beginning to wear thin.”

She was still in her undergarments. And yet she was caught in his embrace, pressed right up against him. His arms remained firm around her.

“Then I think you ought to let go of me.” Panicking, she tried to pull away.

“I don’t think I can…”

“You… I beg your pardon?”

“Would you strike me?”

“I’m sorry?!”

“I fear it is the only thing that can stop me.” His fingers ran down her cheek and softly raised her jaw. “Unless you—”

So she slapped him, without thinking, and before he could finish his sentence.

***

“My lord, what on earth happened to your face?” Paul was the first to inquire about the red, hand-shaped mark on Edgar’s cheek when he visited the earl’s study. Tompkins, Lewis, and Jack all had an inkling of its origin and possessed the good grace not to call attention to it. Paul, however, was a little less discerning about such things.

“I was subject to a passionate display of affection.”

“My lord?”

“Never had I thought she would strike me quite so hard.” He had been so endeared to her that he hadn’t wanted to let go and had only meant to gently tease her. “I made an error in judgment. I ought not to have asked her to hit me.”

“Was that not obvious at the time?”

“Firman, might I suggest that you also allow your beloved to strike you? Far from turning you off her, it will stoke the flames of desire. It was like tightening a noose around my own neck, all while being unable to lay a real finger on her.” Edgar smiled at his openly exasperated friend and rose from his chair. “Anyway, do you have any new information for me?” he asked expectantly.

Paul seemed to remember his business amid his bewilderment and quickly stood up straight. “Ah, yes, I do. We have located Mr. Caan’s widow.”

“Oh yes? Where is she?”

“I have brought her with me. She was concerned that the demon would come for her next, so I managed to convince her that your lordship would protect her.”

“Meaning that the demon killed her husband, yes?”

“That is what she seems to believe.”

It appeared that the Nightmare had indeed played a role in the London Bridge murders. There was no doubt that Mr. and Mrs. Caan were in possession of key information.

“I shall have Lydia accompany me.”

He could already sense that the discussion would turn to the topics of runes and goddesses.

Tompkins called Lydia to the parlor after she was dressed. He had told her that Paul had come with the wife of Mr. Caan, the man who had possessed the diopside bearing Macha’s name. Edgar and Paul were already present when she entered the room. At length, Mrs. Caan was shown in by Tompkins. As pallid and haggard as she looked, she was properly dressed in her mourning clothes.

She gave a quick curtsy before looking at Edgar and asking in a feeble voice, “Might you be the Blue Knight Earl?” Her eyes wandered around the room restlessly, and she gave off a fearful air. “Will you truly protect me from that horrifying beast?”

“Mrs. Caan, having come to me, there is no longer anything to fear. I have with me a highly skilled fairy doctor.”

The woman glanced in Lydia’s direction, still seeming anxious. “If I may be so frank, I was uncertain whether I should come. I was trying to think of someone who might believe that my husband was killed by a demon. That was when I recalled you, who received the title of the Earl of Ibrazel. However, if you will excuse the discourtesy, my husband often said you were an impostor.”

“Consider yourself excused. Please do go on.”

“The Blue Knight Earl’s lineage ended a hundred years ago. That, he would say, is beyond doubt.”

It was indeed true. But for Mr. Caan to have known that, there

must have been a hundred-year-old link between his royal heritage and the earl's. Lydia studied Edgar's expression. He glanced at her and nodded, showing that he was thinking along similar lines. They were finally within reach of the connection between the Ceylonese diopside and the legendary Irish goddesses. Whoever had carved that name into the stone must have been well-versed in British folktales and fairies. It would make sense had it been the Blue Knight Earl of a hundred years ago.

"There was an ancestor of mine, a countess, Lady Gladys Ashenbert, who lived during that time. She formed a pact with one of your husband's ancestors. Would I be correct in thinking that he perceived a link between the characters carved into the Hadiyan diopside and the current spate of murders?"

Edgar spoke as though he had known as much for some time, though Lydia suspected he had come to the conclusion moments ago, just as she had.

"Lady Ashenbert made every effort to prevent the crisis that was soon to befall Britain at the hands of the Unseelie Court. I daresay the diopside was essential to her battle. Though she lost her life, the earldom did not end with her." His words seemed to be perfectly calculated to remove all doubt from Mrs. Caan's mind.

Indeed, a look of relief crossed her face. "Your lordship *must* be the Blue Knight Earl to know all that… If only I had come seeking your counsel sooner. Perhaps my husband needn't have died. Believing that your lineage had ended, he concealed his true name and heritage and endeavored alone to protect the gem from that evil society that seeks to harness demonic powers."

"Said society is precisely whom Lady Ashenbert was fighting against."

The Prince's organization.

"I believe so too, and that calamity would befall us should all three stones fall into that society's possession. There was mention of the Blue Knight Earl's final testament…"

"What kind of calamity?"

"I do not know the details. I know only that the diopside apparently manifested as the power of a superior demonic creature that once pledged allegiance to Hadiya's royal family. Therefore, I am not sure what would come of the stones being

gathered by outsiders."

"There may well be a descendant of the family who intends to misuse them, for example."

"Or perhaps gathering the stones will resurrect the Goddess of War," Lydia interjected. "Badb is a merciless spirit, Edgar, but those who follow her are guaranteed victory. We believe that the Prince is a Jacobite, a supporter of James II, who was exiled from Britain. It is therefore no wonder he seeks those stones."

"In which case, Lady Ashenbert was determined to keep the goddess's power from the Prince's clutches."

The Prince himself was an amalgamation of the blood shed at the Battle of Culloden a hundred years ago and the black magic possessed by the Unseelie Court. Such a vicious battle had never been fought before, and Charles Edward, James II's grandson, had suffered defeat. Many of his supporters were residents of Scotland and Ireland: people with close links to the fairies who were said to have developed from ancient gods and goddesses. It was possible that Charles's side had sworn revenge against his enemies, the House of Hanover, and utilized dark sorcery to revive the forgotten, ancient war goddess using the blood spilled on the battlefield. Given the era in which the battle had taken place, there would have been a fair number of people in the Highlands with knowledge of fairy magic, including those capable of abusing it.

"I wonder whether Lady Ashenbert noticed an increase in the strength of the Unseelie Court and moved to suppress Badb's power. I believe, however, that it would have required an equally powerful tool," Lydia said.

"And is that what led her to use the diopside of the Ceylonese demon?" Edgar asked.

"Exactly."

"But it belonged to Hadiyan royalty, who treasured it. They may have had a long-lasting friendship with the Blue Knight Earldom, but using it in such a manner would only have been to Britain's benefit, not theirs. I wonder whether you can provide any insight, Mrs. Caan."

"As colonization advanced, the family was forced out of its land and scattered," she began quietly. "I am told that my husband's great-grandfather came over to Britain with the earldom's assistance and managed to make a life for himself. Given the bond

between them, I do not see why the Hadiyan side would have hesitated to allow Lady Ashenbert use of the stones' power."

"And so the goddess was sealed away in the diopside while she was still regaining her vitality. That must have been the deed that Lady Ashenbert risked her life to complete," Lydia said.

In doing so, she had restricted the power of the Prince, born by occult means, and his supporters, driving them from Britain in the process. However, she had been unable to take his life. That was why the current Prince had killed every member of the Blue Knight Earl's bloodline and was attempting to retrieve the goddess's power, which Gladys had taken from his relative.

Their guest continued. "Two of the three stones have already fallen into enemy hands. Macha, belonging to Mr. Caan, and Neamhan, belonging to Miss Ulya."

Edgar nodded gravely.

"Only Morrigu remains. She is the most powerful of the three goddesses."

"And the goddess will return once all three stones are gathered?" Edgar asked.

Were that to happen, Britain might see a repeat of the terrible battle fought a hundred years ago. Who could be in possession of the third diopside? Was there someone else related to Hadiyan royalty, or had it been passed on to someone with no connection whatsoever? The Prince must have been searching for it, and beyond that, Lydia was worried about Raven.

Ermine had said that Raven's spirits would no longer obey Edgar were the boy to come into contact with the diopside. She would wager that all the spirits of Hadiya were followers of the powerful demon that had become the stones. As the master of said demon, so too would Hadiyan royalty hold dominion over Raven, regardless of his own wishes. If such royal blood was still out there, and that person happened to answer to the Prince as Ulya had, then what would happen to Raven? He might become Edgar's enemy, just as Ermine had.

"Mrs. Caan, might you be privy to the location of the final stone?" Edgar asked.

"I am afraid not. Only one stone has ever been passed down through the generations of my husband's family since they lost their native land. Nor do I know how the Blue Knight Earl—how

Lady Ashenbert was able to locate them. My husband sensed that there was someone who sought his diopside and that the demon had him in its sights, but that was all."

It sounded like Mr. Caan had both a tolerance for and a sensitivity to the spiritual, much like Ulya.

"He was right. I wonder whether the demon will come for me now," she concluded.

"I do not believe there is any reason for it to do so at this point in time. Be that as it may, the fact remains that your husband's lineage had an enduring friendship with the earldom. Please allow me to do what I can to put your mind at ease." Edgar looked at Paul. "Did you follow all of that, Firman? Report to Mr. Slade, would you? And escort Mrs. Caan to the Wileman Hotel."

Edgar owned the hotel. The security would be flawless, and there were several members of Scarlet Moon staying there.

Paul nodded and saw Mrs. Caan out before swiftly returning to Edgar's side with an anxious look on his face. "My lord, you seem to be rather short of hands at present. I know of someone who could prove a useful and capable servant, if not quite to the same degree as the one you have lost."

With Raven gone, Lydia had also been nervous about the estate's safety with only the Scarlet Moon guards there to protect it. But Edgar shook his head.

"Raven is the only servant I require. Quite apart from anything else, I am capable of protecting myself."

It seemed that witnessing how Raven had lost his senses and turned on him had made him resolved to prove himself the boy's one and only master. Edgar had claimed that he could keep on fighting as long as Lydia stayed with him, but she suspected he had always relied on Raven remaining by his side, even if he lost everything else.

Lydia watched Paul leave again, strongly convinced that they had to rescue Raven no matter what. "Where do you suppose Raven was taken? The Prince's hideout?"

"We have been questioning Miss Ulya on the matter, but she has only been sharing information about herself. She claims that her loyalty to the Prince came about as the result of deception and threats. However, that she won't let slip even the most trivial of information tells me she has been extremely well trained."

If that was true, then perhaps her earlier behavior had been an act designed to garner Lydia's sympathy.

Edgar glanced at her and added, "I haven't yet made any permanent decisions about her."

There came a sudden hum from the window. "Ye wanna know where the raven wean's ended up?" Kelpie was sitting on the frame in his human form of a dauntless young man. When exactly he had arrived was a mystery. A daring smile on his face, there was a challenging glint in his eye as he looked at Edgar.

"Do you know, Kelpie?" Lydia made to run to him, only to be pulled back by Edgar's hand.

"You won't tell us for nothing, correct?" he prompted the fairy.

"Aye."

"Then you may take your leave. We've nothing for you."

If experience had taught Lydia anything, it was that Kelpie was hoping to obtain her through this deal. However, the next thing out of his mouth defied her expectations.

"Give us the Nightmare's vessel."

Edgar blinked. "You want Ulya?"

"I cannae jist let the Nightmare run free. It's had a taste of Lydia's blood."

Lydia put her hand to the wound on her chest, recalling how the demon within Ulya had inflicted it.

"Meaning that it will go after her again?"

"Aye. So I need its cage."

"I take it that you are here under Ulysses's orders."

Kelpie scowled at the mention of the boy's name. "Are ye daft? Ah'm no gonna be that wean's tool. He fooled me once, and right now, ah'm thinkin' about what kinda revenge ah'm gonna take. But ah'm more concerned about the fact that ye cannae protect Lydia from the Nightmare, Earl."

Edgar looked most offended, possibly because Kelpie was right. "If I give you Ulya, you will tell me where Raven is, yes?" he asked cautiously.

"Aye. Ye wanna be gettin' that foreigner outta here. Do that, and ah'll tell ye. Ah, and ah'll be taking Lydia too while the Nightmare's outta its vessel. Jist till I can be sure the thing cannae touch her no more."

At that, Edgar seemed to lose his temper and snatched up his

rapier. “So, you came for Lydia after all. Get out of my sight!”

“Wait, Edgar,” Lydia said. She couldn’t see how they had any hope of saving Raven without Kelpie’s information. “I shan’t be gone long. Kelpie doesn’t lie.”

“Lydia, just because one doesn’t lie directly doesn’t make one incapable of deception. There is such a thing as lying by omission.”

“There is no need for concern. I am a fairy doctor. I excel at bargaining with fairies.” Although she knew that her experience was sorely lacking, now was the time to ensure that Edgar had confidence in her.

“No.”

“But we need to rescue Raven.”

“We can do that by our own power.”

“If the Nightmare runs rampant again, it could affect him too. Kelpie would never do anything to harm me either.”

“He is trying to take you from me.”

“I do not belong to you. I do not belong to anyone!”

Lydia was only trying to do what she believed was best for Edgar. However, it seemed that he had taken her declaration as a rejection. His brows knitted themselves into a pained expression. Still, the hand that was holding her back loosened its grip slightly, making her more determined than ever to see this through.

“Wait for me, Edgar. I really shan’t be long.”

Recognizing that she couldn’t afford to doubt her decision, she approached Kelpie’s outstretched arms. Just as it seemed he was about to pick her up, he transformed into a jet-black horse. She seemed to float in the air for a moment before landing on his back.

“Lydia!”

Kelpie leaped from the window, leaving a powerful wind in his wake. Lydia held fast to his mane and closed her eyes.

Edgar’s cry echoed in her ears. “You would leave me on my own?”

Anxiety gripped her then. She had promised to stay with him, to do what she could to keep him from despair, even if she was no replacement for Raven. Had it been wrong to leave him, even temporarily?

He has Mr. Firman and Scarlet Moon. He isn’t alone, she thought, hoping to convince herself.

An Unstoppable Heart

Kelpie had taken Lydia to a cabin beside a stream. They had arrived in the dead of night when it had been too dark to see anything. When Kelpie left, she had lain on the bench inside, where the rhythmic running of the water and the creaking of the waterwheel must have lulled her to sleep. She woke up to find a fire in the wood stove, which explained why she didn't feel cold. However, Kelpie wasn't able to handle fire, meaning it must have been lit by somebody else.

She rubbed the sooty window glass and peered outside. The thin, pale mist of dawn enshrouded the surroundings, smoking out the silhouettes of the trees and the little bridge over the stream. Even when she opened the window and leaned out, there was too much mist and shrubbery beyond the bridge to see very far, let alone any sign of houses. If nothing else, she could deduce that she was still in the human world. The lamp in the cabin had a label on it from the same manufacturer as the one Lydia had at home.

Dropping her gaze to her hand, she could see that the moonstone on her ring was glowing. Now a symbol of her engagement to Edgar, it had belonged to the first Blue Knight Earl's guardian fairy and bride. Only he was able to remove it, and wearing it meant that no one, Kelpie or otherwise, would be able to take her to the fairy world without her consent.

Considering she was still in the human world, she couldn't have been that far from London. She wondered whether Edgar had set Ulya free yet. It was as she was pondering that a feeble voice called out to her.

"Lydia..."

She looked around the cabin, but there was no one there.

"Help me, Lydia..."

Searching for the voice, she peered past the ladder that was set up in the cabin's center.

"Nico! What are you doing here?"

The pouting gray fairy cat was tied to a post. "How on earth

could you stay sleeping when I've been calling for you all this time? Just look at what that dastardly kelpie did to me!"

"Forgive me," Lydia murmured as she quickly untied him. "What are you doing here? Did Kelpie capture you?"

"Would that I knew his intentions! I was sleeping peacefully last night when he came out of nowhere, grabbed me, and brought me here! Initially, I thought he merely wanted me to light the fire for him, but then he bound me and told me to stay put!"

Fairy though he was, Nico was capable of using matches. That seemed to be what Kelpie had wanted him for.

As soon as he was free from his ropes, Nico got to his feet and began to smooth down his ruffled fur. "Why did you come here with him, Lydia? You left the earl completely down in the dumps!"

Lydia's heart stung.

"He even hunted me down and tried to drag me to his bed last night! He certainly has a childish streak about him. I do wish he would act his age!" As much as he complained, Nico didn't seem to resent Edgar's behavior to the extent he used to.

"It sounds like you are taking a shine to one another."

"What? I'll have you know that I put up with him for *your* sake." Nico put his paws on his hips and looked up at her, exasperated. "You have no *idea* what I go through."

"What do you mean 'for my sake'?"

"Isn't it obvious? You have feelings for the earl, don't you?"

"Feelings?! For that philanderer?!"

"I have been by your side since you were born. And even if I hadn't been, a *fool* would know if he saw you sneaking from the house at night, come back crying about the earl calling another girl's name, then sending him away when he came to see you the next day."

Her cheeks red, Lydia kept her gaze fixed on the floor.

"*That* is why I am prepared to spend time with someone so arrogant that he would treat me like a common feline at the drop of a hat."

She wasn't sure that was entirely true. Nico was easily tempted by expensive tea and treats. She shot him a glance to see that he was still stretched out on his back and looking very pleased with himself.

"Anyway, Nico, I wonder what Kelpie is thinking." Keeping her

gaze away from him, she changed the subject in an attempt to quell her embarrassment.

"Who knows? Let's just hurry and leave before the horse comes home," Nico said, only to turn around and see Kelpie standing imposingly right in front of him.

"Ah'm no a horse, *cat*," he said, delivering a swift kick.

The fairy cat screeched as he tumbled through the air and landed atop a shelf. "What was that for?!" he demanded, fur bristling, but Kelpie didn't seem intimidated in the least.

"I got ye some breakfast, Lydia. I bet ye're hungry." He tossed a bundle of bread and cheese onto her lap. "I didnae steal it. I left a duck in its place. Ye cannae swallow a duck, can ye?"

Clearly, he was trying to emphasize how considerate he had been for her sake, and she supposed she wasn't ungrateful for it. Better that she be presented with bread and cheese than a dead duck.

"And where's *my* breakfast?" Nico grumbled.

"Huh? Get yer own!"

"How was I supposed to do that when you tied me up?!"

"You may have half of mine, Nico," Lydia said.

The fairy cat stamped his feet. "You are missing the point: I find this horse's attitude to be most distasteful!" However, the moment Kelpie scooped him into the air, he froze, and the anger seemed to leave him.



“Stop. Release me. I doubt I would make for a tasty meal!”

“Put him down, Kelpie,” Lydia pleaded.

“I don’t wanna eat no bag of skin and bones. No fairy’d get tamed by no fake earl either. Ye’re a cat through and through. Now listen. Ye tell the earl that the raven lad’s in a house near London Bridge. West of the station with a red roof and a black chimney. There’s a pot of daisies in front of the entrance. That oughta be enough.” With that, Kelpie tossed him out of the window.

“Nico! Kelpie, what was that for?!” Lydia cried, grabbing him.

All of a sudden, the anxiety came for her. Kelpie had promised to give Edgar Raven’s location in exchange for Ulya’s release. She had envisioned that she would witness the Nightmare being placed back inside Ulya before returning to Edgar with the promised information. But now Kelpie was giving Nico the job of messenger. There was no longer any need for him to seal the Nightmare away or to let Lydia go free.

“I am going back to London with Nico,” she declared.

“What’s the rush?” Kelpie was standing in front of the cabin’s only door.

“What happened to the Nightmare?”

“It’s eaten its fill, and the powerful magic inside the raven wean has made it huge. It’s no gonna fit inside a human body no more, so I tied it to London Bridge. That bridge’s been like the city’s barrier since ancient times, right? Ulysses was gonna tie it there once it was big enough anyhows, and it does seem to attract magic, that place. Plenty of people pass by to keep it fed too.” That had been Kelpie’s plan from the very beginning. Ulya could no longer serve as the Nightmare’s vessel. “Don’t ye be goin’ near that bridge now, awright?”

And yet he had struck a deal with Edgar.

“Then why did you ask for Miss Ulya back?”

“So that I didnae hafta involve ye in the deal. I thought it’d get ye to come with us. Ye’re here now, and I cannae put the Nightmare back into Ulya anyhows, so I don’t hafta send ye back to the earl.”

“You deceived me!” Lydia shoved him as hard as she could, but he didn’t so much as twitch.

“Ye think ye’ve got a right to complain? First there was yer engagement with the earl, and then Ulysses pulls the wool over

my eyes. Ah've decided ah'm no takin' nonsense from no humans no more!"

Just because one doesn't lie directly doesn't make one incapable of deception. There is such a thing as lying by omission.

Lydia was utterly frustrated with herself. What was it that made her so blind to truth again and again? Meanwhile, she continued to mistrust the man she wanted to believe in the most, preventing her from being honest about her feelings for him. And so too had she already broken her promise to stay by his side. Her fear of getting hurt constantly led her to hurt him.

"Away with you, Kelpie! I need to go back to London!"

The water horse was tall with a perfectly symmetrical frame. He didn't seem to feel it as Lydia battered his chest. If anything, her palms were stinging. Kelpie took her hands up in a gentle grip to stop her, as though worried her delicate fingers would redden and swell.

"Do ye hate us now?"

"No. I just…"

"Please. I jist want to protect you." Kelpie's earnest request left her unsure how to proceed. "The earl's enemy is no ordinary man. I know it sounds daft comin' from us, but he's like a demon takin' on human form. Well, he *is* human, but it's like he's holdin' the resentment of a thousand souls."

It was difficult for Lydia to picture such a thing. However, she was confident that the resentment in question must have belonged to the royals exiled from Britain and their adherents slaughtered through wars and oppression.

"You've met the Prince?"

"Ah've glimpsed him."

"Is he capable of manipulating fairies in the same way that Ulysses is?"

"I dunno. Seems all the fairy stuff is left up to Ulysses. Either way, the fact that he exists in the first place is horrifyin'. He attracts poison. Y'know how the earl charms people, or how the people in this country go mad over someone jist 'cause they're royalty? The Prince has the same kinda power that can influence people and destiny. Only it attracts dark emotions and destructive desires."

This was the same man who had tried to drive Edgar to despair and fill him with darkness in order to subjugate him. His methods

had not changed. He wanted the earl to suffer to the very last.

Lydia should not have left. He had asked her not to—asked her whether she held him in contempt, his face cracked with loneliness. Before Paul, Tompkins, and Scarlet Moon, he was his usual flippant, immodest self. But Lydia should have recognized how hard he was working to keep himself afloat, knowing that he couldn't afford to despair even upon losing Raven. She was the only one to whom he showed any weakness. Perhaps that had only come about because she wasn't one of the followers who pinned all their hopes on him, but she was by no means dissatisfied with it. She had thought she might have been able to understand him, even as unremarkable and naive as she was. When she pictured him as an ordinary man in his early twenties, she even felt capable of supporting him. It wasn't much, but it gave her presence beside him value.

"I want to go back," Lydia managed, her gaze stuck on the floor. She was well aware of how worried Kelpie was for her, but it would never be enough to keep her there.

"Do ye love the earl?"

While she might have lacked the passion that Ermine was capable of, Lydia believed that she loved Edgar in her own way.

"Can he really treasure ye alone?"

That was something that only Edgar, in his heart of hearts, could answer. And regardless of what that answer might be, all Lydia knew was that she wanted to return to him.

"Kelpie, you do not suffer from solitude. Humans are not like fairies."

"If ye get lonely, then ah'll jist make sure that ye're never alone."

"It isn't as simple as that. Only when one manages to alleviate the loneliness of another can one truly dispel the loneliness from one's own heart."

Lydia had never known the joy of being wanted by another until she had met Edgar. Because of the fairies who kept her company, she had never thought herself lonely. And perhaps she hadn't been, but she had never imagined that her presence could bring relief or comfort to somebody else. Nor had she known how much morale and growth could spring from being needed in that way.

She had always been careful to keep her guard up around Edgar. And yet she had fallen in love with him anyway because,

behind the presumptuous touches and the flippant seduction, he had always seemed so happy just to be looking at her. He had sought her out to ease his pain and told her that he would be able to keep fighting as long as she stayed with him.

"I want to be with Edgar."

"Ye'll be killed."

"I want to save Raven with him."

"What's that lad and that snake or bird or whatever he carries inside him— What's he to ye?!"

"My friend."

"Ye cannae go. No now." Kelpie set his devilish eyes on her, their luster like two black pearls. She could feel his magic. It had the power to bewilder and to rid its target of thought. An ability common to all kelpies, it was how they dragged humans into the water's depths so that they could feed.

Lydia felt the strength leave her body as dizziness took over. Kelpie was no longer hesitating to apply his magic, and it seemed the moonstone wasn't enough to defend her from it. So far, he had been held in check by Lydia and Edgar's engagement, the vow they had exchanged purely for the sake of convenience. Although it was still enough to prevent the kelpie from taking her from this world, his dark, pearly eyes were adamant that he would not let her return to Edgar.

Kelpie caught her in his embrace. She was weightless, floating atop a pool that was perfectly still, and completely content to let go of her consciousness.

***

As soon as Nico informed Edgar that Raven was in the vicinity of London Bridge, the earl located the building in question and had his men keep watch over it. Reaching it meant crossing to the other side of the river, passing under the railway bridge, deviating west from the main road, and progressing through the squalor located there. Among the row of tall, narrow houses sat one that matched Kelpie's description perfectly.

Meanwhile, Edgar had also ordered a search for the cabin in which the water horse was keeping Lydia captive, though it had already been empty by the time it was found. He had his carriage

pull up by the crossroads in the early-morning gloom, making sure the narrow, four-story building remained in his sights, if only just. As he waited for word from his subordinates, Nico's advice came to mind.

"Kelpie will never stray far from water."

Though it wasn't enough information to locate the water horse, Edgar found himself wanting to run this way and that in search of Lydia. He forced himself to suppress the urge and stay put. Danger was inching closer to him by the day, making Raven his top priority. While Edgar could be certain that Kelpie would not harm Lydia, the Prince could and would kill Raven on nothing more than a whim. Edgar did not think that the villain would do so thoughtlessly, for his men had been looking into the secrets behind the boy's spirits and abilities, but there was no telling what lengths he would go to in order to deal a blow to the earl.

A sudden cry interrupted his thoughts.

"Blue Knight Earl! I must thank you for your patience!"

A leaf floated in through the carriage window, landed atop the seat, and began to flutter in a most unnatural manner. It was the coblynau's way of signaling where it was to Edgar, who could hear it but not quite see it. Though he didn't understand why, he had learned that there were some fairies, such as Nico and Kelpie, who were capable of showing themselves to any and all humans, and some like the coblynau, who weren't. While he might not have possessed the Blue Knight Earl's latent ability to see fairies, this never seemed to bother the coblynau.

"I am not too late, am I? I came as soon as I heard you were marching to war!" The trouble with this fairy in particular was that its values seemed stuck in the Middle Ages.

"Is something the matter, Coblynau?" Edgar picked up the leaf and laid it on his palm. While he couldn't be sure that the fairy had come with it, he kept his eyes on it as he waited for a response.

"I have come to tell you of the suit of armor my family has forged for you!"

"Suit of… In this day and age?"

The coblynau responded by placing something the size of a silver coin in his palm.

"What is this?"

"The armor in question," it announced proudly.

“For you and your brethren to wear?”

“No, for *you* to wear. I would be honored were you to do so.”

Edgar paused. “Thank you.”

“Oh yes, and I meant to advise you that it would behoove you to begin arrangements to marry Lady Lydia as soon as possible. The moonstone’s power will be strengthened once your engagement becomes official. No longer will you need worry about that kelpie sticking his nose in!”

Edgar wished it were that simple. On that subject, it seemed the coblynau had only words to share and could help no further. Despite the earl’s oncoming despondency, the leaf fluttered out of the carriage window, presumably along with the fairy. The brawny twins of Scarlet Moon appeared in its place.

“My lord, there is still no sign that anyone is inhabiting the building. There have been no signs of fire, nor any light.”

The other houses were starting to rouse for the day, the smoke emanating from their chimneys and the illumination glowing behind their curtains sure signs of life within. The building they were watching seemed to be an exception.

“No one came to answer the door when we dressed as peddlers and rang the bell.”

Edgar listened to Jack and Louis’s report, placing his miniature suit of armor in his inside pocket as he fell into thought. Perhaps Raven had already been moved to another location. “This is the same area in which we lost Miss Ulya yesterday, correct?”

To comply with Kelpie’s demands, Edgar had loosened his security slightly the day prior to provide her with an opportunity to flee. It was quite possible that she had been suspicious of the ease with which she had managed to escape, and she might have foreseen that she would be followed. Nevertheless, she had crossed London Bridge and gone west from the main road, which was where she had suddenly vanished. If that building was indeed a safe house for the Prince’s organization, she might well have taken refuge within it while ensuring that it appeared empty.

That said, the potted plants that lined the front of the house and its windows made it seem more like an ordinary, cared-for home than a hideout of any description. The plants in question were flowering beautifully, and Edgar wouldn’t have been surprised to see a maid emerge at any moment to sweep the front

of the property.

“Should we attempt to enter, my lord?”

“Not before we have just the slightest bit more information,” Edgar replied, casting his gaze over their surroundings. It was too early for there to be many people out under the city’s thin layer of fog, and he quickly noticed the plump, bearded man approaching the carriage.

“Forgive the tardiness, my lord. I have information on the owner of this property.” It was Slade, one of Scarlet Moon’s leading members.

Taking the note offered to him, Edgar wasted no time in scanning it. The family name was Webster. The man of the house was a retired clerk for a railway company and now lived alone with his wife. He had been talking recently at his local pub about how his younger brother had returned from India with his adopted son.

“Ulya and the Prince,” Edgar murmured.

Did that make the elderly couple who lived at the address the Prince’s underlings? Or had he murdered Webster’s brother and taken his place? Ulysses had also assumed someone else’s identity in order to enter the country. The Prince might have used the same tactics. He wore a bandage to cover the large burn on his face, which meant he didn’t even need to resemble the brother in question.

“This man who returned from India was apparently rather successful over there and has paid for the Websters to go away as a present. Mr. Webster was seen to be in high spirits as he told the pub’s landlord that he would be gone for a while and unable to drink there for some time. This conversation took place two weeks ago.”

“I wonder whether the Prince orchestrated their departure to use their home as a hideaway,” said one of the twins.

“How generous of him.”

As he listened to his subordinates discuss the information, Edgar knitted his brow unconsciously. Putting aside the disturbing premonition and the tragic memories within him for the moment, he alighted from the carriage. He sheathed the merrows’ sword, an heirloom of the earldom, in his sword belt and raised his head. Though he had no idea if the blade would prove useful, he had no

way of fighting demons or other sinister creatures, and to that end he hoped it might at least act as a ward of sorts. It was an excellent weapon to use against human opponents, in any case.

"Let us enter."

Slade frowned at Edgar. "Enter how, my lord?"

"Through the window. I do not believe we have any other option but to break the glass."

"That I understand, my lord, but please do not tell me you intend to go yourself!"

"Why shouldn't I?"

"Your lordship is a prestigious earl and our leader. To break and enter into another's home like a common thief would set a bad example for the younger—"

"Is there a law that states that a lord mustn't enter a home through the window?"

"There is a law that states that one mustn't trespass upon another's property."

"You once described yourselves as a society of gentlemen thieves and proved yourselves as much through your actions. Pray tell, when during that time did you see the law as cause for hesitation?"

"Were your lordship to be arrested as a thief and sent to jail, you would become a laughingstock, made worse by the fact that you are a nobleman breaking into a commoner's house."

Now and then, Slade would make a point of objecting to Edgar's reckless ways. Presently, however, the earl had no time for a debate.

"I have sneaked into women's houses on countless occasions, but never have I been branded a thief." Gesturing to Jack and Louis to follow him, Edgar drew closer to the building.

"The woman who occupies *that* house is elderly!"

"I shall pretend I mistook it for the house next door." Edgar glanced back at Slade to make sure he wasn't going to argue further—though his mouth was still open—and continued. "Mr. Slade, I want two men coming in through the back. Then I need you to ensure that we have watchmen and messengers to cover all the strategic points outside."

"The house next door is unoccupied," Slade muttered bitterly, before instructing the men accompanying him.

If Raven really was inside, it was imperative that Edgar be a part of this.

The intruders came to an empty bedroom on the second floor. They went on to check the rest of the rooms, but those were just as deserted.

"Search every nook and cranny. There may be a hidden room."

"Yes, my lord," the man next to him replied. Edgar didn't know whether he was with Louis or Jack.

That was when the other twin called from the top of the stairs, "I think I've found Mr. and Mrs. Webster! They're in the loft!"

Rushing upstairs at once, Edgar could only let out a heavy sigh at the tragic sight of the corpses before him. As expected as it was, he still found his fists curling by his side. The Prince had been quick to realize that Edgar would be coming here. It was not a far-fetched deduction given that the earl had captured Ulya, but murdering the couple to make sport of him was taking things a step further.

"Why go to such lengths?" The young man's voice was shaking. He had yet to learn that the Prince's organization perceived creating a corpse or two to be no worse than a distasteful practical joke. "Wait a moment, I think there are three of them... There are too many arms."

Edgar's gaze fell on a torn black jacket, which he lifted with his cane to inspect. "This belongs to Raven."

Needless to say, the discovery inspired panic, but he kept his breathing even as he scanned for the head that accompanied the extra arms. He found it on the floor beside a chest, and its long hair immediately identified it as female.

"The maid was the third victim," one of the twins said.

"Their servant. She must have been the only one in their employ."

Edgar closed his eyes briefly as if in prayer. "It doesn't appear they have been dead for very long. Presumably they were held captive here before that."

"That seems like an awful waste of effort," said the other twin.

"Kill them too early, and the smell would have caught someone's attention," Edgar muttered, turning on his heel. He clenched his teeth. It was a clear invitation from the Prince to a

party that was only just beginning.

“My lord, there’s an opening behind the wardrobe!” came a cry from below. The twin who had been disturbed by the corpses must have rushed from the attic as soon as the opportunity presented itself.

***

He was being held in an iron cage like some sort of savage beast. Ermine approached with an oil lamp in her hand. The pitiable boy was huddled up inside it. Not only was he in the cage, but his hands had been bound.

“Won’t you eat, Raven?”

The bread that had been tossed between the bars lay untouched. She hadn’t expected him to have an appetite, but the way he was now, she couldn’t even see him reacting if an assassin showed up to kill him. Even when she held the lamp up to him, he didn’t wince away from its light, but kept his eyes wide open, allowing her to see the deep green within them. She believed that his contact with the Nightmare had awakened the demons deep within him and that they were devouring his consciousness, leaving his eyes soulless and unseeing. He used to fall into this state frequently. His spirits would take over, pushing him into a rampaging slaughter, and once he was finished, he would stop reacting to anything, as though completely exhausted. To be at the mercy of the spirits’ unwieldable strength must have taken a heavy toll on his mortal body.

Ermine’s heart wrenched as she gazed at her brother. She had never thought she would see him like this again after they started serving Edgar.

“Don’t even think about setting him free.”

Ermine slowly turned around to find a dark-skinned man standing in the doorway. She kept her guard up as she fumbled for a weapon. As she did so, she recalled that this person, Ulya, was supposedly a woman who dressed in men’s clothing, but she had no confirmation of that. Ulysses had mentioned that Ulya had failed the task assigned to him, and yet here he was, alive and without so much as a scratch on him. It didn’t make sense.

“I was under the impression you had been captured,” Ermine

remarked, lowering her guard ever so slightly when she realized that Ulya didn't seem especially tense himself.

"I was allowed to escape, perhaps to act as a decoy. A rather obvious move on the part of your former master. I wonder whether he is truly as proficient as the rumors say."

Ermine had never known Edgar to release one of the enemy's underlings unharmed. Nor would the Prince be quick to offer mercy to a returning subordinate who had failed their mission.

"Didn't the Prince punish you?"

Ulya scoffed. "I am an exception." He turned his gaze to the tiny room's sole window. "The venue for the party is far beyond the other side of the Tower of London. I hear that the Prince will be spectating from afar in his box seat. I have come to assign your role."

Though Ermine's arrival hadn't been premeditated, it seemed that this place was somehow involved in the Prince's plan. A disturbing shiver ran down her spine.

"It is no secret to the Prince that you went behind Ulysses's back to come and check on the prisoner."

"My role?"

"You are to show the invitee to the party."

"The invitee being Lord Ashenbert?"

"Precisely. I daresay he will be making an appearance very soon."

Ermine dropped her gaze to her hands. She was still alive. Edgar had her seal-skin, and with it, the ability to immediately take her life no matter where she might be. But he had yet to do so. Perhaps it was because he could do so whenever he liked that he hadn't felt it necessary to rush the deed. Just how much defiance would it take for him to grant her her peace? While there was more she hoped to achieve with the life she had, she was prepared to accept her death whenever Edgar chose for it to come. At the same time, she was bound to obey the Prince for as long as she continued to live.

"It still baffles me, you know. It takes an eccentric sort to pluck a servant from his enemy and make her his own."

Ulya seemed to be in a particularly good mood, and Ermine could only stare at him. He followed the Prince in order to fulfill his own ambitions, just as she did. However, she couldn't help but pity

him a little. It was clear that he didn't understand the man he was working for in the slightest.

"I detest the Prince. He knows it only too well, and yet still he uses me," said Ermine.

He was using her because it would cause Edgar to suffer. The moment he no longer needed her or she did something to endanger him, he would kill her. There was nothing more to it than that.

"Do you truly believe that the Prince will return your land?" she asked Ulya.

"Are you suggesting that I am naive? When you so begged the Prince to make you the earl's woman?"

Ermine fell silent. Ulya had reminded her that the Prince was highly enjoying the present situation. But there was no doubt that he already knew Ermine had ulterior motives in joining his side. His true amusement came from the fact that she had once begged him to give her to Edgar in an attempt to curry favor with him, but that since then she had helplessly pined for the earl.

"You and I are the same. We both want something that we do not have, and so we have no choice but to rely on the Prince's strength."

"No. We are not the same," Ermine replied with an unintentional firmness.

"That may well be the case. *I* possess the power to fulfill my ambitions without relying on the Prince. It is a realization I have come to only recently." He smirked down at Ermine. "I was the cornerstone. That is why he wanted me." His voice taking on a sudden, pompous tone, Ulya pulled something from his jacket pocket. "As white as your skin is, you possess the same Hadiyan blood as I do, yes? That makes you one of my subjects. You may find yourself working for me from now on, along with your brother."

He had two deep-green diopside stones. One had belonged to the late Mr. Caan. The other was likely the one that had originally been in his possession. Both of them were supposed to be with the Prince, not here.

"The Prince gave these to me. I am a representative of Hadiyan royalty, and with these, I can tame the spirits that dwell within this boy."

His aim was to subjugate Raven. The elder of the forest had once told Ermine that the king's gems existed to control the spirits within his soldiers. It was how those spirits became his loyal guardians. However, Raven had placed his trust in Edgar and accepted him as his master, allowing him to keep control of his spirits without the need for such stones. Would the diopside prove more powerful than Raven's will?

Ulya slowly approached the cage, and Ermine had no choice but to watch with bated breath. Reaching through the bars, he touched the stones to Raven's downcast brow. The boy's head shifted. His eyes retained their vacant expression. However, his attention did seem to be focused on Ulya, indicating that the spirits were reacting to the diopside. There was no sign of his own resolve.

Producing a key, Ulya unlocked the cage. "Come, my servant."

Raven tried to stand up carefully, his hands still bound. Upon taking an unsteady step out of the cage, he staggered, and Ermine instinctively reached out her hand. The moment she did so, he grabbed it aggressively, wrenched it upward, and pushed her to the floor. He swiftly twisted her arm to keep her pinned down, and she knew that if he'd had a blade on him, she would be dead. His hands were still bound together.

"Cease."

A single word from Ulya and Raven went still. He released Ermine. It had always been difficult for Edgar's commands to reach him once he started fighting, and yet he obeyed the stone-holder perfectly.

"My, aren't you well-behaved?" Ulya said, looking pleased as he had Raven kneel before him.

"What do you intend to do with him?"

"The Prince says he wishes to see this boy harm Lord Ashenbert. He will also have his spirits seek out the third diopside. According to him, they ought to be able to sniff it out, seeing that they answer to the stones. However," Ulya murmured, his lip curling, "what neither the Prince nor Ulysses knows is that I already *have* the third stone. How powerful do you suppose I shall be with both the legendary Rakshasa *and* the war goddesses that they seek on my side?"

***

A sliver of light no thicker than a needle was shining into Lydia's eyes, rousing her. She sat up on the grass. The sky was overcast, and while it wasn't clear where the sun was, she felt like she was bathing in its brilliant light. Her eyes naturally fell to her hand, where the moonstone was faintly glowing. It was a mysterious stone, its luster affected by the waxing and waning of the moon. At present, it looked brighter than usual, likely because the full moon was near. Either that, or it had worked to awaken Lydia from Kelpie's spell.

Speaking of Kelpie, she could not see him. There was a gentle hill beyond the sparse trees. Though there didn't seem to be any houses, there was a narrow path where the grass had been pushed apart. This was her chance to flee. She got to her feet. Kelpie probably hadn't expected her to wake up and had gone in search of food.

Lydia started to follow the path, carefully descending the steep slope before her. She would place her faith in the ring that connected her and Edgar. She didn't know which way she ought to go, but if she followed the path, she was likely to run into someone eventually. She could ask them.

As it transpired, the first "someone" she came across was not a person. It was a small wrinkled fellow with a pipe in his mouth, and he sat on a pebble by the roadside. Lydia stared down the end of the path and around the hill, but she still couldn't see any humans or houses.

"Excuse me, my good neighbor, I wonder if I might trouble you for your time?" she asked the fairy. "Do you happen to know the way to London?" She placed a piece of the cheese Kelpie had given her on the grass.

The fairy seemed to glance up at her from beneath its headgear. Woven from leaves, it could not quite be described as a hat. "Are you in a hurry?"

"Yes, indeed I am."

Puffing on its pipe, the little brown fairy turned its head to the right.

"Thank you, my good neighbor," she said, setting off again.

Lydia had been walking for some time when the sky suddenly

started to darken. Though it was too early for the sun to be setting, the light was steadily fading regardless. Before she knew it, the straight path she had been following was gone, and her surroundings had been replaced by dense forest. She let out a startled cry as she remembered that a fairy's shortcut was never to be trusted. She was supposed to be a fairy doctor, and yet she was still prone to a carelessness that made her feel quite wretched. That said, she could not turn back. She had to push on. If she stopped or tried to change course, she would become lost. Her only option was to continue in the direction the fairy had told her to follow, no matter how far she ended up walking.

Running her fingertip over her ring as if to draw courage from it, Lydia pressed on.

***

There was a large opening in the wall behind the wardrobe. It passed through into the terraced house next door. Slade had mentioned it was empty, so perhaps Ulya and the Prince's underlings had been helping themselves to its use. Edgar and the members of Scarlet Moon had gone through the opening and continued until they had arrived at a curious room with an iron cage in the center.

"What on earth is that?" one of his companions asked. "Were they keeping a wild beast here?"

"It was for Raven," Edgar murmured under his breath.

Though the cage appeared to require a key, it had been left open and contained nothing but bread.

"They locked your lordship's young servant in a cage?"

The next question was where he had been moved to.

"I neglected to mention that, in his current state, Raven might well be more dangerous than any beast."

His entourage exchanged baffled glances.

"In that case, how are we to rescue him once we locate him?"

It was as Edgar was pondering the question that he felt the presence of a newcomer and whipped around to find Ermine standing at the door.

"I beg you to accept that Raven is gone." Her gaze sliding over the battle-ready members of Scarlet Moon, she stepped farther

into the room without putting her guard up.

“Accept it? Are you suggesting I give up on him?”

“Ulya has possession of two of the diopside stones, and Raven’s spirits have accepted him as their king. Raven has become an obedient Hadiyan soldier who fights only for his ruler. Should he be ordered to kill you, my lord, I daresay he will not hesitate.”

In other words, the situation was even more fraught than when Raven’s rampaging spirits had taken over on the bridge. Was that enough of a reason for Edgar to turn his back on him and walk away? The spirits might have accepted Ulya as their master, but it was unthinkable that Raven himself had.

Edgar began to walk toward Ermine. He glared at her steadily as he approached, and though her beautiful features stiffened in discomfort, she did not look away.

“Surely you did not come here just to tell me that? Unless the Prince ordered you to?”

“I am still capable of acting of my own volition.”

“So it was your volition that led you to caution me? I would appreciate it if you stopped wasting my time. You know where Raven is. I shall have that information, even if I need to force it out of you.” Edgar pressed on, despite how it pained him to have to treat Ermine with such hostility.

“My duty is to lead you to him.”

“I see. Thus putting on a most fascinating show for the Prince.”

“I may lead you, Lord Ashenbert, but you are to be alone,” Ermine whispered so that only he would hear her. Presumably she wanted to avoid inviting objections and commotion from the members of Scarlet Moon.

If anything, Edgar was more than happy to go alone. He didn’t want Scarlet Moon exposed to Raven’s bloodlust. “I shan’t be ‘alone.’ Raven will be with me,” he murmured.

No matter the situation, Raven was his most trusted servant. He would bring him back. If he was then to face the Prince, he would do so with Raven by his side.

“Lead the way,” he said firmly before his companions could pick up on the fact that Ermine intended for him to come alone. He touched the merrows’ sword that hung on his hip under his frock coat.

Edgar had received the title of Blue Knight Earl. Ulya might have

had two of the three stones that held the goddess of war, which would bring conflict to Britain, but that did not relieve him of his duty to stand up to his enemies. The merrows who had once defended the sword and the earldom's banshee had both accepted him as the title's new holder. He would do everything in his power to rescue Raven and prevent the goddess's resurrection. Such was the duty entrusted to him by Lady Gladys Ashenbert, who had herself fought against the Prince's organization.

"Are you certain, my lord?" Ermine asked.

"I daresay Ulysses will make an appearance if you do not do this. I would much rather follow you than him."

She reached a hand out toward him and touched his shoulder. Jack and Louis immediately tried to jump into action, but she must have already been applying her magic.

"Please close your eyes for a spell."

He did so, but only for a second. It was enough for the scenery around them to change completely. They arrived at an overgrown garden that seemed to have been abandoned for some time. The shrubbery was in desperate need of pruning and the flowers in the bed were horribly withered. The brick footpath was crumbling and buried beneath fallen leaves.

Edgar stood facing Ermine under the arbor. No doubt the withered grapevines had once been thick and full. All that was left on the arch's skeleton were the circling branches that used to form the stitches of the feature's tapestry. Looking up, he was struck by the impression that he had been trapped in a birdcage. He brought his gaze back down to the woman who was standing before him. She returned his stare with deep-brown eyes full of pain. They shouldn't have been able to be this close given their current relationship, and yet her gaze contained not a hint of hostility or hatred. Seeing her as she was now, Edgar could not bring himself to believe that she had turned against him out of resentment.

"Do you remember when we fled from the Prince and didn't sleep for three days and three nights?" he asked.

Ermine nodded, despite the question's apparent irrelevance. Perhaps the same memory had come to her.

"Once we were all but certain that we had shaken free from our pursuers, we took refuge in a neglected garden much like this

one.”

The escapees had huddled together and slept beneath an arbor that had formed a tent with its hanging vines. Edgar had observed the moon between the gaps in the leaves above and contemplated their immediate future. He had pondered their survival and how he might protect his companions from the Prince’s shadow. He had thought, too, about Ermine.

“I shall never forget that night.” The eyes she looked at him with now had not changed in the slightest.

It had been Edgar’s intention to watch over her always in order to ensure her happiness. But now he realized, as she looked at him with that same powerful affection, that it had been egotistical of him to pray for her happiness while constantly rejecting the feelings she held for him. Though he had always tried not to think too hard about it, he was not the same man he had once been. He treasured Ermine as much as he always had, but he himself had changed. While he didn’t believe that was why she had betrayed him, he did feel as though it played a part in why she had been unable to stay with him.

“The Prince wanted to invite me here specifically, did he? That would be in rather poor taste.”

Ermine looked crestfallen. “I have never shared my memories with him.” As though snapped out of a dream, she averted her gaze and tried to walk away.

He grabbed hold of her arm to stop her, certain that this would be his last chance to say what he needed to. “Ermine, I want you to forgive me.”

“Forgive you for what? I am the one who betrayed you.”

“I am in love with Lydia.”

“I know.”

“Were you still to bear a grudge against me, I had been prepared to offer you my life. However, that is no longer possible. My life belongs to Lydia. I want to live with her, and I shall die for her alone.”

Ermine looked conflicted, and he wondered whether she thought his words cruel. He pressed on nevertheless.

“I had always tried to put you first, before even my lovers. I believed we were connected by an unbreakable bond like that shared between brother and sister. To me, love was not something

that lasted, but what I had with you was different, and I believed that it would allow me to atone for my sins and fulfill my responsibilities…although I do have to wonder whether all of that was the result of conceit on my part."

"My lord, you are mistaken. You showered me with more love than I could ever have hoped for."

"It wasn't enough, was it?"

Ermine said nothing.

"Had I kept my distance from you, we could both have buried the memory that we so dearly want to forget. At first I thought that I had considered doing so because of how precious you are to me, but perhaps I merely wanted to shed my burden."

To do so would have been against Ermine's wishes in any case. She had wanted Edgar to need her, despite the pain it caused her.

"Having met Lydia, I understand it all so much better. Despite how I may suffer, I do not wish to take the easy way out. I possess an affection for her that I wish to see through to the end. I do not wish to let go of her, even at the cost of hurting her or involving her in my conflicts. If anything should happen to her, I shall regret it enough to welcome death, but even then I shall no longer be stopped."



Ermine let out a quiet sigh, her lips twitching into the hint of a smile. Perhaps she found irony in the fact that his feelings mirrored her own at last, but that he held them for another woman. “My only hope is that you do not cause Miss Carlton too much trouble.” The intense sarcasm in her tone was very like Ermine.

When Edgar released her, she took a few steps back and looked up at the sky through the gaps in the withered branches above. “That is where the Prince is. He has been observing these proceedings the entire time.”

A hot-air balloon was floating in the distant sky. It seemed to be approaching the air above the garden. The Prince was here to observe who would die: Edgar or Raven. Either that, or he would have Raven stop moments before dealing the finishing blow so that he could be entertained at length by the half-dead earl’s suffering. Whatever the case, if the boy truly came at Edgar ready to kill, then he would not live long unless he responded in kind.

“Would this happen to be the fairy world?”

“No, we are still in the mortal realm.”

That was something, even if it didn’t offer Edgar any explicit advantage. All it meant was that he was less likely to be affected by any unexpected illusory magic. He did wonder whether Raven would really pull a weapon on him. He had come here without knowing how he might call the boy’s consciousness to the surface and away from the spirits’ domination.

Suddenly, the bush beside them began to rustle, and Ermine fell into a guarded stance.

“There you are, Earl!”

Edgar let out a silent sigh of relief. A gray cat pushed its way through the arch’s dry branches, then hopped down to stand in front of him.

“What are you doing here, Nico?”

The cat spared a quick glance for Ermine, who had relaxed, then launched into an explanation. “Scarlet Moon was up in arms, saying you had suddenly vanished along with Ermine, so I hurried after you. They didn’t even see the large hole in front of the cage.”

Had there been a hole?

“I told them where it leads, so I daresay they will be along sooner or later, though I can’t be certain that they understood me

exactly, so— Ah, never mind, there's trouble afoot! Lydia managed to escape from Kelpie and is on her way here!"

"Here? How does she know to come here?"

"Kelpie came barging into the estate demanding Lydia back but went to search for her when he realized that she wasn't there. It seems she asked a fairy for directions. Supposing she follows the fairy's shortcut, it will probably lead her to you."

"But this place is dangerous. It is a stage set by the Prince."

"It is?!" Nico immediately jumped back up into the bush to conceal himself, his tufty tail remaining in full view. However, he seemed to have a change of heart, because he stuck his head out from the leaves to look up at Edgar. "A fairy's shortcut leads one to the place that they are in a hurry to reach. Lydia must be anxious about you and Raven."

"Then we must find her as soon as possible and tell her to leave."

Nico nodded his agreement from between the leaves.

"My lord, I would advise against wandering this place haphazardly. The abundance of shrubbery makes for excellent hiding spots. You could be caught off guard and attacked at any moment," Ermine warned him.

All the more reason not to allow Lydia to come here.

"Such a warning makes one wonder about your true loyalties, Ermine."

She fell silent. Edgar gave her a smile in lieu of bidding her goodbye. Their parting was unavoidable. Ermine had likely chosen her path, even if it wouldn't lead to the same happiness that Edgar wished for her. Meanwhile, he had chosen the woman he loved above all others, and it was not her.

"I thought I had made myself quite clear," he announced. "When it comes to Lydia, I shan't be stopped."

With that, he launched into a run.

The Dwelling Place of the Two Shadows

He didn’t sleep during the nights after his spirits rampaged. It was like he was constantly being stabbed by the ends of many needles. His entire body felt impossibly heavy, and he couldn’t so much as stir, let alone lie down. He could only sit hunched over like a clockwork doll that needed winding. Even then, he was ignored. He was forever locked alone in that room, which was fitted with iron bars. He only left to receive training. There were teachers who taught him how to use and master weapons. The instructors were replaced frequently; it was not at all rare for the boy to kill them during practice.

He made exceptionally quick progress in the art of combat. However, the stronger he became, the more difficult it was for those around him to handle him. Even when physical punishment was incorporated into his training, he would continue to inflict injury on anyone and everyone once he started fighting. Eventually, no one dared approach him unless his limbs were bound. Those who did approach him did so with the purpose of assaulting him when he was in no state to resist.

Naturally, the Prince did not look kindly on his subordinates who abandoned their duty of training the boy. A variety of scholars and doctors attempted to look into the boy’s mental condition, but even the use of unorthodox religious leaders and practitioners of witchcraft proved mostly fruitless. Though the Prince was interested in his unique abilities, if they could not be harnessed, death was the only fate that remained. Soon, that declaration began to echo in the boy’s ears.

It wasn’t long before he was kept permanently chained, and those who attended to him were expected to do no more than toss food between the bars he was kept behind. By now, they were simply waiting for the Prince to give up on the boy. That was when everything changed.

“I have found your master,” his sister said. Unbeknownst to anyone else, she would often come to see him in the dead of night. This was the first time she had brought company.

Said company was a young man with gorgeous golden hair and facial features so perfect that he almost seemed supernatural. Somehow, he had the key to the cage. Unlocking it, he stepped inside without hesitation.

He smiled down at the boy and stroked his cheek. “Will you be my soldier?”

The spirits seemed to prostrate themselves at his touch, but the boy couldn’t be sure that he hadn’t imagined it. They had been eager to lash out for all the senseless violence that had been inflicted on him. Unable to do so because of his bonds, that pain, like needles poking into his nerves, had continued to bother him. But now it ebbed away.

“I can save you from this hell, but you and your spirits must pledge allegiance to me.”

The boy didn’t know anyone else who spoke or carried themselves like this man did. Though he knew nothing of nobility, he did have a vague understanding of why his sister had called the stranger “master.” The man did not fear the boy’s spirits. Though he must have heard how dangerous they were, he did not hesitate to touch the boy and address the unknown entities as though he were born to rule. The boy was enveloped by a quiet sense of safety that was far removed from any form of oppression or intimidation.

“I have a name for you so that you might become a new version of yourself.” The man dubbed him Raven. “The creature that, according to ancient legend, ruled over all spirits. From now on, you will command your spirits.”

The boy caught the hand on his cheek in both of his. Previously the spirits would have snapped the man’s arm and smashed his skull to pieces. Now, however, the boy was free from even the slightest violent urge. Though no one had taught him to do it, he naturally took to one knee and pressed the man’s slender, pale fingers against his forehead.

***

Lydia continued to walk the gloomy forest path alone. The thick branches of the tall trees surrounding her completely blocked out the sky, making it feel like she was traversing an endless cave.

Now and then, the silence would be broken by an animalistic cry that she could not identify. The twigs hanging from large shrubs would catch on her hair and clothing. Though it made her jump every time, she did not stop walking. She knew that the giant trees and boulders that blocked her path and even the unsettling marshes were mere illusions. When she continued toward them, they turned out to be dead, brittle twigs, pebbles, and small puddles.

Fairy paths reflected the state of a person's mind. The road ahead would only become more challenging the more anxious she became. It was a dreamlike world fraught with magic, but Lydia pushed on. It was then that she heard another eerie cry, closer this time. She turned just her head in its direction. The creature spread its black wings and took flight, circling above her head before settling on a branch farther down the path and observing her. It was a gray-bodied, hooded crow. It could have been an ordinary bird or, given where it had appeared, a fairy's avatar.

According to legend, the three embodiments of the Goddess of War took the form of hooded crows. The disconcerting birds flew over the battlefield, seeking the blood of the vanquished.

"Who dares obstruct my path?" the crow seemed to ask. It might have been an illusion born of Lydia's imaginings about the goddess. It was sometimes said that illusions seen in the magical realm held some truth, but Lydia wasn't sure if that was so.

"You believe you can put a stop to me, Blue Knight Earl? A great war is coming. This island nation will be awash with blood. The Prince of Calamity has promised me that blood as an offering."

At the mention of that name, Lydia surveyed the crow more closely. The title belonged to the prince whom Lady Gladys Ashenbert had ousted from Britain. The king who had been defeated a hundred years ago had left behind a curse of sorts, which drew on the power of the Unseelie Court to give rise to the terrible prince. Understanding these events to be the origins of the Prince and the organization that opposed Edgar, Lydia couldn't help but listen more closely.

The crow went on. "The Unseelie Court of this nation will continue to strengthen. I am not the only entity that the Prince has called upon."

Who did the crow represent? Neamhan? Macha? Or Morrigu? It

seemed to be speaking to the Blue Knight Earl of old, likely Gladys herself. Was Lydia witnessing a past version of one of the goddesses reawakened by the Prince's organization?

"Blue Knight Earl, I am a goddess of war. I do not answer to anybody. I lend my protection to whoever offers me the most blood on the battlefield." The crow cawed from its throat, keeping its beak shut. It sounded like it was laughing. "You detest blood? Then you will not have victory. Oh, so you wish to prevent my revival? I suppose that is your subordinate, then."

The crow looked up at another branch, which suddenly began to shake. Lydia screamed as she noticed the giant snake coiled around it. She couldn't stand serpents, and she immediately started to run. However, no matter how much she ran, the snake was always there, hanging from a branch in front of her. It was permanently in view, like the mountain ridges from a train window.

The crow and the snake continued to glare at one another. The tension was maintained for some time until the snake suddenly made its move. It leaped at the crow, digging its fangs into the bird and trying to constrict it. Its adversary thrashed about and fought back with its sharp beak. It ripped off the snake's scales, but the serpent continued trying to swallow the crow even as it bled.

The violent battle raged on. The snake squirmed in pain when it was pecked in the eye. Struggling to free itself, the crow gouged out the other animal's eyeball. But the snake did not loosen its grip. At last it managed to wrap its jaws around the bird's head, at which point it constricted even more tightly. The crow was left lifeless as the snake continued cracking its bones and swallowing it whole.

At last, the snake started to move again, dragging its swollen belly along but keeping its head raised. It was then that it suddenly turned to look at Lydia. At some point she had stopped running, and now her legs were rooted to the spot. The snake's remaining eye was a deep, clear green, the same bewitching green as a diopside.

Gladys had made use of that precious Ceylonese stone. This snake was part of the ferocious demon from which the stones had come. The goddess had been on the cusp of awakening when it

had swallowed and imprisoned her, and now the terrifying demon seemed to have its sights set on Lydia.

The urgency of her situation had only just struck her when the snake leaped in her direction. She could only watch its gaping jaws draw closer until someone pulled her to the ground. The serpent skimmed her, and she heard the rustling sound as it seemed to land in the bushes. She was pulled to her feet before she could turn to look.

"You must leave this place at once." Keeping a grip on Lydia's arm, Raven broke into a run.

"Raven! What are you doing here?"

"I might ask you the same question. Is this not *my* dream?"

"Dream?"

Before long, they stopped in front of a shabby hut that more closely resembled a pile of dead branches.

"I am fairly confident that it won't pursue us this far." Raven gently released Lydia's arm. There was something apologetic about the manner in which he did so.

"Is this cabin a part of your dream too, Raven?"

"I believe so. I feel as if I have laid eyes on it before, long ago. As if I used to frequent it with my sister. But I cannot recall clearly. This was where the dream began."

Raven went on to explain that he had been wandering in circles since then. He knew that he needed to return to Edgar, but it was proving difficult. He wanted to wake up, but he couldn't. Whenever he progressed deeper into the forest, he would come across a hooded crow and a large serpent. They would fight, and the snake would emerge victorious. It would then turn on Raven and attempt to swallow him too. A second later, he would wake up. Or rather, he would *seem* to wake up, only to find himself in front of the cabin again. This time, however, he had found Lydia. It was the first change in his endlessly looping dream.

"I was following a fairy's shortcut on my way back to London. I wonder if this means I have lost my way."

"Is Lord Ashenbert safe?"

Lydia nodded. She wondered if Raven was unable to wake up because his body was currently under the dominion of his spirits. When they had rampaged on London Bridge, his willpower had no longer been enough to control them. She had no idea what had

happened to him after he had been taken by Ulysses, but given that he couldn't wake up, it was possible that his spirits were raging still.

"Perhaps you will be able to escape if we go together." Lydia took him by the hand. "Listen closely. You must keep your mind clear and simply follow where I lead you. Imagine you are a part of me."

"I can do that, Miss Carlton, but I do not deserve for my master's fiancée to lead me by the hand." Though Raven tried to gently untangle his hand from hers, she would not let go.

"This is an emergency, and I am sure that Edgar won't mind." The risk of them being separated was too great.

"I wish I could be so certain," Raven said anxiously.

Lydia had always thought that Edgar's "jealousy," much like his praise, was a trick he employed to capture a woman's attention. Perhaps that wasn't the case. "Then we simply shan't tell him."

"I cannot keep secrets from his lordship."

"If he reacts with anger, then I shall accept that I am wrong. Well, Raven? Is he that sort of man?"

After mulling it over for some time, he all but sighed his answer. "No, he is not."

It seemed her gambit had paid off.

"Then let's make haste," she said, setting off.

Raven followed in silence. There was no sign of the crow or the snake. Encouraged, Lydia grew certain that they would find their way out. Eventually, the branches above began to thin out, offering glimpses of the pale violet sky above, and the path before them started to grow a little brighter. That sky was brimming with light just like the cusp of daybreak. They were close to the exit. However, the brighter their surroundings became, the more sluggish Raven's footsteps seemed.

"We must hurry," Lydia pressed him. But then he stopped completely and let go of her hand. "Raven?"

"I'd forgotten. I cannot fight anymore. I hesitated to kill my master's enemy."

"Do you mean Ermine? Edgar told you not to."

"But even a moment's hesitation can prove fatal. That is also why I was unable to keep my spirits under control. I am not capable of protecting my master."

Their surroundings were getting much brighter now as the sunlight prepared to pierce the clouds. The overgrown forest was fading away. At the same time, Raven's body seemed to grow translucent. At this rate, he would not be able to wake up. Lydia hurriedly reached out for him, but she was already unable to touch him.

"Miss Carlton, if you should meet me in the real world, it is imperative that you keep your distance from me. And please pass these words on to Lord Ashenbert: The spirits within me can only see with my right eye. If they are in full control of my body, its left side is their weakness. Once I am slain, they—"

"No, Raven! You are Edgar's warrior! The proof lies within the human emotions you have developed!"

Lydia's cry proved to be in vain as Raven vanished completely, and she found herself standing in an unfamiliar ruined garden. It had been taken over by weeds and shrubs, and the only clue that it used to be a flower garden rather than a grove were the rows of Roman-style stone pillars. She wasn't sure if she was near London or if the detours she had taken from the path meant it had led her somewhere else entirely.

As she was surveying her surroundings and trying to get her bearings, she saw a figure emerge from between two pillars. It was Raven, there in front of her like he had stepped right out of the dream.

He must have made it after all!

Overjoyed, she made to rush over to him, only to stop when she realized that something didn't seem right. He wasn't wearing his jacket, and his tie had come loose. Raven was always vigilant about avoiding anything that could cause his master embarrassment. It wasn't like him to allow his appearance to fall into such a dire state. This was Raven as he currently was in the real world: a slave to his bloodthirsty spirits. In his hand he carried a knife.

Lydia immediately turned on her heel and ran. He gave chase, and almost at once, she could sense him right behind her.

"Lydia! This way!"

It was Edgar's voice. She had only just started to turn her head back and forth in search of him when a pair of arms emerged and pulled her into the shrubbery.

“Edgar…” She let herself all but collapse into his embrace, completely forgetting about the pigheaded shyness she would normally experience. She was so relieved that she even pressed her cheek to his chest. His arms tightened around her, making her heart feel full. “Edgar, I—”

But there was no time to exchange words. He immediately pushed her behind him and unsheathed his sword. There came a clash of metal. The merrows’ sword had caught Raven’s knife. Mustering his strength, Edgar just about managed to push Raven back. Then, taking Lydia’s arm, he broke into a run.

Raven was swift, and she worried that running was a waste of energy. But Edgar led them into a labyrinth formed by tall hedges. The vegetation had been left to grow wild, and it was difficult to discern the intended pathways. They pushed on nevertheless, and it soon seemed that they had managed to shake Raven off. Edgar continued to lead the way, cutting down the twigs that were in their path with his sword. Lydia kept turning her head to look behind them, even after their pursuer’s footsteps had faded away.

“Raven has a poor sense of direction. He ought to struggle in a place such as this.”

“Really?”

“He was forever getting lost on the estate when we had only just started living there,” Edgar said, slowing down to a stroll at last.

“And how is *your* sense of direction?”

“Hmm?”

“I just wonder whether we shall ever find our way out of here,” Lydia said nervously. There was a twig at her feet that could have been one of the ones he had cut down.

“There was a maze just like this one in the garden of the estate I grew up in. I used it to escape my dear, fussy aunt and my governess, who detested insects.”

Lydia found the thought of his antics as a young boy rather endearing. After all, she couldn’t have known of the scheme he had once devised to separate a visiting noble girl from her supervising lady’s maid and hide with her in the maze.

“Surely *that* labyrinth could not have had the same layout as this one?”

“Then let us wander it forever. That would suit me just fine so

long as you are by my side." Edgar stopped to sheathe his sword and smiled playfully at her over his shoulder.

"This is no place to live!"

"You would live with me if we were to find somewhere else?"

As usual, she wasn't sure how to respond and fell silent. Though she thought she loved him, she struggled to voice those feelings. "That is hardly the most pressing matter at hand, is it?"

"It is at the forefront of my mind at all times," he replied, pulling her toward him. "I missed you. I was fearful that you would never make your way home. When Nico—not you—came to tell me where Raven was, he said that Kelpie was still keeping you. I wondered whether you were staying with him of your own volition."

"Why would you think so?" Lydia stammered, not as keen to cling to him as she had been earlier. His arms were around her back, and he was looking at her so desperately and at such close proximity that her embarrassment won out this time. It was her feelings for him and the effort they inspired in her that allowed her to stay in place.

"Well, I thought you might have chosen Kelpie."

She had made it clear to Kelpie that she had chosen Edgar and had said things that she wouldn't have dared say in front of the earl himself.

"I promised not to leave you alone, didn't I?" Lydia knew she was being dishonest, and yet she still gave such a shallow excuse.

"Thank you. You really are too kind."

But she wasn't speaking out of kindness. "Edgar, strictly speaking, Kelpie is a fairy and not a man. He is my friend and I do not perceive him in…such a manner."

"What about me? Do you perceive me in that 'manner'?"

She knew how deeply the intense passion in his gaze was making her blush, and that knowledge prevented her from responding. He did not wait for her, instead pressing his lips to her temple. He then ran his fingers through her hair as though soothing her from the shock. Those long, slender fingers cradled her head. He drew it closer, and she could no longer look away. All she could do was close her eyes as he kissed one of their lids.

That was when she was hit by a sudden wave of fear. With her eyes closed, she couldn't see him. She couldn't tell if he was really

looking at *her* or somebody else. After all, he had promised her that he wouldn't force a kiss on her until she accepted his proposal.

"You said you would wait," Lydia murmured, keeping her eyes closed. The subtle change in the air told her that he had withdrawn ever so slightly.

"I did. I'm sorry."

No, you're not.

He had already broken his promise. Why was he now hesitating to break it further?

What on earth am I thinking?

Panicking, she unfastened Edgar's arms from around her and stepped back. Indeed, there were more urgent matters at hand, and she used that fact to quickly change the subject.

"What is this place, exactly? I thought Raven was being kept in a house in the vicinity of London Bridge."

"It seems that this is the arena the Prince has selected for Raven and me to fight in." Though he sighed slightly at her obstinance, Edgar did not hesitate to answer her question. He set off slowly through the hedge maze again.

Lydia followed, uncertain whether she was relieved or disappointed.

"Apparently, Raven's spirits have acknowledged Miss Ulya as their queen. As long as the spirits control him, he will regard us as his enemies."

"But you cannot fight him."

"I may not be able to avoid it if I get too close to him in his current state."

"Is there truly no way to escape this place? There is no need to confront Raven. It is the Prince you must defeat."

Edgar shook his head firmly. "I must have Raven back. He needs to retrieve his own will and remember the bond we share. Then he won't turn on me."

"You will be killed before that happens."

"I do not believe that the Prince wants me dead just yet. It is more likely that he wants to see my most trusted retainer beat me to within an inch of my life."

"Will Raven's spirits be able to stop at the correct time without his intervention?"

“They will follow Miss Ulya’s commands.”

That just meant the situation was even more dangerous. There was nothing to say that his life would be preserved. And yet he was going to face such danger anyway. In all likelihood, the state of things was already more painful for him than the question of his death. Ermine had betrayed him, Raven had been taken from him, and now he would be forced to fight the latter. There was nothing more disgraceful than to be pushed into a situation where he would have to kill or be killed by one of his closest confidants. The people around him were being trampled on and used as tools in order to force him into despair and resignation.

As late a stage as it was, Lydia found herself overcome by an intense disgust for the Prince’s methods. What upset her most of all was how slim Edgar’s chance of victory was.

“You mustn’t do this, Edgar. Raven cannot wake up. He doesn’t believe himself capable of protecting you anymore.”

The earl cut down another impeding branch. Beyond it was a fountain surrounded by a stone wall. They were at the maze’s exit.

Edgar halted and turned to frown at Lydia. “When did he tell you that?”

“While I was traversing the fairy’s shortcut. I wandered into his dream, and he said he couldn’t wake up. I believe part of the cause is that he doesn’t want to.”

“Why wouldn’t he want to?”

“Because he failed to kill Ermine and he cannot fathom why. He feels that he has suddenly become weak, useless. That is how the spirits managed to bury his consciousness when they rampaged, and he remains in that state now.”

Edgar’s brow knitted sorrowfully as he listened to her speak.

“I tried to convince him and lead him from his dream, but it proved impossible. And then he said…”

Lydia was genuinely uncertain whether she should divulge this information to Edgar, as vital as it was. Telling him would only push him one step closer to a heartrending decision. However, she was confident that Raven would gladly sacrifice his life should it grant Edgar victory over the Prince, and she knew that it was imperative that the earl interpret his servant’s words for himself.

“Raven’s spirits are blind in their left eye. That is their weakness while they control his body. He wished for me to share that with

you.”

Edgar looked up at the sky in silence. There was a grave expression on his face, and she wondered what decision he had come to. “Lydia, as I understand it, the Prince is looking down on this garden from that hot-air balloon. Occasionally, there are lights reflecting from it. I believe he is using them to communicate with Miss Ulya on the ground.”

It was only then that she spotted the balloon high above them.

“Although we should be hard to spot from the sky while we are in the hedges of this maze, we shall surely be seen the moment we step outside it. That is why I ask that you stay here. Nico is currently searching for you. With him, you will be able to escape this place without anyone noticing, yes?”

“Are you planning to go alone, Edgar?”

“You understand why I must when Raven is my opponent, don’t you?”

Lydia did not possess the means to defend herself against Raven, and Edgar would not be able to spare the concentration needed to keep an eye on her. However, the boy was under the influence of *spirits*. They might have originated in a far-off land, but they were still supernatural beings just like fairies. Lydia’s knowledge might prove invaluable.

“I am accompanying you. We may well find a way to wake him up, and then there will be no need to fight after all.”

“You said yourself that it was impossible.”

“But I wish to support you.”

“And nothing could make me happier, but the danger is too great.”

“Perfect. Give her over to us, then.” A moment later, a black horse had leaped over the shrubbery and was standing before them.

“Kelpie!” Lydia cried.

“Ah’ve been lookin’ for ye, Lydia. Ye gave us a fright when ye broke through my sleepin’ magic and wandered off home.”

“*You* were wrong to cast that spell in the first place. I made it quite clear that I wanted to leave.”

Now in human form, Kelpie scratched the back of his head, apparently embarrassed. But when he replied, he sounded indignant. “But didnae the earl jist say ye were in his way?”

“I certainly didn’t phrase it like that.”

“Exactly!” Lydia looked up at Edgar pleadingly.

“Nevertheless, Lydia, I am the only one who needs to face Raven. You must keep yourself concealed no matter what happens and wait for an opportunity to flee.”

“Guid. Ah’ll protect her.” Kelpie caught her shoulder.

“No. I am going with Edgar.” Like a petulant child, she shook his hand off.

“Ye want that wean to kill ye?”

“If you are worried about me, Kelpie, you will assist us in quelling Raven’s spirits!”

“Sorry, but those spirits are strong and have probably been around a long time. I don’t want nothin’ to do with this.”

When describing Raven’s spirits, Kelpie had said something about a bird or a snake. Something seemed to tug at the back of Lydia’s mind.

“Miss Ulya is here. As is Raven.” Edgar was looking beyond the hedges. “Your extravagant entrance must have signaled our location to them, Kelpie.”

Ulya seemed to be heading straight for the maze’s exit. The earl made to leave, but Lydia grabbed his jacket to stop him.

“Wait! There is one more important thing I’ve forgotten to tell you.”

“That you will marry me?”

“No!”

“Oh.” Despite the outrageously inappropriate timing of his quip, he looked disappointed.

“Move it, Earl,” Kelpie warned him.

Elbowing the meddlesome fairy out of the way, Lydia closed in on Edgar. “A snake and a crow!”

Within Raven’s dream, she had witnessed a snake with a diopside-like eye fighting the goddess who had assumed the form of a hooded crow. The boy’s soul contained memories of the past that he himself was unaware of.

“A snake and a hooded crow,” she repeated. “That is what dwells within Raven!”

“You will have to elaborate.”

“According to legend, the three Goddesses of War appear as hooded crows. I saw one of them in Raven’s dream. I am certain

that she was Morrigu, the third goddess. A snake then swallowed her. Supposing that snake was the demonic presence in the diopside that sealed the goddess away, there is no doubt in my mind that the spirits within Raven number two: the snake of the diopside and the embodiment of the goddess, the crow."

"Would that mean that Raven possesses the final diopside?"

"He does not possess a physical stone. Though the demon's core would ordinarily take that form, I believe that it was instead taken in by a human soul."

One of the superior demon's three parts had been employed to protect the royalty that possessed the two diopsides and, in doing so, had protected itself. This method had allowed humans to control the malevolent entity.

"In short, Raven *himself* is the third diopside that comprises the Rakshasa—the demon—and a goddess of war?" Edgar put a hand to his forehead as if to suppress the cold sweat that had no doubt sprung up there. Gathering the three stones in one place would reawaken the goddess. "That would mean that Miss Ulya already possesses the three pieces. The Rakshasa's power is currently imprisoning and suppressing the goddess, but the Rakshasa itself is also under Miss Ulya's control. She may be able to command it to release the goddess."

Raven did not currently have the willpower to resist his spirits' obedience to Ulya.

"Do you suppose the Prince is aware that Raven harbors Morrigu?" Lydia asked.

"If he were, would he truly allow Miss Ulya possession of the remaining stones?"

"Could *she* be aware?"

"The legend surrounding the diopside has been passed down through her family. She may well be aware. Moreover, she seeks the restoration of her country. She would have no need to rely on the Prince if she had the means to fulfill her objective by herself."

If Ulya attempted to revive the goddess, ridding Raven of any possible means of suppressing his spirits, then Edgar's victory would only be achieved by his servant's death. The boy's snake spirit would likely fall into a long slumber with Morrigu still in its belly, waiting for another human body to inhabit before it could reawaken. The Prince would be unable to harness Badb's power

for himself.

The question was whether Edgar would be able to kill Raven. Would knowing his servant's weakness and knowing for certain that he would never wake up be enough for him to find the strength? If not, his fate would be the one that was sealed.

"Edgar, the crow goddesses are ancestors of the fairies. And British fairies are my specialty." Lydia was terrified to leave him alone at this critical time. The anxiety that she might never see him again if she did so was suffocating.

"Don't be an idiot, Lydia, ah'm takin' ye whether ye like it or no. Otherwise ye're jist gonna jump out yerself or somethin'." Kelpie grabbed her arm, and this time his grip was too strong to be easily shaken off.

"Kelpie, Lydia is my fiancée. You have no right to take her."

"Awright, so ye're happy for her to leap out in front of everyone after ye get yerself beaten to a bloody pulp? Asides, this isn't the only time she's gonna be in danger. The Nightmare's got a taste of her blood, and yer enemies are probably gonna be after her again at some point, right? Jist lemme take her. Ah'll keep her somewhere safe till ye come to pick her up."

Troubled, Edgar gave a sigh but raised his head again almost at once. "Lydia and I have exchanged vows over the moonstone. When I come for her, I expect you to return her immediately."

Kelpie grinned. "Aye. Jist come as soon as ye're no dead."

"No, Edgar! You mustn't strike a deal with a fairy!"

"Do ensure that you take her somewhere I can actually *reach*, won't you?" Edgar said.

"Sorry to say it, but that pain-in-the-arse moonstone means I cannae take her to the fairy world. What do ye say ye come get her from her house in Scotland?"

"You mustn't, Edgar," Lydia repeated. "Even if he cannot take me to the fairy world, Kelpie will ensnare me with magic!"

"Ye're her fiancé, aren't ye? Isn't the love shared between humans s'posed to be more powerful than fairy magic? Or are ye too much of a coward to take the risk?"

"You asked me not to leave you, Edgar! I regretted leaving with Kelpie when I did! I came back because I realized I should never have gone in the first place!" She reached out a desperate hand toward him, but he made no attempt to take it.

“Ah’m no leavin’ ye here to die with the earl!”

Lydia continued to try to pull away from Kelpie, but then he picked her up.

Edgar gave her a calm, reassuring smile. “Thank you, Lydia. Your words are more than enough for me to have hope. As long as you wish to meet me again, I promise that I shall not die. And I shall do what it takes to tear down Kelpie’s magic.”

“You liar! You always make the most ridiculous promises!” What could he do against fairy magic when he didn’t know the first thing about it?

“I do not lie to you.”

“Another falsehood! You claim to love me and you flirt with me against my will, but your mind is so engrossed by another woman that you won’t even kiss me properly!”

“You are mistaken, Lydia.”

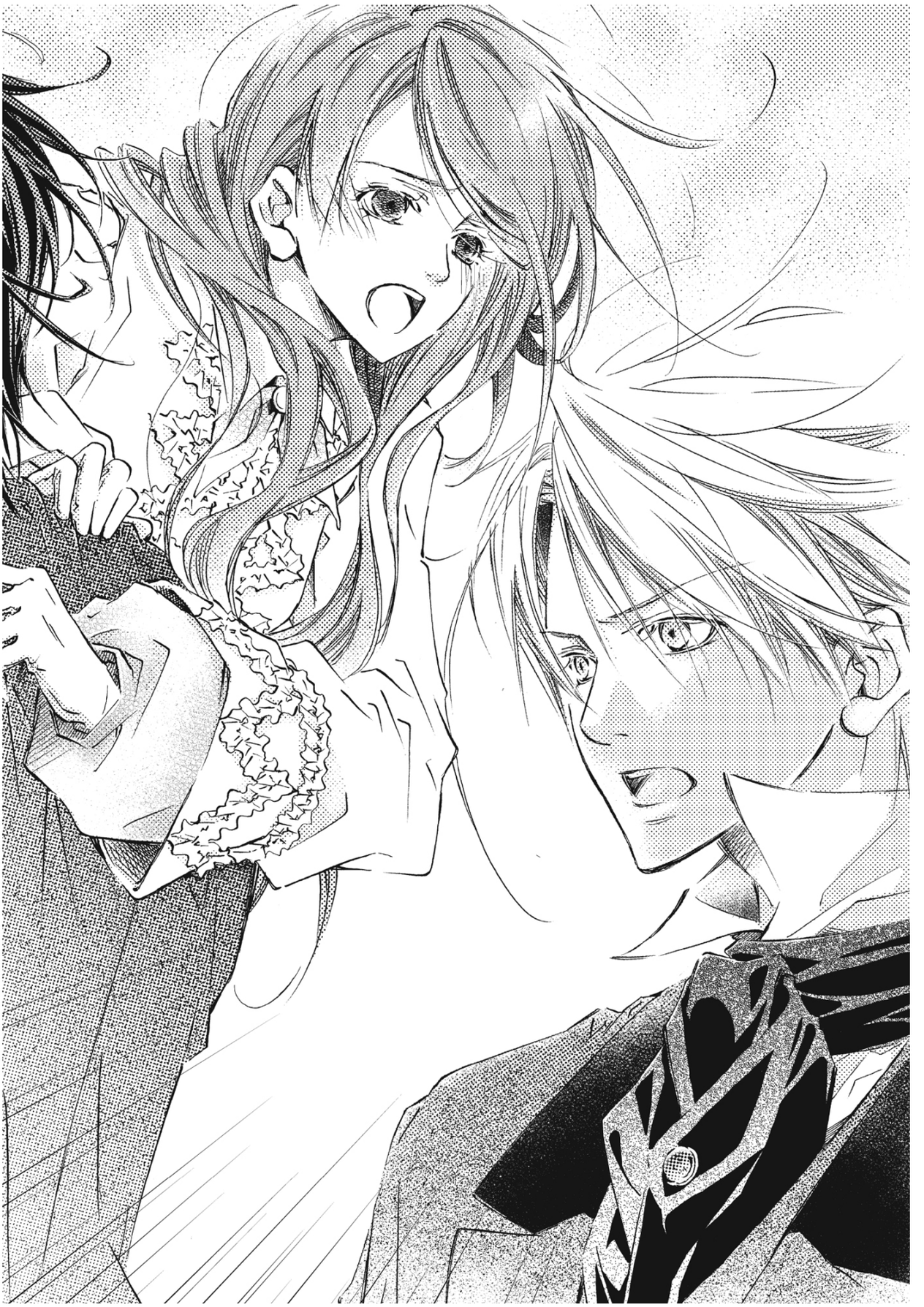
“I am at my wits’ end! That is why I grew scared and drew back from you, because I cannot believe a single word you say. But it was the first time I felt that I *wanted* you to kiss me!” Lydia cried out as Kelpie dragged her away. The situation was too pressing for her to feel embarrassment or worry about seeming indecent.

Edgar might have tried to move toward her. He seemed to lean forward in her direction ever so slightly but remained rooted to the spot.

“It was a first for me as well,” he cried in desperation, “to want to honor my promise to you and *not* kiss you regardless!”

Surprise sapped the strength from Lydia’s limbs. Kelpie took the opportunity to hoist her over his shoulder.

“You must believe me! I have gained new life as the Blue Knight Earl, and you are my one hope for the future! No matter what may come to pass, I do not want to lose you!”



“Our contract is final, Earl.” Kelpie thrust a hand into the tall, flat hedge that stood in his way. The branches and leaves slid away like they had a life of their own, opening up a passage before him. With Lydia still on his shoulder, he made to enter a path that only a fairy’s magic could grant access to.

All Lydia could do was shout. “I shall… I shall marry you! I will! Please…”

She would no longer be stopped. Nothing would stand in her way anymore. She had thought that she lacked the same level of passion as Ermine, but she had been lying to herself. Even if Edgar treasured another woman more than he did her, she wanted to be as close to his heart as she possibly could. She wanted to believe him when he said he loved her, even if pain was the end result.

She continued to repeat her promise to marry Edgar through her tears, even as Kelpie carried her into the hole. Her dearest wish was that it would protect him from despair, no matter what was about to happen. If becoming his lover in truth and not just in name would grant him hope, then she swore she would do it.

The Party Commences

The hole in the hedge vanished the very moment it swallowed up Lydia and Kelpie. Edgar turned around to see Ulya standing before the fountain with Raven.

"Why don't you stop hiding and show yourself? Or will you still insist on running when you have long lost any hope of escape?" Ulya goaded them.

Edgar stepped out slowly from the hedge maze. The moment Raven spotted him, the boy readied his knife. The earl reaffirmed his grip on the merrows' sword, but his small-framed, agile servant was already right in front of him. And then he lunged like a beast. He showed no hint of concern over Edgar's weapon. He must have perceived that the earl had yet to build up the resolve to strike. The sword's point merely grazed Raven's shirt while the knife hurtled toward his target's heart. Unable to avoid it, Edgar felt a heavy impact against his chest.

Forcing himself to move backward, Edgar worked to steady his breathing as he endured the pain. It felt like he had been punched. Confused, Raven studied the chip in his knife before casting his master a wary look.

The coblynau's suit of armor...

Edgar felt for the piece of metal in his pocket with the hand he had pressed against his chest. Had it not been there, that strike would almost certainly have killed him.

Raven was not one to be passive in combat. This time, he came for the earl's neck, which was undoubtedly defenseless. His murderous intent was already focused on Edgar again. Having righted himself, the earl turned his attention to Raven's supposedly blind left side. He advanced toward it, dodging the knife the moment it came for him, and slipped past. Raven was forced to turn his entire body to keep his sights on Edgar. The earl took the split-second opportunity to swing his sword. It made contact with the knife and sent it flying. However, Raven would not be discouraged just because he had lost his weapon. Reading his opponent's movements, he darted to the left. And then he leaped.

No sooner was he behind Edgar than he had his arms around his master's neck. The earl's consciousness seemed to drift away for a moment. The painful strike against his back after he was pulled down was what brought him to, and by then, Raven was leaning over him with the retrieved knife at his throat.

"Do not kill him. He will serve as an offering to the Prince."

The bloodlust faded from Raven's eyes, but he kept the knife where it was, ensuring that Edgar couldn't move.

Ulya let out a contented chuckle as she approached them. "The Prince may regard me as traitorous for usurping the goddess, but I have no intention of making an enemy of him. I daresay he will be willing to negotiate if I present him with you, Earl."

"The goddess is a spirit that has formed a contract with him. Things will not be as easy as you suppose."

"The Rakshasa that swears allegiance to my blood and the Goddess of War have become one and the same. I have all three diopsides in my possession. The demon and the goddess both belong to me."

A diopside was a dark green stone. Within Raven's black eyes was a subtle tinge of green. Looking up into the emotionless irises before him, Edgar was certain, and without a shadow of a doubt, that he was gazing upon the third gem. And within were the spirits of the Ceylonese Rakshasa and a Celtic goddess, two entities represented by the same mineral. Raven clearly differed from Ulya's stones. One could possess a stone, but not even a king could possess the soul of another.

Edgar shifted, ignoring how the knife scraped against his throat. Raven had been ordered not to kill, and he shifted the blade back ever so slightly. Aiming for the boy's right eye, Edgar threw out a punch as hard as he could. Raven stumbled back a few paces, but it was unlikely that he had suffered any real injury. His vision, however, would have been temporarily impaired, and the earl took the opportunity to stand up. Sword in hand, he fell into a fighting stance.

"You have greatly misjudged things, Miss Ulya. Ordering Raven *not* to kill me will only confuse him."

The murderous nature of the boy's spirits came from the very fact that they did not know how to suppress their strength. Telling them not to kill would paralyze them.

Raven was squinting in an effort to pinpoint his opponent. Edgar kicked off the ground, fully intending to strike. His decision was set in stone. If Raven would not come to his senses, then the earl would kill him by his own hand.

"Kill me, Raven. *I* am your master. If you wish to follow Miss Ulya instead, you must kill me first."

Should Raven fight back and kill Edgar, it would mean that Ulya's orders were not absolute and that the spirits were still slaves to their instincts on some level. Therefore, Raven would maintain some control over them even if Edgar had to die for it. The earl had decided to trust that the boy could wake up. But if Ulya's orders took precedence, Raven would be unable to fight back, and Edgar's sword would pierce through him. Everything was riding on this moment.

Ulya clicked her tongue as if she had seen through his plan. "Heed my words, Rakshasa of Hadiya!" she cried suddenly. "Be reborn along with the goddess!"

"Raven, you are no Rakshasa, nor are you Morrigu. You are a raven. That is the name that I, the master of your spirits, gave you!"

He would not allow the goddess's restoration. The Unseelie Court would not have Raven. Edgar swung his sword with all his strength.

There came the beating of wings from above the trees, and the boy looked up as he continued to wander through his dream. Those wings were black. It was not the hooded crow he had seen so many times before, with gray mixed into its plumage, but a jet-black raven. It flew majestically through the skies like they belonged to it alone. A sudden silence descended over the surroundings beneath its shadow, the wind subsiding and the forest falling still as if in awe of the world's master.

The boy was struck with a memory. Edgar had been the first to call him "Raven."

"I have found your master."

He had been the handsome young nobleman brought by Raven's sister.

"I have a name for you so that you might become a new version of yourself."

And thus Raven had become Edgar's soldier. Whenever the earl's companions and acquaintances asked about the peculiar name's origin, he would always say: "Because it embodies mysticism and strength. Fitting, isn't it?"

No one questioned Edgar's reasoning, and apparently, they agreed that the name suited the boy's dark hair and skin. However, it was the earl's *other* meaning that Raven himself took pride in. He could hardly believe he had momentarily forgotten it.

"From now on, you will command your spirits."

That had been his first order. What was he doing, wandering this place and ignoring his duty?

"Lord Ashenbert…" he murmured.

"Lord Ashenbert…"

Edgar was just about to bring his sword down when he heard Raven's voice. Gasping, he forced himself to slow, only just managing to divert his blade, which skimmed the boy's ear, and his sole recourse now was to catch his servant—whose knife was already pointed toward him—in his arms. Raven *had* been ready to fight back, and presently, he lunged at Edgar. His body crashed into the earl's, pushing him back into a tree trunk as they wrestled. The knife, however, only skimmed Edgar.

Letting out a heavy sigh, the boy looked up at his master.

"Raven? Is that you?"

The boy's large eyes widened before a sorrowful crease formed between his brows. "I shan't ever leave your side again, my lord." He turned his gaze toward the ground, but not before his eyes flicked once in Ulya's direction. She was standing behind them. "If you would allow me the honor…"

Edgar pulled his sword back instead of nodding. At the same time, Raven slid away from him before immediately changing direction and charging at Ulya. She collapsed without making a sound. Though the knife lodged in her chest must have reached her lung, she was still breathing between gasps. Raven must have afforded her a few extra moments of life on the off chance that she would tell them something.

The two diopsides fell from her grasp. Edgar perceived that they were fake the moment he picked them up. "These are glass beads. Real diopside makes whatever is placed behind it appear to

have a second layer."

"I was…tricked?" Ulya rasped.

Naturally, she would have been given the genuine stones at the beginning. They would have then been swapped out at some point, likely just before she'd come here.

"You must have had an inkling that the Prince isn't to be trusted. Why else would you have concealed what you knew about the third diopside?"

And yet, the Prince had used her to the very end. He'd had her assist with setting up the battle between Edgar and Raven. Had Ulya won, the Prince would only have continued to deceive and use her further.

The woman gave a feeble chuckle. "The Prince…will destroy London…"

"How, exactly? The third diopside and the Rakshasa's power both belong to Raven and him alone. We shall thwart any attempt to revitalize the Goddess of War."

"London…Bridge…"

"Hmm?"

Ulya no longer possessed the strength to do anything but shift her head to the side slightly. Her lips trembling, it seemed she could no longer stand the pain. "Kill me. Please."

"Raven." Edgar stood up from Ulya's side and tilted his head back to look at the sky. The balloon was still there. He could not begin to guess what the Prince might be thinking, witnessing what he had. Either way, Neamhan and Macha were in his possession.

"Raven, the Prince has not come to Britain to teach me a lesson. He has come to set into motion a plan decades in the making."

Raven had put away his knife, and now he came to stand beside Edgar. "The continuation of the war whose final battle was fought a hundred years ago."

"I believe so."

What had Ulya meant by "London Bridge"? An ancient king had once destroyed the bridge to reclaim the capital from the Vikings who had seized the country. Perhaps the Prince of Calamity intended to make history repeat itself. Perhaps he intended to descend on London, something the Stuart prince of a hundred years ago had just fallen short of.

After all, the Prince's party had only just begun.

***

Kelpie raced through the plains with Lydia on his back. A train was passing by a hill in the distance, puffing out black smoke as it went. It made her wonder where they were. She hadn't said a word since she and Kelpie had been alone. She felt too awkward, too embarrassed, after crying and shouting out that she would marry Edgar. Besides, possibly because of Kelpie's magic, she found she was mostly unable to move. The air around her felt as heavy as though she were underwater, and she could only move her limbs very slowly. Meanwhile, Kelpie continued to run.

As calm finally began to return to Lydia's mind, she understood that there really wasn't anything she could have done had she stayed in the garden. There had been nothing more vital to the situation than the bond between Edgar and Raven. She had been unable to awaken Raven from his dream, leaving his fate resting on whether Edgar could achieve what she had not. And Lydia believed that he possessed the focus to make his desired outcome a reality. She was certain that they were both safe and well at this very moment.

"Do you intend to run all the way to Scotland, Kelpie?"

The water horse inclined his head slightly, looking back at her as though he thought it strange that she should address him at all. "Aye."

"But nightfall is nearing."

"Aye, I know."

"I shan't sleep outdoors."

"Ye willnae have to. Ah'm gonna keep runnin' through the night."

Apparently, she would have to sleep on Kelpie's back. She knew she wouldn't fall off if she *did* sleep, but she doubted that it would be a particularly restful slumber. A water horse that never tired was not a suitable travel companion, she realized. That said, she knew that Kelpie's concern for her welfare was genuine. She also knew that he was being more forceful than usual because the danger she was in was more real than ever since the Nightmare had targeted her. The savage water horse was a peculiar fairy indeed.

"I am sure I would truly have wavered were you human."

“Would ye have chosen us?”

She would likely have chosen Edgar even then. As the thought struck her, she couldn’t help but wonder if she had taken leave of her senses. Edgar was a philanderer who was nevertheless possessive and overall incorrigible.

“Lydia, the only thing the earl can offer ye is empty promises. Don’t ye be cryin’ now if he doesnae come for ye.”

Indeed, Edgar might not come. The possibility had left Lydia fraught with anxiety even before Kelpie had broached it. The earl whispered both lies and truths in identical saccharine tones. He was quick to make promises that he couldn’t possibly fulfill. Perhaps the thought that they might turn into falsehoods didn’t concern him. Perhaps the promise he had made to come for her had been similarly half-hearted.

No, that cannot be the case.

At the crux of Edgar’s thoughtless promises was the desire to protect himself and those around him from their pursuers. And so, he would endeavor to fulfill them come what may. She could well imagine that he had made brazen claims to do whatever it took countless times during his flight from the Prince and the conflicts that followed. Such displays of confidence must have been why his companions, including Raven and Ermine, had stayed with him. Amid his sorrow over failing to bring happiness to Ermine and those he had lost, he must have been aware that his promises had transformed into lies. And yet he continued to lie in anticipation of the day that those lies became truths.

“Edgar *will* come for me,” Lydia murmured unconsciously.

“Ye’re gonna put yer trust in a liar?”

At the heart of Edgar’s confident words was an ardent wish. She refused to undermine that wish by presuming his promise to be insincere.

“He and I are properly engaged now, Kelpie. Things have changed.”

It was all right for her to think so, wasn’t it? Lydia lifted her gaze to the sky, which was starting to take on the pale orange of sunset.

***

“I humbly beg forgiveness, my lord.” Without warning, Raven

knelt and offered his apology for the umpteenth time since the day prior. He had returned to his duties, but whenever he spotted a new cut or bruise on Edgar's body, he would immediately stop what he was doing and seek forgiveness.

"Have I not said that you needn't concern yourself with it any longer?" Edgar fastened his necktie, attempting to hide the mark on the back of his neck.

"But my lord, causing injury to one's master is inexcusable. I shan't be able to bear this burden without punishment."

"I struck you too, didn't I?" Edgar reached out a hand to part Raven's forelocks. "It doesn't hurt too badly, does it?"

Raven frowned as if struggling to comprehend.

"Your right eye is swollen and bruised."

The boy put a hand to his eyelid and grimaced like he was only now noticing the pain. "I see. That was the reason for the ice Mr. Tompkins offered me," he said thoughtfully.

"I suppose you have yet to look in a mirror?"

Raven paused. "I have not had the opportunity to do so."

One shouldn't need an "opportunity"... Edgar thought. But perhaps Raven didn't feel that a mirror was a requirement in his day-to-day life. Exasperated, Edgar had him stand before his own mirror, at which point the realization seemed to strike at last.

"I *did* think it strange that the maids kept trying to peer at my face."

It was so like Raven to say such a thing that Edgar felt amusement bubbling up inside him. "I think it would be quite fair for us not to speak of our respective injuries again, wouldn't you agree?" he suggested with a small smile before walking to the window.

He wasn't yet able to smile from the bottom of his heart. Lydia was absent. The Prince was in Britain. Gazing through the window, one would think that peace was returning to London, a city that knew not of the Prince's existence. The murders on London Bridge would fade from its citizens' memories with the arrival of new incidents and tabloid articles. There had been no new victims since Mr. Caan. Nevertheless, it seemed that the bridge remained crucial to the Prince's designs, so Edgar would continue to keep an eye on it. It was possible that further killings would occur there.

That said, things were not all bad. The Prince was still unaware

that Raven was the third diopside. Lydia's unique abilities had granted Edgar that knowledge and allowed him to retrieve his servant. If they were able to prevent Badb's revival, then perhaps their chances of victory were not so slim.

We must *win.*

It was Edgar's most fervent wish. And it was not for the sake of London or Britain, but for the sake of Raven and Scarlet Moon. For the name and title of the Blue Knight Earl, which had granted Edgar a second chance. And most of all, for Lydia. For the happiness of the woman who had at last accepted his proposal.

Tompkins entered the room with a cashmere jacket in his arms. "I have acquired your train tickets, my lord. I have also ensured that the letter announcing your visit will precede you."

Edgar put on the jacket over his white silk waistcoat. Combined with the crested cameo tiepin and the rest of his ceremonial attire, one would think that he was on his way to pay a formal visit to a superior nobleman.

"Have you business outside the estate, my lord?" Raven asked with a quizzical cock of his head. Edgar had not informed him of any exceptional appointments that day.

"Indeed I do. The balance of my entire future hangs on this meeting, Raven, so do be on your best behavior."

"Yes, my lord. Which estate are we visiting?"

"We are going to Cambridge."

Raven fell into thought, as though trying to think of an important nobleman who lived in the city.

"To see Professor Carlton," Edgar explained.

"I see," the boy replied, though he still looked confused.

Certainly, Carlton was an important man, but he was not nobility. He was not the sort of man to whom an earl would normally pay a courtesy call, especially not one preceded by a letter.

"I must meet with him before I go to pick up Lydia." Edgar glanced at Nico, who was lounging on the chaise longue by the window. "It would only be right to do so, wouldn't you agree, Nico?"

"Mm? I couldn't possibly say when there is no way to tell what is going on."

Kelpie had taken Lydia to Scotland and was liable to put some

variety of magic in place to ensure that Edgar could not easily reach her. The earl was all but certain that he would require the professor's assistance to bring her back.

"Find out for me posthaste."

When Edgar had proposed to Lydia, he had done so knowing that the Prince might target her. Though that danger had yet to pass, Raven was back safe and sound. Edgar was also in the process of strengthening the estate's defenses and wanted to bring Lydia back sooner rather than later.

"I'm not your underling. As long as Lydia's safe, I don't see any reason to drop everything." Nico seemed to have taken a liking to the chaise longue's velvet. He was rubbing his cheek against it and showed no sign of getting up. The lazy feline then added, quite impudently, "There is nothing so troublesome as a kelpie's magic. Do you not think before you make such decisions?"

If thinking were enough to bring things to a desirable conclusion, life would be far easier. Regardless, Edgar had done what he'd thought best at the time. There had been few alternatives in a situation so desperate, and he had been confident in letting Lydia go, knowing that their connection through the moonstone would protect her from whatever Kelpie might decide to do. None of this changed the fact that Edgar was less than pleased about the company she was in. That was why he was carefully calculating the best course of action even now.

"Things are only guaranteed to become troublesome when one does nothing about them, Nico."

"I suppose you have a plan, then?"

"The coblynau very kindly told me that the moonstone will grow more powerful once Lydia and I are officially engaged. Should it become more powerful than the spell Kelpie has her under, I have no doubt that I shall be able to bring her home." He gave Raven a meaningful look. "You understand what is meant by an official engagement, don't you?"

"It will become official when Miss Carlton consents to marrying your lordship?"

"She has already consented."

"Congratulations, my lord," Raven said, though he was clearly dubious. Not only did he not look pleased in the slightest, he even seemed a little anxious. There was no doubt that he was worrying

about Lydia's ireful response should Edgar move things forward without her knowledge.

A shade indignant, the earl turned to Tompkins. "You believe me, don't you, Tompkins?"

"I certainly do, my lord, but I have to wonder whether Professor Carlton will."

Apparently, Tompkins didn't believe him either. However, he was right in that Edgar might struggle to convince Carlton as things stood, especially since Lydia wasn't readily available to say her piece.

"Quite right, Tompkins. Raven, you will act as my witness."

"But, my lord, I did not bear witness to Miss Carlton giving her consent."

"Yes, you did. And now it is so."

"Won't Miss Carlton be upset?"

"Do you answer to her or to me?"

Raven fell silent. He must have been conflicted. Edgar, however, had no intention of rescinding the order, and he knew that his servant would see it through.

"All I require now to make our engagement official is Professor Carlton's permission. Lydia is still too young to marry without parental consent."

In truth, Edgar was the most disbelieving of all of them that Lydia had said she would marry him. He had been high-handed in forcing her to go with Kelpie, and now that things had calmed down, the possibility struck him that she might be regretting her words. Naturally, he intended to move forward regardless. He would *not* let go of her, no matter what might come to pass. He believed that she would eventually be glad of their marriage, even if she still had her reservations at this point in time.

"Let us make haste lest we miss our train." Edgar put his pocket watch away and picked Nico up by the scruff of his neck.

"Oi! Unhand me, Earl!"

"Tompkins, package this up for me and have it sent as an express railway parcel to the Carlton residence in Scotland, would you?"

"*Fine*, I shall go! 'Posthaste,' was it?!"

The moment Edgar let go, Nico vanished as if fleeing. The earl took his top hat and cane from Tompkins. Everything would unfold

from this point forward, including his future with Lydia. Whether it was a bright one or not would depend on the outcome of his feud with the Prince.

Afterword

Hello. Welcome back to the main plot after a bit of a break. What did you all think of this volume?

There was something that suddenly came back to me as I was writing: a picture book of nursery rhymes I had when I was little. It was a collection of the famous ones that everyone must have heard at least once, and I think it was my first encounter with “London Bridge is Falling Down.” It was the picture that accompanied the rhyme in the book that I remembered. I don’t have the book anymore, so I cannot check, but I vaguely remember that it looked like there were houses built on the bridge, and that made it a very strange bridge to my childish mind. Looking at old photographs of London Bridge at the time the story is set—the nineteenth century—it looks like a magnificent bridge with no visible oddities. However, I did discover another illustration of London Bridge with a row of tightly packed houses built on it, which solved the years-long mystery.

Apparently, that was how London Bridge looked from medieval times to the early modern period. Even today, there are medieval bridges in Europe with buildings on them, but London Bridge was still an outlier, as it easily held five- and six-story buildings like it was just another street. To cross the bridge, one had to navigate that labyrinthine construction. I don’t think it would even seem like a bridge at that point…

It’s a shame that we’ve lost such a fascinating structure, but it probably wasn’t too convenient for traffic. The magnificent bridge built in the nineteenth century is also gone, and London Bridge has since been reborn as something more modern. The bridge that Lydia and Edgar would have visited in the story was dismantled and rebuilt somewhere in America, so I think it’s still possible to see it if you’re so inclined. I’m not sure if it would have the same impact as seeing it in London, though. Anyway, the incidents on London Bridge from this volume will be linked to the next one. I hope you’ll be eagerly awaiting it.

On another topic, I bought a new refrigerator this summer. I

know it’s a standard feature these days, but my new one makes ice automatically, and it’s very convenient. I’ll wake up in the morning and open the door, and there will be a mountain of ice waiting even though I used it all up the night before. I had the thought that during the night, a swarm of fridge fairies came out and banded together to make all that ice for me. I’m just joking, of course.

Which reminds me: I saw a fridge fairy once in what I think was an American cartoon. When you close the refrigerator door, the light turns off, but have you wondered whether it’s really off? (Perhaps not…) Anyway, this character wanted to know, so they would open and close the door countless times. Eventually coming to no conclusion, they installed a smaller door so they could check. After they closed the fridge door, they opened the tiny one and peered inside only to find that the light was still on. But then they saw a fairy come out of what I think was a tiny room at the back of the fridge, and it clicked the lamp shut before going back in. If such a hardworking fairy can live in a refrigerator, I’d love for one to try living inside a computer. And then, by morning, my manuscript would be complete…

But I went way off track there, didn’t I?

Thank you to all my enthusiastic readers for once again reading the whole volume. I think we are reaching a turning point in the story, but we still have a bit of a climb before the climax. I am as grateful as ever to Asako Takaboshi-sama for her charming illustrations, and on that note, I would like to wrap things up. Dear readers, I hope we’ll have another opportunity to meet soon.

Mizue Tani, August 2006



Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!
Newsletter

And you can read the latest chapters of series like this by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:
J-Novel Club Membership

Copyright

Earl and Fairy: Volume 9
by Mizue Tani

Translated by Alexandra Owen-Burns
Edited by Tess Nanavati

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

HAKUSHAKU TO YOSEI © 2006 by Mizue Tani
Illustration by Asako Takaboshi

First published in Japan in 2006 by SHUEISHA Inc., Tokyo
English translation rights arranged with SHUEISHA Inc., Tokyo and J-Novel Club LLC through Tuttle-Mori Agency, Inc.

All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property.

J-Novel Club LLC
j-novel.club
The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.
Ebook edition 1.0: January 2025
Premium E-Book for cbg