
10
MIZUE TANI
Earl and Fairy
The Bright Star of London Bridge


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RAVEN
A mysterious boy, he is Edgar's servant. He is skilled with weapons, and his loyalty to his master is seemingly flawless...
KELPIE
An old fairy friend of Lydia's. He is gentle with her alone, even though he is savage by nature.
LOTTA
Granddaughter of the Grand Duke of Cremona. After going missing when she was very young, she was taken in by pirates and now excels at handling ships.
ULYSSES
A close associate of Edgar's longtime enemy, the Prince. He has the power to command fairies, and despises Edgar.
EDGAR
Originally born to a noble family, he was trafficked by a shady organization led by the Prince. After years of suffering, he obtained the title of Blue Knight Earl with Lydia's assistance. While half his time is spent plotting a ruthless revenge against his former captor, he spends the other half trying to whisper sweet nothings into Lydia's ear.
NICO
A fairy that takes on the form of a cat, he has been Lydia's friend and partner since her childhood. In spite of his coarse nature, he is fussy about his food and attire, and very much acts like a gentleman.
LYDIA
A girl who can see and talk to fairies. She is Edgar's fairy doctor and has found herself in an engagement of convenience with him. Unsure of his true intentions, her feelings initially wavered. But as his confrontation with Prince drew ever closer, she loudly declared that she would indeed marry him.
Earl and Fairy
CHARACTERS

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The Skulking Shadow

A row of countless masts was lined up along the River Thames like a grove of withered trees. This port of the British Empire, which attracted ships from all over the world, was as crowded as ever. Among the crowd was one vessel traveling slowly upstream. As it moved closer to the Tower of London, it passed the canals that ran into the riverside, the Docklands and their warehouses, and even the elegant form of a world-renowned clipper. These marvels were soon behind it as it closed in on its destination: the wharf in front of London Bridge.

"The city looks ancient and miserable. So I guess nothin's changed," Lotta murmured as she stood on the deck and gazed upon London. Granddaughter to the defected Grand Duke of Cremona, she owned this ship and had returned to this city for the first time in three months. "The clouds came in the second we entered London. It's like the sun hates this place."

While her dress was befitting of her high-class status, her hair hung down in a loose ponytail, and she was smoking a cigarette. She looked like she belonged in the slums, and understandably so, as she had indeed been raised in such an environment by a pirate captain. Even after reuniting with her grandfather and adopting the title of "princess," it seemed she had yet to fully adapt to her new role.

The servant she had appointed lookout returned then. "Ma'am, it appears it will take some time before we are able to disembark. The wharf is rather crowded."

At his sharp glare, she stubbed out her cigarette and clicked her tongue. "Well, *I* haven't got all day."

She peered over the side of the deck. There were a number of small rowboats that were moving freely between the larger vessels, carrying lightermen and shipwrights. They were certainly faster than their bigger counterparts.

"Hey! Lemme on your boat!" Lotta called down to them.

"Ma'am!"

She ignored the servant's panic and continued to wave. Once

she was sure a boat had stopped for her, she picked up the rope ladder piled to one side of the deck and threw it over the rail. Without missing a beat, she jumped after it, practically slid down it, and hopped aboard the smaller boat while its occupants were still recovering from their shock.

"Sorry to intrude. Think you could get me closer to the bank?"

Bursting into laughter, the men started a gentle row toward land.

"That's a right nice ship you've got there. Was it a battleship back in the day?" one of them asked. He was an elderly man who was blind in one eye.

"Yep. How d'you know?"

"I know a battleship soon as I see it."

"You used to be in the navy or somethin'?"

"Nah, they'd be the ones after me, they would."

The men laughed as one. They only laughed harder when a grinning Lotta asked whether the elderly man used to be a pirate.

"Interested in pirates, are ya?"

"Yeah, 'cause I used to be one too."

"Ain't that a larf!"

"Thanks." Lotta laughed, feeling relaxed at last. She scanned the river again, which was when she spotted a ship flying a peculiar flag.

"Oh, I hear it's called the Ark. I reckon some rich fella built it for fun." The elderly man must have sensed that he and Lotta shared a similar history, because he seemed quite happy to fill her in on the strange ship.

The flag suddenly made sense. The image on it was reminiscent of Noah's Ark from the Old Testament. However, the ship itself was not shaped like an ark. It was an ordinary sailing vessel but for the fact that the windows were boarded up, concealing the inside.

"Maybe whoever built it is expectin' another great flood," Lotta said.

"Who knows? Ya hear these rumors 'bout the end being near, but...eh, maybe he's hopin' it'll save his life."

Lotta turned her attention away from the ship. "What rumors?"

The men's tanned faces scrunched up as they guffawed. "There's nutters wherever ya go, right? They say London's gone to the dogs and that the Lord's judgment is comin' any day now."

“And then there’s the nutters who believe ’em!”

There wasn’t a person to be seen on board the Ark. According to the legend, the devout Noah and his family were the only ones to avoid the flood that God sent in His wrath by building an ark to His exact specifications. Whether this vessel’s name was supposed to allude to the story or not, the very sight of the ship unsettled Lotta.

Regardless, all thoughts of the peculiar boat vanished the moment she set foot on the riverbank. This city, surrounded by gray buildings sitting under gray skies, was defiled. Nevertheless, it remained the capital of the British Empire, and with its abundance of goods and people, it was livelier than anywhere else on the planet.

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Around sixty miles north of London and located on the River Cam was the university city of Cambridge. Edgar had come here to meet Professor Carlton, a mineralogist. Home to several colleges, this was where the professor had obtained his degree when he was younger, and he was now teaching at the University of London. His staying here was something of a coincidence, as he was attending a prestigious conference on natural history.

In truth, Edgar had also come to Cambridge the previous week. However, the professor had fled before he had been able to properly state his business. It seemed that Carlton had perceived the reason for Edgar’s visit: that the earl wished to ask permission to marry his lone daughter, Lydia. Edgar had then been forced to return to London due to various engagements, but now he had come to Cambridge once again. This time, he would not allow the professor an opportunity to escape.

“What do you suppose it is about me that the professor takes exception to?” Edgar murmured. He was gazing at the serene rural landscape through the carriage window. They had left the train station and were now en route to the college.

His servant boy was sitting beside him and pondering the question. It seemed he had come upon so many answers that he thought it best to simply hold his tongue.

“I wonder whether it is because he considers the nobility to be

unprincipled."

"Why should he hold that opinion?" the usually taciturn servant asked a rare question.

"There are certain practices among the upper class that can understandably be seen as deviating from the rules set by respectable society. Keeping mistresses or killing for the sake of honor and escaping punishment, for example."

Carlton was a distinguished academic, and his dealings with nobility were many. It seemed that he struggled to understand certain facets of upper-class society, although he would never let that prejudice him against any one person. Perhaps he did not wish his precious daughter to marry into such an environment.

"But *I* would never partake in such things, would I, Raven?"

It was well-known among the upper class that Lord Edgar Ashenbert was an outrageous philanderer. His flawless good looks and smooth tongue lent themselves to an art of seduction that had pulled countless women into the center of rumors and gossip. Whether he knew it or not, both his servant and the professor could easily see him taking countless mistresses and even "disposing" of anyone he disliked, and Raven was struggling to form an appropriate response.

"I shall go through a boundless transformation if it means marrying Lydia."

Despite how stubborn she had been, he had finally succeeded in his attempts to seduce her. It would be the epitome of farce should her father prove an even greater obstacle. He was determined to meet with the professor come hell or high water, so he was infiltrating a classroom at Trinity College, where a special lecture was being held in connection with the natural history conference. The large lecture hall was packed with students, and Professor Carlton stood at the podium. He did not notice Edgar until the lecture was drawing to a close.

"Now, are there any questions?"

It was the moment the earl had been waiting for. He shot to his feet, leaving the professor open-mouthed and frozen.

"Professor Carlton, I come bearing a most earnest request."

"Ah, um, I am in the middle of teach—"

"I am here to ask for your daughter's hand in marriage."

Carlton let out a cry. "Yes, yes, we can discuss that later! I

promise I shall make time for you."

"Thank you kindly." Edgar smiled and sat down.

The professor wiped the sweat from his brow, pushed his spectacles back up his nose, and slumped his shoulders as though exhausted.

That evening, Edgar was finally afforded the opportunity to sit down with Professor Carlton and discuss matters at length. The professor greeted the earl at the brickwork building he was staying at, his hair even more of a mess than usual. It was clear that he had spent a great deal of time rumpling it in his distress. Edgar was aware that the man cherished his only daughter like she was a precious treasure, but the earl himself was starting to consider her to be just as precious and irreplaceable.

Edgar smiled politely, determined to receive approval from Lydia's father at any cost. "You delivered a wonderful lecture, Professor. In truth, I have several more profound questions that I should like to ask you."

"My lord, please do not trouble yourself with making small talk." It seemed the professor was tired of avoiding Edgar and had decided to get this business over and done with as soon as possible.

"In that case, I shall save my questions for another opportunity."

"Oh, well, if your lordship is really that interested…" Professor Carlton replied, immediately switching to delaying tactics again.

"I would like to request your permission to have Miss Lydia Carlton's hand in marriage," Edgar said plainly.

His face falling in devastation, the professor slumped against the back of his chair.

"She has already accepted my proposal. While I believe it would have been courteous to ask for your blessing first, I felt compelled to know her thoughts on the matter beforehand. I sincerely apologize for my failure to follow the proper order of things."

The professor gave a semi-affirmative sigh. Edgar determined that it would be to his advantage not to give Lydia's father too much thinking time, so he pressed on.

"Miss Carlton is presently at her home in Scotland. Kelpie has taken her there against her will. I shan't bore you with the

meandering details, but it is my intention to go after her and bring her back. You are aware that Kelpie would very much like to take her with him to the fairy world, aren't you?"

Seemingly flustered, the professor nodded.

"I shall not allow her to become his bride. I humbly beg for your permission to bring her back to London as my fiancée. With that, our engagement will be official and become a power that repels fairy magic."

Despite the unease in his expression, the professor remained calm as he responded. "I can fret about fairies all I like, but I remain powerless to do anything about them. Lydia, however, will be able to right the situation on her own. Therefore, my lord, I should like to consider your request separately from the current predicament."

Edgar hadn't expected him to acquiesce immediately. As much as he had tried to hurry Lydia's father along, the professor was predictably resistant when it came to the matter of the engagement itself. The earl fell silent and nodded. Being too forceful at this point was not wise.

Professor Carlton's hands fidgeted in his lap for some time. However, when he eventually raised his head, it was with a marked determination. "To be frank, I am of the opinion that Lydia is still too young to marry. However, if she wishes to do so, then I do not see how I can stop her." He paused. "All that being said, my lord—and I recognize my impudence in confessing as much—I find it difficult not to question your lordship's intentions."

"You mean you cannot believe that she truly wishes to marry me?" Edgar clarified.

"No, I… Lydia is my daughter. Seeing her as I do on a daily basis, it is quite clear to me that she holds you dear. My doubts concern whether your lordship's desire to marry her is genuine."

Professor Carlton was rather inattentive when it came to subjects outside his area of study. He paid little attention to his appearance, and once he fell into thought, he was liable to miss even the strangest of happenings. It had been Lydia who described him in such terms, but Edgar was starting to think that he was in fact incredibly astute. After all, he had been able to extract what was truly important to the situation at hand. At the same time, he was extremely good-natured. Even when he was

able to perceive the negative traits of others, he chose to see them in the best possible light. That was something to be appreciated and something he shared with Lydia. It was for this reason that Edgar had no intention of misrepresenting himself to the professor.

"Am I to presume that the cause of these doubts is the rumors surrounding my relationships with other women?"

"Oh, well, I... I suppose it isn't at all unheard of for bachelors to openly enjoy their freedom. Rather, it is society's way for a gentleman to wed a woman who is worthy of his station, and I would imagine your lordship also holds such sentiments. While I am grateful for your fondness of Lydia, I wonder whether she is a suitable marriage candidate for an earl. She has a tendency to defy expectations, so if your proposal was, shall we say, a result of persistent persuasion on your part, then I do not expect your marriage to be a happy one."

"The nature of my proposal was quite different. Besides, it is no longer so uncommon for one to marry outside one's station."

"Whether by preference or compromise, when a nobleman marries a commoner, the latter tends to be incredibly wealthy. We Carltons may be upper-middle class, but we are not especially rich, nor is there any aristocracy in our lineage. To marry a Carlton would be to lower your lordship's social position."

"The Ashenbert name is a prestigious one. It is incomparable to these noble families that have existed for a mere hundred or two hundred years. People may try to talk, but that will have no effect on my social position. Not that I have any intention of allowing gossip to run rife."

Edgar was in no way being dismissive of his social class. He was doing his utmost to behave in a manner that would not cause Lydia trouble further down the line. His declaration was borne of his resolve to build a perfect foundation for this marriage. Unfortunately, Professor Carlton did not appear convinced.

"I wonder, Professor, whether your true concern lies in the fact that I am an unknown entity who claimed a title that did not rightfully belong to me."

The professor knew the particulars of how Edgar had come to be the Earl of Ibrazel, and the younger man had no intention of shying away from such discussion.

“I have no intention of giving up on Miss Carlton, come what may. I am therefore determined that you will come to terms with any doubts or concerns you may have about me.”

The professor stirred, his eyes squinting behind his spectacles against the westering sun that streamed through the window. He cast his gaze to the view outside as the conflicted expression on his face softened. When he spoke, his tone was gentle.

“My lord, would you care to join me for a stroll outside?”

The River Cam was dyed golden by the setting sun. The dark shadows gliding along its surface were students practicing their boating. Professor Carlton crossed the college gardens, walked around the rear of the building, and went over a small bridge before beginning to follow the river. It was apparent from the way he walked that it was a route he was familiar with.

“Lydia was born in this city. I was a fellow of Trinity College at the time and lived here with my wife.”

Edgar had been expecting a barrage of questions rather than a personal account. He studied the professor’s expression from where he walked beside him to see that the older man was wearing a slight smile.

“I doubt that Lydia remembers her time here. She was still an infant when I was offered a position at the University of Edinburgh and we returned to Scotland, where I grew up.”

Cambridge must have been a highly nostalgic place for the professor. It was where he had studied and where he had been blessed with a family. Perhaps he had gone for walks with them along this riverside.

“It is very clear to me just from looking at Miss Carlton that she was raised with much love.” Edgar smiled. The affection that shone from her past inspired both envy and adoration within him.

“I am sure that you were raised with just as much love, my lord.”

He had to wonder about that. The majestic country house in which he had been brought up had been surrounded by a forest and lake. The expansive building and grounds had been peaceful but rather boring outside of the party season. Edgar had constantly been accompanied by his governess and wet nurse, and surrounded by a great number of servants. On the occasions his parents had spent time with him, they had shown a dignified

sort of affection. At least, that was how he remembered it.

“My father was strict, particular, and a man of few words. I’m told that I was like my grandfather in my naivety, which my father found somewhat disagreeable. I believe he was therefore often at a loss as to what to do with me.” That said, Edgar had never felt dissatisfied during that period of his life, nor had there been anything for him to fear. “I remember my mother as a very stylish, gentle woman who was never without a smile. But regardless of how my parents treated me, they ensured that I grew up in an ideal environment. I suppose that *is* what one would call ‘love.’”

Edgar spoke freely about his childhood—the one that belonged to his true self. As the eldest son of a duke, his every need had been catered to, something that he knew couldn’t be said of most commoner families. It was for this reason that he had never lost his pride as a member of the aristocracy, not even when his life had hit rock bottom. Taking charge of his companions had come naturally to him. As young as he still was, he held a title, and that meant dealing with the most astute of noblemen on equal terms. Never once had he let his guard down, lest he be looked down upon. However, when speaking with the professor, he refrained from hiding behind his title or any pretensions and began to move closer to the man he truly was.

Professor Carlton was used to working with a great number of students who were close to Edgar in age, so he must have had an understanding of young adults. Somehow, he was gently encouraging the earl to speak as though he were conversing with a troubled student. And, strangely, Edgar did not begrudge him that.

“Did your parents perhaps pass away when you were very young?”

“When I was thirteen.”

“I did think that you must have been born into the aristocracy. Does Lydia know about all of this?”

Edgar nodded. “My name was Edgar Leland, the Marquess of Maulding. My father was the Duke of Sylvanford.”

“A duke…” the professor murmured, as though trying to come to terms with what he had just been presented with. “Then is your lordship not presently supposed to be the Duke of Sylvanford?”

“The estate burned down. Several people lost their lives: my

parents, the relatives and visitors who were sojourning with us, the servants… I myself am thought to be dead. The name of Sylvanford exists solely as an entity without an heir."

"Forgive me, but your lordship is not dead."

"I do not possess the means to prove my identity. The fire was planned in part to strip me of my name. I was taken from the estate. However, I was able to escape my captor and am currently at war with him. Miss Carlton has offered me her support in my plight."

The professor gave a heavy sigh. No doubt he was less than pleased to hear that his daughter was assisting in a fight against such a dangerous enemy. "I think I am beginning to understand why you have chosen Lydia. As many female admirers as I daresay you have, asking them to understand you and stand by you is another matter altogether."

A passing boat drew white ripples on the river's surface. Professor Carlton stopped, his eyes softening as he took in the view in its entirety. "Whoever you may be and wherever you may hail from, my lord, there is only one thing I require of Lydia's groom. Will you take walks with her and gaze upon the sunset together, even years down the line? When you do so, will she be able to smile?"

The sky, dyed red by the sunset, seemed to tell of Lydia's smile, of the future in store. The depths of Edgar's heart began to burn, and he felt that he might burst into tears. It wasn't so long ago that it had seemed like an impossible dream. He now believed that it was within his grasp. At some point since meeting her, he had started to think that he could hope for the happiness enjoyed by the common man. His hope stemmed from her enduring kindness in the face of adversity, and her love for fairies and nature that allowed her to find joy in life's most mundane moments. She had been cherished by her parents: the professor with his endlessly gentle eyes and her late fairy-doctor mother. That was why it would be wrong for Edgar to want to be with her if he couldn't make her happy. He had no right to propose marriage if he could not offer her more than her father had already given her. As much as he acknowledged these things, he could not help but long for her.

"I am grateful to the workings of fate that led me to meet Lydia.

I am grateful, too, to you and her mother. I am aware that it might be imprudent to be considering marriage at a time like this, but I need her. I have realized that I am incapable of fighting alone."

Noticing the desperation in Edgar's tone, the professor turned to face him. "I understand well how your lordship feels. However, I would like to request some more time to consider the matter, if possible." His tone was as strict as his eyes were gentle.

"When might I expect an answer?"

Professor Carlton did not answer. Instead, he offered Edgar a piece of folded paper. "This is something that Lydia asked me to look into. It relates to Freya, a unique variety of fluorite. I am entrusting it to you. I believe you will find it helpful."

"Lydia requested this for me?"

"The stories that surround this mineral are not for the faint of heart, and it concerns me to think that Lydia is being exposed to such things. A fairy doctor is no magician. If the enemy you speak of is involved in these occult practices, I would advise you not to fight. Knowing Lydia, she is determined to help you as best she can, so I hope your lordship understands how anxious I am as her father."

Humbled, Edgar accepted the piece of paper.

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The slum's gloomy back lane was muddy from the rain that had fallen at dawn, and its stagnant air was pregnant with a foul stench. Footsteps sounded through the deserted dead-end alley, sending rats scurrying away. A dead body lay curled up beneath its rags, only for men in similar attire to grab it and throw it uncaringly into their handcart. Most of the people who inhabited the slum had no family to speak of, let alone a house to live in. No one had a shred of sympathy for those who fell dead in the street. There were already several such bodies piled up in the cart.

"Seems there's more dead than ever lately," one of the men muttered like he was fed up with the whole affair.

"Might be there's a plague or somefink. Them government blokes've been blamin' the bad air, but they never come see what it's like down here. They don't want nuffink to do with us."

"Always givin' us the dangerous jobs to do just so they can tell

everyone how safe things are."

They were on their way to the public cemetery, which was when they found themselves at the end of a funeral procession. The deep lines in the people's faces and their ashen countenances rivaled those of the dead's, such was their exhaustion.

"This is the third funeral this week of someone I know."

"There's soil all over the cemetery from where they've been diggin' graves. They'll be runnin' outta places to bury people eventually."

Such talk was not at all uncommon in the slums lately. Nor was this an extraordinary situation. Disease ran rampant in the East End, where the particularly notorious slums were concentrated. Now and then, these illnesses would seem to take on a mind of their own and terrorize people like monsters. These invisible beasts would crawl through the dank alleyways and feast on their inhabitants. Eventually, they would find their way into the buildings. The poor families who lived five or six to a tiny space—often with children—would become the next victims. The monsters could not be slowed, let alone stopped.

This time, however, something was different. It was difficult to say what it was, exactly, but the people had the sense that there was something slinking behind the sooty joists and under the mildewed mattresses. Something that hadn't been there before. The tiny shadows that rose with the Thames's stinking mist, slithered through the alleyways, and slipped through doors and poorly fitted windows might have been nothing more than an illusion. The possibility did little to calm the people's fears. There wasn't a single person who knew precisely what was going on in these slums yet.

"Our boy's stuck in bed with a fever. All we can do is pray he don't get worse."

"They say it gives you nightmares and all. You ain't got no more than three days once you start cryin' in your sleep."

"Everyone cries in their sleep when they're ill."

"Yeah, but this is different. 'Slike there's demonic influences or somefink."

The men had left the cemetery and were continuing their conversation as they dodged other handcarts.

It caught the attention of a young man they passed. "Excuse

me, but is that true?" he asked.

The men didn't take the time to answer him properly, since it was obvious from his attire that he wasn't working class.

"Sorry, lad, but if you're scared of catchin' somefink, I'd get outta here sharpish."

"I beg your pardon, but I believe you mentioned demons..."

"So it's demons you're scared of? I'm sure the pastor'll give you a blessing if you ask nicely." The men left without entertaining his question further.

The young man sighed. Just then, he heard a voice that was far too jovial for the surroundings.

"Paul? Is that you?"

Paul turned to see a man in a frock coat, a garment that one rarely saw in the slums. That said, he was dressed in one himself. "Greg?" he murmured. He recognized the flippant grin the man wore on even the most inappropriate occasions, though the beard and slight haggardness was new.

Just like Paul, Greg had been an aspiring artist before he had suddenly vanished from the clubs and galleries that such artists assembled at.

"It's been a while, hasn't it, Paul? What are you doing in a place like this? I heard you made your debut in the artists' world and mingle with the upper classes now."

"Oh no, it's... I'm still very much a novice."

Lord Ashenbert was the only reason Paul could be considered a painter at all. Not only was the earl an important buyer of the artist's works, but he considered Paul a friend too. Lord Ashenbert expected great things of him, so Paul was determined to dedicate himself to his craft with the utmost devotion.

"You dress well for a 'novice.'"

Paul's jacket had been a gift from the earl. He had often been mistaken for a peddler during his frequent visits to Edgar's pristine-white mansion on account of his old, worn jacket.

"A gentleman dressing like that in the East End is unlikely to be well received."

"You are dressed rather well yourself, Greg. What business do you have here?"

"Just having a look." Though his grin gave the impression that there was something to read into in his words, that often wasn't

the case. “There’s illness spreading through the East End. I was curious and came to see for myself, and it seems it’s getting worse. I suppose he was right…”

Paul was surprised to find that there *did* seem to be a deeper level to what Greg was saying on this occasion. “Who is ‘he’?”

“Monsieur Alba, the French prophet. This illness is more than a nasty cold. Monsieur Alba has been warning the people that it will eventually spread through the whole of London. You haven’t heard?”

Paul nodded noncommittally. This city was full of dubious characters, whether they claimed to be prophets or magicians.

“He says that London is soon to be destroyed by a great calamity and that salvation can only be found in him. Well, Paul, will you believe him?”

“Do *you*?”

“Me? I am simply lending him a hand for the generous compensation. That, and if his claims *are* true, then working with him should protect me from it all. I can’t see the harm in it.”

It sounded like Greg was involved with quite the shady group. Perhaps Paul was in no position to criticize, seeing as he was a member of a “shady group” himself: a secret organization known as Scarlet Moon. However, Scarlet Moon had originally been an artisans’ guild and was incomparable to a religious group that warned of the world’s end.

Nevertheless, Paul was curious about this Monsieur Alba character. A long-standing enemy of Lord Ashenbert was currently lurking in this city, and it wasn’t yet clear what he and his associates were plotting. They seemed, however, to have a wish to destroy London, which lined up with Alba’s prediction.

“Seeing as you’re an old friend of mine, Paul, I’d be happy to introduce you to Monsieur Alba. We’re short a few hands to help with the party on his ship, and you could make a fair sum. Should help clear your anxieties about becoming unwell too. Tickets to the Ark aren’t available to the masses, but getting on board is apparently the only way to escape the disaster,” Greg explained with a grin.

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Although railways were being laid all over Scotland, one tranquil town on the outskirts of Edinburgh remained without a station to this day. The reasons given were that it produced no specialty goods to rush over to the city, nor was it close enough to any urban areas to justify a factory. Nevertheless, its land produced plenty of crops and plump goats and sheep, and it was currently bustling with fairies. They lived in the ancient raths and large dolmens. This was Lydia's hometown, and she would not exchange it for the world.

Just like her fairy-doctor mother, she was able to see and speak to fairies. Though the unbelieving townspeople considered her to be an eccentric, her communications with the energetic fae meant she was far from lonely. Their presence allowed her to enjoy life, even though she had no human friends and her father rarely came home from his post in London.

The hobgoblins, who loved nothing more than cleanliness, had spread a cloth over the table and decorated it with flowers. Presently, Lydia was lining up some herbal cookies on it. With the pouring of the hot, milky tea into the cups, the preparations for teatime were complete. The fairies gathered with the cookies in their sights, something that she was very used to seeing.

But then a doubt struck her that something wasn't right. Lydia frowned. Why did it feel as though she was forgetting something important?

"That's right! Where's Nico?"

The fairy cat had been with Lydia since her birth, and he adored tea. It wasn't like him to miss out.

"He'll still be in London," said the kelpie sitting across the table from her. He was currently in the form of a virile, dark-haired man, and was holding a cookie between his fingers. He grimaced as he chewed, and Lydia shuddered to think of the ingredients he would prefer to add to his snacks. She would rather that he didn't like these.

Kelpies were savage beasts by nature that devoured humans and livestock whole. This one, however, seemed to have taken a liking to her for whatever reason and paid her home frequent visits. He would inevitably scowl as he washed his cookie down with tea. Personally, she didn't see why he would force himself to eat them if he didn't enjoy them, but maybe his interest in her

pushed him to do as she did.

Naturally, even with the grimace on his face, the fairy was captivatingly beautiful. He was not a typical water horse whatsoever. As rugged and even alluring as the creatures were, they used their wicked powers to tempt people into the water and feast on them. Even knowing this, Lydia often felt as though he were of a different species altogether.

“Nico is still in London? Are you certain?”

Now that she thought of it, she had gone to England’s capital around this time last year to spend Easter with her father.

“Aye. It’s all the interestin’ grub that’s keepin’ him there, y’know.”

“Ah yes, I remember. He said he was going to live there…” She trailed off. Wouldn’t that mean she had spent an entire year without him? Perhaps she had. Her life was unchanging, monotonous, and every day might have lasted a year as far she was concerned. “Goodness me, does his gluttony know no bounds?”

Lydia took a sip of her tea. Truly, her life was a peaceful one. Her days might have been uneventful, but she had few real worries and knew little suffering. She had a vague sense that this was how she would spend the rest of her life. Though she had adopted her mother’s title of fairy doctor, she doubted there were many people who would seek her help with fairy-related trouble in this era, which saw locomotives running all over Britain. She was merely the town’s greatest eccentric with no hope of attracting any romantic interest.

“It’s no like ye’ll be goin’ back to London anytime soon anyhows. Much nicer to be in bonnie Scotland, ey?” Kelpie asked. He was sitting with one leg crossed over the other on a chair that was much too small for him.

“Yes.”

For some reason, her response elicited a contented smile.

“Say, Kelpie, aren’t these teacups lovely? I found them at the market yesterday. The plates came with them too. Don’t you think this pale green is a beautiful color?”

“Huh? How’s the color matter as long as they hold the tea?”

“I suppose…”

Lydia was surprised at herself for expecting a different

response, despite knowing that kelpies lacked such sensitivities. She hadn't had a human conversation in a long time, so why would she broach such a topic with him?

Even if she did up her hair and wore her best dress, the fairies would never notice. They would never compare anything to her "peridot" eyes. They certainly wouldn't describe her dull, rust-colored hair as being the same shade as delicious caramel. Then again, neither would any human.

Lydia frowned to herself again. Her mind had suddenly conjured up an image of a man with a dauntless smile and a passionate, ash-mauve gaze. He was full of confidence, particularly when it came to having women do what he wanted. The young nobleman's hair was a dazzling shade of blond. Certainly, his delicate, handsome features would make him appealing to any woman, but he also had a merciless side: one that allowed him to do whatever it took to achieve his goals.

Ah, yes. That *gentleman.*

The pretentious, philanderous villain. He had put Lydia through a horrendous ordeal. She had been on her way to London when he had all but kidnapped her and forced her to accompany him on a treasure hunt. A *dangerous* treasure hunt, no less. She had the sense that calling these events to mind was bound to attract even more terrible things, so she shook her head to rid it of his visage. Afterward, she had spent Easter with her father in London before returning to Scotland and her ordinary life.

The young man had earned the title of the Earl of Ibrazel upon obtaining the merrows' sword. That was the last time she had seen him. And she would probably never see him again, given that he had no more use for her. She was essentially a stranger to him.

For whatever reason, she could remember no further details about her experiences with Edgar. He had dragged her along on a treasure hunt and used her till her utility was exhausted. That was where her memories ended. Missing were the precious experiences of working as his fairy doctor in London, of gradually falling in love with him and accepting his proposal, and so she decided that he was no longer worthy of her thought. There was just one small inconsistency that tugged at her heart: the mysterious ring set on her finger.

No matter how she tried to remove the moonstone, it refused

to come off. It was a beautiful stone that gently encompassed a soft, milky light. It seemed significant that it should fit her finger so perfectly, as though made for her. Such a ring was supposed to symbolize a vow by someone dear to marry her, and yet a person like that didn't exist in her life. Nor would they exist in her future. As peaceful as her days were, her lack of memories surrounding that ring filled Lydia with the slightest sense of trepidation.

"Lydia has forgotten about me?"

Nico had just started filling Edgar in on what he had witnessed at Lydia's house. At present, they were in a first-class compartment of a Scotland-bound train, and the fairy cat was very much enjoying his tea. He had already been to Scotland and back on the earl's request to investigate what had happened to Lydia after she was taken by Kelpie.

Naturally, Edgar was well aware that fairies disliked the railway. However, Nico had met him in Cambridge at the very last second before he was due to board the train to Edinburgh. He had managed to persuade the fairy cat to join him using the promise of tea and refreshments. What he had then learned about Lydia's situation took him completely by surprise.

"She hasn't quite forgotten *everything*. She remembers up until this point last year, when she came to London for Easter. Kelpie's magic seems to have deprived her of her memories beyond that. As far as I could tell, she remembers you as nothing more than the man who put her through a trying ordeal in search of the merrows' sword."

"I daresay that puts me in a more difficult spot than if she had forgotten about me altogether." It meant that the only image she had of Edgar was the appalling first impression he had made on her. "It had finally gotten to the point that she was beginning to understand me after all these months. Must we go through all of that again?"

He threw himself down on the sofa in a huff. If he would be forced to start afresh, then he was determined to see through as many seduction attempts as necessary to win her over again. However, his initial deception of her had been the very reason he had struggled to convince her his proposal was genuine.

Ignoring Edgar's distress, Nico casually called out to the boy who was serving them. "I need more milk in this tea, Raven."

He was enjoying his beverage to the fullest extent, and Edgar found himself wondering whether Nico really did dislike railways after all. Although he looked like nothing more than a gray cat, he liked to think of himself as a gentleman, something that was reflected in the way he deftly held his teacup in his front paws and the fact that he was never without his necktie. Raven never questioned treating Nico as he would a human guest either.

The earl gazed at the dark-skinned boy pouring more milk into the fairy cat's teacup and, after some thought, concluded that it was a peculiar sight indeed. However, after having met Lydia and becoming the Earl of Ibrazel, he no longer found such things so curious anymore. His sole wish was that he would encounter more such peaceful and peculiar sights in his everyday life moving forward.

"It's a bloody miracle you were able to get her to agree to marry you in the first place," Nico went on. "There isn't a chance in hell you'll manage it a second time."

"I suppose one reaps what one sows," Raven mused. "Ah...not that it is deserved in *every* case..."

"Was the addition of that caveat a last-minute decision, Raven?"

"Certainly not, my lord." Though his expression didn't change, Raven's stiff posture suggested that he was rather flustered. His emotions tended to be fleeting at best, and he struggled to understand the inner workings of the human mind. In other words, he had meant to say what he'd said. The fact that he was right only dragged Edgar's spirits lower.

This *was* Edgar's fault. Letting his chin rest on his hand, he turned his gaze outside the window. This wouldn't have happened if *he* hadn't allowed Lydia to go with Kelpie. He had wanted to protect her by distancing her from a dangerous situation. He had made a promise with Kelpie: The water horse would return Lydia if Edgar went to Scotland to fetch her. However, Edgar had foreseen that Kelpie would make use of his magic to hinder him in some way.

According to Nico, a magic barrier had been erected around Lydia's hometown that not only prevented her from leaving but stopped anyone from entering. That included Edgar, his companions, and even Professor Carlton. Not only that, but Kelpie had taken away her memories of her time in London. Since she

was so far away from the people who knew her, she was apparently living each day unaware that there was anything wrong. Kelpie had managed to orchestrate a situation in which he was able to keep her by his side without breaking his promise. Even if Edgar was able to get into the town somehow, he would struggle to convince Lydia to leave with him, given that she had forgotten all about his proposal.

"The horse is shrewd, I'll give him that," Edgar muttered. But despite what he was up against, he had promised Lydia that he would come for her. He was determined to keep that promise at all costs.

"Why not forget about Lydia for a while, Earl? The Prince and his lot won't be able to touch her while she's protected by Kelpie's magic. She's safer this way," Nico said.

Edgar could understand where he was coming from. The earl's fight with the Prince and his shadowy society raged on, and it was their intention to rob Edgar of *everything*. Lydia was precious to him, and she was therefore in danger. That was what concerned Kelpie and why he had taken her away in the first place. She had protested, saying that she wanted to stay with Edgar, but he'd had no choice but to let her go. He never wanted to find himself in a situation like that ever again. Being around him would inevitably mean that Lydia was in danger. However, he now had a duty to protect her. She had agreed to become his partner, the one who would join him in overcoming danger *together*. Allowing Kelpie to usurp his role was unacceptable. That was why he needed to go to Scotland.

As he thought things through, he touched the breast of his frock coat. On the other side was the pocket containing a piece of paper. He made sure he could still feel it as he recalled the information recorded on it by the professor. Freya was a flame-colored fluorite found only in Wallcave, a village in Yorkshire. Carlton had prefaced by pointing out that, from a mineralogical perspective, it was nothing more than a variant of fluorite, which already came in different shades depending on its properties. However, it used to be thought that Freya was the fiery breath of a dragon that had crystallized. Edgar knew that there was some truth to the legend. In truth, it had been produced by a worm that had lived in the area since time immemorial. The Prince had

obtained a piece of Freya by forcing it to awaken from its long slumber and create the first specimen in hundreds of years.

Freya was the essence of the worm's lifeblood, and it was said to be a stone of immortality. But it was also supposed to be useless in the hands of one who didn't have a thorough understanding of fairy magic. It seemed that Lydia had asked her father to look into the stories surrounding the stone to help understand how the Prince intended to use it. Her father had come back with something much more complex than simple stories—the information he had gathered was well within the territory of black magic.

Professor Carlton had found a medieval grimoire. Based on its contents, it was no wonder it made him uneasy to think that there were people undertaking such practices in the present day. Apparently, the Freya's core, where its magic was strongest, had the power to remove a soul from its body and store it. It was then possible to take that soul and transfer it into a new body. It seemed this was why it was known as a stone of immortality. When one's body grew old and death became inevitable, one could simply find a new, younger body to possess. In order to do so, the soul that occupied the younger body needed to be killed. There were several methods noted for this, all of which amounted to outright torture, leaving the body unscathed while pushing the soul's mind into the pits of despair, robbing it of its ability to think or resist and crushing the personality of whomever it belonged to. Or at least, such was the probable outcome of those methods.

It was advisable to select a blood relative for the process. The candidate would also have to learn the ways of the one who sought their body to ensure that the new soul could adapt. The transfer would have a greater success rate the closer the receiver's knowledge, education, preferences, habits, and behavior were to those of the soul's owner. These methods were strongly reminiscent of the abuse and instruction Edgar had gone through at the Prince's hands. While he didn't know how old the Prince was, he couldn't imagine that his nemesis had lived for more than a hundred years. There was a high possibility that the villain was on his second or third body.

Ulysses, the Prince's closest associate, had probably been the one to tap into the Freya's magic. Though he carried the Blue

Knight Earl's blood, he was descended from an illegitimate child. Therefore, he'd had no claim to the title even after the direct line had come to an end. Nevertheless, his ability to command fairy magic was impressive.

It had become all too obvious that the Prince, who was physically impaired and only getting older, was desperately searching for a new body. Although Edgar had been the chosen vessel, he had fled. At first, the Prince had wanted him to be captured alive, but lately it seemed his focus was to teach Edgar a terrible lesson before killing him. It was therefore possible that the villain had found a new vessel. Whatever he was plotting, it was Edgar's intention to stand in his way at every turn. That was how he would protect Lydia and his companions.

"I wish to see Lydia, Nico. While you claim that she would be safer were I to leave her alone, the truth is quite simply that you are afraid of Kelpie, no?"

"Well, he *did* threaten to eat my tail the next time he saw me."

As a fairy himself, Nico was able to evade Kelpie's magic. That was why Edgar had sent him to check on Lydia in the first place, but whatever the water horse had done to him after he was caught had clearly left him quaking.

"Is that all? Let him feast on your tail, then. I might be able to rescue Lydia in the meantime. And I shall buy you a fox tail as a replacement."

"Absolutely not! My tail is the finest in all the world!" Nico protested, wrapping his front paws around the bushy thing as though terrified it would be taken from him that very instant. Edgar was almost certain that there were tears in his eyes.

"That was in jest, of course. For now, you must think of a way to break through Kelpie's magic."

Nico was still stroking his tail discontentedly, but he did spare a glance for the earl. "There *is* a way to enter the town before sunset. However, the barrier will still be in place, meaning Lydia cannot escape. This method is also limited to a single use."

The conditions were less than favorable. That said, nothing would change unless Edgar could meet with Lydia face-to-face.

"Elaborate."

"One of the town's residents will have to invite you in."

His Dear Fairy Doctor

White apple blossoms floated like clouds above the path by the field. Lydia walked along it as the spring breeze played with her loose hair. Following her were little fairies dressed in petals.

“Where are you going, Lydia?”

“Where are you going?”

“I’m going to buy some honey,” she replied.

“Honey!”

“Honey! Goodness!”

The fairies began to giggle, seemingly for no reason at all. They grabbed Lydia’s hair and flew around her as they played with it.

“Sweet honey the color of rapeseed!”

They clung to her locks in a show of affection. Lydia didn’t mind, and it was why she rarely felt the need to tie her hair up even at her age. Though she knew it made her appear childish, she had accidentally left it loose when leaving the house today too.

At length, she came to the end of the apple path and arrived at the town’s sole collection of shops. They stood in a row, their carved wooden signs hanging from their eaves. Lydia was going to the shop on the corner.

As she was leaving after completing her shopping, she spotted a carriage on the other side of the street. Three girls, who seemed to have only just alighted, were standing beside it engaged in animated conversation. The town was small enough that Lydia was already acquainted with the three sisters. She wasn’t, however, familiar with the man in the black top hat who stood in their center. He had a well-proportioned frame that was clad in a perfectly tailored overcoat. It was unthinkable that he should hail from this town when he was wearing a garment of such slick black material. No doubt the girls were overly excited because they had met an elegant gentleman from the city.

“Are you certain that you want to get off here, my lord? I know there isn’t much to see here, but I would be delighted to keep showing you around in my carriage for a while longer.”

“Yes, and please do stop by the house for tea! We have liquor

that I'm sure you won't have seen in the city, my lord!"

Their joyful cries sent a twinge of jealousy through Lydia. That must have been how everyone fell in love: a chance encounter, after which the pair would gradually draw closer. And she would never experience it.

"That is so very kind of you, but I would like to take a stroll through the town."

The gentleman's voice made Lydia freeze in shock. It felt very much like her heart was racing. She dismissed it as a ridiculous notion and made to start walking again.

"I must thank you for the hospitality you have shown me. I was so incredibly fortunate that you three beautiful ladies happened to be passing just after my carriage ran into a ditch."

"Goodness!" the sisters exclaimed, their giggling growing all the more pretentious.

"Surely the ladies of the city are *far* more beautiful than us!"

"There is nothing beautiful about embellishing one's appearance too much. It seems that I am much more drawn to the lovely wildflowers of this small town."

Now Lydia started for an entirely different reason. That confident, flirtatious tone sounded all too familiar. She tentatively turned her head to check. The man in the hat slowly turned around. It was as though he could feel her gaze on him. That was when his ash-mauve eyes caught sight of her.

"Lydia?" His look of surprise suddenly turned into one of pain before eventually shifting into a gentle smile. "Ah, it really is you. I didn't think I would run into you so soon. My fairy, how overjoyed I am to see you!"

She didn't know how to respond. She remembered his smile being something much haughtier. It was worlds apart from his current expression, which was shining with unconcealed joy. As usual, her perplexed reaction did not deter him, and he immediately strode toward her.

"I have come for you, as promised. I do hope you weren't growing impatient."

"I beg your pardon?" she stammered. "What on earth are you doing here?!"

"I was just about to visit your house, but to think that we would find each other the moment I set foot here. Truly, we must be

soulmates."

Lydia was more perturbed by the stares of the three sisters than the way he took her hand and planted a kiss on it.

"Might this young lady be an acquaintance of yours, my lord?" one of the young women asked tentatively.

"Yes, in fact she is my dear—"

"Not another word!" Lydia exclaimed, forcefully shaking free of his grip. There was no telling *what* he might say should she allow him to speak freely.

Naturally, her resistance didn't deter him either, and he took the paper bag from her grasp. "Allow me. You will show me to your house, won't you?"

Lydia would certainly not abide him barging into her home. "I'm afraid I shall have to decline. I cannot invite a gentleman into my house while my father is absent."

"Even when the gentleman in question is your fiancé? I am entitled to the privilege of spending time alone with you, am I not?"

"Forgive me, but did you say 'fiancé'?!" one of the sisters cried before Lydia could reply.

"Is that true, Miss Carlton?"

"I—" Lydia began.

"Oh, I see!" Edgar exclaimed. "You are of similar ages and grew up in the same town, so it is no wonder that you are old friends of Miss Carlton's."

It was a small town, so their families were naturally aware of each other. But they were not friends. The stiff smiles that quickly rose to the sisters' faces were therefore rather baffling. They were even nodding.

"Oh, yes. We have been friends with Miss Carlton since we were all very young. That is why we were so surprised to learn that your lordship is engaged to her!"

The claim completely shocked Lydia, but Edgar seemed more enthused than ever. "How lovely. In that case, we mustn't forget to invite you to the engagement party."

In turn, the sisters' excitement seemed to grow. They must have been longing to meet the friends and acquaintances of this urban nobleman, even if it meant they had to associate with Lydia.

"You should have told us that you have such a wonderful fiancé,

Miss Carlton!”

“A lord too! I can scarcely believe it!”

“The four of us should celebrate this news together!”

Lydia was only growing more confused with each passing second.

“Doesn’t that sound wonderful, Lydia?” Edgar said. “You should certainly take these fine ladies up on the offer and make arrangements when you next have the opportunity. Now, if you’ll excuse us…”

“Of course. Have a lovely day, my lord.”

Shooting a smile at the sisters, who were still overreacting with excitement, Edgar took a dumbfounded Lydia by the arm and began to lead her away.

It wasn’t until they had left the shops behind and started along the brookside path that she found her voice. “Why on *earth* did you tell them we were engaged?!”

“Why shouldn’t I have? They seemed interested in being your friends. Otherwise, supposing they have ever teased you, this is your opportunity to get back at them.” Edgar could be awfully malicious in spite of the cordial impression he gave.

“I wouldn’t say that they teased me.”

“Then why not accept their friendship? They have avoided you out of a prejudice against your ability to see fairies up until now, but there is no reason things should stay that way.”

Though he might well have been right, surely any friendship she could foster with them now would be built on the preconception that she and Edgar would be marrying.

“I shall have you know that I have no interest in being their friend.” Lydia’s main concern was that he had fed such nonsense about their relationship to a group of strangers.

“Incidentally, this *is* the way to your house, isn’t it?”

“Edgar…”

“We can take a roundabout way if you like.”

“We take a left here,” Lydia said with a resigned sigh. To be frank, she was starting to grow curious about what had brought Edgar to Scotland in the first place. Shouldn’t he have been in London managing his earldom? Why had he come back to her? It was a wonder that he even remembered who she was. The thought caused a slight ache in the depths of her heart, but she

wasn't sure what it was, so she ignored it. "Did something happen?"

"So you *are* worried about me."

"That isn't what I—"

"I wanted to see what your hometown was like."

It was so like him not to take her question seriously.

"You have tired of London's women, is that it? And you have come in search of wildflowers?"

He grimaced slightly. "What I meant by that was that I consider this town's women to be the loveliest in the world. And that includes you. Women comparable to wildflowers, who are loved by the fairies. Do you see what I mean?"

"He hasn't changed one bit," Lydia muttered to herself. *Honestly, what* is *he doing here?* She couldn't believe that he would have come merely to flirt with her. She shook her head. How ridiculous it all was. Even if his coming here *was* his peculiar way of teasing her, surely he had better things to do?

"Where were you before the shops, Lydia? Your hair is full of apple blossoms."

"It is?! Oh dear!"

She froze and tried to brush them away, but Edgar caught her hand to stop her.

He smiled at her. "Why rid it of these adornments? They suit you perfectly."

Lydia desperately looked around. They were on the path she had walked by the field, but she couldn't see a single apple tree that was in bloom. They weren't even budding yet. This town was teeming with fairies, and now and then Lydia would take an unknowing step into their world. It didn't matter so much to her, but it was sure to give someone a fright if they noticed a girl wearing petals from flowers that weren't in bloom yet. That was why she was so desperate to be rid of them. Edgar, however, continued to smile.

"It was the fairies pulling a prank. As unsettling as it is, it often happens," she explained.

"The fairies know well how to enhance your beauty." Edgar took a flower that had fallen onto her shoulder and tucked it behind her ear.

Her face red, Lydia stole a glance at him. It didn't *look* like he

found it unsettling. In truth, she was relieved that part of him hadn't changed either. It showed that he hadn't just feigned an interest in fairies in order to use her. He still accepted Lydia's dealings with them as something perfectly natural.

"You are a curious gentleman. I had thought you would have forgotten about me long ago since obtaining an earldom and returning to upper-class society."

Perhaps she shouldn't have said that. It would make it sound as if she hadn't *wanted* him to forget her. Slightly embarrassed, she lowered her gaze. The longer Edgar kept his silence, the stranger she found her own words to be.

"How could I have forgotten about you?" There was an unexpected assertiveness to his question, as though he was troubled by her remark. "Even if every one of your memories should leave you, I shall never forget, Lydia."

Confused, she looked up at him once more. Her eyes met his close, earnest gaze.

"I shan't ever forget the exact words you uttered when you promised to marry me."

"I…did what?"

"You truly don't remember? There exists a love between you and me that we have nurtured, little by little, for some time now. As soon as I was named the Earl of Ibrazel, I hired you as my personal fairy doctor. Ever since then, you have been living with your father in London and solving the fairy-related troubles of my people on a daily basis."

"Wait a moment…"

"I beg you to recall, Lydia. We were so drawn to one another that neither our pasts nor our social positions could come between us. We made a promise to marry."

"I would appreciate it if you could stop lying to me. I have been in Scotland all this time." Lydia took a step back, trying to escape his gaze, only for him to catch her arm and pull her back.

"You have been placed under a spell. If you cannot take me at my word, then allow me to show you proof." Edgar held up her hand, drawing her attention to the moonstone ring. "This ring confirms our engagement. It belonged to Gwendolen, bride to the first Earl of Ibrazel. Now it rests on your finger. That, you cannot deny."



It was true that Lydia couldn't remember how she had come to wear the ring, and now she didn't know what to think. Regardless, Edgar's claims were too outrageous to believe. The ripples that spread through her heart were much like those making the brook water swell violently. Moments later, a jet-black horse ran up the bank in a spray of droplets.

"Hallo, Earl. How'd ye get in?"

"I have come for Lydia. You promised to return her to me immediately."

Kelpie returned to his human form and stood in Edgar's way threateningly. "It doesnae matter if ye cheated yer way in. My spell's still in place. The promise doesnae mean nothin' if ye cannae get Lydia out on yer own strength."

A powerful whirlwind whipped up around them, forcing Lydia to close her eyes. When she opened them again, neither Edgar nor Kelpie were anywhere to be seen.

***

Edgar and I can't *be engaged…*

And yet, Kelpie had spoken as if he knew the earl, and he had been quick to separate them. Lydia had to wonder where and when they had met before. As strange as their acquaintance was, however, the idea that she was betrothed was stranger still. Not to mention it was unthinkable that Edgar would choose to marry a girl of common birth. The final nail in the coffin was that he was a prolific liar.

"Ah! Perhaps he is attempting to swindle me!"

Lydia tried to consider *what* he would want to cheat her out of exactly, but it proved fruitless. That was when the doorbell rang. She snapped her book shut and jumped up from her seat by the hearth.

"Who on earth could be calling at this hour?"

The sun had set a while ago. It was no time to be welcoming visitors.

Could it be Edgar?

"Who is it?" she called timidly from the other side of the front door.

"Lydia? It's me, Lotta."

Lotta?

When she opened the door, a girl with tied-back, coffee-colored hair embraced her.

"How've you been, Lydia? I tried to come see you in London, but your housekeeper said you were out here!"

That's right. I do *have a human friend.* Lydia recalled that Lotta had gone to the Netherlands with her grandfather.

Kelpie's magic, both in terms of the barrier that prevented Lydia's associates from entering the town and its interference with her memories, hadn't had an effect on Lotta, who had been abroad. Lydia remained unaware of this as she studied her friend's face.

"Welcome back, Miss Lotta. You'll be able to stay in Britain for the foreseeable future now, won't you?"

Lotta's brown almond-shaped eyes softened as she smiled in a way that was exceedingly charming.

"I'm so glad to see you. Please do come in. It's still cold outside after sunset, isn't it?" Lydia took her by the hand and showed her to the reception room.

Now a princess, Lotta was wearing a very fine dress. However, her lack of gloves and bonnet made her look like a girl from the slums, something that was more befitting of her personality.

"Are you hungry?" Lydia asked.

"I ate at the pub by the station. Anyway, did you ask for another leave of absence or somethin'? You two have a fight?"

"Did I have a fight with whom?"

"The man who hired you as his fairy doctor."

Lydia frowned. Lotta frowned back at her.

"Edgar. He's Lord, uh...Ashenbert now, right? You said in your letter he proposed to you properly."

He proposed? Lydia unconsciously brought her right hand to the moonstone ring. Edgar had said they were engaged when she met him that afternoon. What did it all mean?

"Wait, did he do something to make you run away? That's disgusting! Using force just because he couldn't get you to fall in love with him."

"Miss Lotta, when you say I sent you a letter—"

"Och, if it isn't the pirate lass." Kelpie had come in through the window, cutting Lydia off.

“Well, if it isn’t…Kelpie, wasn’t it? Still loitering around Lydia, huh?”

“So?”

“I guess it’s fine as long as you don’t get any dirty ideas.”

“Miss Lotta!” Lydia protested, her face red.

The pirate princess grinned. “You’re as pure as they come, Lydia. Guess I can rule out any suspicions I had.”

“Suspicions?”

“Forget it. Just keep bein’ yourself, okay?” She squeezed Lydia like she was a small child.

“I cannae believe I forgot about her…” Kelpie grumbled to himself.

“You say somethin’?”

“Naw.”

“Oh yeah, Lydia. Where’s the little pussy cat?” Lotta asked.

“Nico is in London. It seems he was unable to tear himself away from the city’s cuisine.”

“Huh. He’ll regret missing out on what I brought back from the Netherlands.” Lotta opened the trunk she had been dragging behind her and pulled out a bottle of wine. “Whatever. I’m sure we won’t have trouble finishing it off together!”

“What about us?” Kelpie asked bitterly.

Thanks to the water horse and the hobgoblins that joined them, the evening turned into something more lively, and Lydia soon forgot all about her doubts regarding Edgar.

After becoming comfortably drunk, Lydia fell into a slumber, only for her eyes to snap open again in the middle of the night. She had been crying out in her dream.

“I shall marry you…”

The words hovered faintly at the back of her mind but vanished without a trace mere moments after she woke up. She couldn’t remember a single thing about the nature of her dream, and yet her cheeks were wet. She turned over. The moonlight chased the sleep from her mind and bounced off the glittering moonstone on her finger, drawing her attention to it and bringing doubt to the forefront of her thoughts once again.

Something wasn’t right. Lotta had spoken as though Lydia were working for Edgar in London, and had even mentioned a proposal.

Where had the two of them met anyway? Lydia began to gradually follow the threads of her memories. As she recalled, the pirate girl had come in search of her missing friend, who had been captured by a worm in one of Edgar's territories. Edgar and Lotta had known each other since the earl was in America.

The more fragments of her memory returned to her, the bigger Lydia's doubt grew. Why had *she* gone to Edgar's territory? How did she know that he and Lotta were old friends? She wasn't supposed to have been in contact with Edgar since they had found the sword. It was all too strange. Nico was nowhere to be seen. Kelpie's presence was unusually constant.

Lydia felt too uneasy to remain lying in her bed, so she got up, fetched her coat, and made for the front door. She wasn't sure what she hoped to achieve wandering outside in the middle of the night.

I wonder if Edgar is still here…

The next train out of Edinburgh shouldn't have been departing until tomorrow morning, so he might have been staying at an inn somewhere. Lydia cut across the garden, pushed open the low wooden door, and walked out past her gate. Or at least she thought she had, but she found herself in the garden again. The moonlit road was on the other side of the wooden door. She pushed it open once more and stepped through it slowly. However, a single step and she was back in the garden. It was fairy magic: a spell of illusion.

The moment it came to her, she naturally deduced that her fragmented memories must also have been caused by magic. Magic that could only have been cast by a powerful fairy. Lydia could think of no other possible culprit than Kelpie.

"Why would he do such a thing?"

Though he was of the Unseelie Court, he had never done anything to cause her harm. Nor had he ever used his magic on her. If he was the culprit, then breaking the spell would prove difficult. Nevertheless, Lydia persisted in trying to leave the garden. The result was the same whether she tried to leave from the back or use a ladder to climb over the hedge. Exhausted, she sat beneath the ladder.

"What're you doing, Lydia?"

Lotta's question snapped her from her reverie and she looked

up. Not only was Lydia wearing nothing but a coat over her nightclothes, she was covered in leaves and dirt from trying to escape through the shrubbery. Embarrassment overwhelmed her as she realized she must have looked awfully peculiar.

"I'm sorry. I suppose I was making a racket…"

"Nah, I was just struggling to get to sleep. Somethin' on your mind?"

"A spell has been cast on me, and I'm unable to leave the garden."

The mention of magic had Lotta cocking her head, but she sounded quite practical as she asked, "What d'you wanna leave for in the middle of the night?"

"I miss him."

Lotta didn't ask who.

"I ran into him this afternoon. He should still be here. I need to ask him if…if I truly agreed to marry him…"

Lotta gently took Lydia by the hand and helped her to her feet. Once they were back in the reception room, she was encouraged into the chair by the fire. The princess poked the fire, filling the room with a sudden light. Just that was enough to calm Lydia slightly.

"Edgar's in town?" Lotta asked, and Lydia nodded.

"It seems that I've forgotten an awful lot," she explained.

"Like what?"

"You mentioned that I was working under Edgar's employ in London and that he proposed to me."

"You don't remember any of that?"

Lydia shook her head. "Now that I think about it, my missing memories all concern Edgar. I thought that I had only met him once and that I had been in this town ever since. However, when I met him today, he said he had promised to come for me. That we were engaged…"

Lotta gave a thoughtful hum. "But he's always pretended that you were his fiancée, even when you didn't wanna be."

He did? Did that mean his words today were all in jest?

"You were always really firm with him when he tried it, though. Never thought I'd hear you say you miss him." Lotta smiled gently. "If that's how you feel, maybe you did get engaged to him after all. I definitely think something inside you's changed."

Did that change mean that Lydia was now capable of falling in love with Edgar? A lying, philandering villain?

"Maybe Edgar's changed too," Lotta went on. "You wrote that his proposal was serious, so somethin' must've happened to make you think his feelings for you are genuine."

While that might have been true, the Edgar she had met today was the same as ever: overly confident, two-faced, and far too quick to compliment any woman in the vicinity. He still wasn't serious, awkward, or sincere, all of which were traits Lydia hoped for in a husband.

"Miss Lotta, I realize that I said I miss him, but in reality I simply want to know the truth."

"Okay, well, what did you think when you saw him? If the engagement thing is just Edgar being Edgar, you probably would've found him annoying. If you didn't, then maybe you were actually happy to see him."

Lydia only remembered Edgar as a man who had used her. And yet she had been slightly relieved to learn that he hadn't forgotten about her. His loud claims that she was his fiancée were rather troubling, but they hadn't made her especially angry. She just couldn't remember. She couldn't even remember him having proposed to her, so how was she expected to believe that he was in love with her?

"What if I ask him about it and he tells me that it really was all in jest? For example, if I fell in love with him and he decided to propose to me simply because it amused him? You know how he so enjoys encouraging women who develop a fondness for him."

As distasteful as it was, he adored it when they fawned over him. If he had come here simply to tease Lydia, then she would be better off without her memories.

Lotta grinned and placed a hand on Lydia's head as though oblivious to her anxieties. "Relax, Lydia. If that's really what he's thinkin', I'll make sure he regrets toying with you." The pirate girl got to her feet. "I'm also gonna make sure you two meet. You wait here. I'll sniff him out and bring him over."

***

Edgar was staying at an inn in the neighboring town. Following

a sleepless night, he was sitting at the windowside table in his dressing gown and opening the letter that had arrived just that morning. The food on the plate before him had grown stone-cold.

"Would you like me to reheat your breakfast, my lord?" Raven offered the moment the earl, who had been deep in thought all this time, showed the slightest hint of movement. He had certainly been concerned about his master's lack of appetite but hadn't wanted to make the suggestion at an inopportune moment.

"That's quite all right," Edgar replied. "Forgive me, but would you mind leaving me be?"

"Not at all, my lord. Would you like some warm milky tea?"

"Please."

After being driven out of town by Kelpie yesterday, Edgar had made several varied attempts to reenter to no avail. Taking a right at a fork in the road eventually returned him to the same spot via the left path. He had wandered around in endless circles. He had walked in one direction down a single road only for the same signpost to appear in the distance again and again. Nico had persuaded him that, since he had been driven out, it was now impossible to return, so he had reluctantly taken a room at the inn. However, he presently had more to think about than just retrieving Lydia.

A letter had come that morning from Scarlet Moon, a secret organization investigating the Prince's movements in London. It reported that one of the society's members, a young artist named Paul Firman whom Edgar considered a friend, had gone missing. Paul acted as a liaison between the earl and Scarlet Moon, which was by no means a dangerous duty. Quite apart from anything else, he possessed an honesty that was typical of the lower middle class, making him unsuited to being a proper spy. Having said that, he was a frequent visitor to Edgar's estate and was known to the Prince's right-hand man. It was quite possible that he had been singled out.

"The last thing anyone had heard from him was that he was going to visit the sick children at the almshouse in the East End..." Edgar murmured as Raven brought him his tea.

Paul had given art lessons to those children a number of times. Presumably, he thought it would help lift their spirits.

"I wonder whether the children at the almshouse are afflicted

by the illness that is spreading through the area."

"That may well be the case."

"Perhaps the painter has also fallen victim to it," Nico remarked as he sipped his tea in front of the fire. He had finished his breakfast some time ago.

"And he is therefore unable to make contact with anybody?" Edgar asked.

The disease itself wasn't fully understood. Those afflicted developed a lasting high fever similar to the symptoms of a nasty cold until their lungs could take no more damage and they perished. However, they did not lose consciousness immediately.

"My lord, I cannot shake the sense that the Prince is in some way connected to this disease," said Raven. When he and Edgar had returned from Cambridge to London, it had been because Scarlet Moon had called the earl back to discuss the illness. There was a collection of slums in the East End that were home to a great number of destitute laborers and migrants. A contagious disease was currently spreading through them, putting London's citizenry on guard.

The East End was already teeming with sickness of all kinds. Outbreaks of cholera and typhus tended to originate there. As such, even the spread of an unknown illness wasn't unusual, but Scarlet Moon's investigation had uncovered evidence that this one might not be entirely natural.

"The Prince will destroy London."

That was what one of the man's underlings had told Edgar shortly before her death. The memory of it was still fresh in his mind, and he had continued to ponder the meaning of those words, instructing Scarlet Moon to monitor London and keep an eye on even the slightest hint of anything sinister. That was how they had come to know about the illness in the East End.

"It is most peculiar that the same symptoms aren't being seen to the west of the City of London," Raven said, expressing the same concern held by Scarlet Moon.

There were no physical boundaries in London to stop an illness that originated in the slums from reaching as far as Westminster and beyond and infecting some of the population there. In this instance, however, there were no such cases. The illness was spreading like a drop of ink on blotting paper. It was more like a

shadow crawling over the ground and pushing through everything in its path than something that jumped from person to person.

"Is that a premonition of yours, Raven? A message from the spirits within you?"

"I cannot be sure." He paused. "But perhaps you are right. I feel apprehensive…"

Although Scarlet Moon's letter stated that the illness was still confined to the slums, there were an increasing number of people anxious that it hailed the end times. The citizens of London were unaware of the Prince or the plans of his organization. Nevertheless, they must have sensed that something sinister was lurking in the shadows. Could Paul's disappearance really be related to their foe and this mysterious disease?

"Will you be going back to London, Earl?" Nico stirred his tea and narrowed his eyes as he inhaled the steam. The lack of concern in his tone spoke to his separation from the situation.

Perhaps returning was Edgar's only option. He would have elected to do so immediately if not for one remaining concern.

"Is there truly no possibility of meeting with Lydia again?"

"Kelpie's warier than ever at the moment. You won't be seeing her short of breaking his spell completely."

Edgar blinked. "And how would I go about doing that?"

"Your knowledge of magic is far too lacking. You wouldn't have made that careless deal with Kelpie in the first place otherwise."

Edgar took issue with the idea that he had acted without care. "Lydia and I have made it through countless trials by combining our strength, whether or not there was fairy magic involved. The bond between us should be enough to see things through."

"Lydia recalls no such bond."

"Therein lies the problem."

Just then, there was a knock at the door. It opened quietly to reveal one of the inn's staff. "You have a visitor, my lord. May I show her in?"

"A visitor? Unless my fairy has come to see me, you will send her away," Edgar replied dismissively.

A coffee-haired girl barged into the room without waiting for permission. "Sorry to disappoint."

Lotta was a former pirate whose acquaintance he had made in America. The two of them did not get along on account of their

clashing personalities.

The earl glared at her. “Throw her out, Raven,” he said darkly.

When his servant made to move, Lotta panicked and ran behind the sofa.

“You sure you wanna kick me out? I’ve been asking at every inn I could find ’cause Lydia wanted me to look for you!”

Edgar stood up and strode over to her. “You saw Lydia? How did you get into that town?”

“Not even gonna offer me a cup of tea?” Lotta glared at him as if to start a contest of dominance.

Unfortunately for her, sarcasm was Edgar’s forte. “Do excuse me, Your Royal Highness. Please, have a seat.” With a saccharine smile, he led her by the hand, and goose bumps erupted over her skin. “Raven, some tea, if you please. *That* tea,” he added, glancing at Nico, who was gazing blissfully at the cup in his paws.

Unwilling to disobey his master, Raven took the beverage from the fairy cat. “Forgive me, Mr. Nico.”

“Oi! What’re you playing at, Earl?!” Nico protested.

Lotta looked just as put out as the cup was placed in front of her. “I’m not gonna have the cat’s leftovers!”

“I’m not a cat!” Nico had climbed up onto the table and was glaring at her with his front paws on his hips.

At this, Lotta seemed to deflate, and she pushed the teacup toward him with a weary sigh.

“Tell me everything you know about Lydia’s current situation,” Edgar demanded coolly.

“If she hadn’t asked me to do this, I would’ve flipped this table and left by now.”

“And yet she did.”

As deep as her frown was, it seemed Lotta was eager to see her business finished. “I’m probably the only friend of hers who can go in and out of the town freely. Lydia said Kelpie’s cast some spell? Either way, looks like the magic didn’t reach me out in the Netherlands. And ’cause I showed up, Lydia’s realized she’s missing a ton of memories.” She didn’t take her eyes off Edgar as she spoke.

“Does that mean she doesn’t doubt what I told her?”

“About bein’ engaged? *Is* that true?”

“Naturally.”

Lotta frowned at him dubiously, then turned to look at Raven.

"It is true," the boy confirmed quickly.

Her frown only deepened. "I didn't even ask you. You told him to say that, Edgar."

The earl evaded the question and pressed her. "What did Lydia say?"

Lotta paused. "I think she half believes you. But she wants to see you again to be sure."

Needless to say, Edgar was also eager to see her as soon as possible. "She cannot leave the town, correct? I managed to enter myself, but it doesn't seem it will be quite as simple to do so a second time."

"Yeah. And at night, it looks like she can't even leave her garden."

"Lydia needs to regain her memories of me in order to break Kelpie's spell. However, if she is to remember me, she will need to meet with me…which puts us very much in a fix."

"Maybe we wouldn't be in a fix if you were the legitimate Earl of Ibrazel," Lotta muttered bitterly.

"Young lady, our Blue Knight Earl will not be bested by a mere kelpie," a disembodied voice said.

Anyone who referred to Edgar by his alias of "Blue Knight Earl" was usually a fairy. Though Edgar couldn't see anything when he looked around, he recognized the voice.

"Coblynau? Where are you?"

"I am here!"

"Ouch! How dare you pull my tail?!" Nico cried. The tip of his tail was shaking from side to side.

"The power of Lady Lydia's moonstone is strengthening," the coblynau explained. "Bow has never called out to me like this before."

"Bow?"

"I have been referring to it by that name for centuries. Anyway, Bow has shared some invaluable information with me. I came here in a hurry, knowing I must share it with you also."

Coblynau were said to be fairies that lived in the mines. According to Lydia, they dressed like miners, wore pointed hats, and had red, hairy faces. Gemstones were their specialty, and this one was steward to the mysterious moonstone that had been

passed down the earl's lineage for generations.

"Tell me," Edgar said.

Lotta watched Nico's tail carefully. She must have been familiar with the coblynau herself.

"There is one way that you can meet with her ladyship. Mr. Kelpie's magic has no effect on the church. When the setting sun pushes the shadow of its steeple to the point beyond the brook on the edge of the town, it creates a hole in the barrier."

It seemed Nico had taken his tail back from the coblynau. He was now holding it in his lap and smoothing down its fur. As a result, Edgar no longer had any idea where the smaller fairy was. The same must have held true for Lotta and Raven, and yet the three of them continued to keep their eyes on Nico's tail.

"Will I be able to take Lydia out from there?" Edgar asked.

"It isn't big enough for that. Please think of it as being able to meet her on the other side of a window. In order to break the glass, the spell cast on her ladyship must be completely undone."

Nevertheless, it was better than being unable to meet with her at all. He wanted to explain to her why he had to return to London.

"You will have until the steeple's shadow returns to the other side of the brook. It won't be long at all."

Edgar nodded and turned to Lotta. "You will let Lydia know for me, won't you?"

The princess got to her feet. Then she froze as though struck by a thought. "Lemme just check one thing."

"I am not lying about our engagement. Do not make me repeat it another hundred times."

"You haven't backed her into a corner where marriage is her only option, have you?"

"I have never done anything so coercive to any woman, Lotta. The long and short of it is that Lydia recognized that my love for her is genuine."

Lotta huffed. "*Everything* you do is coercive."

"I fear you may be failing to distinguish between coercion and persistence."

"Same as anyone else would. Look, I just wanna make sure Lydia's not gonna regret having her memories back once that spell's gone."

Edgar and Lydia hadn't even shared a proper kiss, but he wasn't

in the mood to point that out. “Lydia said she wanted to be with me.”

Even if she had only said so out of the goodness of her limitless heart, he would still be content if she saw it through.

***

As the sun began its descent toward the west, Lydia ensured Kelpie wasn’t nearby before quietly leaving her house through the back door. Lotta had told her about the church, and that was where she was going now. Once the building was in sight, she started to walk along its shadow, which stretched over the field behind it. When she was past that field, she came to a narrow brook. There was a crossing in the form of a short, simple bridge, made only from a few logs tied together. Soon, the long, narrow cross of the steeple’s shadow would touch the opposite bank. There was already a dark figure waiting beyond it.

Realizing it must have been Edgar, she broke into a run. His face gradually grew clearer. He had removed his top hat and didn’t seem to mind as the wind swept through his dazzling, golden hair. His smile held the same pain within it as Lydia had seen yesterday. She hurried over the bridge, panting, unaware that the setting sun was adding a deep red to her hair and cheeks that made her look unusually alluring. Just moments earlier, she would have found herself back on the other side of the brook and unable to cross beyond the town’s boundaries. Now, however, she had managed to traverse the bridge normally. The cross’s shadow was right at her feet.

Lydia couldn’t take another step. She raised her head where she stood to find Edgar regarding her tenderly.

“I’m so glad you came, Lydia.”

“Um, I…”

In truth, she wasn’t sure what to say. Merely seeing him again had done nothing to restore her memories, and though she felt a small urge to ask whether she had loved him and how she had come to accept his proposal, another part of her was frightened to do so.

“It pained me to think you misunderstood my intentions, so I am incredibly grateful to Lotta. Can you assure me that you do not

think me a frivolous man who sought you out solely to entertain myself?"

"Not at all. However…"

"I understand that it must be difficult to believe everything I have told you without question. Unfortunately, I do not presently have enough time to explain. Furthermore, I need to return to London urgently."

"Oh…"

"I shall come again to fetch you. I wonder whether you might promise me something in the meantime? I want you to remember all about me when we next meet. The bond that exists between two human beings is more powerful than any fairy magic, yes? If you can promise to remember me, we shall surely overcome this trial. I truly believe that our reunion, should it come to pass, will be all that is needed to break the spell."

"Should it come to pass"…

It sounded as though he wasn't certain that it would, and Lydia grew anxious. "Did something happen in London?"

Edgar had come to Britain fleeing an organization led by a man known as "the Prince." Perhaps this enemy of his was continuing his pursuit.

"Is it the Prince?" she pressed. "You won't do anything dangerous, will you, Edgar?"

"I appreciate your concern, but you needn't worry."

Lydia knew that she very much *did* need to worry. The Prince and his organization were ruthless, and if Edgar needed to take risks to stand up against them, he would do so. She stared at him accusingly.

"I'm sorry. You're right. I ought to be honest with you. You are my fairy doctor, after all." With a defeated sigh, he continued. "It seems there has been an outbreak of a contagious disease in London's East End. The Prince may be employing an occult power of some kind."

"Is he a magician?"

"No, but among his underlings is a boy named Ulysses, and he possesses the same abilities as a fairy doctor. He holds some dominion over the Unseelie Court."

The Prince is working with a fairy doctor? As surprised as she was, Lydia seemed to catch a glimpse of why she had remained by

Edgar's side. She had likely played an invaluable role despite her lack of experience. Was that when he had started to gradually become more important to her than anybody else? Or was it just another example of him using her for his own self-interests?

"There are fairies capable of bringing about epidemics. Terrifying fairies that live in the wetlands and can destroy people and livestock with illness, often because humans have entered their land or been remiss in supplying them with offerings."

When Edgar had asked Lydia to assist him in searching for the sword, learning that he wasn't a real earl and was using her abilities under false pretenses hadn't deterred her. She had been satisfied simply knowing that her skills were of use to someone. Therefore, she wasn't concerned about any ulterior motives on this occasion either. Her only company was fae, and if there was a reason for her to associate with humans, it stemmed from her abilities. As long as she could use them to help someone, that was enough for her.

"There are other kinds of wicked fairies apart from those," she continued. "While they may not be spiteful, exactly, they possess terrible abilities from a human perspective. When such members of the Unseelie Court come together, it has the potential to bring about calamity."

"In that case, the Prince could be gathering those fairies in the East End, yes? The majority of London's outskirts used to be marshes fed by the Thames, presumably making a perfect habitat for the fairies you describe."

"Perhaps, but London has existed as a town for a long time now. While I am sure that it has suffered countless natural disasters, none of them have been totally devastating. I believe it has long been protected by a powerful force to keep away evil spirits."

"I see. That reminds me of the fort erected near Hastings to protect London. The Prince instructed Ulysses to destroy it. Though it didn't fall completely, I wonder whether its power has weakened."

A sense of uneasiness came over Lydia then. Had she been with Edgar during that event too? In all likelihood, he and the Prince's organization had clashed on several occasions since he had obtained his title. This would not be their first encounter since

Edgar's flight.

"I daresay danger lies ahead if the Prince destroys whatever it is that protects London," Lydia warned him.

Edgar nodded gravely. "Now, what form might that protection take?" he mused.

Lydia had the sense that she might have once had a potential answer to that question, though it was an instinct rather than a clear memory. Unfortunately, any relevant memories she possessed remained locked away.

"Anyway, Lydia, thank you. I am sure that there is a vital clue among the information you have shared with me. I vow to you that I shan't let the Prince's scheme come to fruition."

Though his smile exuded confidence and seemed meant to reassure her, Lydia was frustrated that she hadn't been able to recall anything important. And yet he had thanked her. It still wasn't enough for her to believe they were engaged. There was so much she wanted to talk to him about, but not nearly enough time for everything. When she checked the position of the steeple's shadow, panic made her look up at Edgar's face. Still, she struggled to speak.

He looked back at her as though he too was reluctant to part and grappling with words. "I promise to come and see you again," he murmured at last.

"Were you and I truly engaged?"

"Have I any redeeming qualities in your eyes?"

"Of course…" Lydia found herself in his gentle, comforting embrace as she pondered the question.

"The coblynau told me it would be like I was speaking to you through a closed window. But it seems I can still touch you."

"Yes…" It was all she could say. Panic was making her heart pound, yet her mind felt oddly hazy.

"Lydia, on the occasions I attempted to embrace you before, you would inevitably strike me. Now, however, you accept me. Am I understanding that right?"

She couldn't say one way or the other. On the one hand, she had little choice other than to allow herself to go limp, but there was also a part of her that felt she might have wanted him to hold her like this.

Suddenly, Edgar's grip on her loosened. He seemed to tilt his

head to get a better view of her. The next second, his warm lips were on hers. They brushed over her own gently, and it felt like the most natural thing in the world.

“I wonder whether you remember my warmth, if nothing else?”

It was her first kiss. Or perhaps it wasn’t.

“Did we do this often?” Lydia asked tentatively.

“Several times.”

Despite Edgar’s warm smile, her lack of recollection only made her more bashful. How had she felt when he’d held her on all of those occasions? Had she been this nervous? Had it made her seem reluctant? Perhaps to Edgar, who needed to be struck to realize she was unwilling, her passivity alone was like a dream come true. Her confusion over it all meant she was caught off guard when he came back for more. This time, he tried for something deeper and more assertive than a light kiss, making her panic and push him away.

“Was *that* among the things we did too?”

“Yes, it was.”

“But… I’m sorry. I still cannot remember anything, so…”

“I understand. In that case, might I ask that you bear in mind just one thing? Meeting you gave me hope that I shall be able to overcome my past and live.”

Unsure of how to react, Lydia kept her gaze pinned to the ground. It was there that she saw the steeple’s shadow starting to move away from the riverbank. Edgar stroked her hair gently. He studied her in silence as though trying to make the most of the time they had left. She felt like she wanted him to hold her again. Then she realized that she needed only reach out for him. It was as she was hesitating that he vanished, and she was left alone before the bridge.

“Edgar,” she murmured, though she knew he wouldn’t hear her. “Please, the next time we meet, help me to remember you…”

The Ark and the Mysterious Fairy

“Hi, Lydia.” Lotta smiled at her as she came through the door. “You timed that perfectly. The tea’s ready.”

Lydia had always thought it would be difficult for anyone outside her family to like or understand her. And yet she had a friend and even a supposed fiancé, but she couldn’t even remember what had changed or when. The fairies around her had always been boisterous no matter her mood, distracting her from her loneliness. But it was a far cry from having human company.

She had come straight home after meeting Edgar. The painful, hollow sensation inside her lingered, as did the heat in her cheeks, but it did nothing to take away from her happiness at seeing Lotta. She embraced her friend with genuine joy.

“Good evening, Miss Lotta.”

The princess wasted no time in returning the hug. “Oh, yeah. Your friends dropped by.” Lotta took Lydia by the hand and led her to the tearoom.

“Which friends?”

“I think they were girls from the town. Forgot to ask their names, though.”

The three sisters she had seen with Edgar sprang to mind. It was the first time that Lydia had received a visit from any girl in town—even if, on this occasion, they simply wanted to form a connection with an aristocrat. As strange as it was, it was as though Edgar’s presence was all it took to effect change in her vicinity.

Was he the reason that *she* had changed? She surmised that she wouldn’t have met Lotta if not for him. Moreover, it was difficult to imagine herself intimate with any man based purely on the memories she had. When she pictured herself in possession of a lover, her imagination went no further than staring into his eyes. And yet Edgar’s embrace and lips had felt so perfectly natural. He was the first person for whom her abilities were a necessity. Had meeting him enabled her to change?

“I was gonna let them in to wait for you, but then they saw this

pile of leaves movin' and ran off home."

"Goodness. I suppose it must have been a fairy playing a joke." Amused, Lydia giggled. Even if she had changed somewhat, she would likely forever be seen as an unsettling eccentric in the eyes of the townspeople.

That suited her perfectly. Nothing was more important to her than her relationship with the fairies. The people who remained close to her would more likely than not be limited to those who understood that connection.

"I dunno if it was a joke. Look." As they entered the tearoom, Lotta turned her bemused gaze to the table. There was a pile of leaves on one of the chairs. It was holding up a teacup, and the approximate area around its nose was twitching as though it was savoring the scent. On the table was a smaller mass of leaves biting into a cookie.

"Nico? And is that you, Coblynau? What are you doing?"

The leaves on the chair turned around with a start. "How did you see through our masterful disguises?!"

"'Masterful'?" Taking a seat, Lydia exchanged a nod with Lotta.

Nico's body might have been hidden beneath leaves, but his bushy gray tail was on full display. Meanwhile, the coblynau was engrossed in eating and making no effort to hide its scraggly beard or oversized nose.

"And why are you in disguise, exactly?" Lydia asked.

"Because I would rather not be discovered and eaten by Kelpie. He chased me away the last time I was here."

The target of Kelpie's illusory magic was humans. It had no effect on fairies such as Nico. That must have been why the water horse had been keeping a close watch and chased out the fairy cat as soon as he found him. Regardless, since Nico was here, Lydia was no longer powerless against Kelpie's spell.

She leaned forward over the table. "You could open up a fairy path, Nico! That ought to allow me to escape Kelpie's magic barrier."

"Really?!" Lotta exclaimed, leaning forward herself. "Does that mean you'll be able to undo the spell?"

"*That* I can't do. Merely leaving the town probably won't bring your memories back, Lydia. But what do you want to leave for anyway?"

“I wish to go to London.” Lydia couldn’t abide sitting back and waiting. The Prince was allied with a fairy doctor. Edgar would be at a great disadvantage if he were to fight such an enemy alone. “It is my understanding that fairies of the Unseelie Court are gathering there with the intent to bring about calamity. I believe that I can be of assistance to Edgar by identifying whatever is shielding London from evil.”

Nico shook his head beneath his strange layer of leaves. “Listen to me, Lydia. You should stay here. All you need to do is wait until the earl puts an end to this mess.”

“But, Mr. Nico,” the coblynau interjected, “her ladyship is the Blue Knight Earl’s bride. It is she who must come to her husband’s aid and face danger alongside him.”

“You don’t know Lydia. She’s softhearted to a fault.”

“Bow promises to protect her ladyship.”

Nico’s eyes shot to the moonstone on Lydia’s finger. “What’s a shiny pebble going to do? It might act as a charm against evil, but it’s not going to bring her memories back. Besides, you’re the only one who can communicate with it.”

“It has its ways.” The coblynau puffed out its chest in the same way a proud, doting parent would.

“What’re *they* doin’ here?”

The sudden voice at the window made the two fairies freeze.

“Kelpie!” Lydia cried. “Um, they aren’t…”

“I’m… I’m a leaf spirit!” Nico made a poor attempt at changing his voice.

Kelpie grabbed him by the tail and yanked him into the air. “What, ye think ah’m daft?”

“Put me down!” the fairy cat yowled.

The coblynau hurriedly jumped from the table and thrust its head into a knothole on the floor, trying to escape through it. Unfortunately, Kelpie managed to pick it up while it was attempting to dislodge its rump from where it got caught. The water horse shook both fairies violently. Their leaves quickly fell loose to reveal the cat and miniature miner beneath.

“I knew it was ye! Didnae I tell ye I was gonna eat ye the next time I saw ye?”

“Kelpie, don’t!” Lydia stepped out in front of him and glared up at him with her hands on her hips. “I *know* about the spell you cast

on me."

A deep crease appeared in the water horse's brow before he tossed Nico and the coblynau sulkily to one side. "So what? I did it to protect ye. I got a contract with the earl too," he shot back.

"What sort of contract?"

"Ah'm s'posed to protect ye from the enemy no matter what. Means ah'm no s'posed to let anyone touch ye till he comes to get ye."

"But he *did* come for me."

"He spoke to ye through a gap in my magic. It doesnae count unless he can undo the spell on ye."

Edgar did not possess enough knowledge to be able to do that. Lydia couldn't remember what had led him to form such a reckless contract in the first place, but supposing he hadn't felt he had a choice, she could only assume he had been trying to protect her.

"The barrier is one thing, but it really was rather nasty of you to rid me of my memories of him. Give them back."

"Don't have to." Kelpie folded his arms and looked down at her with a haughty glint in his eye. "Ye're better off without them."

"How on earth could that be?!"

"He's no gonna be around for very long anyhows."

Did that mean Edgar was going to die? If so, Kelpie must have had an idea of who the earl's enemies were.

"That... That simply isn't true," Lydia stammered.

"The Prince and Ulysses are obsessed with him. They're no jist gonna let him live."

"He promised we would meet again!"

"Ah'll make ye forget that too. Ye always look hurt whenever ye think about him. Ye never used to look like that."

Kelpie was concerned about her. Lydia's heart stung as she realized that *he* had never looked so conflicted either.

"I don't want to forget."

Both she and Kelpie had changed. There must have been a whole host of events missing from her memories. Even if she was unable to see it clearly, she knew that *something* had built up within her. It fueled the certainty in her words.

"I want to remember him."

"Ye're no serious. Ye cannae even remember the spell that'll break the magic."

“There’s a spell? I suppose you wiped that from my memory too?”

“Listen. *I* don’t want ye to remember nothin’.” Kelpie turned on his heel and vanished through the window.

Lydia sat on the bench beside a tree in her garden, gazing at the moon. The stone on her ring finger was shimmering as brightly and mysteriously as the celestial body above. Apparently, it was protecting her from darkness. If nothing else, the ring itself seemed to believe that she and Edgar were engaged. It seemed to be asking her whether she was truly content with staying in Scotland, reminding her that its owner was meant to walk with the Blue Knight Earl as her partner. Unfortunately, Lydia wasn’t able to leave on her own strength. She heard her sigh echoed from right beside her on the bench, which was where she found Nico.

“What was that sigh for?” she asked.

“You have a deeply ingrained habit of charging off into trouble by yourself. It has caused me no end of headaches over the years.”

As a child, she would often wander deep into the world of the fae after being invited over by a friendly fairy. Her mother had always warned her not to follow them, but she had done so knowing that Nico would inevitably come looking for her. In his company, the fairy world was just like a secret garden. She knew she would always be able to return to her home world no matter how far she went.

“But were you ever truly concerned? You always seemed deeply reluctant to search for me and only did so at the request of my mother and father.”

“I’m good friends with the fairies in this town. Even if you were unable to come back by yourself, I knew they wouldn’t harm you and that they would eventually escort you home. It was a real bother having to come and fetch you each and every time. However, there was always the risk that you would wander a little too far into an unknown place with unknown fairies. Hence my countless headaches.”

Now and then, he would lose his temper and warn her not to enter the fairy world without good reason. Perhaps those were the times she had wandered too far and lost her way. Nico was fickle, cowardly, and tended to be absent at crucial moments, but he would always come running whenever she was in *real* danger.

When she relied on him, he let her down. When she didn't, he would do his utmost to help. That was the trick to understanding her companion.

"I want to leave, Nico. Please, could you make me a path?"

"Does that mean you believe you're engaged to the earl?"

"I'm not certain…"

"Then why expose yourself to danger for his sake? Whatever the Prince's abominable plan for London, it seems he is already setting it into motion. Why on earth would you go there willingly?"

"I know. I must have taken leave of my senses."

"Without a doubt," Nico muttered.

Lydia gently took hold of his paw and held it tightly. It was small, warm, and covered in fluffy fur. "But you see, Nico, Edgar has led me to believe that I can make a difference. After all, I helped him to find that sword, all because—as incorrigible as he is—I believed he deserved happiness."

"And if *you* become unhappy because of him?"

"All I need to concern myself with is seeing my determination through. Whatever happens won't be anybody's fault."

"Just because your mother was stubborn doesn't mean you should be the same."

Nico had been her mother's closest friend. He had been the only fairy to come with her when she had eloped with Lydia's father and abandoned her birthplace.

"Humans can be so reckless in spite of their short lifespans. And then I'm the one who's left behind." It likely wasn't just Lydia's mother he was remembering, but the human he had been close to before her. He looked awfully despondent with his drooping ears and downcast gaze.

"I'm still here. And I intend to live for longer than my mother. No, even longer than my father."

Perhaps that still wouldn't be a very long time as far as Nico was concerned.



The fairy cat turned his head in her direction and studied her intently. “You really do resemble her.”

“My mother? I can but hope that I become as beautiful as she was.”

“She wasn’t especially beautiful. Not until she met the professor, at least.” Nico got to his feet. “Come, Lydia. Let us go to London.”

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London’s skies were unusually clear, the city bathed in a spring sunlight that had drawn out its inhabitants. The noblewomen were free of their coats and wearing gorgeous dresses in the colors of the season, which swayed as they walked. The patrons of the outdoor café were all smiles. Here, the rumors of sickness in the East End seemed to have been forgotten. It was as though the nasty event was taking place in another country altogether. Edgar was sitting with a plump, middle-aged man who wore a sorrowful expression on his face.

The earl sighed. “You don’t suppose Firman has fallen victim to a seductress who has him engrossed to the extent he has forgotten all else?”

“Mr. Firman is not cut from the same cloth as you, my lord,” Slade replied sullenly. He was a senior member of Scarlet Moon, the secret organization that Edgar led. Being an obstinate man, the quip the earl had made in an attempt to lighten the mood had proven ineffective on him.

“In any case, I trust your investigation is making progress?”

“More and more people are dying in the East End by the day. And yet there have still been no cases west of the City.”

“Is there anything to indicate a link between the disease and Firman’s disappearance?”

“We did find this.” Slade unfolded a sheet of paper. It appeared to be a cheaply printed leaflet. “Recently, there have been several cases of missing persons just like Mr. Firman. These leaflets were found in a significant number of the victims’ homes.”

Seek salvation in the Ark and the gate of Heaven shall be opened unto you.

A drawing of Noah’s Ark accompanied the caption.

“It seems very Christian in tone, though it doesn’t appear to

have any relation to the Church," Edgar remarked.

"These have come from a Frenchman named Monsieur Alba. He is something of a modern soothsayer. He claims that a great calamity will soon befall London and is selling tickets to his vessel, the Ark. Apparently, boarding his ship also allows one to escape the disease."

"And are these tickets selling well?"

Slade nodded. "His ship is moored on the Thames. It's there for all to see, and some say that he is the one preventing the illness from spreading into the City, so it seems he has his adherents. And it is indeed true that the disease has not spread west."

Lydia had mentioned that fairies of the Unseelie Court were capable of causing epidemics. If Ulysses was controlling those fairies, it was probable that he was also controlling the disease's spread. Was he doing so to give credence to this Monsieur Alba character? In any case, it was too early to attribute both the illness and this Ark business to the Prince.

"Your thoughts, my lord?"

"I suppose it *is* possible that Firman was invited to board the Ark."

"This Frenchman is being supported by the Prince, then?"

"That, or he is simply taking advantage of the hysteria surrounding the sickness. Either way, I should like to see him for myself."

"Your lordship won't have to wait long." Slade puffed out his chest, an evident sign that he was very pleased with whatever it was he had so perfectly arranged.

Edgar followed the other man's gaze as he sipped on his lukewarm coffee. It rested on a young woman sitting at one of the other outdoor tables. Despite her age, she possessed the calm, elegant air of one who was married, and she was accompanied by an elderly woman who appeared to be her lady's maid. She seemed to be waiting for someone.

"The lady to the right is a patron of my gallery. She has an interest in fortune-telling, magic…that sort of thing. I happened to hear that she plans to meet Monsieur Alba here today."

"He seems to have brought company," Edgar mused.

A party of three men was approaching the woman's table. When their faces came into view, the man in the middle gave the

earl a start. The right side of his face was hidden behind a black mask, which reminded Edgar of the Prince. However, judging from the visible part of the man's visage, he was still young. He must have only just passed thirty, if at all. Nevertheless, it was immediately clear from how the party acted that he was Alba, the men either side of him his attendants.

"Monsieur Alba is apparently blind in one eye, hence the mask," Slade said. "Of course, it may all be an act to make him appear more mysterious."

The mask was the only thing that stood out about the man. His cheek was hollow and gaunt. Nevertheless, Edgar sensed a vigor and a dignity in the way he spoke that must have attracted people to him. Although he was supposed to be French, his English was delivered in an upper-class British accent. There was a refinement to every one of his gestures down to the manner in which he summoned the waiter, and the women were not taking their eyes off him. But the more Edgar watched, the colder the icy chill he felt, which made goose bumps form on his skin. This man was like the Prince in every way. In his intonation, the way he sat, the positioning of his hands on the table… Every last gesture was identical to those that the Prince's organization had attempted to drill into Edgar.

"Wait a moment. I recognize that gentleman," Slade said.

Edgar forced himself to shake free of the dizzying disgust and pull his awareness back to the present. "Which one?"

"The one to the left. I believe he was once an aspiring artist, and he visited my gallery frequently. I think his name is Greg…"

"Would that make him an acquaintance of Firman's?"

"Oh! Yes, I do believe he was."

They had uncovered a single connecting thread. Though they were yet to find any evidence, Edgar suspected that Greg was involved in Paul's disappearance somehow. He was now handing an envelope to one of the women, having been instructed by Alba to do so. The "prophet" then got to his feet, exchanged a warm handshake with her, and left. A member of Scarlet Moon who had been casually perusing a newspaper in a nearby seat quickly got up to tail the three men, at which point Edgar rose himself and approached the women that Alba had been speaking to.

He made to pass the younger woman, who was rising from her

chair, purposely letting their shoulders collide, and when she pitched forward and steadied herself on the table, he stopped in feigned panic.

"Please excuse me, madame!"

"Not at all." Her cheeks flushed at Edgar's apologetic gaze. "I ought to have looked behind me before standing."

"You didn't dirty your gloves, did you?"

Her cup had tipped over when she'd put her hands on the table. A coffee stain was spreading over the cloth.

Edgar swiftly took her hand and pretended to look it over. "I'm awfully sorry. The fault is mine. Would you mind terribly if I asked you your name? I would like to have a new pair sent to you." He looked into her eyes again as he kept her hand in his.

Bewildered, the woman hurriedly shook her head. "I couldn't ask you to do that. They are not all that dirty. But I certainly appreciate the thought." She quickly took a step back from him. "Please pay it no more mind. Good day." With a polite nod, she and her lady's maid rushed away.

Edgar decided that she was a chaste, middle-class woman. He had already foreseen that she would resist his suggestion. His objective had merely been to distract her. When he returned to Slade, he had the envelope from Alba in his possession.

"My lord, were you perhaps a pickpocket in a previous life?"

"You offend me, Mr. Slade. Let us say I am educated." Ignoring Slade's mutterings about his "dubious education," Edgar opened the envelope. "It is a ticket to the Ark."

More precisely, it was a ticket to a party on board the Ark. There was no indication that the vessel would be going anywhere. Neither was there any further information written on it. However, Edgar was more concerned with the crest printed on the reverse side of the ticket next to the name of the ship.

"These are the arms of the House of Stuart."

"The House of Stuart? The royal house from which the Prince claims to be descended?"

Edgar's enemy was a self-proclaimed descendant of James II, the king who had been exiled as a result of Britain's Glorious Revolution. A hundred years ago, James II's grandson, Charles Edward Stuart, had proclaimed himself the crown prince and, in an attempt to retrieve the throne, waged a war he had ultimately lost.

Throughout the fighting and its aftermath, those within Britain's borders who supported the Stuarts' return to the throne had found themselves thoroughly suppressed. Supposedly, the resentment and oppression of these supporters had brought about a dark magic that had given birth to a new prince who carried James II's blood in his veins. They had formed an organization within the shadows of society to keep that blood alive into the present day, all while waiting for their chance to enact revenge on Britain and her monarchy.

It was essential to the organization that their Prince was genetically linked to James II. Though there was no shortage of noblemen with such blood links in Britain, the society's peculiar logic had led them to attempt to capture Edgar as the most "suitable" candidate. His parents had been murdered, leaving him presumed dead, and he had been taken to America all so that he could be trained to become the Prince's successor.

"It has been altered rather cunningly, but this pattern is peculiar to the House of Stuart. I also believe that 'Alba' comes from an ancient name for Scotland, which the Stuarts, of course, originally ruled over."

"And James II fled to France after his deposition. I wonder, then, whether Monsieur Alba, as well as enjoying the Prince's support, is descended from him. I suppose that would also make him the Prince's relative."

It seemed the Prince had found a new successor after Edgar's flight: another man possessing royal blood. There was no doubt in the earl's mind that this Alba had also undergone a very unique education. The abuse would have utterly destroyed his sense of self and reconstructed him into a puppet controlled by the Prince.

His mind bustling with thought, Edgar pushed the envelope toward Slade and got to his feet. "Get this back into the lady's possession somehow. Just be subtle about it. I also want you to procure a ticket each for Raven and me."

"You're planning to board the Ark? I can have my men search for Mr. Firman, my lord."

"And I expect your men to accompany me, of course. But I do intend to board that vessel personally. The grudge I bear against the Prince is no longer the only thing at stake in my fight against him. I must fulfill my duty as the Blue Knight Earl. That is not

something I can delegate."

When Edgar had started his feud with the Prince, he had sought revenge for everything being taken from him. However, since obtaining the title of Earl of Ibrazel and being accepted as such by fairykind, he intended to adopt and see through the earldom's duty: to defend Britain against the dark magic of the Unseelie Court. The last head of the earldom, Gladys Ashenbert, had exhausted her strength expelling the Prince from Britain a hundred years ago. She had left a message imploring her successor to put an end to the villain's bloodline, but no such successor had appeared, allowing the Prince to maintain his organization and pursue his ambitions unchecked. That is, until Edgar took up the mantle.

He had the sense that it was not just his duty to put an end to the Prince, but to ensure that no one could inherit the man's wicked ambitions. He understood this to be his obligation as the Blue Knight Earl, despite his lack of magical abilities or fairy-related knowledge. Ever since he had abandoned his desire for revenge and decided to follow the principles of noblesse oblige, he had started to hope that he might be able to live a respectable life. He had therefore chosen to have faith that he was permitted to want Lydia by his side and to wish for a happy future. And in order to defend that which he must, he would have to best his enemy.

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Lydia and Nico walked along the lakeshore. The water's surface was aglow with moonlight. The narrow path meandered, and the moon and the lake periodically disappeared behind the trees they passed, making it feel like they were wandering through a forest cavern.

These sights were all new to Lydia. In order to evade Kelpie's barrier, they had to delve deep into the fairy world. Nevertheless, there was no risk of losing her way with Nico at the helm, and she followed him without fear. Considering they were going to London, it didn't seem right to be traveling so lightly, but it was ill-advised to take too much more than the clothes on one's back from the human world into the land of the fairies. Any luggage was liable to go missing the moment one's eyes came off it. Lydia had sewed a

small pouch to the inside of her coat to keep the money she would need for travel once they were back in the mortal realm and a small amount of confectionery. For the sake of avoiding unwanted attention from any fairies as well as for ease of movement, she had forgone the crinoline under her favored casual attire. She had also rolled up her skirt like a maid and pinned it at her waist so that it didn't drag along the ground.

I am hardly in a fit state to see my fiancé… Exasperated by the thought that crossed her mind, Lydia dismissed it in a panic.

"What's the matter?" Nico asked. "Are you tired?"

"Sorry? Oh. No, not at all. Say, Nico, how much longer until we are away from Kelpie's magic?"

"I wish I could tell you. These things depend on timing, circumstances…and the paths in this world are forever changing."

Lydia had to wonder what kind of landmarks existed in such a world for the fairies to navigate it successfully.

"I'm more concerned about Kelpie noticing our absence and coming after us," Nico continued.

"Miss Lotta should be able to keep him at bay for a while."

Lydia wasn't certain how long it had been since they had left the house. It could have been an entire age or a single second. Even with Lotta diverting his attention, Kelpie would eventually realize they were gone. He would then inevitably come to retrieve Lydia, and she and Nico would struggle to hide from him in the fairy world. Though she hoped they could return to the mortal realm as soon as possible, from the way her companion was behaving, it seemed they still had a ways to go.

Just then, Nico came to a sudden stop. Lydia had been walking right behind him, and she had to halt in a hurry to avoid stepping on his tail.

"What is it?" she asked, bracing herself in case the answer was Kelpie. She strained her eyes at the dark forest that Nico was staring into.

"We might have bigger problems than him." He was still standing on his hind legs, and it wasn't until the fur across his back bristled that Lydia picked up on the strange presence he was reacting to. They were surrounded by a pack of black dogs with glaring red eyes.

"Black dogs?" she asked.

“Ulysses’s black dogs.”

She recognized the name—Edgar had mentioned it. Ulysses was the Prince’s right-hand man, and he was capable of controlling fairies.

“What are they doing *here*?”

“They’ve come for you.”

Lydia lacked the memories to explain what they would want with her. The fairy dogs started to close the ring around her and Nico, spilling out like dark pools from between the trees. A young, pale boy of around ten years old stepped out from their midst. Though he looked human, there was no doubt that he was a black dog himself. When Lydia glared at him, he sneered.

“Well, if it isn’t the Blue Knight Earl’s fairy doctor. I suggest you come with me if you don’t want to end up as their supper.”

I really am the earl’s fairy doctor... she thought, rummaging through her pocket for some hawthorn berries, which repelled fae.

“We shall run for it, Nico,” she whispered, the berries tight in her grip. “Be gone, fairy dogs! Unless *you* wish to get yourselves hurt!”

Lydia tossed the berries as she shouted. They seemed to glimmer in the air above the shadowy dogs before immediately flashing with a powerful light. The fairies were stunned, allowing her and Nico to break into a run. However, there were a great many pursuers. They seemed to spring up one after the other as they gave chase. Though Lydia threw berries at them, her supply was soon exhausted, leaving her with nothing to do but run. The dogs could only run straight ahead, but even if the pair were to dodge out of their path, there were too many to avoid them all.

“Lydia! It’s a dead-end!” Nico cried.

She came to a halt. They had reached a cliff jutting out over a lake. Hardly daring to breathe, she slowly turned around. The pack was growling and creeping closer.

“What now, Nico?”

It was at times like these that the fairy cat was at his least dependable. He was hiding behind Lydia’s skirt. She shifted back slightly, knocking a pebble down to the lake below. Her legs froze.

Then, out of nowhere, the sky lit up. A silver, piercing light came hurtling toward them, its brightness forcing her eyes closed. It

must have burned the dogs' eyes as well, for she heard them howl shrilly and scamper away. She only dared to look when all was quiet again. The light had faded, leaving behind the moon and the night. Lydia and Nico were the only beings occupying the cliff now.

"Look, Lydia."

She glanced up to see what Nico was pointing at. There was a faint light in the sky above, just as silver as the one that had repelled the fairy dogs. It was still shining, the diameter of its glow no longer than a snowflake's, and it was gently drifting down toward her. It seemed to vanish suddenly, only for a tall young man to appear before them the next second. There was something mystical about him. He wore only a thin robe, and every inch of him was silver, from his skin to his long hair.

He knelt before her. "Are you hurt, my lady?"

"'My lady'?!"

"You are the Blue Knight Earl's bride, are you not?" He glanced at her moonstone ring. Was that how fairies interpreted her wearing of it?

"I am still unwed," she explained nervously.

"So you are engaged? No matter. I would still ask that you lend my master your strength."

"What does that entail exactly?"

"You will come to understand when you are ready to do so."

"When I am ready?"

"It is at that time that you will be able to locate my master's arrow. Please come with me. There are things that must be done first."

Things were moving too quickly for Lydia to make any sense of them. "Will locating this arrow allow me to meet your master?"

"Locating it will allow you to return alive."

She blinked at him. "So you mean to kill me?"

"Not at all. I simply mean that if you prove yourself, I shall follow you and devote myself to your protection."

All this talk of "proving" myself and being "ready"... It seemed to Lydia incredibly rude for him to appear without warning and expect her to take part in some sort of trial. Not to mention that he hadn't even introduced himself. She wasn't even sure what kind of fairy he was.

Nico climbed up onto her shoulder and whispered frantically in

her ear. “What if *Ulysses* is the ‘master’ this chap is talking about?”

“But Nico, he chased away Ulysses’s black dogs.”

“To gain your trust, perhaps. Who else would make use of fairy dogs to lure us somewhere?”

“Can’t you think of anybody?”

“Not a soul.”

The stranger couldn’t have been any ordinary fairy to have been able to dispel so many black dogs at once. Why would the master of such a fairy want her help?

Lydia studied the silver-haired man warily. “Where do you intend to take me? Or can you not tell me that either?”

He hesitated for a moment. “London Bridge.”

“I beg your pardon? Why London Bridge?”

“That is where my master is.”

Nico’s whiskers were trembling. “Lydia! The Prince killed several people on London Bridge just recently. You almost died there too!”

“Truly?!”

Perhaps this fairy really was under Ulysses’s control. Lydia started to panic. There might not be a way out this time. The cliff’s drop was still behind them, and the silver fairy was standing before them, unwilling to let them pass.

“Please come with me. I have no intention of harming you.” Although he sounded perfectly polite, he didn’t look like he would take no for an answer.

“Who’re *you*?” A jet-black kelpie emerged from between the trees. “Ah’m protectin’ Lydia. Ye cannae jist whisk her away somewhere.”

The silver fairy turned slowly in Kelpie’s direction, his expression not losing its composure. “A kelpie?” he muttered contemptuously.

“Lydia, London Bridge is no holiday. It’s the most dangerous place there is right now. All that’s there is the savage Nightmare, and it’s fully grown.”

It seemed that Kelpie could sense the mysterious fairy’s powerful magic. He kept a careful distance from it, taking a roundabout route to come and stand by Lydia.

“A Nightmare? Kelpie, is that true?”

“Aye. Ulysses tied it to the bridge to weaken the structure’s holy power. The murders on the bridge dirtied it, makin’ it easier to tie the Nightmare to. Apparently, that thing’s been the city’s fort since

ancient times, protectin' it from darkness. But now it belongs to the demon, and I bet it's startin' to crumble like rusted metal."

London Bridge? A fort?

Lydia had indeed heard that it had been acting as a stronghold since time immemorial, keeping back human enemies. However, she hadn't known that it was also an important spiritual boundary that protected London from an invasion of the Unseelie Court. Or had she?

"Have you told me about this before, Kelpie?"

"Might've done."

She must have known. She had the sense that she already knew what it was that protected London. But she had failed to remember and hadn't been able to pass the information on to Edgar. London Bridge was what was stopping the disease in the East End from spreading any further. The slums were downstream of it. Central London, including the City and Westminster, were upstream. If the Nightmare continued to eat away at the bridge's power, it would eventually allow the Unseelie Court and the illness to flood London entirely.

Lydia needed to let Edgar know. Though panic rushed through her, there was little she could do with Kelpie and the silver fairy glaring at one another.

"We must stop the bridge from weakening further. That is why we require your assistance," the mysterious fairy said determinedly.

"But I…" She trailed off.

"Ye're bein' daft now. How's Lydia gonna manage somethin' like that? Or are ye gonna use her as bait for the Nightmare?"

It was true that there was no way she would be able to hold her own against the demon. Neither did she possess the means to reinforce the bridge. Fairy doctors could see fairies and hear their voices. They were familiar with the creatures, their customs, related taboos, and the nature of their magic. They used this knowledge to act as a bridge between human- and fairykind, helping them coexist harmoniously. It was for this reason that they were often conflated with witches and magicians, even though they did not use magic. Why, then, did this fairy consider her help necessary?

"What would you have me do?" she asked.

“I need you to come with me.” He took a smooth step in her direction and reached for her.

She was conflicted. If it was truly his intention to protect London Bridge and there was something she could do to aid him, then her actions should be able to assist Edgar in turn. She just didn’t know enough about him, least of all who he was.

“Away with ye! Don’t touch her!” Kelpie shouted, just as Lydia was enveloped in the pale light of the silver fairy’s arms.

She felt no sensation and saw only the glowing outline of his limbs around her. “Let go of me, please,” she stammered uneasily.

“You would listen to a kelpie, a fairy of the Unseelie Court?”

Lydia shrieked as she started floating. Nico pounced up onto her skirt, only to be lifted up into the air with her. When she looked down, she saw nothing but the lake beneath her, and fear seized her limbs.

“Lydia!” Kelpie transformed into his horse form and leaped from the cliff at the silver fairy. “He doesnae care which court a fairy’s from! He only cares if they’re against his master or not! He’s gotta be workin’ for the Prince!”

The fairy nimbly evaded Kelpie and released Lydia, but the light was still enveloping her, and she stayed floating in the air. He turned to the water horse and raised his arm.

“Look out, Kelpie!” Lydia cried, recalling how the stranger had dispelled the pack of black dogs in one fell swoop.

Nevertheless, Kelpie jumped at the silver fairy again, just as the latter released his light. Lydia forced her eyes to stay open and watched as the water horse was flung away toward the lake. A great spray went up as he struck the surface, huge ripples spreading out across the water.

“Kelpie!” She turned to the silver fairy. “What did you do that for? He’s my friend!”

“He is a water horse. Falling into a lake shouldn’t harm him.”

“But I haven’t agreed to accompany you!”

The stranger didn’t respond. Surrounded by light, Lydia and Nico continued to climb higher and higher. If Kelpie couldn’t best him, they certainly didn’t possess the strength to resist. It felt as though they would rise high enough to reach the moon. The lake below them seemed no larger than a puddle.

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The merrows' sword, a treasure that had been passed down the Ashenbert bloodline for generations, was said to have been bestowed upon the first Blue Knight by the King of England alongside his title. The star in the large sapphire that adorned it had been carved by merrow magic. The jewel was therefore known as the Star of the Merrow. When Edgar had obtained the sword, there had been no star in the sapphire. He had struck a deal with the merrows, promising to fulfill his responsibilities as the new Blue Knight Earl, and they had carved a new star in return. The cross-shaped pattern had been sparkling at the center of the deep indigo jewel ever since.

Edgar studied the lustrous sapphire. Had he carried the Blue Knight Earl's blood, which made one worthy of receiving the sword, he would have possessed the star that was meant to embellish the gemstone. Instead, he had passed on the cross branded on his body. It had marked him as one of the Prince's slaves. There was nothing mystical about it. Although it had allowed Edgar to obtain the sword, he had no way of accessing the mysterious powers that dwelt within it. It was for this reason that he was doubtful that he would be able to manifest the strength required to defeat the Prince, despite the fact that he was the Blue Knight Earl's successor.

"Lord Ashenbert." Raven had entered the room and was offering him a silver pistol.

Edgar gently placed his sword on the table and accepted it. After checking that it was loaded, he put it inside his frock coat, and his preparations were complete. It was time to attend the Ark's onboard party. He was essentially entering enemy territory, and there was no telling what might happen. His lack of awareness surrounding fairy magic rendered his sword little more than an antique, and seeing no advantage to bringing such a thing to a party, he was left with little choice but to leave it behind. In its place, he took the pistol, which would offer him no protection against magic at all. Nevertheless, he had come this far relying on his own knowledge and weapons. Satisfied that his ignorance of magic shouldn't hinder him, he got to his feet.

"Are you going out, my lord?" asked a disembodied voice.

Used to such things by now, Edgar was quick to notice a wavering leaf by the window. “What brings you here, Coblynau?” As he recalled, the fairy had stayed behind in Scotland with Nico. He had assumed it was still at Lydia’s house.

“Lady Lydia and Mr. Nico entered a fairy path to return here, so I have made my own way back.”

Edgar rushed to the window and drew his face closer to the swaying leaf. “Lydia is coming to London? What about Kelpie’s spell?”

“Passing the barrier necessitated entering the fairy world.”

“If she is returning to me, does that mean she has retrieved her memories?”

“I’m afraid that doesn’t appear to be the case.”

She must have been led by her usual softheartedness.

“In any case, as I was leaving, Bow asked me to pass on a request that you go and receive her ladyship,” the fairy continued.

“I would be more than happy to. Where must I go and when?”

“I do not know.”

That’s rather unhelpful…

“Ah, yes, there was more to the message: Please bring the merrows’ sword.”

“Will it guide me to Lydia?”

“You may be able to discover where she is by asking the star sapphire. I believe that it and the moonstone can communicate with one another even when they are apart.”

“Ask it? How?” Edgar had never spoken to a jewel before.

“It doesn’t speak to you? How strange. I heard that it will speak when its name is called.”

“Its name being ‘Star of the Merrow’?”

“No, that is more of a nickname. To fairies, a name represents one’s true nature. Revealing that name to a human is equivalent to revealing one’s secrets and pledging obedience. It must only be given to one who is absolutely trustworthy. You should seek to learn the sapphire’s name as soon as possible.”

Despite the earl’s bewilderment, the coblynau seemed to consider their business concluded and left. Edgar couldn’t find out where Lydia was without the star sapphire’s name. Although the coblynau could communicate with the moonstone, it seemed it was impossible at a distance. What was it expecting him to do?

“My lord, we ought to make haste,” Raven said, bringing him back to the present.

The Ark was their first order of business. They couldn’t miss their opportunity to board.

“My lord?”

“We shall carry on as planned. I want you to consider the matter of the star sapphire’s name while we are out. I shall do the same.”

Edgar glanced at the sword on the table. It was imperative that he returned from the Ark for Lydia’s sake.

The Waiting Trap

The party aboard the Ark commenced before the break of dawn. The tens of people gathered on the otherwise empty wharf who had managed to obtain one of the costly tickets were all particularly wealthy even by London's standards. As far as they were concerned, an expensive chance of survival was worth paying for compared to the risk posed by a disease that afflicted rich and poor indiscriminately.

The Ark's interior was completely blocked off from the outside world, as if to try and make its promise of salvation seem more convincing. There were two sets of large doors at its entrance that led to a spacious floor below the deck. Every window was boarded up, and if all the lamps were to be extinguished, the guests would likely find themselves in total darkness. It was a confined space in which day and night did not exist, and the spinning ceiling fan seemed to be an attempt at some consolation.

There were no vibrations or mechanical sounds. Judging by its appearance, the Ark was a reconstructed sailing vessel. There was nothing to suggest it was steam-powered, and Edgar surmised that there was no such equipment on board whatsoever. The fan must have been spinning manually. The ship was a paper tiger built entirely for form over function.

A rug was spread out over the floor, but it must have seemed rather plain to the invitees, who were used to extravagance on a daily basis. And yet, their guide was enthusiastically explaining that the ship's value came not from its presentation but from its implementation of the latest technological advancements. Edgar looked around to make sure the members of Scarlet Moon he had requested be among the guests were present while the guide continued with his outrageous claims: for example, that the ship was capable of excluding the air that was polluted with the disease and taking in only that which was clean; that breathing in said clean air for an hour would allow one to spend twenty-four hours outside without contracting the illness.

"I would advise you not to accept any beverages, my lord,"

Raven said as his master was handed a glass of wine.

Edgar nodded. There must have been more than just wine in there. “Do you suppose this room is being monitored from the outside?”

“I believe so.”

The earl discreetly cast his gaze around the room. There were several doors leading from it. At the same time, he took careful note of the gaps between each lamp.

“Please take this time to enjoy yourselves, dear guests. Monsieur Alba will be here to make an address just as soon as he is ready,” the guide said before leaving the room.

“Secure us an exit. I shall create the opportunity,” Edgar whispered to Raven, casting his gaze toward a certain door. His servant slipped away at once, approaching it nonchalantly. Every door was manned by two men who were keeping watch over the proceedings while masquerading as ordinary staff. None of them should prove any match for Raven.

Edgar moved closer to a candle he had spotted. Pretending to trip, he splashed it with the water from a nearby flower vase. He sensed Raven jumping at the lookouts the moment the surrounding area fell into darkness. There was no sound to be heard from them. Not even a grunt. The subtle rustling of clothing told Edgar that his servant had completed the task, so he approached the nearby door. He witnessed the guests doubling over and falling to the floor one by one just before he slipped through it. A dimly lit stairwell led him down to a floor that seemed to be silent.

“The guests have been put into a deep slumber. Why do you suppose that is?” he asked Raven, who had joined him in descending the stairs.

“I couldn’t say, my lord.”

“I doubt our associates from Scarlet Moon drank any of the wine.”

“I should hope they didn’t.”

A thin splash of light spilling out from a nearby room appeared before them. They immediately held their tongues and stopped walking. There came the faint sound of conversation. Edgar approached the door and peered through. Inside, he saw Paul’s associate, whom he had caught sight of the other day. Perhaps

unsurprisingly, the man with him was the second of Alba's entourage. They seemed to be playing cards.

"I'm really not sure about this Alba chap, you know."

"I know what you mean. Sometimes he seems to turn into somebody else altogether. I hear he works as a hotel clerk, though I'm not sure I believe it."

"And sometimes it's as though he forgets how to speak English, and he'll say he isn't Alba after all. You saw how he was, ordering us about like he was our mother till he burst into tears and asked us to 'save' him…"

"If you ask me, he's not quite right in the head."

Edgar listened with knitted brows. Whatever Alba's original persona, it sounded like it was on the verge of death instead of being remodeled into the Prince.

"Ah, and then there's the man's brother. He's awfully arrogant for such a young boy. Have you heard the way Alba screams when he looks at him during one of his demented moments? He sounds utterly terrified. I hardly believe them to be brothers."

"Suppose they aren't. What use would the boy have for investing so much into the Ark's construction and inviting all these passengers?"

They were speaking about Ulysses. The question of his intentions for the vessel and its passengers was a pertinent one indeed, and it was imperative that Edgar extracted the answer by force if these men weren't going to give voice to it. He signaled to Raven to enter the room. His servant nodded and made his move.

"The party should be quietening down. Go and make sure everything's going to plan, would you?"

"Why should I? You go."

The men were glaring at their cards and stubbornly staying put as Raven slowly approached them. He was already immediately beside them by the time they noticed his presence and looked up. One of them panicked and tried to stand, only for the boy to kick him and his chair into the wall, knocking him unconscious. Raven wasted no time in grabbing the collar of the second man and pulling him up, constricting his throat as he forced him to look at Edgar.

"What is the meaning of selling tickets to this vessel and locking everyone up in it?" the earl asked as he approached Greg, Paul's

acquaintance.

"Who... Who are you?"

"What do you intend to do with all these guests?"

Greg paused. "There will be people coming here soon."

"I see. Then we ought to make this quick." Edgar produced his pistol and pushed it between the man's eyebrows. "If you do not answer me immediately, you will be dead by the time we receive company. Where are Alba and his brother? I would like to inquire about their plans."

Edgar's cold glare and thin smile must have given Greg the impression that he was ready to pull the trigger at any moment. And indeed he was should the man refuse to cooperate. He needed to be for this tactic to work. Any hesitation he felt would be seen through.

"I..." Greg swallowed. "I don't know anything. I am here solely for the reward that was promised for assisting Monsieur Alba in gathering funds and guests." He spoke quickly and fearfully. "And he isn't on board. Our task was simply to confine the guests on the Ark and deliver it..."

It sounded to Edgar as though Greg was making excuses. From the earlier conversation, it seemed they were aware of what was to be done with the guests. The earl struck the man across the jaw with the grip of his pistol. Raven was holding Greg up to ensure he didn't fall. Forcing him back to consciousness, Edgar continued.

"I shall change the question. Where is Firman?"

Greg was clearly perturbed by the mention of Paul.

"Your old acquaintance, Paul Firman. I have reason to believe you recently met him in the East End."

"Paul Firman?" Though he feigned ignorance, he was focusing on the wall behind Edgar.

Realizing there must have been a secret door there, the earl went to inspect the wall. There, he found a crack that created an opening when pushed.

"Bring him with us, Raven," Edgar said as he stepped into the pitch-black passageway.

"Wait! I wouldn't go down there if I were you!" Greg warned.

"Why not?"

"Don't bring that!" he cried, seeing that Raven had picked up a candlestick from the room. He was clearly agitated.

Edgar continued despite his suspicions. At the end of the short passageway was a locked door. He pulled out his pistol to break it down.

"Stop!" Greg shouted. "I have the key!"

Even the earl was beginning to feel uneasy now. He took the key and had Raven and his candlestick stand down. Then, he opened the door. Though it was difficult to see through the darkness inside, there was something stirring in the corner.

"Greg? What time is it? It's impossible to tell in here…"

Edgar recognized the voice as Paul's. Light streamed into the room. Raven must have moved forward for a closer look. Paul was tied to a post. He squinted and looked up before his mouth fell open blankly. Though haggard, he otherwise seemed to be in good shape. Edgar looked around the hidden storeroom. It was filled with wooden boxes and a peculiar smell that alerted his survival instincts: gunpowder. No wonder Greg had feared the candle. The possibility of oil or gas had crossed Edgar's mind, but a large quantity of gunpowder was something he had never expected.

"Get back, Raven."

"Lord Ashenbert? This ship is extremely dangerous. You must leave posthaste," Paul said quickly as he noticed the open flame.

"You are coming with us." Edgar pulled out a knife and swiftly cut through the artist's bonds. "Incidentally, how did you come to be here?"

"They intend to blow up this vessel and let it sink. By pure coincidence, I was asked to work on board. I thought there might be a connection to the illness spreading through the East End, so I accepted the offer. But then I stumbled across the gunpowder. They feared I would talk, and I was tied up here…"

Edgar surmised that Greg must have been trying to hide the gunpowder's discovery from Alba and Ulysses. Paul may have been held captive, but it was a relief to know that Ulysses likely wasn't aware of his presence. It was also fortunate that the painter had come to no real harm. He seemed exhausted, but he retained his faculties. There was just one thing that Edgar couldn't understand.

"Surely it wouldn't require *this* much gunpowder simply to sink the ship?" The earl glared at Greg as he helped Paul up.

Raven twisted the man's arm, and he let out a yelp before talking. "It's to destroy the bridge. The ship's going to collide with that stone bridge… The passengers are 'unwitting sacrifices.'"

London Bridge?

The heart of London sat to the west of the bridge, upstream from it. It was the old town known as the City of London, and even farther upstream was where the royalty and nobility resided. That was what made London Bridge a stronghold that protected the capital from enemy ships.

A realization struck Edgar then. It wasn't just humans that threatened the city. The bridge was holding off the demons and fairies of the Unseelie Court that occupied the Thames's marshes. It kept away the illness in the East End. There was no doubt in his mind that it was the spiritual protection Lydia had spoken about. Now he understood the Prince's plan to destroy London. A shiver ran down his spine. If the bridge came down, the city would drown in an unprecedented plague.

"When is this set to happen?" Edgar asked.

A clamor erupted before Greg could answer. The ship's crew must have picked up on the fact that something wasn't right. Edgar expected the voices to get louder as they approached. Instead, there came the sounds of a brawl. The crew had run into Scarlet Moon.

"Come, Firman." The earl's immediate concern was to extract Paul.

Raven knocked Greg out before tossing him to one side. The three of them passed back through the room they had come from and chose the quieter passageway. All the while, Edgar mused that they stood to gain very little by simply escaping. As long as the Prince lived, he would see the bridge fall by any means necessary. And even if he didn't, they couldn't simply allow things to continue as they were. Even if the dark spirits lurking in the East End didn't enter the city west of the bridge, they had already claimed countless lives. And the illness's influence was not contained to the east. London's depleting workforce meant economic activity was grinding to a halt. It was doubtful whether the vessels that came from all over the world would be able to enter the narrow Thames and use the docks unimpeded anymore. Ship traffic would grind to a halt and London would quickly run

out of resources, with even the provision of food being affected. Stopping the Ark would not be enough. They needed to get close enough to the enemy to choke the life out of him.

Edgar's train of thought was interrupted by approaching footsteps in front of them. He immediately stopped in his tracks. Raven raised his guard but lowered it almost at once.

"Lord Ashenbert! Are you unharmed?"

It was Jack and Lewis, twin members of Scarlet Moon. They spotted Paul and took him from Edgar, supporting him between them.

"There are boats approaching. The crew must have called for reinforcements. I don't see that we have any option but to retreat as soon as possible."

"Then take Firman and make yourselves scarce."

"What about you, my lord?" Paul asked weakly.

"Go. I shall divert their attention. The enemy ships are gathering on our portside, so escape to the river from starboard when the time comes." Edgar broke into a run.

"Lord Ashenbert!"

"You three are in charge of stopping the vessel. I shall give you further instructions later. For now, just gather those who can fight."

Raven ran after him. His servant would follow him anywhere, even if he had to travel to the depths of Hell. Edgar had no intention of dissuading him. In fact, he recognized Raven as a soldier bound to him by fate.

"Raven, I am going to ask something of you that you will find incredibly difficult and dangerous. Can I trust you to see it through?"

"Whatever you wish, my lord."

"I am going to seek out the Prince. If I allow Ulysses to capture me, he should take me to him. When that happens, you mustn't interfere, no matter what they might try to do to me. You are only to follow and keep yourself hidden until you are needed. That is when I shall call for you explicitly."

Edgar knew how unreasonable he was being. Raven would have to infiltrate the Prince's hiding place on his own. If he was caught, he would likely be killed as a warning to Edgar. Nevertheless, his response was immediate.

“Yes, my lord.”

The earl turned, met his servant’s gaze with a nod, then handed over his pistol. It would only be taken from him if he kept it.

“As soon as we know where the Prince is hiding, you must pass that information on to Scarlet Moon before you do anything else.” Edgar opened the door that led onto the deck.

Raven let his master pull ahead, then concealed himself behind a post. Meanwhile, Edgar stepped outside and approached the ship’s railing. He strained his eyes at the morning mist. There were indeed boats coming, leaving a trail of ripples over the river’s surface behind them. They brought with them the sound of splashing and the creaking of several oars.

Edgar took a deliberate position beside a lamp that made his blond hair shine like the sun. He would be difficult to miss from the perspective of the rowboats. An intense gaze focused itself on him from below. He stared back at Ulysses with just as much intensity. The earl’s dauntless glare delivered a firm message: Not even the Prince could make him yield.



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The fairy world and the human world were like two sides of a thin cloth. While they seemed to exist independently of one another, in reality they were very closely connected. The fairy world was hidden behind the visible realm. However, fairies were capable of passing between both, like air or water passing through the cloth. It wasn't unheard of for humans to do the same, albeit unwittingly. Just as tea spilled on fabric would stain the other side, events that took place in the human world had an effect—whether it be large or small—on the fairy world.

The silver fairy had been leading Lydia through the skies for some time when she finally felt him descend. She looked below to see a large river: the Thames. There was no forest or grassland stretching from its banks, only the blackness of London's buildings. However, the city lights she would expect to see were absent. Normally, the gas lamps would be lit all through the night, brilliantly illuminating the wide streets. But now, every road and building was dark, making the sprawling riverside city appear as if it had been utterly destroyed. This was how London looked from the fairy world.

The city's people and their activities were invisible from this side. Though London's moonlight created crisp shadows of the metropolis's plentiful buildings in this world, the structures themselves did not exist here. Nevertheless, the silver fairy flew down toward the shadowy city. It was then that Lydia noticed that London's eastern portion, downstream of the river, was covered in what looked like squirming black insects. They were stretched over the buildings and even the narrow alleyways. Now and then, they would come together as a swarm and fly up and around the area like dark clouds.

Lydia could hardly believe the curious sight before her, created by an intense concentration of the Unseelie Court's magic. The only thing containing those fairies in the east was a single bridge spanning the Thames. It was glowing faintly, a sure sign of its power to ward off evil. Although Lydia had no memories of this city, she immediately understood that she was gazing at London Bridge. Its light, however, appeared somewhat blurred. There was

something large lying on the bridge: a gigantic dark demon of indefinite form, the likes of which Lydia had never seen before.

"We shall come down at the bridge's southern end to avoid attracting the Nightmare's attention. Please try to keep silent."

That must be the Nightmare that Kelpie mentioned.

Goose bumps washed over her skin. The beast was larger than she had imagined and shrouded in mystery. The silver fairy flew carefully over its head before landing quietly close to the bridge. As shadowy as the structure was, it looked no different to any ordinary bridge at close proximity. The fairy started down some stairs that led underneath it, and Lydia and Nico followed. The pier supporting the bridge from directly beneath was as large as a wall of stone. When the fairy placed a hand on it, a hole opened up in the post. The space beyond was so deep and dark as to give the impression that it went on forever.

The fairy lowered his voice. "From here, we enter the boundary. Please leap in."

"In there?" Lydia asked hesitantly.

Nico's fur stood on end after he peered into it, and he shook his head vigorously. "*You* go first."

"It will close immediately behind me."

"I suppose that leaves us without a choice," Lydia said.

"Wait a moment, Lydia. You can't go in there. You don't even know who this chap is," Nico protested.

"As I mentioned before, you will come to understand everything in due time," the fairy said as calmly as ever.

"But she needs to 'prove herself,'" Nico muttered. "And if she can't, do you intend to leave us to our…"

He trailed off as their surroundings suddenly turned dark. Lydia looked up to see what had come between them and the moonlight. The large, black shadow was leaning from the bridge, the unsettling glint of its red eyes focused squarely on them. The Nightmare had found them.

"Into the hole! Quickly!" the silver fairy urged, just as what seemed to be the demon's sharp claw swung down toward them.

Fear rooted Lydia to the spot. The fairy rushed in front of her, trying to push her into the void.

"Search for it!" he cried. "The sacrificial maiden's arrow!"

With no further clues as to what he might mean, Lydia fell into

the hole. She caught a glimpse of the Nightmare's claw swiping at the fairy's back just moments before her vision was cut off and her surroundings were plunged into darkness.

When Lydia came to, she was standing in a dank cave. It must have been a magical space. There were no apparent light sources, but she could still vaguely make out her surroundings.

"Nico? Where are you?" she called, looking around this way and that.

There came a caterwaul from above. Noticing a gray mass falling down, she quickly dodged out of the way. Though he was flipping over and over, Nico somehow managed to land on all fours. He let out a relieved huff, stood up on his hind feet, fixed his tie, whiskers, and fur, and crossed his front paws behind his back, turning in a grand gesture.

"Who does that fairy think he is, forcing me to behave like a *cat*?!"

Lydia knew he couldn't have been resenting his feline instincts too much, given they had broken his fall. "You ought to be grateful that you didn't fall flat on your face."

"Lydia, you do realize he has trapped us in this space? He tossed us in here with no regard as to how *we* might feel about it!"

"Trapped us? Do you mean to say there is no way out?"

"That is exactly what I mean to say. He sealed off the hole we came through."

"Was that not to prevent the Nightmare from entering?"

"The same Nightmare that was about to slay him. He might well be in its belly by now. He's left us in a complete fix."

"But this is where he wanted to lead me, isn't it? We shall simply have to move forward on our own. Besides, I suspect his master is around here somewhere."

Lydia didn't know how much damage that swipe from the Nightmare would have dealt to the fairy, but she did know that he had taken the brunt of it to protect her. He might have had yet to explain anything to her, but he had still defended her despite not knowing whether she would pass his trial. She couldn't think poorly of his intentions after that.

"He referred to a 'boundary,' didn't he?" Lydia voiced her thoughts as they walked. "Do you suppose he meant this place?"

“The stone wall we came through is part of a human bridge. I’d wager there was a tiny crevice in the bridge that someone linked to a space in the fairy world.”

The cave’s path was complex and narrow like a tunnel in an ant colony. There were no clues to suggest where Lydia and Nico might be heading. Since the path they followed had been built by someone, the fairy cat wasn’t able to navigate it like he would a natural trail. No matter how far they went, they saw nothing but stone, and it was impossible to extrapolate any hints about what Lydia was supposed to do. She was beginning to doubt that the fairy’s master was here at all. That said, the “arrow” should be her first priority. Finding it would amount to proving herself. That should then allow her to meet the fairy’s master and find out what she was meant to do.

“The arrow is the key. The fairy mentioned something about a sacrifice. I wonder what that could mean.”

“A sacrifice?”

“Yes,” Lydia replied. “He wanted me to find the ‘sacrificial maiden’s arrow.’”

Nico stopped and folded his arms thoughtfully, whiskers twitching. “This sounds dangerous, Lydia. What if his intentions for you don’t require any action on your part and he only means to sacrifice you?”

“Do you really think so?”

“He said he wanted to stop London Bridge from weakening. You’ve heard of sacrifices being built into bridges to prevent them being washed away, haven’t you? It’s something that stretches back to antiquity.”

Indeed, Lydia was aware of such stories.

“Maybe there’s a trap somewhere that will send arrows flying at us if it’s tripped! I don’t fancy our chances against *that*!” Panicked, Nico looked around them.

“With how many turns there are in this path, I would have to wonder where those arrows could come from,” Lydia said.

That being said, she could not discount the possibility that a human sacrifice would be one way to protect London Bridge. It was a barrier that protected the capital from evil. Whatever maintained its power had to be something incredibly profound itself. She had heard that there was little more lucrative than a

human soul when offering something in exchange for magic. Lydia possessed no special abilities of her own that would aid in the bridge's protection. However, sacrificing her soul would likely grant the structure a large amount of magic.

A shiver ran down her spine. Had human sacrifice provided the bridge its protection for all this time? She made an effort to think rationally despite her fear.

"Say, Nico, if the fairy does intend to use a sacrifice to defend the bridge, it doesn't change the fact that his intentions are at odds with those of the Prince, who wishes to destroy it. Does that mean there is someone other than Edgar who regards the Prince as an enemy?"

The fairy cat's head snapped up. "You don't suppose the fairy's master is from the Blue Knight Earl's house?"

"The Blue Knight Earl's bloodline has ended. That's why Edgar was able to take up the title."

"I know, but what about the countess from a hundred years ago—the last person to carry his blood? Gladys Ashenbert, wasn't it? That was when this 'Prince' was born by dark forces, himself carrying royal blood. She was apparently the one to chase him from Britain."

Though Lydia had the sense she might have already known this information, it was presently absent from her memories. "What happened to Lady Gladys?"

"I believe she used the last of her strength to exile the Prince and died without leaving a successor."

The pieces of her conclusion came together in Lydia's mind quite naturally. "Supposing she passed away on London Bridge, Nico? What if she sacrificed herself to protect London and to ensure that the Prince could never return to the shores of Britain?"

A Prince born of the magic of the Unseelie Court via a conspiracy that had the potential to rock this nation to its core… It was not absurd to think that Gladys might have sacrificed herself to expel him.

"Though London Bridge can defend against spirits, it wouldn't be able to repel humans," Nico said.

"Of course, I wouldn't expect it to prevent the Prince himself from reaching Britain. But without any fairy magic, he and his organization would be no more powerful than ordinary men."

The Prince had no position within the monarchy or a right to the throne. He was essentially a commoner. That was why he needed to equip himself with the Unseelie Court's magic in order to subjugate London. Therefore, preventing those evil spirits from infiltrating the city was of the utmost importance. Someone needed to protect London Bridge just as Gladys had done all those years before.

"You think that the silver fairy is a messenger of the late Gladys, then?" Nico asked. "Why didn't he summon the present earl in that case?"

"Perhaps he thought the earl's fairy doctor a better choice?"

"Don't be silly, Lydia. This is clearly a job for the man himself. I'll admit that he doesn't quite fit the profile of 'maiden,' but he ought to be capable of the 'sacrificial' part."

"No, Nico." Lydia paused. "I was chosen because I am engaged to him."

It meant she was a member of the Blue Knight Earldom. She dropped her gaze to the moonstone. Though she wasn't yet married, it seemed that possessing the ring identified her as the earl's bride. Perhaps that meant it was her duty to protect London, just as Gladys had all those decades ago.

"Let's flee, Lydia. This isn't your responsibility. It isn't as though you and the earl are *officially* engaged. This has nothing to do with you."

"But—"

"You are without your memories. Maybe this whole thing is just another ploy concocted by the earl, and I'll be damned if we're going to get killed because of it!"

She had to concede that he was probably right. Besides, she wasn't too enthralled by the idea of dying here either. She simply wanted to help Edgar.

"Let's try to remain calm for the moment, Nico," she said quickly. "We cannot yet be certain that the fairy meant for me to sacrifice myself. What about the arrow he told me to seek? He said he would protect me if I found it."

Nico let out a deep sigh, placing a paw on the wall. "I should like to see him try to protect you if the Nightmare's killed him." Suddenly, he moved his face closer to the wall as if he had spotted something. "Oi, Lydia. You can see through to the outside from

here.”

Perhaps there was a tear in the boundary between the stonework. Lydia could feel a subtle shift in the air. When she peered through, she could see the Thames and the vessels upon it, as well as the figures rowing some of them.

“That’s the human world’s London,” she said.

“Look how close the river’s surface is. This space probably floods at high tide…”

“Oh?”

Nico suddenly scampered back from the wall and grabbed Lydia’s skirt. “We have to get to higher ground!”

“Which way do we go?” she stammered.

“I don’t know! But let’s not stand around here!”

Agreeing, Lydia set off at a run, all the while battling the nasty sense of foreboding that rose in her chest. A part of it was that should this place flood, there would be no saving them. She would be sacrificed whether she liked it or not. The other part was that she couldn’t be entirely sure she was here because Gladys willed it. If it truly was the wish of the Blue Knight Earldom to obtain a human sacrifice to protect London Bridge, then shouldn’t the present-day earl be the one to set the plan into motion? Wasn’t it possible that Edgar had known the importance of the bridge and lured her to it? And that his claim that she was his fiancée was because the sacrifice needed to come from the earldom? He was using her while feigning affection. Unable to resent him for it, she had developed a desire to help him. It had been the same when she had helped him find the sword.

How likely was it that he was repeating the same plot: sacrificing her in order to gain the power he needed to stand up to the Prince? The thought frightened her dreadfully the moment she came upon it. And yet, it was difficult to discount the possibility that it was true. Was his seemingly earnest promise to see her again just a trick to lure her to London? If so, then perhaps *everything* had been an act, from the affection in his gaze to his greedy kisses and his request that she remember all about him on their reunion. Maybe he didn’t even mean to see her again.

He’s deceiving me. Again.

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Edgar was taken to a large, old estate that was around a two-hour carriage ride from London. Given that the carriage windows had been covered, however, he had no idea of the direction they had traveled in or the roads they had taken. All he knew was that the estate was in a remote area and that its bombastic defensive walls and gate suggested it was a reconstructed ancient castle. Ulysses hadn't answered when Edgar had asked whether this was the Prince's hideaway. Though he had the appearance of a young boy, he had been serving as the Prince's aide for several decades. Edgar supposed his foul mood was due to the fact that his master had warned him not to harm the earl unless he resisted. Ulysses must have been bored beyond belief.

All that being said, Ulysses had been perfectly courteous in his treatment of Edgar. It was only as he was leading the earl to the room he was to be locked up in that the boy at last made a snide comment.

"I am sure your raven will sniff out this place in no time. How eager he is to sacrifice himself for you, my lord. I can respect his loyalty, at least."

"You and your men are not capable of killing Raven."

"But he will die if you do. My lord, you ought to be aware that His Royal Highness has no intention of showing you mercy. He wishes to bury you with his own hands. I have not harmed you because I wouldn't deign to take away from his enjoyment."

"I'm afraid to say I have also come with a wish to bury the Prince."

Ulysses's lip curled like he was suppressing a laugh. "Without a weapon or command of magic?"

As salient as his point was, Edgar responded only with a meaningful smile.

Ulysses scowled, in an even fouler mood than before. "Please, come this way. You will soon learn how it feels to be a prisoner waiting to be hanged."

"I am well aware of how it feels."

Edgar had thought it a rather witty quip, but Ulysses did not smile. The earl stepped obediently through the door that opened before him. The bottom halves of the room's windows were boarded up, making it awfully gloomy despite it being the middle of the day.

“No lamps?” Edgar asked.

“As I recall, you once planned a violent escape that involved setting fire to your confines. You won’t be able to light the hearth either. Hopefully you can grin and bear it.” Ulysses closed the door, his expression as sour as ever.

The Prince had no intention of allowing Edgar to live. Presumably, that meant that he had chosen Alba as his successor and that he intended to use the Freya to usurp the man’s body. If so, then it wouldn’t be enough to destroy the villain himself. Alba and the dark forces that allowed the Prince to exist would also need to be extinguished.

“Is Alba here as well?” Edgar asked, though naturally he was alone in the room. Nevertheless, he was confident that Raven must have been nearby, so he voiced his thoughts out loud. “You must lure him here. If he learns that he is not unique in having been chosen as the Prince’s successor, he will likely become curious.”

When Edgar had been put into the carriage at the docks, he had caught a glimpse of Raven atop a tall stack of cargo. He had looked away then, assuming that his servant was planning to jump onto the carriage roof. Though the earl had no idea what had happened to Raven after that, he knew that his servant would not have defied his orders. Security at this building must have been tight, but the enemy could not have had enough time or manpower to have transformed it into a perfect stronghold like the estate in America. If Raven had been able to reach it, he would have had no trouble infiltrating it.

Though Edgar received nothing in the way of response, he took a seat on the sofa to wait. He was deep in the heart of enemy territory, and Alba was his most promising tool at present. As a puppet that answered to the Prince, he likely feared being abandoned by his master. It was a fear that Edgar would take advantage of.

The earl waited like a statue in the silent darkness. Time passed, the sun set, and the pale moonlight outside became his only source of light. It mattered not. Darkness and silence were his friends. They had been so since his days fleeing the Prince, so he felt more at ease now that the night had come. Silence revealed even the slightest of movements and changes in one’s

surroundings.

One such sign came to Edgar in the form of a tiny noise. He closed his eyes and focused on it. It was the door being unlocked. Next, the knob turned slowly, and then the door opened a crack. There was only a sliver of moonlight coming in through the narrow section of unobstructed window, and Edgar still had his eyes closed. It should seem to the intruder that he was asleep. He sensed the person getting closer not just through sound, but through their breathing and the change in the air. His sharpened senses even allowed him to determine his visitor's stature, how they were moving, and their intentions.

Edgar could sense bloodlust. The item in the intruder's hand must have been a knife. The moment it was raised, he opened his eyes and evaded the strike. His opponent's weapon was lodged in the sofa, and the attacker pitched forward, allowing Edgar to grab him from behind. The earl grasped the man's wrist and tore the knife away while constricting his neck. He then forced the man's face toward the window, which revealed that he was wearing a black mask. That combined with his uncovered features identified him as Alba.

Edgar tore the mask away to get a proper look at his face. It was as Slade had said: He was visibly blind in his right eye, and there was a large gash that traveled down to his cheek.

"Was it your decision to attack me, Monsieur Alba? You do realize that the Prince will punish you if you act without his approval?"

"Unhand me! *I* am the Prince!" he demanded haughtily.

"That is yet to be seen. You came hoping to extinguish your competitor, didn't you?"

"You won't get away with…with this impudence!"

"You truly believe you have the upper hand?"

Alba paused. "He said I was the Prince. That to be the Prince is my destiny. You are to be killed either way. I shan't face punishment for bringing the deed forward. I am sure of it. Every thought that passes through my mind is identical to his."

Edgar understood then that this was the end result of a human destroyed and remolded. However, Alba was not yet identical to the Prince. He would show no fear toward the earl were that the case. That was the chink in his armor.

A thin smile on his lips, Edgar peered at Alba. It was the same expression the Prince wore before deciding on a brutal punishment, a look that was almost gleeful in its iciness. “You are my replacement and nothing more. In reality, the Prince wanted to make *me* his successor. He requires an heir with rich noble—*royal*—blood. Not a distant relative chosen from among the riffraff.”

Dismay rose to Alba’s features.

“I do not doubt that the Prince despises me enough to want me dead,” Edgar continued. “But he has no reason to kill me now that I am in his grasp. You, however, have become obsolete.”

He did not believe that the Prince was still intent on turning him into his successor. He would wager that what Ulysses had said was true: The villain wanted Edgar to suffer dreadfully before dying at his hands. The earl was a failed experiment whose soul was still intact. However, the Prince’s hatred that encompassed his wish to see Edgar suffer was stronger than the earl could have imagined. Ironically, it was this that had prevented the Prince from killing him thus far. From the outside, it likely seemed that the villain was obsessed with capturing Edgar by any means.

“You know the Prince well,” Edgar went on. “I assume you are being educated in his ways? So you ought to understand whom he would prefer.”

Alba’s expression twisted.

“Now that you are no longer needed, I imagine you will be finely minced and discarded in the gutter.”

The prophet’s gaze darted this way and that. He had turned pale and was quaking. “You don’t know what you’re talking about. The preparations for the ritual are already complete. It won’t be long until I receive *everything* of his.” He flailed violently as he spoke, shoving Edgar away. Then he cowered on the floor, held his head, and groaned. “The ritual… I’ll disappear… They’re going to kill me…” His voice was but a whimper as he looked up at Edgar fearfully.

“What ritual?”

Alba gave a start. The question had made him even more flustered. “Please leave me be! I shan’t say anything… I shan’t think anything!”

His expression and tone were undoubtedly different from the man he had been before. This must have been the original Alba. It

was his soul on the verge of death—the “somebody else” that Greg had been discussing with the other man.

“I am a friend. There is no cause for concern. I am not here to punish you,” said Edgar.

This was the Alba who was enduring extreme cruelty at the hands of the Prince’s underlings, so Edgar decided to try to pacify him cautiously.

“A friend?”

“I have come here to help you. That is why I need you to tell me what you can about this ritual.”

“You will help me?” Alba hesitated. “No. You are lying. This is a trap. It must be.”

“You don’t want the Prince to erase your existence, do you? That’s what will happen if you choose not to believe me. You have no choice but to rely on me, trap or no.”

The man fell silent. He likely felt he would rather die than endure any more suffering. The Prince had attempted to instill Edgar with the same despair. However, Alba’s soul remained intact. The despair hadn’t yet crushed him completely. That being the case, he ought to see the earl as a ray of hope.

“I shall put a stop to the ritual,” Edgar continued, “but I require your assistance.”

“You…can’t do it.”

“I am heir to the Blue Knight Earl. My earldom once successfully exiled the Prince from Britain. You must have heard of the title, given you have spent so much time in his vicinity.”

Though Alba shook his head disbelievingly, there was a glint of light in his gaze that encouraged Edgar to go on.

“Am I right in thinking that the ritual is when your soul will be destroyed and your body taken over? I wish to know the specifics.”

The man’s eyes darted away as he hesitated, but he made the decision to speak nonetheless. “The Prince’s memories have been transferred into a red fluorite. All the memories of the first Prince. I was told there would soon be a ritual to move them from the fluorite into me.”

“His memories? Not his soul?”

“I’m not sure. That’s just what I’ve heard…”

“So his memories have been transferred. Does that mean the Prince himself is still alive?”

“Yes. But the body he possesses at the moment is getting close to the end of its life. So, my… Once my body is empty, it will receive his memories, apparently so he can implement an important plan with a new, healthy body.”

“What plan? The scheme involving the Ark?”

Alba nodded, though he seemed uncertain. If it was not the Prince’s soul but his memories that had been inserted into the Freya, then he would remain alive to watch his new self set the plan into motion.

“Memories…” Edgar murmured. Would that really suffice for Alba to become the Prince?

Out of nowhere, the man began to chuckle. “Yes, indeed. The Freya is capable of transferring memories perfectly from one person to another. That is the only thing it can be relied upon for.” The other Alba had returned. He ran his fingers through his disheveled hair, his sharp gaze narrowing at Edgar.

“I fail to see the difference between obtaining another’s memories and reading his biography. You will know everything he has experienced in life, but it will not equate to you having experienced it for yourself. You will not *become* the Prince.”

“That is why he who inherits the Prince’s memories is stripped of individuality and trained to adopt his exalted knowledge and preferences. That prior education fuses with the memories, enabling the candidate to become a perfect copy.”

“And your approaching death via this process doesn’t disturb you in any way?”

“*I* am not going to die. I am the Prince. You went through the same education as I only to come out a failure. You can no longer become the Prince. I would advise you not to get ahead of yourself. *I* am the chosen one.” He laughed uproariously. Then, he suddenly looked panicked and leaned forward to cling to Edgar. “Please help me! I don’t want to disappear!”

The earl grabbed his shoulders tightly. “I will. I will help you.”

This man was just like Edgar had once been. He was being killed little by little for reasons that were totally unjustified. Edgar knew what it was to be tortured time and time again, but carefully so as not to cause his body any great damage. Having needles pushed under his fingernails and being forced to fast or go without sleep until he was almost at his limit would have been

common occurrences for Alba. So too would he know the horror and fear that came with each instance of a loved one being brutally murdered before him. He had been through the same experiences and witnessed the same scenes as Edgar, so the earl wanted to help him.

"What is your real name?" he asked.

"It's Nodier. My life was very ordinary, but I was happy. But then they came. They killed my wife, set my house on fire…"

Even that detail was the same. Edgar put his arms around the man who clung to him. Unlike in the earl's case, Alba's face had likely been disfigured because the Prince hadn't been able to kill all who knew him.

"I shan't let them meddle in your life any further," the earl said firmly.

Alba looked up like he had been struck to his core. "Please don't let that Freya get anywhere near me. The moment I touch it, the Prince's memories will react to the blood that links me to him, and they will flow into me. Please, before that happens…"

"I know. I shall prevent the ritual. Do you know where the Freya is?"

Alba shook his head. "He doesn't know anything. It's no use asking him," said the other Alba.

Edgar grabbed him by the collar, tugged him closer, and delivered a strike to his solar plexus that rendered him unconscious. "Forgive me. I'd rather your dual personality *not* make a fuss, so I am going to tie you up."

He removed the man's necktie to bind his wrists and gagged him with a handkerchief. Searching Alba's upper pocket, he found a small folded piece of paper and the key to the room, which Alba had presumably taken without permission. It was a report from Raven that gave a rough description of the building's layout. It went on to mention that security was concentrated around the eastern wing and that only the Prince's closest aides were granted entry. In all likelihood, that was where their enemy lay in wait.

Edgar picked up Alba's mask and put it on. His stature and the color of his hair differed from the Frenchman's, but with only candles to fight off the darkness of the night, he ought to be able to conceal his identity. Next, he pulled the knife from the sofa.

"Raven. I intend to infiltrate the eastern wing."

His servant might not have been nearby, but he had managed to deliver the floor plan. He could probably predict what was expected of him after sending Alba to this room, as well as what Edgar would do next.

The earl stepped out and locked the door behind him. The guards were fast asleep, which was likely Alba's doing. He slipped past them and began walking with confidence down the hallway. Those who glanced his way from afar took no action. They had no reason to suspect his identity, given that he was supposed to be incarcerated.

The first item on his agenda was to locate Ulysses.

The Treacherous Prince

The Nightmare had returned to its post on London Bridge. The people walked past without fear, unaware of the enormous demon sprawling over the structure. Though it was late enough that the gas lamps had been lit, the bridge remained packed with carriages and pedestrians. The Nightmare was continuously absorbing vitality from the crowds, building its strength and gradually growing.

A jet-black kelpie gazed at it in shock. Recognizing that it had grown too large for him to handle, he quietly stepped away from the bridge. He had come in pursuit of Lydia and the silver fairy that had whisked her away. Although he could sense her presence, the enchantment on the inner part of the bridge transformed it into a holy place that prevented him from getting too close to it. There seemed to be a great deal of that magic here, which repelled fairies of the Unseelie Court like himself. It was protecting London Bridge.

The only reason that the structure still stood and people were able to cross it despite the expanding Nightmare was the power of the holy ground within it. The demon's influence was certainly growing beyond the bridge, but the strength within the landmark kept it supported, creating a barrier.

The knowledge did little to assuage Kelpie's fears. The Prince's organization had tied the Nightmare here with the purpose of destroying the bridge. Should it grow any stronger, Lydia was in danger of being buried beneath the rubble along with the holy ground within. Kelpie needed the help of a human who could get inside and save her. As much as he was loath to admit it, the earl was the only person he could think of. Kelpies were fairies who ate humans, and as such, there weren't exactly many among his acquaintances.

"It's his fault Lydia left town in the first place," he muttered, transforming into his horse form with the intention of traveling to the earl's mansion. Even if he was visible to any of the humans crossing the bridge, they wouldn't register his presence on a

conscious level. He was employing a concealment spell that would make it so, and yet he still spotted someone looking his way.

He came to a stop. It wasn't a human who had seen him, but a selkie. She stood with her arms folded, and when she spoke, she sounded most displeased.

"And what, may I ask, are *you* doing here?"

"I could ask ye the same thing. Och, I guess ye came to see how the Nightmare and the bridge were doin'."

She was dressed in her usual male attire. Her elegant eyebrows knitted themselves into a frown. As a human, she'd had the name Ermine and had been one of the earl's allies. Ever since Ulysses had forced her to be reborn as a fairy, however, she had been part of the enemy's side. Kelpie wasn't aligned with either side, but just as the majority of fairies feared kelpies, so too did she seem to see him as a threat on an instinctual level. That said, she understood that he wouldn't eat her, so she was able to approach him slowly.

"Has something happened to Miss Carlton?" she asked.

Ulysses's fairy dogs had come as far as Scotland in pursuit of Lydia. The boy had known that Kelpie was safeguarding her up there, so the selkie was probably aware of that fact too. If so, perhaps she even knew that Lydia had been taken by a mysterious fairy.

"How come ye wanna know? So ye can go off and snitch to Ulysses?" Kelpie said bitterly, though he knew that her loyalty to the boy was far from absolute. She might have cozied up to the enemy, but her sentiment for the earl and his servant, her younger brother, subtly influenced her actions.

"Of course I intend to inform him of your response. I cannot allow myself to be driven from the organization. Something about this bridge is preying on your mind, isn't it?"

Clearly, she was angling for a deal. In all likelihood, Ulysses had ordered her to look into Lydia's whereabouts, and she had identified London Bridge as a likely place for the fairy doctor to be. In that case, they should understand the significance of Lydia being trapped within its stone pier.

"Do ye know what the bridge's depths are like?"

The selkie's gaze hardened as she looked into his eyes. Kelpie's question clearly had her ready to scrutinize him. When she did eventually speak, it was with the conviction that Lydia was inside

the bridge and that the water horse was ready to strike a deal.

“The sacrificial maiden slumbers there. She comprises a holy power that protects both the bridge and London.”

“The sacrificial… Huh?”

“A lone maiden who exchanged her life for the ability to defend this city. But that was a hundred years ago. The protective power is no longer as potent as it once was.”

“So if a new maiden is sacrificed, that power’ll increase again? The Prince willnae be able to destroy the bridge no more?”

“It will still be possible. It was built by humans, so it can be brought down by humans. However, if a life is sacrificed within the structure, the protective power that was received in exchange will remain fixed in place, regardless of the bridge’s destruction. It’s possible, at least.”



Kelpie clicked his tongue. The silver fairy was planning to sacrifice Lydia. He would rather the stranger had been one of Ulysses's underlings. There was no time to lose. He turned on his heel.

"Lord Ashenbert is at the Prince's hideaway," Ermine said.

Her words caught him off guard. "Huh?"

"Only someone from the Blue Knight Earldom is able to enter the bridge. Effectively, that means only Lord Ashenbert. Unfortunately, he is currently being held captive."

"Where's the hideaway, then?"

"Do you really think I am at liberty to tell you?" Though she sounded exasperated, there was a small smile on her lips. With that, she turned her back on the bridge and set off.

Kelpie followed. As far as he understood her, she was saying that she could not stop him if he wanted to tail her.

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Ulysses's room was located exactly where Raven's floor plan said it would be. In front of the guest room on the second floor stood a man whose duties, Edgar gleaned, seemed to include guarding as well as odd jobs. The earl approached him unhesitantly. He shot Edgar a glance before looking away and allowing him past, apparently believing him to be Alba.

Edgar rapped lightly on the door. He ignored the voice from the other side that asked his identity and opened it without a word. Ulysses was sitting at a desk with his back to the door and didn't immediately turn around. Edgar closed the door behind him and approached the boy silently.

"What do you want?" Ulysses glanced at him but looked back at the desk at once without registering that he wasn't speaking to Alba. However, he must have had an encroaching sense that something wasn't right, because he suddenly made to stand.

Edgar was already behind him, and he grabbed the boy by his frail shoulder to stop him, holding a knife to his cheek.

"Ah. Is that you, Ted?" Ulysses asked, unable to move his head to confirm visually. Ted was the nickname that the Prince had given Edgar.

"You will address me as Lord Ashenbert."

“Oh, I do beg your pardon. Might I ask how you obtained that mask? I suppose Monsieur Alba paid you a visit, did he?”

Ulysses raised his hands in a mock show of surrender. Edgar kept the knife where it was as he forced his adversary to stand. “Alba is a decent man indeed. Not only did he unlock the door to my room, but he even went out of his way to bring me a knife.”

“Did you employ your raven? Alba shouldn’t have known that you were here. I shall have to put the men on high alert and flush your servant out.”

“I’m afraid there are more pressing matters that require your attention. For example, your immediate death should you fail to follow my instructions to the letter.” Edgar lowered the blade from Ulysses’s neck and pressed it against his flank instead. “Ulysses, did you know that this point sits between two ribs? If I were to stab you here, I could rip your lung open unimpeded by bone. Alternatively, I could angle the blade like so and reach your heart in a single—”

“Understood. I am at your command.”

Despite what he said, Ulysses would likely only follow along until he found an opening to turn the situation around. This was the Prince’s hideaway. Everyone in it was on Ulysses’s side, and Edgar was at a distinct disadvantage. All his opponent needed to do was bide his time before cinching an easy victory. It was for that reason that the earl was determined to move quickly.

“Lead me to the Freya,” he demanded.

Ulysses began to walk, and Edgar kept pace beside him. The boy started by leaving the room, his expression one of total disinterest. They were following the long hallway that connected both wings and heading for the eastern building. The door to it was firmly closed, with guardsmen both outside and within it. Some of them stood at the windows, and they were all keeping a very careful eye on their surroundings. It was just as Raven had reported. However, every single one of them moved aside the moment they saw Ulysses, and the door was opened without complaint.

“I’m afraid I can only let you in alone, sir,” one of the men said.

“I have His Royal Highness’s permission.” It was all Ulysses needed to say to bring Edgar into the room that sat deeper within the building.

There were no more guardsmen beyond that point. The boy led the earl through two spacious halls before stopping in a room with a line of old paintings on every wall. In its center was a metal dome the height of an average man. It was like an upside-down church bell. There was a single small window embedded in it like a peephole.

“The Freya is inside.”

Standing in front of the window allowed one to see inside to a glass box sitting on a metal stand. Inside that box was a red stone. It was the Freya that had been stolen from a village in Edgar’s earldom. It had been cut to only the part where its fiery colors were the most intense, leaving it the size of a plum. With its excess reddish tones removed, it was as beautiful as ever. It truly looked as though it were aflame. Mysteriously, it seemed to be producing its own sparkling light that stood out against the dome’s dull interior. It was like a candle’s flame had been frozen in time and trapped within it.

“Open it,” Edgar said.

“Only His Royal Highness can open it.”

Edgar couldn’t be sure that he wasn’t lying. “Then perhaps you would be so kind as to take me to him?”

Ulysses scowled. As if being bested by the earl hadn’t displeased him enough, he was now being asked to expose his humiliation to the Prince.

“Being that you are so wonderfully sagacious, my lord, I trust you understand that His Royal Highness will be utterly unconcerned to see me used as a hostage.”

Should one of his men be captured, the Prince wouldn’t hesitate to let them die at their captor’s hands if that was being threatened. The loyal members of his organization knew exactly the kind of master they were serving. Edgar couldn’t fathom how they weren’t dissuaded. Perhaps it wasn’t the case that they followed the Prince for their own benefit, but rather that they truly believed that his rejected bloodline deserved Britain’s throne. Regardless, this did not make them immune to the fear of death.

“Am I to take it that you are presently begging for your life?” Edgar sneered.

He must have been right, because Ulysses glared back at him in a most displeased manner. The boy didn’t want to die without

cause. Otherwise he wouldn't have led Edgar here, nor would he have been so reluctant to take the earl to the Prince.

"I know that you are capable of unlocking this mechanism, Ulysses. Freya is imbued with fairy magic. And you are the sole member of this organization capable of dealing with such magic. You will be the one to utilize whatever sorcery is required to transfer the Prince's memories into Alba, no? Or are you saying there is another capable of such feats?" Edgar pressed the blade of the knife into his enemy's flank, making sure he could feel it.

Ulysses let out a resigned sigh. "Monsieur Alba is more loose-lipped than I'd bargained for." He took a reluctant step toward the metal dome. "There are twenty-two locks. It is by no means a simple mechanism." Pulling a bundle of keys from his pocket, he began to undo the locks one by one, never once mistaking one key for another.

Edgar's mind ticked on as he watched. This Freya had been stolen from Wallcave. In the past, the village had been the sole location where Freya could be mined, and as things stood now, the mineral would never be produced again. It wasn't beyond the realm of possibility that there were other specimens remaining from when it had been widely circulated, but fluorite was a brittle substance. Unlike other gems, it couldn't hold its shape over eons, so if there was any Freya left, it would be hard to get ahold of. Freya with magical properties should have been rarer still. That was why the Prince had reawakened a dragon in an attempt to produce the unique fluorite again. As such, Edgar was confident that this Freya was the last of its kind. Without it, the Prince would die on his sickbed, and his organization would collapse.

"I ought to make one thing clear, my lord. I cannot recommend stealing the Freya. The magic within it is currently in an active state. It cannot be destroyed, and anyone who touches it will immediately burn to death," Ulysses said airily in an act of resistance against the man coercing him.

Alba had said that if *he* touched the Freya, the Prince's memories within would react to his blood and flow into him. But apparently, anyone else would find themselves erupting into flame.

"Within the stone are His Royal Highness's memories: a 'core' that controls a dark magic. I suppose you already know that we

are inducing demons to destroy London, but the *intent* that brought about their advance rests within the Freya. The only one capable of rescinding the order will be the new Prince, he who has inherited the entirety of the stone's contents. That fate belongs to Alba, and I trust that he will rouse the fairies even further. You are completely powerless, my lord."

"I appreciate your concern. As it happens, I was most surprised to discover that the Prince has stayed alive for so long by switching bodies whenever the need arose. Have you been utilizing the same method? If so, I suppose you once had your individuality crushed like Alba."

Ulysses scoffed. "And if I have? *My* individuality is perfectly intact. Might I remind you that there is fairy blood running through my veins? All I require to transfer my memories and live for eternity is the properly prepared body of a descendant. I do not need Freya."

The Freya possessed fairy magic. Ulysses was also descended from the Blue Knight Earl, so perhaps it was no wonder that he was endowed with a similar power. Having said that, fairies lived long lives. He should have had no need to sacrifice a descendant for the sake of longevity, and the idea that he would usurp another's life regardless constituted a misuse of fairy magic by man.

"And then the Blue Knight Earldom prohibited the use of such magic," Ulysses went on, his tone suddenly souring. "In fact, to ensure that such abilities didn't manifest within the earl's illegitimate lineage, a charm was cast that erased such magical powers before the child in question had fully matured. I was in danger of losing my own powers because of it, at least until His Royal Highness saved me. His strength, combined with that of the Unseelie Court, freed me from the earl's curse. Now this ability is mine for all eternity."

It was now clear to Edgar how Ulysses had become loyal to the Prince. That wasn't to say that he didn't have his doubts. After all, wasn't it only the original Prince who had saved Ulysses?

"This all sounds rather farcical to me, Ulysses. You dragged Alba through a living hell. And yet, once he becomes the Prince, you intend to pledge your absolute loyalty to him?"

"Alba will not become my master. My master is the almighty

Prince," the boy replied, pausing without releasing the final lock. "I'm afraid our time is up, my lord. His Royal Highness is informed whenever anybody attempts to enter this room. I suppose he must have grown curious when he heard that Alba was allowed to enter without his permission."

A gunshot rang out. Edgar dove to the floor. Ulysses took the opportunity to distance himself from the earl. The next shot missed the top of the earl's head by inches and hit the metal dome. A group of men stormed into the room, and Edgar darted around the back of the dome to avoid the endless shower of bullets.

"Enough. He doesn't have a pistol of his own. Seize him." Ulysses's order put a stop to the shooting. But then the men began to scream.

Edgar got to his feet to see them being attacked by a jet-black horse. "Kelpie?"

"Get outta here, Earl!"

Fairies were said to be immune to human weaponry, and indeed, Kelpie was ignoring the bullets as he bore his fangs at Ulysses's men, kicking and trampling them. Though Edgar couldn't fathom what the water horse might be doing here, he slipped past the fray and hurried from the room.

"This way! After him!"

Avoiding the men who grouped up to stop him, Edgar ran. It wasn't long before he found a figure standing in his way. Just as the earl prepared to fight back with his knife, the man slumped to the floor.

"Forgive me, my lord." It seemed that Raven was apologizing for having revealed himself before he had been instructed to do so.

Edgar was unconcerned. They had bigger fish to fry. He nodded, then quickly indicated that his servant should follow him into a nearby room. As they barricaded the door with furniture, he looked around for a hiding place.

"Raven, you mustn't allow yourself to be discovered. They won't kill me immediately, but you must hide."

"They won't hesitate to shoot, my lord. Even if they do not intend to kill you, there is a danger that you will be hit by a stray bullet."

"Keep yer maws shut!" The shout came from inside the room.

Kelpie slowly came into view, transforming into a man with dark, wavy hair before approaching Edgar. “Don’t speak. Don’t even move. No even if someone touches ye.”

There came the sound of men trying to break the door down, and with it, a series of vibrations. The wardrobe against it shook like it would collapse at any moment. It was clear that their barricade would not last, so the only option was to carry out Kelpie’s instructions. Edgar nodded, not entirely convinced that the water horse could be trusted. It was as he was giving Raven a look instructing him to do the same that the barricade broke and the men came swarming into the room. They held out their lamps, the lights slowly spilling out and illuminating their surroundings.

The glare of the lights dazzled Edgar, but the men ignored him and his companions as though they were part of the furniture. Several of them were now walking around the room. Edgar and Raven held their breaths and stayed as still as they could. There was no longer any sight of Kelpie. Now and then, the men would come almost close enough to brush shoulders with the earl and his servant, but the pair’s presence seemed to go unnoticed. Then, someone suggested that they might have left through the window and fled into the next room from outside. Once the men withdrew, Kelpie revealed himself and Edgar was able to breathe again.

“Do not let your guard down, my lord,” Raven warned him.

Edgar complied. Kelpie might have lent them his assistance, but the fairy was keen to take Lydia away from the earl. Edgar should have been nothing but a nuisance in his eyes. Moreover, the coblynau had said that Lydia had passed through Kelpie’s magical barrier and was on her way to London. He could understand that the water horse might want to pursue her, but that didn’t explain what business he had *here*. An urgent dread began to press in on him.

“Has something happened to Lydia, Kelpie?”

The fairy shot him a glance before immediately averting his gaze again. There was clearly something he felt obligated to say but would rather keep to himself. “Some fairy ah’ve never seen afore showed up and trapped her deep inside London Bridge. It’s a magical holy ground between the human and fairy worlds, and I cannae get in.”

“The insinuation being that *I* can?”

“Aye. Ah’ll tell ye where the entrance is. But it’s no guid ye jist goin’ in with no plan. Ye gotta make sure ye get Lydia out safely no matter what.”

It irritated Edgar that Kelpie should speak as though *he* were responsible for her safety.

“There is no need to belabor the point. She is my fiancée.”

The water horse clicked his tongue. For his part, he didn’t like to be reminded of the pair’s engagement. “Then ye’ll make sure ye do it right. The bridge is close to collapsin’ under the Nightmare’s weight. Then ye got the Unseelie Court closin’ in from downstream. It’s still standin’ for now, but there’s no tellin’ what’ll happen if it has to take anythin’ else.”

The gunpowder loaded on the Ark sprang back to the forefront of Edgar’s mind. If the vessel crashed into the bridge as the Prince intended, there would be no saving London’s stronghold.

“Why on earth did this fairy trap Lydia inside?”

“She’s gonna be sacrificed. Even if the bridge goes down, offerin’ up a young lassie’s life might let the holy ground maintain its protective power. Apparently, she’s been chosen for the job.”

“But why her? Who exactly is this fairy?”

“How should I know? Ye jist gotta think of a way to save her.”

Knowing he was right, Edgar refocused his mind. The first vital step was to remove the danger of the bridge collapsing. There were two aspects to doing so. First, the Ark would need to be stopped. Second, the advance of the Nightmare and the Unseelie Court in the East End would need to be pushed back. Edgar had already left the Ark in the hands of Scarlet Moon. It would not be an easy problem to solve, but it shouldn’t take any supernatural abilities, so he decided to trust them to deal with it. As for how to restrain the Unseelie Court, that might prove to be a little more complex.

“Kelpie, you are of the Unseelie Court yourself. Could you not do something about them?”

“This mighty kelpie willnae be compared to that pack of rats, thank ye very much.”

“‘Rats’? Then I trust you will have no problems exterminating them.”

“There’re too many. Ye humans cannae handle wee insects when they’re all swarmed up the gether, right? Anyhows, there’s

gotta be a powerful fairy who's commandin' 'em. Take down their leader and the swarm willnae know what to do no more."

"My lord, the Prince has two goddesses of war in his possession. What if they are commanding the wicked fairies?" Raven suggested. It was rare for him to voice his opinion without being asked. He must have been confident in his assertion.

"Macha and Neamhan, you mean? The goddesses sealed within the diopside?"

"When we were aboard the Ark, I saw a hooded crow circling the Tower of London several times."

The Celtic goddess he referred to was able to take the form of a hooded crow, was said to be an ancestor to fairykind, and was herself a trinity of three separate deities. The Prince possessed two of them. The third dwelt within Raven and was unlikely to reawaken ever again. That said, it was clear that his connection with the goddess made him sensitive to the presence of her counterparts.

"When at war, those goddesses are loyal to their commander. They're probably followin' the Prince's will instead of Ulysses," Kelpie said.

Edgar recalled what Ulysses had said: The Prince's memories, held within the Freya, acted as a core that was capable of controlling dark magic. His order to destroy London was also already imbued within the stone. Slaying the Prince and stealing the Freya would do nothing to alter the situation. The only way to stop the rampaging darkness was to have Alba take on the Prince's memories and then order the fairies to pull back. The problem was, once those memories were within Alba, he would become a perfect copy of the villain. Edgar didn't want to kill him if he could help it, especially after he had promised to save the man. That left him with just one option.

"My lord," Raven called anxiously. The brooding look on his silent master's face seemed to have concerned him.

"There is nothing to fear, Raven," Edgar said, feigning composure. "Kelpie, should the Prince order the goddesses to fall back, might that cause the Unseelie Court to scatter?"

The water horse grunted. "Seein' how many of 'em there are, I dunno if they'd scatter. They'd probably jist wander around 'cause they lost their purpose. They'd be weaker than they are now,

though.”

In other words, it was impossible to say exactly what would happen. However, if Edgar was to put a stop to the Prince’s machinations and save Lydia, there was nothing to do but try.

“We don’t have the time to sit around and contemplate,” the earl muttered to himself before raising his head. A determined smile rose to his lips. This was no time to be questioning himself either. “Now, Kelpie, I shall require you to follow my instructions.”

“Huh? Why should I?”

“Because you will do anything it takes to rescue Lydia.”

The fairy neither confirmed nor denied Edgar’s claim.

“First, I would like you to ascertain our enemy’s current situation. The estate has been far too quiet for some time now. They may have given up on searching for us and are planning something bigger. I would also like you to find a man by the name of Alba and update me on his current status. If you are able to bring him to me as well, it would be most appreciated.”

It was clear that the earl wouldn’t accept “no” for an answer. Kelpie snorted. “Ye’d better no forget all about this once it’s over. Lydia’s still under our protection, remember? Even if we rescue her, she’s no gonna remember promisin’ to marry ye as long as my spell’s still in place. She’s never gonna be yer wife if ah’ve got anythin’ to say about it!” he spat before promptly vanishing.

Only when he was gone did Edgar notice that Raven was giving him a bemused look.

“So it really is true, my lord?”

“What is?”

Raven shook his head and averted his gaze. But Edgar had already been struck by an idea of what he might have been referring to. When the earl had announced that Lydia had accepted his proposal, neither Raven nor his butler had believed him. Now that he thought about it, the only witness to her assent had been Kelpie.

“Am I to take it that you still didn’t believe that Lydia accepted my proposal, Raven?”

“Please forgive me, my lord.”

His heartfelt apology disheartened Edgar.

“Congratulations,” Raven added.

The heartfelt congratulations seemed a little underwhelming at

this point. Nevertheless, though Edgar had to sigh, the boy's untimely blessing did lift his spirits a little. Even if Lydia never remembered the moment herself, it didn't take away from the fact that she had accepted him. That in itself had the power to comfort him immensely. He would be capable of seeing anything through if it was for the sake of protecting her. Even if that meant losing everything.

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"I am afraid that women are not permitted in our club. Kindly leave."

"I just wanna meet the man in charge!"

"As I have already told you, he is currently absent."

"But someone's *got* to recognize me. If you'd just let me in—"

"I cannot do that. Women are not permitted to enter."

"D'you even know who I am?! My gang of pirates is fearsome enough that even whiny kids know better than to— Look, this is an emergency, okay?!"

Moonshine was a high-end club that required a membership to enter. One of its employees was standing before the heavy black doors arguing with a foulmouthed woman. As Paul approached the entrance, he gazed curiously at the unfamiliar visitor. What business could she have with Slade, who owned this club? She certainly seemed a peculiar sort. The rough way she spoke combined with her sloppily tied hair gave the impression that she was a working-class girl, yet she was wearing a luxurious dress. Even Paul was able to recognize the delicate tailorship that would have gone into embroidering it with that lace and those beads.

"Edgar's butler told me *everything*. You know him, right? The round man with the fish face?"

Paul was about to pass the pair when he stopped in his tracks. "Excuse me, but are you acquainted with Lord Ashenbert?"

The girl turned, her face brightening, and charged at him with such fervor that he thought she might fling her arms around him. "I sure am! You'll help me out here, right? I just wanna know where Edgar's gone!"

Paul suddenly shrank back as it struck him that she might have been one of the earl's lovers. It wasn't uncommon for noblemen to

adorn a working-class girl in fine clothing and keep her as a mistress. It would explain the disconnect between her attire and her way of speaking. There was sure to be trouble if Scarlet Moon, and by extension Lydia, were to catch wind of this woman's existence. Paul knew how much of a handful Edgar could become when Lydia was confrontational with him, so he found himself overcome with panic in the face of this strange girl.

"I'm afraid that his lordship is not at the club, madame," he stammered as he backed away.

"Where is he, then?"

"Erm…"

"He's not with some other woman, is he? After goin' around telling everyone he's engaged?"

"You are aware of his engagement?"

"I've *heard* he's engaged. Not that I believe him, what with his reputation."

It sounded like she didn't *want* to believe it. But since she was aware of it, perhaps it had been part of a conversation that involved Edgar cutting ties with her.

"He might have gone to see his fiancée. So I suggest that you —" Paul began, hoping to encourage her to give up on the earl.

"Is he *really* engaged? I mean, you don't think a philanderer like him is gonna be able to settle down with one girl for the rest of his life, do you?" the young woman demanded, a grim frown on her face.

"I, um…"

"Truth is, you know where he is, don't you? His fiancée's place was deserted apart from the housekeeper. Plus, his butler said he didn't come home last night. Sounds to me like you're hidin' something, and I don't like it."

It shocked Paul to think that this girl had even dug into Lydia's life and gone to the fairy doctor's house unannounced. Perhaps she had no intention of giving up on Edgar and had decided to wage war on his fiancée. His panic growing, he wiped away the sweat on his forehead with his palm. The young woman seemed to interpret it as a sign that her musings were correct.

"So he *has* gone back to seein' multiple women! He sounded so convincing when he spoke to me, but I guess he was lying as usual. You just wait and see how hard I punch him when I track

him down!”

“Please, you misunderstand.”

“Where is he, then? In this club? I’m gonna crush any hope he has of gettin’ married if you don’t bring him out right now!”

Paul could only imagine how much worse things would get if Lydia became involved in this mess. Unsure of what else to do, he moved to flee into the club.

“Hey! Hold it!”

He caught a glimpse of the doorman restraining her as he hurried up the stairs. He dove into the common room on the second floor, closed the door behind him, then let out a sigh of relief. Scarlet Moon’s senior members were already there.

“Something the matter, Mr. Firman?”

“Sorry? Oh, no. Nothing.”

“Did you manage to make contact with the inspector?”

Paul had just been to see an inspector from Scotland Yard with whom Edgar was on very good terms. A great number of people were being imprisoned on the Ark. Though Paul had asked that the matter be investigated, there was no getting away from the fact that the passengers had boarded willingly. It also seemed that the upper ranks of the Yard were unwilling to look into the Ark.

“I am not the only member of the police force who can be bought,” the inspector had said with a sharp laugh. Edgar frequently bribed him for information.

Slade let out a heavy sigh. “I suppose that means it is up to us to fix this mess.”

“Has his lordship sent any messages at all?”

Edgar had rushed alone straight into enemy territory, and it made Paul uneasy, to say the least. The earl had returned from Scotland upon learning that his friend was missing and saved him from the hidden room aboard the Ark. By no means did the earl view Paul or Scarlet Moon as his pawns. He saw them as allies working toward the same goal, and that was what had made the initially reluctant members such as Slade eventually accept him as their leader. For better or worse, it also meant he went to great lengths to protect them, including putting himself in the line of fire. That tendency concerned Paul.

“The carrier pigeon we lent to Raven returned. Jack and Lewis are on their way to the Prince’s hideaway with some of our

younger members in tow," Slade said.

"Then we must focus all our efforts on the Ark in the meantime," another senior member remarked.

"Quite right," Paul murmured. He had no experience with weaponry, so he would have to rack his brains to come up with a way to stop the Ark. It also bothered him that Greg had been confined to the vessel by Ulysses's underlings. As much as the man had harmed him, he didn't want to abandon an old friend. "But how are we going to stop that ship?"

"I doubt we shall be able to sneak on board, given the tight security. We shall have to stop it from the outside," Slade replied.

"We'll need a jolly big ship for that," someone added.

"Which isn't something that comes about easily," another man mused.

He was right. They would also need to hire a seaman to operate it. Never mind the matter of convincing him to attack the Ark.

"I've got a ship." A female voice cut through the men's reverie. They looked up with a start, their eyes falling on the young woman Paul had met at the entrance.

The artist leaped to his feet. "*You!* How on earth did you manage to get in?!"

"The doorman blacked out when I punched him." Her gaze swept over the astonished men in front of her briefly before she began to approach them. "You're all pals with Edgar, right? Sounds like you lot are in trouble."

"Who *is* this girl, Mr. Firman?" Slade asked.

Paul lowered his voice so that only the art dealer could hear him. "I…*believe* she is one of Lord Ashenbert's lovers."

"What?!"

"Don't get mad, but I couldn't help but overhear part of your conversation," the girl said. "I don't mind helpin' you out. Me and Edgar go back longer than I'd like." She sat in a chair without being offered and threw one leg over the other. "The Ark's that shady ship on the Thames, right? Are you plannin' to sink it or something?" She seemed to be rather clued in to Edgar's circumstances. She approached them like she was joining a war council, with no semblance of surprise or suspicion.

"His lordship certainly has a diverse taste in women," Slade murmured, and Paul nodded in agreement.

“Got a smoke?” the girl asked the man next to her. When he passed her a cigar, she sniffed it like she was quite used to it, then bit off the tip and put it in her mouth before pulling a candlestick toward her to light it. “So, are you gonna let me help you?”

Slade paused. “I shall do my due diligence and ask what *kind* of ship you have.”

“It’s a Dutch frigate. It’s small but light and quick. It’ll be able to navigate the crowded Thames no problem.”

“A frigate? But that’s a warship.”

“It’s old stock that was sold off, so no cannons, I’m afraid.”

“One moment, please,” Slade said before gathering the men in one corner of the room.

“What do you think, Mr. Slade?” Paul asked.

“No matter our plan, we shall need a vessel.”

“But can we trust her?” someone asked.

“She might be an enemy spy,” another pointed out.

“She apparently knew to come here because of Lord Ashenbert’s butler,” Paul said. “Therefore, not only does she know Mr. Tompkins, but he seems to trust her. It shouldn’t take too long to confirm as much either…” He trailed off. Despite his words, he couldn’t shake his reluctance. His clubmates, however, showed more enthusiasm.

“I don’t suppose we shall have any issues, then. She seems more than willing to lend us a hand for his lordship’s sake.”

“Won’t his lordship take issue with us accepting help from one of his lovers? The man just got engaged, for Christ’s sake.”

Slade hesitated. “I am sure that is a problem he can navigate for himself. It is his area of expertise, after all.”

Indeed, it might not prove as much of a predicament for Edgar as they were supposing. Rather, Paul’s concerns as he continued to listen were centered on Lydia. The earl thought nothing of flirting with women, but she was far more fastidious than he realized. Though Edgar claimed she had agreed to marry him, the arrival of this woman with whom he seemed to have a history ran the risk of causing Lydia to change her mind.

Paul genuinely wished for the earl to obtain happiness and peace. To that end, Lydia’s presence was vital, and she herself was a young woman who deserved to be happy and loved. A previous lover who had never expected to marry Edgar anyway might be

unconcerned about his newfound commitment, but that didn't mean that her arrival would go down smoothly during the betrothal period. However, the other members of Scarlet Moon didn't seem to share Paul's concerns.

"What's your name, young lady?" Slade asked.

She blew out a stream of smoke and smiled. "It's Lotta."

Though she seemed strong-willed and her eyes had a harsh shape to them, Paul was surprised to find that the dimples formed by her smile made her look rather charming.

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Edgar and Raven had concealed themselves beneath a dark flight of stairs as they waited for Kelpie's return. An investigation of their immediate surroundings revealed that they were deserted. The earl was now completely convinced that Ulysses had given up searching for them and moved on to something else. As for what that might be, Edgar could only imagine that they were going to hold the ritual to implant the Prince's memories inside Alba, and Ulysses was undoubtedly of the opinion that doing so would draw him out of hiding.

The ritual might have been scheduled for that very night anyway. If so, perhaps the plan had always been for Edgar to bear witness to it. It seemed that he would be doing so regardless. He had the sense that avoiding it would be attempting to work against fate. For now, he decided to consider what he ought to be doing at the moment and came to the realization that he needed to speak to Raven.

"Raven," he said quietly, feeling the boy shift beside him in the darkness. "I am not going to give you any orders from now on. I want you to act in accordance with your own judgment."

Though far away, the glow of a distant lamp revealed the deep, mystical green of Raven's eyes. That shade was proof of the spirits within him. He blinked, then whispered, "Yes, my lord."

"I do, however, have one request. A request, not a command," Edgar said despite knowing that Raven likely wouldn't know the difference. "I want you to prioritize your own safety above all else."

"It is my duty to protect *you*, my lord."

"I might not be able to maintain my composure if you were to

come to harm. Please, Raven. Victory in this upcoming battle hinges on my mental strength. That is the sense I have, at least."

Though Raven seemed confused, Edgar interpreted his silence as assent. Because of the spirits dwelling within him since birth, the boy's original destiny had been to serve his tribe's leader as a soldier. However, he had instead chosen Edgar as his master. Since recovering Raven from the descendant he had been meant to serve, the earl had stopped considering whether he might set him free. He used to believe he would do so one day. He had believed that Raven's position by his side was due to a series of coincidences and that the boy was therefore meant to be living a different life in a different place. He did not think so anymore. Even if Raven should become independent, Edgar would probably continue to be his master. Their bond as master and servant went as deep as their very souls. Their relationship had been perfected independently of the circumstances of their births. It was for this reason that Edgar was certain that, no matter what he chose to do, Raven would remain forever by his side, even if everyone else abandoned him.

"Get yerself over here, Earl," came Kelpie's voice. "It's no like there's anyone to hide from here."

"Did you discover what's going on?" Edgar asked.

"Everyone's in the reception hall. The Prince, Ulysses, and all their men. They've brought the Freya there too. It's still in that contraption that looks like a bell."

"What about Alba?"

"Aye, that's what they were callin' the man who got whipped and collapsed on the floor. I went up to him when I got the chance, and he was mutterin' on and on about the Blue Knight Earl comin' to save him. But then Ulysses came back, and he got up with this grin on his face like his wounds weren't smartin'."

Edgar could picture him trembling with joy at the prospect of finally becoming the Prince. Meanwhile, the real Alba was still holding on to the hope that he would be rescued. Edgar was that glimmer of hope, a concept that the man had almost lost after being captured, confined, and thrust into the depths of despair.

"So Alba is in the hall too, yes?" the earl confirmed.

"Aye."

"Very well." Edgar exchanged a glance with Raven and got to his

feet.

"Ye're jist gonna march in there? It's set up with all these wards to keep away fairies, y'know."

"In that case, you need only spectate the proceedings," Edgar said, ready to set off until Kelpie suddenly grabbed him by the shoulder.

"Ye've no forgotten about Lydia, have ye, Earl?" The water horse sounded unusually desperate. "Ah've always thought that ye were jist usin' her, and that ye only care about yer feud with the Prince."

"I take it that your opinion hasn't changed on that front?"

"Aye, I cannae trust ye. Ye don't care what happens to Lydia as long as ye can kill the Prince."

"Would you believe me if I told you that wasn't the case?"

Enraged, Kelpie grabbed Edgar by the collar. "Don't ye dare get yerself killed, y'hear me? Lydia still ran off to go meet ye even though she doesnae remember agreein' to marry ye. Ah'm no gonna accept it if ye jist plannin' to throw yer life away!"

Edgar had promised to see Lydia again. That was why Kelpie, who ought to have seized upon the opportunity to have her to himself, was warning him to stay alive. He was doing it for Lydia's sake. It was a warning that lent Edgar strength. The earl refused to accept that Kelpie could care for Lydia more than he did. He brushed away the water horse's uncouth grip with a friendly smile.

"Kelpie. I shall not be defeated."

The reception hall was filling up with rows of the Prince's followers, all clad in black robes. They wore their hoods low over their faces like medieval monks, holding candles in their hands as they entered the room. It was the beginning of an occult ritual, and Edgar was almost surprised *not* to see a magic circle or goat's blood on the floor. He and Raven were clothed in some black robes they had stolen and had inserted themselves into the crowd. Their attire's original owners had been shoved into the back of a disused fireplace. They were unlikely to be discovered for some time. Either way, the people in this hall seemed to make up the majority that were at the estate. And their vast numbers surprised Edgar.

In the very center of the hall sat the contentious bell-like container. The one whose seemingly endless array of locks protected the Freya. Beyond a velvet curtain was a "throne"

seating a lone man: the Prince.

He had even more gray hair than when Edgar had last seen him several years ago. He used to wear a mask similar to Alba's, which covered one eye, but what he wore now concealed his entire face. All that could be seen was his mouth and the beard that sprouted from his chin. He harbored a burn that should only have covered a portion of his visage, but the stand-in that had tried to kill Lydia had worn bandages over his entire face. Perhaps he suffered from an illness that was destroying his skin.

The hand resting casually on the throne's armrest was clad in a black glove and adorned with a ring embedded with a large gemstone. His rigid posture and imposing frame were far from what one would expect from an elderly man with crippled legs. That hadn't changed in the slightest since the last time Edgar had seen him.

The Prince's most striking features were the eyes that peered out from behind the mask. Though difficult to see from this side, their razor-sharp gaze was palpable. It was cold, arrogant, and promised to perversely twist the entire fate of any human captured within it. Such was this society's leader, a man who utilized fear to establish an absolute rule like an ancient Roman dictator.

It was the first time in an eternity that Edgar had seen his yearslong enemy, and every drop of blood in his veins was boiling. It was no mean feat to keep his composure in the presence of that man. So overcome was he with deep loathing that he feared he would jump at the Prince's throat at any moment. He gritted his teeth, reminding himself that doing so would not earn him victory. He worried that his enemy might somehow sense his murderous hatred, even within the vast crowd of people. However, he was not the same man that he had once been. He wasn't here for the sake of selfish revenge. He was here to fulfill his duties as the Blue Knight Earl to his people. He was here to protect Lydia.

Edgar murmured her name silently. It was enough to still his tumultuous heart. She had purposefully escaped the safety of Kelpie's protection to meet him again. He needed to secure victory here, for her sake. Even with the Prince in his sights, he felt himself steadily growing calmer as he thought of Lydia. It allowed him to see what he had been blind to before: the subtle trembling

of the Prince's fingertips—a sign that he was in poor health. Perhaps it was taking all his strength just to sit on that throne.

However, in order to subjugate London, the organization required a younger, more attractive Prince to command it and declare war on the sitting royal family. Edgar studied the Prince's surroundings from beneath his hood. That was where he found Ulysses and Alba. The former was standing beside the metal dome carrying the Freya. The latter was sitting in a chair facing the container and wearing a quietly grave expression beneath his mask. Alba and the Freya were surrounded by a number of the Prince's closest associates, whom Edgar recognized.

Ulysses produced his bundle of clanking keys and shot a glance at the Prince. The elderly man gave a slow nod, and the hall fell into a deathly silence. It could only be the beginning of the ritual. The swathes of dark robes added a crushingly melancholic feel to the air. Or perhaps it was the disconcerting way the candlelight illuminated the metal dome. Ulysses began to put the keys into it one by one, just as he had done earlier. The metallic clunking as he worked was the only sound that remained. Twenty-one clicks came in turn. This time, Edgar heard the twenty-second, after which the front of the dome slowly parted to each side. Still, no one made a sound, almost as if they were deeply unimpressed. Indeed, things were proceeding with very little fanfare considering it was supposed to be a ritual.

Ulysses entered the dome and came out within seconds holding the glass box that contained the red Freya. Alba rose from his chair. This would be Edgar's sole chance. He glanced at Raven meaningfully. The boy beside him gave a small nod. The earl broke into a run just as gunshots rang out through the hall. Raven's twin shots sent the crowd into an uproar. The black-robed men broke their ranks. Since Ulysses had turned his attention toward the shots, he didn't immediately notice Edgar coming toward him. The earl leaped at him, pulling them both to the floor, and snatched the glass box away. But despite being restrained by Edgar, Ulysses was smirking.

"That is a decoy. Did you believe I would fail to account for the possibility that you would attempt to steal the Freya?"

Feeling the barrel of a pistol at the back of his head, Edgar was left with no choice but to release Ulysses. The man with the gun

tore away the earl's robe and pushed him down so that he was kneeling on the floor. His neck was twisted forcibly in the Prince's direction.

The loathsome man chuckled quietly. "I applaud your efforts, Ted. Your talents are capable of infuriating me. It is a shame that you won't put them to better use. I still lament that I allowed you to escape. Regardless, I do believe I shall show you the moment of my rebirth before I kill you."

The Prince put his hand into his jacket to take something out. "Here, Alba."

The fiery fluorite tumbled over the carpet. Alba approached it. The moment he touched it, the memories within would react to the blood in his veins and flow into him. What was left of the original Alba would lose any strength to resist and be erased. Unfortunately, the man approaching the stone was overjoyed at the prospect of becoming the Prince.

"Mr. Nodier, *don't*!" Edgar cried. "Pull yourself together! Are you really willing to kill yourself?"

It was at that very moment that Alba looked at the earl. Then at their surroundings. His knees began to shake, and he sank to the floor. "My lord…save—"

Before he could even finish his sentence, he was pulled to his feet by a pair of men and dragged toward the Freya. His arm was grabbed and forced toward the stone. Alba was doing all he could to resist, but it would be over the moment his other self rose to the surface.

It was then that the man holding Edgar down let go and collapsed to the floor. Raven had removed his hood and was now standing before his master armed with a knife and a pistol. Now able to move freely, Edgar rushed for the Freya. He pushed aside the men gripping Alba's arm and reached for the fluorite himself.

"Don't you dare, Earl!" Ulysses cried, his voice pregnant with panic.

But Edgar had already made up his mind. The same blood as Alba's ran in his veins: the blood that connected them to the Prince and to royalty. All the ambition and strength that had created the villain were within those memories, and if they truly were locked within the Freya, Edgar should be able to take *everything*. Once he had the core that commanded the Unseelie Court, he would be

able to employ his own intent to stop their onslaught. He had steeled his resolve once he had concluded that there was no other way to sap the strength from the attack on London Bridge. With no room left for hesitation, he took the Freya firmly into his grip.

The first thing he felt was a scorching heat. A blinding light spilled out from between his fingers before expanding rapidly. Edgar opened his hand unconsciously. The Freya was nowhere to be seen. In its place was a red mark like a burn. He couldn't tell whether the original Prince's memories were within him now or not. Perhaps the change would be more gradual. Either way, his work was not yet done. While the men around them were still frozen in shock, Edgar took the pistol from Raven and pointed it straight at the Prince.

"It has all become quite clear to me, Ted. I ought to have killed you the very moment you betrayed me." Though it was impossible to see the expression beneath his mask, the Prince didn't *sound* especially perturbed. "Do not make the mistake of thinking that this means victory for you. The curse of the prince who was exiled from this land and the resentment borne by his purged adherents are now yours to bear. It is a heavy burden that cannot be extinguished by one man alone."

"Say what you will. This is the end of the line for you."

The Prince gave a quiet chuckle. He seemed to be enjoying himself, despite how things were unfolding contrary to his expectations. "Ted, I am aware of how you vowed your revenge against me, doing everything in your power to cling to life. You were born to rule. You resent me because you cannot tolerate anyone who damages your pride. Eventually, that haughty spirit of yours will bring you to your senses. You will realize that you were meant to take the throne and will no longer be content with your current position."

"I am the Blue Knight Earl. Therein lies my pride, and there it will remain."

"I wonder about that," the Prince murmured. He reached into his jacket in the exact same manner as when he had produced the Freya and pulled out a pistol. Edgar was ready to pull the trigger of his own weapon, but then the Prince put the barrel of his gun to his head. "You will not be able to kill me."

And then he pulled the trigger. Blood burst forth from the

Prince's head before he slumped in his chair, still. Edgar's enemy had died all too anticlimactically. The tension drained from his limbs. He lowered his gun. The Freya was gone. The Prince would not be returning. That was, as long as the earl, whose original personality had not been destroyed, was able to keep the villain's memories separate from his own.

Would the Unseelie Court in the East End sense that the intent behind their orders was gone? Would their magic diminish? If the pressure on London Bridge lessened, Edgar would be able to rescue Lydia. He had taken on a terrible burden in exchange for that possibility, a burden that he had thought he was fully prepared for. However, the Prince's final words weighed heavily on his mind. Would he truly be able to consign the villain's spirit to oblivion? The memories that now existed within him?

Raven stiffened beside Edgar. Ulysses and the Prince's closest associates had lined up before them. The earl slowly swept his gaze over them as they knelt before him.

"Your Royal Highness, the fate of Britannia herself rests on your shoulders. We hereby pledge our eternal loyalty to you and are delighted to accept you as our new ruler."

It was absurd. They didn't seem the least bit concerned that the elderly man they had devoted everything to had dropped dead. Even Ulysses was bowing his head in reverence.

Edgar grabbed him by the collar and pulled him to his feet. "You will put a stop to the Ark and the wicked fairies in the East End."

"I cannot do that, sir," he said quietly, with no hint of his earlier haughty smile. "The fairies' contract is with the 'Prince,' and they respond only to his call. They may lose their unity now that his voice has fallen silent, but their great numbers make them impossible to put an immediate stop to."

"What about the Ark? That is being driven by humans, isn't it?"

"This plan will bring to fruition a long-cherished wish of our organization. The ship has departed the docks, and there is no longer any way to make contact with those onboard. It cannot be ordered to stop by design."

"Then *I* shall put a stop to it."

"Why, sir? Because you do not wish for your most precious fairy doctor to become a sacrifice?"

Edgar stopped in his tracks. How did Ulysses know where Lydia

was? And how did he know about the matter of sacrifice? He glared at the boy.

"Previously, it was the last Blue Knight Earl, Lady Gladys Ashenbert, who sacrificed herself at London Bridge. She expelled Your Royal Highness and our organization from these shores."

"Gladys… Do you truly mean that?"

"Yes, sir. The British Empire's capital has been protected for all these years by a spiritual, protective force that Gladys exchanged her life for. More than a hundred years on, our organization has restored its strength while the bridge's role as the capital's shield against darkness has started to be forgotten. So too has Gladys's strength been waning. London Bridge is ready to be torn down. We factored these circumstances into our scrupulous plan. That is how the Prince and our organization were able to return to Britain."

So determined had Gladys been to fulfill her duty as the Blue Knight Earl and expel the Prince from Britain that she had sacrificed her life to do so.

"However, it would seem that one of Gladys's servants still dwells within London Bridge. No doubt this fairy of hers wishes to reinforce the bridge's power with a new sacrifice. I suppose he selected the fairy doctor because she is your lover."

Edgar was rendered speechless. Kelpie had already mentioned that Lydia had been kidnapped and was trapped inside London Bridge by an unknown fairy. He hadn't realized that said fairy belonged to *Gladys* or that Lydia had been chosen because she was betrothed to the new Blue Knight Earl. Had the fairy therefore decided that it was his duty to offer up Lydia's life to protect London? It wasn't the Prince who was trying to kill her, but a member of the Blue Knight Earldom: Edgar's supposed ally. He could barely believe it.

"I am not certain that her death will be enough to enhance the bridge's strength," Ulysses went on. "It will require a *lot* of power to put a stop to the Nightmare and the swathes of wicked fairies. I cannot imagine that her power would rival that of Gladys."

Lydia had at long last accepted Edgar's proposal. To think that far from helping him to protect her, it would burden her with such a costly responsibility! He wanted to dismiss the entire thing as a farce. Was the bridge truly so important that Lydia should die for

it?

“As the Blue Knight Earl, there is a slim chance that you will be able to protect both. Will you stake your bets on maintaining the bridge but prepare for your lover to die? Or will you rescue the fairy doctor, knowing that the bridge will then be fated to certain doom? Your Royal Highness is our Prince, a man who will lend his aid to London’s annihilation. I cannot see you forsaking that role.”

Ulysses pressed on as though he could perceive Edgar’s inner turmoil. For a split second, that same haughty smile seemed to flash across his face.

“Did you not just claim that your pride lay in your station as the Blue Knight Earl?” he continued. “It will be interesting to see the extent to which you were telling the truth.”

Enraged, Edgar struck him with great force. The boy collapsed to the floor. No one came to help him up. They likely thought nothing of the Prince enacting violence toward them. Ulysses pushed himself up, then knelt again as if to apologize for his insolence. Even as Edgar turned, determined that he would not be stopped this time, Ulysses addressed his retreating back.

“You hold the key to Ibrazel. The power to bury the Blue Knight Earldom for all eternity lies within your grasp. Should you choose to do so, there will no longer be anyone left to oppose us.”

Raven followed his master while supporting an unsteady and absent-minded Alba. The black-robed men scrambled to open up a path for the three of them.

“We eagerly await your return, Your Royal Highness.”

The Star’s Name

It was midnight by the time Edgar finally arrived at London Bridge. The structure rose up before him silently, illuminated by the gas lamps. Blind to the Nightmare and the Unseelie Court, he could perceive no sign of its impending collapse. However, when he cast his gaze downstream, he saw the crowd of countless masts and funnels of the ships moored on the Thames. It made him think of the Ark, wherever it was at present. The vessel had traveled downstream for some time before vanishing from London completely, hostages and all.

Edgar’s latest update had come from the Scarlet Moon members who had come to collect him from the Prince’s hideout. Apparently, the ship was in the vicinity of Greenwich, and there was no telling when it might return upstream in the direction of central London again. Even if Edgar couldn’t see it from London Bridge, it was quite possible that it was already on its way.

The earl had left the hideout just as Scarlet Moon had surrounded the estate, awaiting their chance to storm it. They had been surprised and overjoyed to see him escape unscathed and hadn’t questioned a thing when he told them that the Prince was dead. Edgar had no intention of filling anyone in on the specific details for the time being, having decided instead to focus on what was required of him next.

“Please forgive my tardiness, my lord.”

Edgar turned around at the sound of Raven’s voice. His servant was standing right beside him, gingerly carrying the merrows’ sword. The earl had bade Raven fetch it from the mansion, since he recalled that the coblynau had told him to take it when he went to receive Lydia. He had no idea whether it would prove useful. He still had no idea about its name, and the star sapphire remained silent. Nevertheless, if the jewel truly was able to communicate with the moonstone, then perhaps it would make Lydia easier to find somehow.

“Is Alba—I beg your pardon, *Mr. Nodier*—feeling a little calmer?”

“Mr. Slade made his appearance at just the right time for me to

pass Mr. Nodier into his care. I did warn him that the gentleman might claim to be the Prince from time to time but to pay it no mind."

Alba had seemed awfully vacant, like an empty shell. Most likely his present personality was struggling to come to terms with the fact that he could no longer become the Prince.

"I see. I suppose all that is left is to hope that Scarlet Moon will be able to bring the Ark to a halt." Edgar looked over the sword before sheathing it inside his frock coat.

"I passed on the order to stop it at all costs. It seems that Miss Lotta is lending them her assistance."

"Lotta? Is she back in London?"

He supposed that Lotta would have had no reason to stay in Scotland after Lydia and Nico's departure. She had probably come back hoping to meet up with the fairy doctor here.

"She was talking about launching an attack on the Ark with her own ship. It was at the estate that I saw her, pestering Mr. Tompkins about supplying her with artillery."

"Artillery?"

"Mr. Tompkins asked me to seek your lordship's permission to purchase some, just in case."

Naturally, Edgar contributed to Scarlet Moon's funding. Although Tompkins had a certain level of control over the estate's finances to allow him to make purchases in service of the earldom's upkeep, Edgar couldn't blame him for balking at the thought of buying artillery.

"Raven, the Ark is loaded with gunpowder and a great number of hostages. I wonder whether Lotta is aware that hurling cannonballs at it isn't a particularly good idea?"

"I should like to think that she is."

Lotta was an expert in the subject of ships. She likely knew where the Ark's weak point was and how to use it to bring the vessel to a stop. Perhaps it would be possible to do so with cannons and avoid damaging the bow, where the gunpowder was held, in the process.

"In that case, please tell her this: She can have artillery, cannonballs, and whatever else her heart desires. Oh, and do pass on that such lumps of metal suit her far more than even the finest gems."

"*Must* I add that last bit?"

"Of course."

Raven's eyebrow twitched slightly. Perhaps he was foreseeing the pummeling he would receive at Lotta's hands. Nevertheless, he nodded without complaint, then turned his gaze to the Tower of London.

"Do you see the goddess's crow?" Edgar asked.

"I cannot see it, but I sense its presence. I cannot, however, sense any movement from it."

"I wonder if that means that the Nightmare and the Unseelie Court are quietening down somewhat."

"They've stopped. Probably 'cause they cannae sense the Prince's intent no more." Kelpie was sitting on the bridge's balustrade. "But some of 'em already started climbin' the bridge, and it's no gonna hold for long unless we get rid of 'em all."

Edgar was at a loss as to how to do so. Given that Kelpie had said there were too many for even him to handle, it would likely require some extraordinary measures. It sounded as though the bridge's collapse was only a matter of time, whether or not Lotta managed to halt the Ark. Therefore, it was imperative that they extracted Lydia from inside it. But doing so would rid the structure of its sacrifice, meaning it would also go on to lose the spiritual power that allowed it to defend London. The city would fall to ruin, just as the Prince intended.

Naturally, Edgar had no intention of siding with his enemy's organization. He very much felt that he needed to remain the Blue Knight Earl. But that didn't mean he could sacrifice Lydia.

"Did you manage to find a way inside, Kelpie?"

The water horse had gone in search of an entrance into that holy space. He had been careful to avoid alerting the Nightmare as he had done so.

"Aye. Och, and I forgot to tell ye, but only those from the Blue Knight Earldom can enter."

Edgar turned his attention to his nervous-looking servant and gave a reassuring nod.

"What're ye plannin', Earl?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"I wanna know the details afore I let ye in."

Kelpie sounded as solemn as he ever had, and Edgar knew

exactly why. The water horse had been unable to enter the hall at the Prince's hideout, but he had seen everything that took place. He knew that the earl wasn't quite the person he had been before and that he was in a worse position than ever to be entrusted with Lydia's safety. However, when Edgar left had the hall and the Prince's followers behind, the fairy had said only this:

"Don't ye dare betray Lydia."

What betraying her comprised exactly, Edgar wasn't sure, and he had been continuing to ponder the matter. Did it mean allowing her to sacrifice herself as Gladys had? Or did it mean rescuing her and leaving London to its imminent destruction?

"Should I give an answer that you disapprove of, will you withhold the entrance's location from me?" Edgar asked.

Up to that point, Kelpie had been glaring at him, but presently he dropped his gaze as if exhausted. "Nah. Ye'll cheat the information outta me even if I try."

He must not have felt he had a choice. The holy ground beyond belonged to the Blue Knight Earl, making Edgar the only human capable of reaching Lydia.

"I dunno what Lydia really wants. She worries a lot more since meetin' ye. She's become more human. I thought she'd go back to normal if ye two were apart. But it didnae happen."

Though he kept his face downcast, he sounded resentful. He spoke like he found the ordeal unpleasant, but upon hearing his words, Edgar was overcome with a tender affection for his fiancée. Her memories might have been erased by magic, but her heart remained firmly with him. Her soul remained unchanged from when she had promised to marry him and not leave him alone.

He wanted to be the man with whom Lydia wished to reunite. He wanted to be his *true* self for her, someone separate from the Prince, even if that meant losing his title.

"I shall protect Lydia come what may."

His resolve was clear. There was no need for further thought. Protecting her was more important to him than anything else. More important than Edgar himself, London, or the entirety of Great Britain. Perhaps he was misguided for feeling this way. Perhaps spurning the title of Blue Knight Earl would mean becoming overwhelmed by the curse embedded within the Prince's memories. If so, then Gladys was welcome to take his life.

Allowing her to do so would surely assist the earldom in fulfilling its dearest wish.

Edgar brought his hand to his sword. The light of the star sapphire was icy against his palm.

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"Water. This side is flooding too, Nico."

Lydia and Nico had wandered the labyrinthine passageways for some time. Since this place rested on a boundary between worlds, its flow of time likely differed from that of the mortal realm. As they walked, Lydia had occasionally caught glimpses of the outside world through gaps in the stone. The sun had already risen and was now setting again. Meanwhile, it felt to her as though they had only come here a few hours ago. That said, they had been walking for all that time, and presently she slumped down against the wall, exhausted.

"Every path leads downward. I don't suppose trying to follow them in the opposite direction will be of much help either." Nico joined her, looking just as tired as she felt. He sighed. "And I'm absolutely ravenous."

Lydia rummaged through the pouch she had sewn inside her coat. In addition to her travel money to London, she'd had just enough room for a few cookies.

"Would you like these?" she asked, offering them to Nico.

Lydia shouldn't feel hungry for as long as they remained in the fairy world. She knew that if she did, it would be a figment of her imagination. She could survive here without eating. In fact, if she *were* to eat fairy food, she would be unable to return to the human world. The cookies were to thank any fairies who might assist them on their journey rather than provisions for her. But there wasn't another soul to be seen here, neither human nor fairy.

"Is this all you have?" Nico complained, biting into one. "I'd love to have some steaming hot tea. Or some scones, fresh out of the oven, with honey and jam. Or roast beef dripping with juices, buttery mashed potatoes, kidney pie, and pickled salmon…"

"Fairies don't eat such things. There is nothing they appreciate more than herby cookies."

"They are crude and unrefined creatures, and I fear that will

never change," the fairy cat grumbled on. If anything, he was the odd one out for having such a strong liking for human food.

"Look, the water seems to have receded."

"I suppose it must be low tide."

"These steps lead down into a tunnel."

"And you want to *follow* it?"

"We have yet to see what's down there."

"There won't be anything worth seeing. It's too late for us to do anything but wait for death," Nico muttered wearily, his ears drooping.

Her companion's pessimism brought Lydia's doubt about Edgar's deception to the forefront of her mind. As his fairy doctor, it ought to be her duty to assist him in his fight against the Prince. More importantly, she had set off for London to fulfill their promise to reunite. She wanted to meet him and regain her memories. What had she felt that had led her to accept his proposal? It was that question more than any other that had pushed her to leave her home. But what if that had been precisely what Edgar had wanted?

Lydia forced herself to her feet. "I have no intention of dying."

No matter what happened, she could not die before she saw him again. And if it had truly been his intention to deceive her, she needed to give him the slap he deserved. Seeing Edgar was enough motivation for her to want to focus on finding a way out. The water that had once blocked their path was now receding before their very eyes. Lydia entered the newly visible tunnel that swallowed up the stone steps. Though he dragged his feet, Nico eventually joined her.

The stairs continued downward. The stone wall was crumbling, and Lydia caught sight of a fist-sized hole in it. Coming to a halt, she made to peer through it.

"Look out!"

Something clawlike came hurtling toward them at the same time Nico cried out. It pierced the stone wall and shattered it. Fortunately, Lydia had jumped back and avoided having her eyes gouged out, but there was no time to relax. A group of blackish, small, and ugly fairies were sneering through the crack in the wall. They were very clearly members of the Unseelie Court. Their mouths seemed to split their faces in two, revealing rows of

sawlike teeth. They bustled around the hole, tearing away at the stone with claws and teeth in an attempt to infiltrate the structure. As they did so, the entire bridge felt like it was swaying. Pebbles sprinkled down from the walls and ceiling.

"Lydia! They're trying to destroy this place!"

Lydia and Nico fled farther down the tunnel. The passage collapsed behind them, and now stone completely blocked their way back.

"I thought this was holy ground that even the Nightmare couldn't penetrate," the fairy doctor said.

"You saw how many of them there were, didn't you? We saw them before we entered the bridge too. The river downstream was crawling with them. And now they've made it here!"

This sacred ground, the barrier protecting London from evil, must have been shrinking little by little.

"Do you mean to say that London Bridge is about to collapse at any moment?" Lydia asked.

"It's likely just a matter of time at this point. I have no idea how much more we can expect the barrier to take." Nico's ears drooped again and he hung his head. "I just wish I could have had one more delectable meal before my death."

"We must make haste. We need to find the sacrificial maiden's arrow."

"Even if we do, we'll just become sacrifices ourselves."

"I've never heard of a cat being sacrificed."

"That doesn't mean I won't be the first."

Nico must have felt hopeless if he wasn't even losing his temper over being called a cat. That said, Lydia thought he was probably right to be pessimistic. She could sense the space around them steadily being corroded by the Unseelie Court's magic. Though she was doing her best to act courageously, all she really wanted to do was curl up and cry.

Just then, their surroundings shook once more. Accompanying the vibrations was the sound of something crumbling, followed by a sudden noise of rushing water.

She blinked. "What's happening?"

"Lydia! Look!"

A single glance at the surge of water filling up the narrow passageway was enough for her to set off at a mad dash. The path

before them, however, angled downward. The rush of water was only increasing in speed as it approached. It must have been the high tide breaking through whatever had held it back higher up in the labyrinth. Now it was coming at them all at once. It would be impossible to outrun.

"This way, Lydia!"

She looked back up the path. Edgar was leaning out from the entrance to a tunnel.

I don't believe it...

"Edgar?!"

Was she hallucinating? Or was it a trap? Either way, she rushed back toward him, desperately reaching out for the hand he offered her. She caught it. The sight of the water rushing onward behind them made her squeeze her eyes shut. As he pulled her up, the current roared at her feet, tearing away and carrying with it clumps of stone. Only when she felt the dry surface beneath her rear did she open her eyes. She was met by an ash-mauve gaze at close quarters.

"Thank goodness I made it."

That sweet, tender tone was undoubtedly Edgar's.

"I'm soaking wet!" Nico had been pulled up by clinging to Lydia's leg, and it seemed he had borne the brunt of the water. He shook himself, scattering droplets everywhere.

The fairy doctor was still staring at the man in front of her, struggling to believe he was real.

"I missed you, Lydia." He took her into his arms as though it were the natural thing to do. "You have nothing to worry about anymore now that I'm here. We shall be able to leave in a heartbeat."

"Oh yes, because I'm sure *you* have command over this supernatural space."

Edgar ignored Nico's bitter remark and started stroking Lydia's hair. His long fingers slipped deep between the strands. The tender, affectionate touch made the depths of her heart glow and her vision blur. Warm teardrops drew tracks down her cheeks.

Why am I crying?

She had resolved to strike him, and yet she couldn't even bring herself to raise her hand. Her mind, in its vast uncertainty, was warning her that this was no time to be crying and letting her

guard down, but the tears seemed to be stemming from another part of her altogether.

“What are you doing here?” she managed through her confusion.

“I came to rescue you.”

“Liar…”

“Why else would I have come?”

“You’re here to force me to become a sacrifice.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“I’m begging you, Edgar, please don’t lie to me.”

“I am being truthful.”

“You are behaving as you did then. Showering me with kindness only to lead me into a trap.”

“Do you mean to say that you believe you are here as a result of my deception and manipulation?”

She nodded, and naturally he looked rather put out.

“I think I understand how little trust you used to have in me.” Seeming deeply shocked, he ran an anxious hand through his blond hair. “Yes, I suppose your first impression of me was rather abysmal. However, after that I endeavored to become a sincere man in whom you could place your trust.”

“You did?”

“A likely story,” Nico muttered.

“Please don’t cry anymore, Lydia. I apologize if I frightened you to such an extent that it caused you this much distress. I came here to protect you, and I truly mean that.”

Lydia rubbed her eyes in an attempt to stem her tears, but it was to little avail.

“My word isn’t enough to convince you, is it?” he asked quietly.

“I don’t… I don’t think that’s true.”

Why would he be here if he meant to deceive her? Besides, he seemed genuinely concerned about her and genuinely happy to have reunited with her. That was why she wasn’t sure herself of the reason behind her tears. Not wanting him to see her like this, she turned her face away, only for him to tilt it upward again and wipe away her teardrops with his fingers. The sight of his passionate gaze, golden eyelashes, and captivating features had her crying all over again. His presence was so striking, and she could only conclude that her tears were falling because he was

with her.

“It’s because I… I feared we would never see each other again.”

It all clicked into place then. Why she had promised herself she wouldn’t die before reuniting with him. Before striking him like he deserved. Her determination had mainly been borne of a desire to prove that her paranoia surrounding Edgar was unfounded, but within that was a tender wish just to be in his presence again. But then she began to doubt that the feeling was mutual. What if his claim that they were engaged had simply been part of a plot to manipulate her? What a fool it would make her if that were the case, given that it had driven her to leave her hometown in hopes of helping him.

It might have been Edgar’s plan that she sacrifice herself here. The thought wouldn’t leave her head, and now she feared that she would have been better off not reuniting with him after all. What scared her more than anything else was the possibility that he’d never had any intention of seeing her again. It was terrifying to think that the man she had so wanted to meet again didn’t share the same sentiment.

“It’s all right. We’re together now.” He planted a kiss on her forehead and took her into another gentle embrace.

Edgar was with her. His promise to see her again hadn’t been a lie. It was finally dawning on her that he *wasn’t* an illusion, and that was when she suddenly felt bashful. She felt ashamed to have cried and to have said something so mawkish.

“I’m sorry, Edgar,” she stammered. “I’m not quite myself at the moment. I think everything just feels a little confusing.”

“It’s all right. I cannot blame you, given how long you have spent here. But do you at least trust that my desire to see you again was heartfelt?” He brought his face so close to hers that their foreheads were almost touching, which only served to fluster Lydia further.

“Um… Yes, I do…”

Her confusion abated, only to be replaced by an awkwardness at how Edgar was unashamedly treating her like a lover. She tried to pull away from him gently, and he must have picked up on her hesitation. He let his arms fall away slowly, perhaps recalling that Kelpie’s magic meant she had forgotten all sorts of things.

Edgar had kept his promise to see her again, and yet she had

failed to remember anything. Without saying anything on the subject, he quietly rose to his feet. The melancholy in the action made her heart ache. Was it her doubt that had hurt him? Was it proof that their bond had never been powerful enough to overcome fairy magic?

"I think my memories might come back to me," Lydia began hesitantly. "I just need to compose myself a little more."

"You needn't force yourself." Edgar hesitated, then offered her his hand to help her to her feet. "What matters most at the moment is that you leave this place."

"Do you know where the exit is?"

He nodded and showed her his wrist. Wrapped around it was a black thread that led off into the depths of the passageway. Presumably, its other end was tied near the exit. Edgar undid it and tied it around Lydia's wrist instead.

"You are coming with me, aren't you?" she asked anxiously. His actions weren't filling her with confidence.

"Without a new sacrifice, the bridge will collapse and the Unseelie Court will swarm into London."

"Do you mean to say that *you* intend to be that sacrifice?" Without thinking, Lydia grabbed the hand that was pulling away from her.

"This barrier is Lady Gladys's resting place. I hear that she sacrificed herself to protect London. I have inherited the Blue Knight Earldom. I wish to do what I can."

"But maybe a sacrifice isn't required. There was a fairy who told me to seek an arrow. So I can't..." She trailed off. If she let go, they would be apart again. Afraid, she tightened her grip on him.

"In that case, I shall search for the arrow. There's no telling when this place will collapse. It isn't just the wicked spirits attacking it; there is a plot to drive a vessel loaded with gunpowder into the bridge. Lotta is working to put a stop to it, but there is no guarantee she will succeed. You need to get out of here as soon as possible."

This wasn't something she could allow Edgar to do by himself.

"The fairy led *me* here. This might be something that requires a fairy doctor's knowledge. Let us go together," she pressed him.

He gently squeezed her hand back, his brows knitting sorrowfully. He paused for a moment before speaking in a firm

tone. “I have relied on you far too many times without giving anything in return. Being totally ignorant of fairies, I could not have come this far without you. But why should being my fairy doctor mean you must risk your life for me? Your duty to me shouldn’t extend that far.”

Duty? Suddenly, he was speaking as though she were his employee and nothing more. She couldn’t understand what had brought about this change in behavior.

“I’m your fiancée…aren’t I?”

She wasn’t *just* his fairy doctor. She might still have been without her memories, but reuniting with him had instilled within her a vague confidence that he had been telling the truth about their engagement.

“No, Lydia.” Contrary to her expectations, Edgar averted his gaze. “That was a falsehood.”

“A falsehood?”

“I lied about us being engaged. That is why you cannot remember. We can try all we like, but there exists between us no bond capable of overcoming Kelpie’s magic.”

Lydia remained rooted to the spot, struggling to comprehend his words. “Then why did you claim otherwise?”

“My feelings for you have always been unrequited. Despite how much I tried to seduce you, it was never enough for you to fall in love with me.” He paused. “That is how it has been since the very beginning.”

Though she had no evidence for it, she was sure he must have been lying. But why, after everything?

“It might be the case that you have feelings for another man.”

“Which other man?”

“If I knew, he would presently be lying in a hospital bed,” he said, endeavoring to add some humor to the situation before letting out a resigned sigh. “I hope it is clear to you now the kind of man that I am, Lydia. I am sure you would only regret it were you to come with me and regain your memories. Leave this place. Kelpie is waiting for you outside. He assisted me in entering the bridge because he is concerned about you.”

Lydia kept her hand clenched tightly around his. He gently brought it up to his lips and kissed it. “This is the first time you’ve held my hand so firmly.”

Feeling teased, she loosened her grip instinctively. Edgar took the opportunity to get away from her. He turned his back to her and made to drop down into the tunnel she had come from. The torrents of water had passed.

He was lying to her. She had to remember the truth. As urgent as it all felt, her mind was still caught up in a whirlwind of confusion. She tottered after him, only for the string around her wrist to grow taut. And then she felt it yank on her arm. That was when she realized it was a hair from Kelpie's mane. He must have sensed that it was attached to her now, and he was trying to pull her back to him.

"Edgar's lying to me," Lydia murmured to herself as she fought against the tugging hair. The man who had promised her that they would reunite, hoping all the while that she would remember him, would never have uttered such an absurd lie. So why was he going off alone again? Why was he leaving her with Kelpie again?

Again?

Lydia gazed at Edgar jumping down into the tunnel as Kelpie slowly drew her back. All the while, she tried desperately to catch hold of that thin flicker of a memory. This had happened before. Edgar had sent her away to try to keep her from danger.

"You are my one hope for the future! No matter what may come to pass, I do not want to lose you!"

Those had been his words as he had allowed Kelpie to take her away. And she had cried something back to him. Something of vital importance. But what? She tried desperately to remember as she fought against the string's firm pull. There had been something she had wanted to convey to Edgar then, no matter what. Something far too important to forget. Perhaps those were the words that formed the spell to undo Kelpie's magic. The realization was like the first tiny crack in a hard shell. The thread around her wrist loosened and fell away.

"Careful, Lydia! There'll be no escape if you let go!" Nico cried. In a panic, he pounced at and caught the hair of mane, which was still retreating.

However, Lydia rushed in the opposite direction to follow the tunnel Edgar had disappeared into.

Never had she encountered such a precious spell, a precious promise. Those words had possessed a purpose: to affirm the

bond between them.

“Edgar! I shall marry you! I will!” Lydia was shouting them before she was even conscious of having remembered anything.

The earl stopped in his tracks and looked up, only to see her attempting to jump down from the passageway above. He hurriedly flung his arms wide. “Lydia, wait a—”

She jumped right into them before he could finish his warning. As he caught her safely, she felt the spell cast on her crumble into tiny specks of sand and scatter away. It made sense now why thoughts of Edgar tore her heart apart and drove her to the brink of tears. She had always struggled to believe that he truly cherished her, that he truly wanted her and not anyone else, and the fear of getting hurt had kept her cowed. But when her own feelings had become too strong to ignore, she had decided to place her faith in him. With him, her anxieties vanished. They were calmed not by his words but by the very palpable affection he held for her.

“You’re a wretched liar.”

He held her tightly. He was indeed a liar, and she could place no confidence in his words. But there was nothing dishonest about his silent embrace. Meanwhile, she felt herself enveloped by a warm light.

“The moonstone,” Edgar murmured as he lifted her hand.

Her ring was illuminated with a light as gentle as silk. It cascaded over her hand, filling the air with its milky white glow.

“What’s happening?”

“Lydia, close your eyes.”

At the very moment Edgar spoke, the light evolved into a searing flash that drowned Lydia’s vision in pure white.

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“Where’s Lydia?” Kelpie’s face twisted into a vicious frown as he stared at the cat his mane had fished out through a gap in the stone.

“Phew! I thought I would be trapped in there forever!”

“*Where’s Lydia*, ye wee hairball?! I didnae throw my mane in there for *you*.”

Kelpie’s scowl made Nico drop the hair in a panic and hide

behind Raven's legs.

"She let go! But it's not *my* fault!" he declared, sticking out a defiant tongue.

"Ye're *always* gettin' in my way! Oi, raven wean, be a pal and toss that cat over here." When the boy remained silent, Kelpie took another step forward. "Listen here. Yer precious earl's now stuck in there 'cause of that alley cat!"

Raven looked down at his feet to study Nico, who panicked.

"Hold on just one second! We're friends, aren't we, you and I? You'll protect me from this savage beast, won't you?"

"Friends?"

"Yes, we get on well. Besides, my absence benefits the earl! He'll be able to make up with Lydia without me making things uncomfortable!"

"Aye, ah'm sure they'll be the best of pals together in death!" Kelpie shouted.

Nico recoiled even further. "But there might be a way to save the bridge without anyone needing to die!"

"Is that true, Mr. Nico?" Raven asked.

"Well…I don't know the specifics, but I don't suppose there's anything to lose by praying. It's all the lot of us can do at this point anyway."

"We are friends?"

"Hmm? Oh, that's what you meant. Yes, yes, we're friends."

Raven turned his attention back to Kelpie. "Please do not harm Mr. Nico."

"Ugh! Look, I don't even care no more!" The irritated fairy transformed into a horse and turned his back to the pair.

"Where are you going?" Raven asked.

"All that's left is to wait and see what happens. Might as well get rid of some of the scum in the meanwhile. Not that it'll make a difference." Regardless, it seemed that waiting around would only serve to agitate Kelpie.

"Wait a moment. Look at that." Raven pointed downstream.

The Thames had many twists and turns, and the cluster of docks that lined it went on for miles. It was impossible to see very far down it. However, the signal from the members of Scarlet Moon tasked with monitoring the Ark was clearly visible even from London Bridge: fireworks, illuminating the night sky.

“The Ark has reached the Isle of Dogs,” Raven declared.

When the signal went out, Lotta’s vessel unfurled all of its sails to let them catch the wind. The seamen were skilled enough to direct the ship by angling those sails with precision, no matter the wind direction. Lotta had hired them as soon as she had arrived in London. The majority of them were former convicts with a history of working on pirate or smuggling ships. The older gentleman she had met on her first day entering the Thames had introduced them to her, and she couldn’t have asked for a finer crew. Naturally, she was keeping it a secret from her grandfather that she had replaced his men.

Lotta’s ship had been waiting in one of the Isle of Dogs’s many canals. Upon confirming that the Ark had passed by the wharf-laden peninsula, she immediately gave the order to have her vessel join the Thames.

“Captain, we’re set to catch up with the target’s stern in ten minutes odd.”

Lotta knew that even the finest crew in the world was useless without a competent captain. That was why she had decided to take command of the vessel—something else she had chosen not to share with her grandfather. The Grand Duke of Cremona had likely only intended for the privileged young lady to use this ship as a pleasure boat. Never would he have imagined that she would become its captain, let alone load it with artillery. That said, an ordinary girl would probably have selected a stylish yacht. The Grand Duke might well have decided not to put too much more thought into the subject from the moment Lotta started begging him for a frigate that was otherwise bound for the scrapheap.

“Start by gettin’ as close as possible without being seen,” she commanded.

Paul stood by her side, observing her direction with curious eyes. “I am still incredibly relieved that we managed to make all our preparations in time.”

There were several members of Scarlet Moon on board. They were there to assist in the battle against the Ark and, as someone who had been held captive on the vessel, Paul was assumed to be the most familiar with its internal layout.

“You’re talking about the cannons, right?”

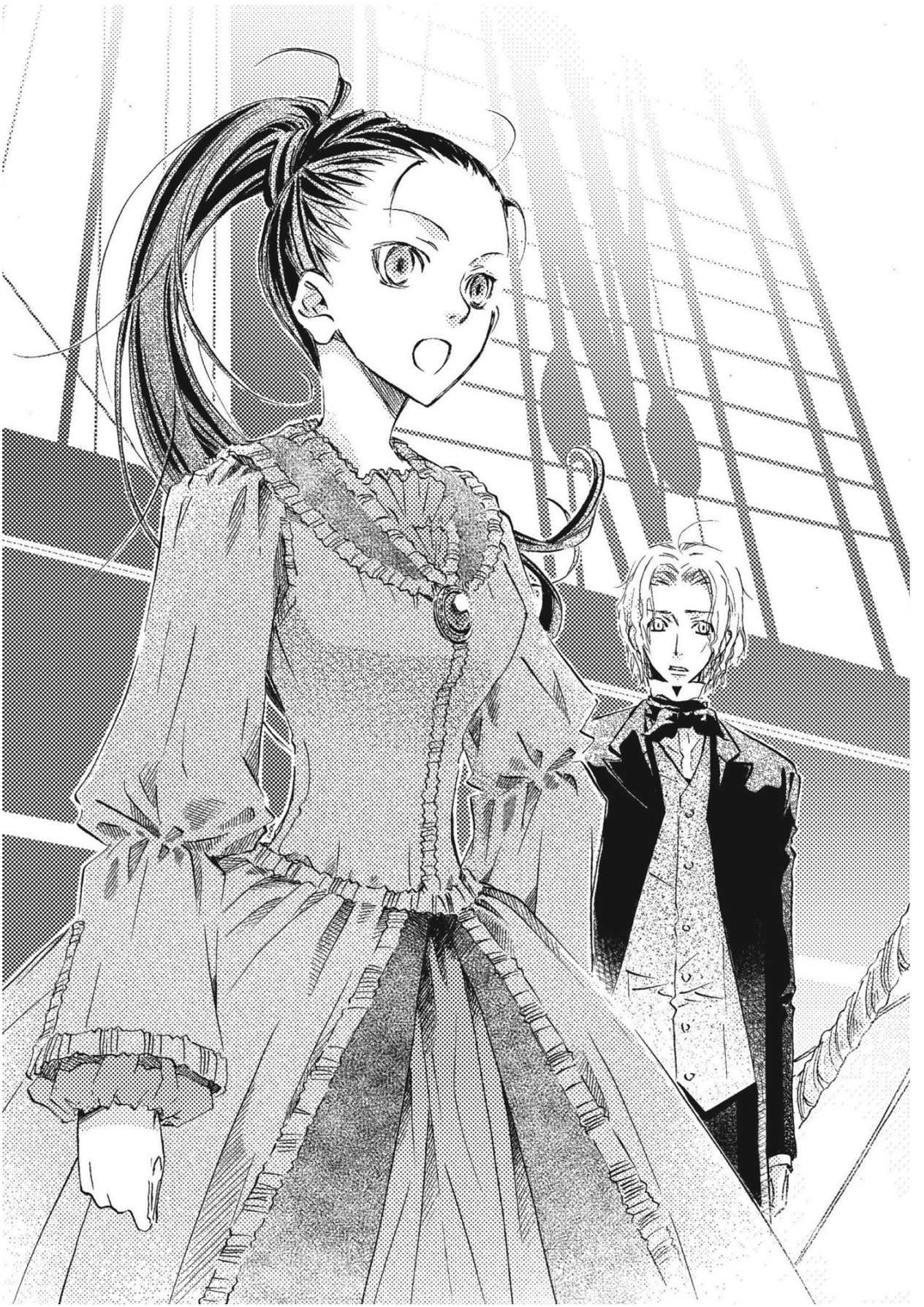
“It hasn’t even been an hour since his lordship gave permission

to purchase them."

"I'd already had them mounted. Decided to worry about the payment later. Not that I thought Edgar would refuse."

"You didn't think… Really?!"

For as gentle an impression as he gave, Paul immediately grew flustered whenever Lotta mentioned Edgar. She had no idea why. How was she to know that he thought her to be the earl's mistress?



“He’s generous,” she said. “That’s about the only good thing I can say about him.”

“Is that what you like about him, then?”

She wouldn’t go that far, but it would certainly be much more difficult working with a man with tight purse strings. She had never begrudged teaming up with Edgar. His plans were tight and efficient, and he was never one to spare expense in their execution. He didn’t take more than his fair share of the spoils either.

“I would’ve cut ties with him ages ago if he was stingy,” Lotta replied. When Paul looked concerned, she continued. “It’s not like these cannons cost *that* much. They’re actually pretty cheap if you compare them to whatever jewelry he hands out to random women.”

She had to sympathize with Lydia having feelings for such a troublesome man. She wasn’t sure whether Edgar’s wandering eyes were something that could be fixed, but he would have to rein them in at the very least if he wanted to keep the fairy doctor around. His surplus desire for female company could then be spent on her instead. While this was sure to draw jealousy from other women, Lydia shouldn’t have a problem as long as she didn’t mind Edgar refraining from making his advances in public.

“Are they *really* going to marry?” Lotta murmured to herself. Was that really what Lydia wanted? She would like to ask again once her friend had her memories back. “Time to ready the cannons,” she said, rousing herself. She shot Paul a smile. “Lend us a hand, would you?”

Lotta’s request made him snap out of his apparent reverie with a start. “Miss Lotta, I am certain that you will one day encounter a gentleman who gifts you with the jewelry you deserve rather than cannons.”

Despite his earnest expression, Lotta was sure it was one of those dark jokes typical of the British. “Maybe if I put a rifle to his head, he’ll give me a whole *box* of accessories.”

Unfortunately, he didn’t seem to find *her* joke amusing, so she was left to laugh it off by herself.

Eventually, Paul let out a chuckle. “It’s good to see you smiling. You’re much more endearing that way.”

“Me? Endearing?” Lotta laughed. “You’re nuts.” Regardless, she

decided that he had only meant to relieve some of the tension in the air before the imminent conflict.

"Captain! The Ark is in sight!"

Lotta snapped her focus back to the situation at hand. "Maintain our distance for the time being. The river's too windy here. We'll approach at speed once we're past that bend!"

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Lydia hadn't been able to close her eyes fast enough. The moonstone's abundant light had dazzled her, and for a while, she wasn't able to see anything.

Has it stopped?

Edgar was still holding her and, feeling him slowly raise his head, she did the same. However, she couldn't even see his face properly.

"What happened, Edgar? Do you see anything?"

"Your golden-green eyes."

"That isn't what I meant," she stammered.

"Your lovely nose and your delectable lips too."

"For goodness' sake, Edgar!" When she tried to pull away, she tripped on the stones at their feet, and he ended up catching her again.

"Do be careful," he said, pulling her in closer. He was no longer teasing her, and his heavy sigh against her ear made her lower her guard.

"What's the matter?"

"You remembered, Lydia." However, he didn't sound entirely delighted.

"Would you rather I hadn't?"

Edgar released his grip on her to study her carefully. Her eyes had finally grown used to the darkness, and as she regarded his expression, it struck her that it was one of intense pain.

"Can you see me?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Tell me something, Lydia. Am I really the man you are willing to take as your husband?"

She wasn't entirely sure what he was asking. There was no question that the man before her was Edgar. Did his question

mean he was having second thoughts about marrying her? Had his feelings toward her changed? When they had met in Scotland, he had yearned for her to remember their engagement from the bottom of his heart. Was that not the case anymore?

"Have you changed your mind? Perhaps you've realized that you're more in love with another woman…" As frightened as she was, Lydia couldn't help but voice her fears.

"It isn't that."

"When you said you lied about us being engaged, was that because you wish we weren't? A fine fix I've put myself in by remembering and coming after you, then!"

"You misunderstand, Lydia."

"Didn't I ask you not to lie to me, Edgar? I would rather you be upfront. If you wish to cancel our engagement, then make it plain to me. Even if it means you admit that you have come to despise me…"

She tried to step away from him, but he pulled her in firmly, cupping her cheeks with his large palms.

"I love you," he said, without an ounce of hesitation in his tone. "My feelings will never change, not even if *you* were to come to loathe or resent me."

"Why would I resent you?"

"I ask that you don't doubt my feelings, no matter what should come to pass."

"Did something happen?"

She couldn't understand why he was saying these things. He was so earnest that she felt foolish for guessing that his heart had turned to another. But if that wasn't the case, then she only felt more anxious about what the alternative might be.

"I shan't lie to you. Instead, I ask that you be patient until the time comes that I am able to explain," Edgar said, his voice strained. He didn't seem willing to elaborate.

"All right. I shall be patient." The last thing Lydia wanted was to put him in a difficult position. She felt just as relieved as he looked when his expression relaxed.

Staring up into his ash-mauve eyes at such close proximity, Lydia suddenly wondered why he was clinging to her so tightly and why he hadn't yet let go. And then the realization that he had never held her quite like this before became lodged in her mind.

“This isn’t where we were standing before, is it, Edgar?” she remarked in an attempt to distract herself from her embarrassment, casting her eyes over the area.

“Indeed. I noticed that we seemed to have moved once the moonstone’s light died down.”

Lydia’s recollection of their engagement must have activated the stone’s magic. “I wonder if it wanted to lead us here.”

They had gone from the twisting, narrow passageway to a space that was much more open. They seemed to be standing at the base of a tall cylinder. There was no ceiling above them, only the night sky. It was freeing to be away from the cramped caverns, and Lydia found herself aglow with hope at the thought that the moonstone might have rescued them.

“I am certain that we are close to the arrow’s hiding place,” she said. “We oughtn’t waste any time in finding it. Once we do, we may learn what we are meant to do with it.”

“I wonder. I don’t see anything.”

There was nothing between them and the curved walls positioned some distance away. Nor were there any clues on the flat stone floor beneath. Edgar stepped away from Lydia and walked over to the center of the space. After investigating the stone for some time, he turned back to her and shook his head.

Suddenly, a ray of light came shooting into the cylinder from above. Lydia looked up to see the full moon shining from between the clouds. A figure rose up from the pool of light on the stone floor.

“Edgar, look!”

The pair of them approached it together. The figure was lying on the floor with her hands clasped together over her chest like a corpse in a coffin. It was a young woman clad in a blue dress, her golden hair sparkling in the moonlight.

“Is this Lady Gladys?” Edgar murmured.

She did indeed bear a resemblance to the portrait that Lydia had seen before. Had this been her form when she had sacrificed herself? And yet she looked so youthful, as though life could be breathed back into her rather than having been dead for a hundred years.

Edgar showed no scruples about touching her. “She is as hard and cold as stone.”

“I suppose because she is dead.”

“Is this what becomes of corpses in the fairy world?”

“No, the corpses themselves vanish. This is more likely to be an afterimage of Lady Gladys’s magic.”

“Then this is the core of the barrier protecting London?”

If that was what her body represented, then Lydia had to wonder where the arrow was. Edgar must have been thinking along the same lines. He tried to move the body, checking whether she was holding anything, but not one of her silky hairs nor a single crease on her clothing shifted. It was truly as though she were a statue carved of stone.

“Say, is she wearing a tiara?” Lydia paused. “Ah, perhaps not…”

Something was sparkling around Gladys’s forehead, and the fairy doctor initially thought it was an ornamental headpiece. On closer inspection, however, the silver radial light was shining from *inside* the countess’s head.

“It’s that fairy!”

He had emitted the same light when he had first appeared before Lydia. It was the form he had taken when descending from the night sky.

“The fairy who trapped you inside the bridge?”

“That’s right. I did wonder what had happened to him after the Nightmare attacked. He seems weaker, but at least he is alive.”

Then, Edgar asked something completely unexpected.

“Lydia, could this be the Star of the Merrow?”

The Star of the Merrow: In other words, the star sapphire that adorned the creatures’ sword. However, it seemed that Edgar was not referring to the jewel itself but the silver star that sat in its center. The pattern in Gladys’s forehead did indeed resemble the shape of reflected light that one saw in so-called star sapphires.

“But your sword already has a star sapphire in it,” Lydia pointed out.

Edgar nodded, producing the weapon from where it sat on his hip. The large sapphire that was embedded in it was marked with a cross-shaped star. “The merrows carved this ‘star’ into the jewel when they bequeathed the sword to me. What was it they said? A legitimate descendant to the earldom would be accepted as such by the merrows only if his body was marked with a star. They would then transfer that star to the sword and return it to him.”

He recalled correctly. However, no legitimate claimant to the earldom had attempted to retrieve the sword before him. The sapphire had remained starless for all the time the merrows had been safeguarding the sword.

"If I understand you correctly, you're suggesting that Lady Gladys died with the star still marking her body because she never went to retrieve the sword from the merrows before her death?" Lydia asked.

"Precisely. This is the earldom's star that was meant to be contained within the sapphire."

The silver fairy had lived on in this place ever since Gladys's death. He had lent his powers to the protection of London Bridge but had sought out Lydia's assistance once its erosion by the Unseelie Court began. What she still couldn't understand was why he had chosen her and not Edgar. If the fairy was the sword's star, then surely he would have sought help from its owner? Unless the sword wasn't what he needed…

When Lydia unconsciously lifted her left hand to her chin in thought, the stone in her ring caught the moonlight. The next thing she knew, it was glowing with a brilliant luster. The light went on to wash over Gladys before the star in her forehead flashed silver. It filled the entire space in an instant before starting to fade, revealing that the countess had vanished. In her place stood the silver fairy. He wore the same thin, robe-like garment, looking as though he had stepped directly out of Ancient Greece. His eyes locked themselves on to the sword in Edgar's grip, at which point his expression turned into a glare.

"Why do you possess that sword? You do not share the blood of my master."

"Please allow us to explain," Lydia interjected quickly, but Edgar assumed a fighting stance and put out a hand to stop her.

The fairy had raised a slow, purposeful hand and put it on the sword without their noticing. "He even possesses the key to Ibrazel…"

"The earl's natural bloodline has ended. I am the new Blue Knight Earl."

The fairy looked even more sterner than before. It was as though he suspected Edgar of lying. Still facing the earl, he drew a sword of his own and tightened his grip on it. "The new earl, you

say? How dare you make such a claim when your blood smells so repugnant?”

The weapon in the fairy’s hand was a mirror image of the merrows’ sword. If he was the star, then the sword was in turn a part of him. It was safe to consider his blade to be exactly the same as Edgar’s. And now he was turning it on the earl.

“Please don’t!” Lydia cried. “He really *is* the earl! He is here to defend the bridge!”

The fairy struck without even hearing her objections through to the end. Edgar parried the attack with his own weapon, sending a piercing clash of metal through the cylindrical structure. The earl thrust the fairy away forcefully, only for his blade to fly up into the air. It stopped suddenly, hovering there under his silver foe’s control. The fairy made it spin in circles, a clear show that the sword was a part of him. The next second, he sent it flying at Edgar. Though the earl tried to evade, the blade skimmed and cut his shoulder before becoming lodged between two of the stone slabs that made up the floor.

The fairy cast his eyes on Edgar, whose wound had started oozing blood, and murmured, “You possess the blood of one who has formed a contract with the Unseelie Court.”

Lydia could not even begin to fathom what the fairy was referring to. Edgar didn’t respond beyond grimacing as he bore the pain.

“This only serves to prove what I already know: that I must ensure you never again see the light of day.”

Edgar’s sword lay too far away for him to retrieve, and there was nowhere he could run to. Lydia started to panic. Somehow, she needed to stop the fairy. It was her duty as Edgar’s fairy doctor. That responsibility had never felt more pressing, and now she racked her brains to think of what the fairy might want from her.

She could prove herself by finding the arrow. What she could gain, she surmised, was the right to know everything about Gladys’s sacrifice. The right to the fairy’s obedience. And if she had that, she could halt his attack. But where could the arrow be?

The moonstone on her finger twinkled as if desperately seeking the fraught fairy doctor’s attention.

Do you know, Bow? “Bow”…like a bow and arrow?

It struck her at once. “The sword’s star!”

He was the arrow. He had come to her because he had been drawn to the moonstone. Together, they made up two halves of a whole. In the night sky, the moon was accompanied by stars. And in this case, the moon—or moonstone—was the bow. The star was the arrow. When combined, they formed a weapon. And now she knew the fairy’s name.

“Don’t, Arrow! That’s who you are, isn’t it? You promised to lend your aid if I found you!” Lydia shouted. “So please don’t kill Edgar!”

The fairy was on the verge of dealing another strike to the earl from above. Lydia rushed out to stop him.

“Lydia, no!” Edgar cried, though he spread out his arms to catch her anyway. She fell into them as the blade made contact with her back.

A New Vow

The sound of cannons rang through the night sky above the Thames. There was no telling how many vagrants sleeping on the wharf were awoken by the racket, amid which came the dull thud of a ball striking one of the Ark's masts. Lotta was used to leading such midnight assaults, relying only on the moon for light. Her crew, too, worked flawlessly, with many of them having once shared her former profession themselves.

Its sails damaged, the Ark was beginning to slow. Lotta had her ship draw in even closer and fire two more consecutive shots. They were aimed at the sails to avoid damaging the Ark's hull. Firing artillery near the docks naturally risked a stray cannonball missing the target and hitting one of the stationary boats. Lotta decided to pay the possibility no mind. It was too dark to be sure of anything, and she was confident that Edgar would deal with any consequences afterward. That was as much a part of his gift as the cannons themselves.

"I can't see a single person on their ship," Lotta muttered.

Perhaps its crew were hiding. Not only had no one come out on deck in reaction to the assault, but it appeared that no one was disposed to repair the sagging mast either. There were no signs of a counterattack, and though the bombardment had the Ark lurching over to one side before righting itself with a splash, it was continuing on its path.

"It's like a ghost ship," Paul agreed quietly from beside her.

A shiver ran down Lotta's spine, something that was rather rare for her. Her companion was right: The Ark's silhouette against the moonlight and its tattered, fluttering sails made it look deeply unsettling. It was not least because, although slowed, it was still moving despite the damage done to it. Either way, it was no excuse to hesitate. The ship had to be stopped.

"Cease fire," Lotta ordered. "Sail alongside it and match its speed. Have we got anyone who can board it?"

Several of the crew snapped into action as an idle handful volunteered.

“Fell the mainmast. Drop its anchor and make it stop!”

Locating a dark spot on the Ark, the seamen stretched a rope across the gap and boarded the enemy ship, with members of Scarlet Moon among them. They met no opponents on the other vessel to resist their raid. Lotta had her own ship sail alongside the Ark as she waited for their return.

“Not a single crewmember to be seen, Captain!” came the first report back. “Looks like they abandoned ship ages ago. One of the boats is gone.”

“You’re kidding.”

The ship had been left without a crew? Lotta knew that the Ark was fated for self-destruction, but she would have expected the seamen to jump out just before reaching London Bridge. It seemed strange that they would have done so already. How could the vessel be moving without them? The Thames was not a straight line, and wind direction was impossible to predict. Under such circumstances, a sailing vessel normally required a handful of crewmates and a decent amount of effort to maneuver.

“You’re tellin’ me there’s not a single person on board?” Lotta asked.

“There’re hostages. They were locked up in this one room, and we reckon they were drugged. We’re thinking there are twenty, maybe thirty of ’em.”

If they were of the wealthy middle and upper classes however, it was unlikely that any of them knew how to handle a ship.

“What about the anchor? Can you lower it?”

“There *is* no anchor!”

“And the rudder won’t move,” another crewmate added.

Lotta clicked her tongue and kicked the gunwale. Her seamen were well on their way to felling the mast, but by now she suspected that the Ark would continue on its trajectory with or without it.

“Looks like we’re gonna hafta sink it,” she muttered to herself.

“What about the hostages?” Paul asked nervously.

The princess slapped him on the back in a manner that was meant to reassure him. “Don’t you worry. I’m not planning to abandon them.” She turned to her crew. “Oi! How long would it take to get the hostages on the boats and onto the river?”

“Too long. The Ark’ll hit the bridge by then!”

Just then, Lotta's ship swayed violently. She quickly grabbed the rope to stop herself ending up in the Thames and thrust out a hand to grab Paul, who had started falling. Though she managed to catch him, the vessel suddenly lurched in the opposite direction, smashing into their tumbling bodies. Their momentum was only stopped when they crashed into a mast.

"Are you all right, Captain?!"

"Uh, yeah…" As Lotta started to get to her feet, she realized that Paul was pinned beneath her. "Hey, Paul! Hang in there!"

He was unconscious and might have been concussed. Lotta helped him to sit up and supported him.

"What just happened?" she asked the sailor.

"I'm not sure. The Ark didn't shift, and we've been pulled away from it."

"Fairies," Paul murmured as he hung from Lotta's shoulder. It still seemed to be too much of an ordeal for him to focus his eyes on anything.

"What about fairies?" she prompted.

"There might be something in the water," he breathed, "pushing the Ark forward."

Maybe whatever it was had attacked Lotta's ship to stop it from interfering.

"Draw level with it again! Quickly!" she demanded.

As she gave the order, Paul's mind seemed to regain its sharpness, and he shuffled away from her with a cry.

"What? Scared of women?"

"No, I just—"

"Inexperienced. Huh."

Paul cleared his throat. "Don't tell his lordship about this, will you?"

"Why? Is he gonna make fun of you for not knowing how to deal with the opposite sex? That puts him in the wrong, not you."

Naturally, Lotta was unaware that Paul was more concerned about what would happen if Edgar found out he had been so physically close to the earl's potential lover.

"That's isn't—" he began.

"Captain, look!"

The young woman shot to her feet. She had yet to learn what Paul actually meant, but the urgency of the situation forced her to

forget about it in any case. Rushing over to the bow, she spotted a number of yellow lights dotting the river's surface. They were gas lamps. The dark shadow of London Bridge was looming ahead.

The Ark was still moving without its mainmast. Their one remaining option now was to attack the hull. The question was whether they had enough time. Even sparks caused by friction ran the risk of igniting the gunpowder and blowing the Ark up. And then there were the hostages to consider.

Lotta clenched her fists.

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When Lydia landed in his arms, Edgar sank to his knees. Her eyes had been squeezed shut, and she had been completely still since the sword struck her squarely in the back.

"Lydia…" He gently swept aside the caramel lock that had fallen onto her cheek. Then he held her so tightly that it disheveled her hair completely. He didn't know what else to do. "Why did you… Didn't *I* promise to protect *you*?!"

Though Edgar sensed the fairy's approach, he no longer possessed the will to fight. He had no reason to. He was as corrupted as the fairy said he was. He wasn't even sure if he should be permitted to live. The only reason he had *wanted* to was so that he could protect her, *do* something for her.

The fairy stuck the point of his sword on the center of Edgar's brow. As far as the earl was concerned, the creature could kill him. However, his title remained his pride, so he glared back resolutely at his opponent.

"This young woman worked for the earldom. She did not deserve this."

"For the earldom? Or for *you*? There is a stark difference. I cannot say which side she would have fallen on, but it seems that my sword has made the final judgment."

"And that was worth killing her?"

The fairy shook his head and slowly withdrew his blade from Edgar's forehead. "This sword has not harmed her."

With a start, Edgar put his hands on Lydia's back. Her dress was torn and her corset badly ripped, but all he felt was dry fabric. There wasn't even a drop of blood.

“She’s alive?” He touched her neck. There was a pulse. She *was* alive.

“She is merely unconscious as a result of the powerful magic blow she received.”

Relieved, Edgar held her more tightly, giving thanks to a god that he hadn’t spared a thought for in a long, long time. He clasped a hand to the back of her head and pressed his cheek to hers. As overjoyed as he was that he had not lost her, he couldn’t help wondering about the path he would lead her on going forward. There was a distinct possibility that the fairies with links to the Blue Knight Earldom would no longer remain his allies. Would Lydia continue to follow him then? He had no way of knowing. But what he did know was that he couldn’t bring himself to let go of her.

The fairy spoke as he watched the couple from above, a hint of wonder in his tone. “You hold the sword, the key, and the title. And yet your blood is defiled. This blade should not be able to harm its master, but it drew your blood. Meanwhile, it shielded that young girl from harm because it recognized her as your fiancée.”

It was indeed a baffling set of circumstances. If they were enough to confuse the earldom’s fairy, then Edgar certainly had no cause to understand.

“If there is one thing I am inclined to take from these events, it is that—for better or for worse—I am not to rid you of your life on this occasion.”

The earl himself had no intention of dying. He raised his head. “Arrow,” he said, intentionally using the name that Lydia had come upon. “You are my servant. This sword belongs to me, no matter who may question it. If you and this blade are one together, then you belong to me by extension.”

The fairy’s face twisted into a bitter scowl. “As loath as I am to admit it, you are indeed correct. That isn’t to say that I shall accept it. I shall place my loyalty with your fiancée, for she found the arrow, and I gave her my word that I would aid her. Therefore, I shall assist in whatever it is that you desire. I trust you have no objections?”

However he spun it, Edgar was satisfied as long as the fairy’s power was his. “Are you able to put a stop to the Unseelie Court?”

“It will be difficult by my strength alone. I have grown weak

from defending the barrier for all these years, and I was forced to rest after the Nightmare attacked me. I have recovered a fraction of my strength, in no small part thanks to the moonstone's power. To do what you ask of me, I shall require your assistance."

"What must I do?"

The fairy slowly moved his gaze, eventually resting it on Edgar's sword, which remained embedded in the ground. It rocked slightly before becoming free and floating into the air once more. Then it approached the earl and stopped before him, lying flat as if being presented to him by invisible hands.

"I ask that you command the sword to lend me its power."

"Are you not one and the same?"

"I have been separated from it for a long time. It seems that a new star has taken root within it. An entity that shares my name, my power. A brother, if you will."

Supporting Lydia with one hand, Edgar took the sword in his other. The cross-shaped star sparkled in the center of its deep indigo sapphire. It was also named Arrow, its twin the Bow within Lydia's ring.

"I believe it altered the direction of the sword when I threw it," the fairy said. "It prevented you from suffering an injury worse than that flesh wound."

Edgar had to scoff as it became apparent that he wouldn't have avoided the sword on his own strength. He traced his fingertip over the star sapphire. The cross within was a mark he had been branded with when he was the Prince's captive. The merrows had carved the four-pointed star into the sword in exchange for the brand. That had been the moment at which Edgar had shaken free of his former captive self and gained the title of earl. It was proof that he had become a new version of himself. The sword despised his blood. However, it seemed that a part of it had faith that he could become the true Blue Knight Earl.

Edgar whispered to his star: the star sapphire. "Arrow, lend me your strength. I beg you work with your brother to defend London."

The sword began to glow. The silver fairy caught a streak of that radial light—an arrow. A breathtaking silver arrow, to be precise. Their surroundings began to shake violently before Edgar had time to admire its beauty. The quaking made the stone walls

crumble and debris fall.

“Come. We do not have much longer.”

“Where?” Edgar asked.

The fairy pointed toward the sky. “Please keep a tight grip on your fiancée.”

The moment the earl reaffirmed his grip on her, he felt himself floating into the air.

***

“The store of gunpowder was toward the bow, right, Paul? Gimme a proper sketch!” Lotta was flitting this way and that, racking her brain for a way to stop the enemy vessel. “Get us in front of the Ark!”

She frowned at the sketch for a moment before rushing to the artillery battery with it still in her grip. Just then, something leaped over the gunwale to land on the deck. It was a man with dark curls, and he looked disgruntled as he stood in her way.

“That bloody boat’s still goin’. Ye twiddlin’ yer thumbs or somethin’?”

Lotta hesitated for a moment. “You’re Kelpie, right?”

“Lydia’s still in the bridge. Second the boat hits it, it’s gonna collapse y’know.”

“I know, and there’s no time, so get outta my way.” She froze just as she was about to push past Kelpie, then turned to look up at him. As she recalled, he was a fairy who lived in the water. He was capable of exhibiting extraordinary power when under or near a source of it, so it was advisable not to get too close to such places when there was a water horse nearby. Lotta remembered Lydia telling her all of this at one point. Apparently, kelpies could also manipulate water and cause floods to sweep away large swathes of livestock from the shore.

“Can you make massive waves?” she asked.

“Huh?”

“I want you to start making ’em when I give the word.”

“And how’ve I gotta listen to ye for?”

“You wanna save Lydia, don’t you?”

Though he scowled, the mention of Lydia’s name successfully silenced him.

Deciding she had his agreement, Lotta turned to her crew. “Listen, we’re gonna blow a hole right above the store on this side here!”

“That’s too close,” Paul protested. “What if you spark the gunpowder?”

Lotta responded with a splendid grin. “Trust me, this’ll work. Kelpie, you’d better get ready.”

“I don’t need to ‘get ready’ to whip up a wave or two.”

“Good to hear.” Watching as the cannon was loaded, Lotta grabbed hold of the lanyard and waited for her chance.

When she came to, Lydia found herself on London Bridge. Edgar was carrying her. She couldn’t find the strength to demand she be put down, and in fact she was so exhausted that she couldn’t even feel embarrassed right away. Edgar didn’t seem to have noticed that she was awake. He was walking slowly toward the balustrade. She could see the light of the gas lamps, positioned at regular intervals, faintly reflecting off the river’s surface below. It wasn’t yet dawn, and there wasn’t a soul to be seen on London Bridge. Though the Thames ought to have been silent, it was alive with the sound of cannon fire. Lydia jolted in surprise, and Edgar peered at her.

“It’s all right. That’s Lotta’s doing. She’s working to stop the Ark.”

“Would you mind setting me down, Edgar?”

“Can you stand?”

She hesitated. “I think so.”

Though he seemed to be of two minds about it, he eventually put her down carefully. When she staggered, he put an arm around her waist and pulled her in, encouraging her to lean on him. She found herself unable to refuse, then peered over the balustrade, knowing that the Ark was the bigger danger.

Two vessels were moving toward the bridge beneath the moonlight. One was the Ark, topped with tilting masts tangled with tattered sails, and the other must have been Lotta’s ship. There came another boom of a cannon, and the Ark’s hull swayed violently as it was hit.

“I thought that ship was full of gunpowder,” Lydia remarked.

“Lotta would be aware of that.”

Should the powder be ignited by the cannonball’s sparks, her

ship would be caught in the blast. And yet her vessel had launched another shell with an almighty rumble. Next, a spray of water burst up and smashed into the ship. Lydia caught sight of a black horse near the river's surface.

"Kelpie?" she murmured.

The pieces came together. Waves were washing over the Ark at full force, filling the hole shot by the cannon with water and undoubtedly flooding the inside.

"I see. They're wetting the gunpowder to render it useless," Edgar remarked. Not only that, but Lotta's ship was now knocking into the Ark in a last-ditch effort to stop it.

The Ark, however, was still on course for London Bridge. Even if it didn't explode, the impact with the bridge would destroy it, sinking it with the hostages on board. Though its broken sails weren't catching any wind and it didn't seem to be steam-powered, it continued on silently. As curious as it was, Lydia's eyes were drawn to the mass of squirming blackness crowding the ship like ants: the Unseelie Court.

"Arrow! Put a stop to them posthaste!" Edgar shouted.

Could the earl see them too? Perhaps he and Lydia were still standing in the barrier between worlds.

"I shall need to borrow your fiancée!" came the hurried reply from above. Lydia looked up to see a twinkling star flying over them.

"I beg your pardon?" Edgar replied.

"The bow is in her possession. She is the only one capable of using it!"

"You want *Lydia* to fire a bow?" The earl looked at her nervously. "That's asking far too much!"

"Bow will surely guide her."

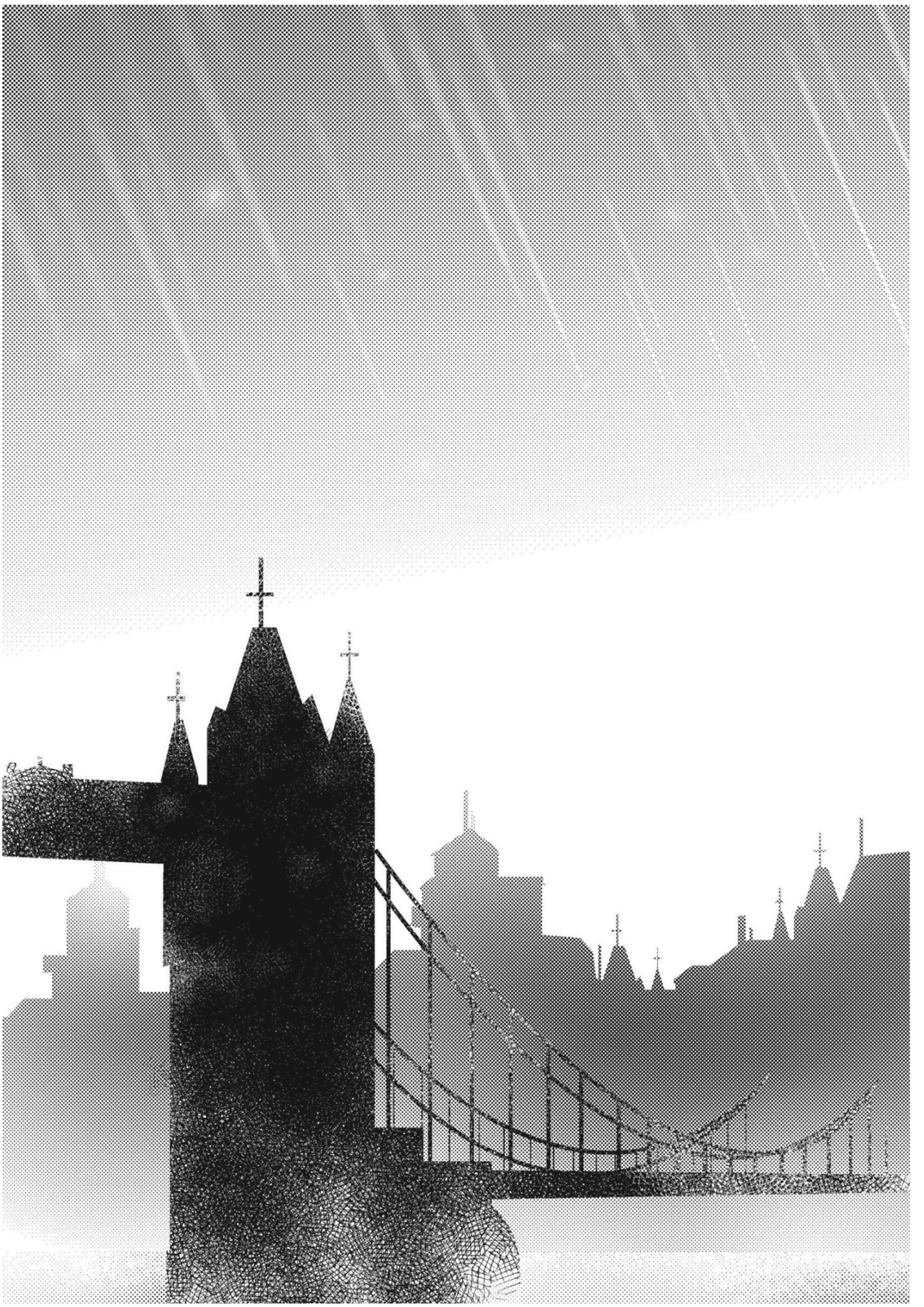
"I shall do it, Edgar," said Lydia, though he still seemed reluctant to let go of her. She understood that he was concerned about her physical condition. So she straightened up and stood free of his support, turning her golden-green gaze right at him. "I am to become part of the earldom, aren't I? I shall fight with you."

The shining silver fairy lifted her left hand and held her ring up to the moon. It released a bright ray of light that transformed into a delicate bow with the curve of a thin lunar crescent. Lydia caught hold of it from where it floated in the air and felt a new power

coursing through her. It was like she and Bow had formed a connection. Her body felt as light as though she had become a fairy herself as she was lifted high into the air and set down onto the balustrade. She cast her gaze over the river below. The Ark was drawing ever close to the girder supporting them.

The silver star above her transformed into an arrow. Her arm reached out to grab and nock it, all without her conscious input. Her body was enveloped in a warm, gentle power that she was happy to entrust her entire self to. The lunar bow glowed golden. She released the starry arrow into the sky, her eyes following its trajectory.

The star climbed into the darkness until it had been all but swallowed up, until far above the city, it released a brief flash of light that seemed to transform the night into day. As it faded, it was replaced by a shower of meteors that stretched as far as the eye could see. The countless stars gathered above Lydia’s head, each shining with a radial light, before they began to stream down. They rained down over the bridge, the Thames, and London itself. The shadows that had been plaguing the slums began to retreat. They seemed to shrink, dissipate, and vanish. The light of the falling stars gradually rendered the Nightmare that had been lying on the bridge translucent before making it disappear completely. The purifying light obliterated the beings clinging to the Ark and even those lurking around nearby roofs, cobblestones, and gutters.



Lydia mulled things over as the scene unfolded before her. Two mysterious stones, the first Blue Knight's star sapphire and his fairy bride's moonstone, seemed to have chosen her. Edgar had no real connection to the earldom. Lydia was nothing more than a fairy doctor from the country. Nevertheless, she had the sense that their fates had been sealed ever since he had obtained the sword and the moonstone had fallen into her possession as if drawn to its partner. When she had first accepted the stone and Edgar's proposal, she had thought it little more than a stopgap measure, but perhaps their connection to one another was something more significant. After all, they had exchanged a legitimate vow in the eyes of the fairy world. Now that she thought of it, it had been from that moment that his flirtations had become excessive and that she had been less able to push thoughts of him from her mind.

Lydia stared at the river's surface. With nothing left to propel it forward, the Ark came to a leisurely stop before the bridge. The golden bow in her hand vanished, restoring the weight to her body without warning. She stumbled, about to fall from the balustrade.

What's going to happen to me now?

She still struggled to believe that love and marriage were attainable for her. Her attraction to Edgar was real, but what should come beyond that was impossible to imagine. At the same time, she could not imagine returning to her old life of frolicking with the fairies by herself.

Edgar caught her as she began to fall. Before she allowed her consciousness to leave her, she made a wish that his arms would always be there to support her.

***

Kelpie had swum through the deepest parts of the Thames to avoid the star shower. Only when he reached the London suburbs upstream did he climb from the river, shake the water from his mane, and study the sky. The falling stars had long since started to vanish. Now and then, a small one would shoot down through the area over central London, but it likely wouldn't be long before even they stopped. Soon, a faint light appeared in the east. It was time

for the stars to go.

Kelpie had watched Lydia fire the star from beneath the bridge. Though he knew something else had been borrowing her body, it had felt as though the girl herself had been drawing away from him. She was engaged to the Blue Knight Earl. Lydia had made that decision for herself. Considering how stubborn she was, that was no longer liable to change.

Edgar was now of greater concern to Kelpie. The earl had become the Prince. Who was to say that he wouldn't betray Lydia?

"You seem exhausted. Perhaps I shouldn't be surprised."

Kelpie turned around. A woman in male attire stood beneath a riverside tree. "Whaddya want, selkie?"

"I'd have thought you would be eradicated alongside the Nightmare."

"Ah'm no soft enough for that."

"So it would seem."

"What're ye doin' here, then?"

"Just passing by."

Kelpie snorted. The holy arrow of light that had sapped the Unseelie Court of its magic had rained down all over London. Ermine had come knowing that had he managed to escape, he would have done so by swimming upstream, away from the city. But, unaware of this, his mind had been following a different path. He called out to her as she made to leave.

"Did ye know this was gonna happen?"

"Did I know what was going to happen?" she asked without turning around.

Kelpie was certain she must have known the answer to her own question. "Ye're the one who stole the Freya and handed it to Ulysses. That stone let the Prince's core survive. Ye must've realized the earl could've become the Prince."

Ermine didn't respond. Kelpie took her silence as confirmation.

"Is that how ye joined with the Prince in the first place? 'Cause this was the only way ye could get the earl for yerself? 'Cause if he ever betrays Lydia and goes to rule over Ulysses and that lot, ye'll be able to serve him again?"

She turned around. Though she glared at Kelpie, when she spoke, her delivery was subdued. "I never would have stolen the Freya had I known what would happen."

“How come ye stole it, then?”

He wondered whether she had done so to gain the trust of the Prince’s organization. However, he also understood that she continued to be concerned for the earl and her brother and worked to protect them even as she sided with their enemy. That being the case, would she really have stolen the Freya from the earl and handed it to the Prince without carefully considering the consequences of its potential ability? If she’d had no idea of its powers, she should have been even more careful about letting it fall into enemy hands.

Ermine didn’t answer Kelpie’s question. “Perhaps this is fate. And if so, I have no reason to stray from my path.”

The water horse’s mind was occupied by a single, simple doubt. Who exactly had ordered Ermine to steal the Freya? There had to be someone who had convinced her that this was the only way she could protect her brother and the earl. In the first place, it was difficult to imagine her deciding to betray the earl and join the Prince of her own accord, even if it would somehow benefit her former master. Obtaining the Freya might have gained the Prince’s trust, but she had lost the earl’s. So who had pushed her into doing it?

“Who do ye answer to? Someone must’ve telt ye that gettin’ in with the Prince’s organization could help the earl and yer brother, and it wasnae Ulysses or the Prince himself, right?”

“Lord Ashenbert is the only master of my soul.”

“But he’s no the one givin’ ye orders.”

Unsurprisingly, Ermine seemed disinclined to divulge anything. “What I am doing aligns with my own volition.” In other words, it shouldn’t matter whether she was receiving orders to the same effect. She gave a short sigh. “I regret nothing. However, I sincerely hope that going forward, I am not put in a position that assists his lordship.”

Kelpie supposed he agreed with her. The earl having any contact with this selkie would mean he had a link to the Prince’s society. For Lydia’s sake, the water horse would rather that didn’t happen. He knew that the earl had taken the Freya because he didn’t want to lose Lydia. What Kelpie didn’t know was whether it had been the right decision. Edgar had already dragged her into a dangerous conflict, and yet he still insisted on keeping her by his

side. This was coupled with Lydia's habit of leaping into danger without a second thought.

Feels like a disaster waitin' to happen, Kelpie thought to himself.

"Ye used to be human, so ye probably understand. How're they so desperate to be together the second they fall in love?"

"I suppose it must be because their time is limited. These tumultuous, transitory emotions and compelling passions are necessary for them to outpace their short lifespans." With that, Ermine vanished from view.

"Is that right?" Kelpie muttered with a sigh.

***

Once dawn came over London, the city was abuzz with chatter about the cannon fire and the meteor shower witnessed overnight. The biggest mystery confronting the citizens was the wreckage of the Ark floating just in front of London Bridge. Though the passengers had all been helped out safely, not one of them could explain what had happened. Monsieur Alba, the vessel's proprietor, had vanished. In fact, he had never existed in the first place, and it seemed that "Alba" had bribed a not insignificant number of London's elite policemen. They were unlikely to launch headfirst into an investigation. As for Greg and his associates, they too had been trapped on board by Ulysses's men, their lives endangered just like those of the hostages, and they were naturally disinclined to speak about the incident they had originally contributed to. They had fled at the first opportunity.

Now that the Unseelie Court had vanished, the illness in the East End was bound to settle and, still without an explanation, everything would eventually be forgotten with the passage of time. It would be no mean feat to get the public to swallow the story about the Prince and his meticulous plan to rebel against Britain, given that it involved fairies and magic. Besides, Edgar was actively concealing his past. He had known not to rely on the country or its courts since long before learning that the Prince was targeting the throne. It was for this reason that he had permitted Lotta to do something so dangerous and now considered it his task to sweep the whole matter of the Ark under the rug, cannons

and all. And he had managed it promptly, all before the break of dawn.

The protective barrier that was London Bridge stood in its usual position over the Thames. Though its strength had weakened, it was apparently still powerful enough to defend the city from the darkness that manifested in nature.

“I shall remain with Lady Gladys until the day her protective energy runs dry,” the silver fairy had said before taking his leave. “Generations come and go for the fae just as they do for humankind. There is nothing to be gained from denying that.”

The cross-shaped star continued to shine on Edgar’s blade. It was the earldom’s new star, even as Arrow lived on.

The earl let his sofa take the weight of his weary body, the sensation of the sword that leaned against his shoulder growing heavier. He had every intention of becoming savior to the Blue Knight Earldom. However, his very presence now had the potential to lead it to utter destruction. The future seemed more uncertain than ever.

“Won’t you rest, my lord?”

Edgar had left the door open, and Raven was anxiously peering into the room.

“No, night is far behind us.”

“But you didn’t sleep a wink.”

There had been too much to attend to. Nevertheless, Edgar felt he would be unable to sleep now even if he tried. “How is Lydia?”

“She has shown no sign of waking up yet.”

Lydia had been unconscious ever since she’d fainted on the bridge. Edgar got to his feet, passed the sword to Raven, and left the room.

“May I take that from you, my lord? I do not believe it is still necessary.”

The earl’s jacket had brushed against Raven for a moment as he squeezed past. The boy must have noticed the pistol that was still inside it and had been unsettled enough to stop his master—something he rarely did.

“Ah. I suppose you’re right,” Edgar said, though he walked away from his servant anyway. He hadn’t been planning to do anything especially dangerous with it. He didn’t think so, at least.

He left the mansion and began to wander aimlessly. Before he

realized it, he had stepped into a nearby church. The morning service had concluded, and the place was empty. A gentle light spilled into the chapel through the stained glass windows. Edgar took a seat in an illuminated pew in the corner. He sat there for some time, his mind absent of any real thought, and then it suddenly struck him as strange that he should find himself in such a place.

Edgar did not believe in God. He hadn't believed in such a thing ever since his fate had been twisted and manipulated by a single man nine years ago. He had escaped from the depths of hell with his life and obtained a new name by his own strength and with the support of his companions. That was why he did not resent a deity for the situation he was in but accepted that it was of his own making. He opened his fist slowly. The burn-like scar he had suffered from touching the Freya had mostly faded. It would probably vanish completely with time.

He still didn't feel any different. Ever since yesterday, he had been reassuring himself constantly that, as long as he stayed strong in the knowledge that he was the Blue Knight Earl, the Prince's memories within him would remain little more than information. However...

Edgar brought the hand the Freya had marked to his chest. He could feel the hardness of the pistol in his jacket, and he noted that its muzzle was located directly above his heart. If he were to die, the Prince would be buried for all eternity. That truth continued to smolder in his chest even after daybreak. How easy it would be compared to agonizing over the future.

But he had to think of Lydia. And when he did, the tension left his grip.

"Lord Ashenbert?"

Edgar immediately lowered his hand from his chest. He turned to see that it was Professor Carlton who had entered the chapel, alone. His hair was as unkempt as ever, and as usual, his round spectacles had started to slip down his nose without his noticing. He broke into a broad grin upon seeing the earl.

"I thought it was you. I saw that blond hair of yours the moment I stepped through the doorway."

"I didn't realize you were back from Cambridge, Professor."

"Yes, well, I have some errands to run at the university today, so

I was allowed to pop home."

Edgar somehow managed a smile and stood up from the bench. "Have you been to see Miss Carlton yet? Oh! Please forgive me for not sending word earlier. I realize that I told you just recently that she was in Scotland, but certain circumstances required her to return to London. There was fairy-related business that seems to have utterly exhausted her, and she is currently resting. But please rest assured that her general health has not suffered."

"Thank you, my lord. Mr. Tompkins has already filled me in. Lydia had just awoken when I went to see her, and she seemed to be in fine health indeed."

"She's awake? Oh, thank goodness…"

"Your butler went on to tell me that you had gone out for a walk, so I decided to follow suit in hopes that I might bump into you. You see, my lord, I would like to give my response to the request you recently made of me."

The relief Edgar felt upon hearing Lydia was awake quickly dissipated, and he found himself conscious of the burn on his palm. He could not listen to what the professor had to say as long as it remained a secret. Edgar had vowed to be honest with Carlton in order to secure permission to marry Lydia.

"Professor, if you wouldn't mind taking a look at this…" The earl opened his palm before Carlton could continue. "I came into contact with a Freya's magic. Apparently, it has the effect not of transferring a soul from an old body to a young one but of transferring *memories*. The memories of a man who practiced this deplorable black magic now reside within me."

"Memories, you say?"

"I do not know what effect they will have yet. However, it seems that the leader of this organization has survived by transferring these memories from body to body, creating a long line of successors."

In Carlton's eyes was a complex mix of surprise and bewilderment as he looked at Edgar. He opened his mouth to say something before eventually closing it again wordlessly. Perhaps he was struggling to come to terms with what was being said by this man, who had a deep connection with his daughter but might otherwise be a stranger.

“Professor, it is too late for me simply to pretend that I was never betrothed to Miss Carlton. I love her, and I could not bear to break our relationship off or forget about her. However, should you withhold your permission, I cannot see that she will betray your trust in order to be with me,” Edgar said, pouring out his splintering heart. He would not give up, even if Carlton refused him. He might even find himself whisking her away and taking her far from her father’s reach. Even as he became aware of the lengths he could go to, he felt he had no choice than to let his feelings be known.

However, Carlton surprised him with a rather self-deprecating appraisal. “I wonder about that.”

The professor turned his gaze to the chapel entrance, where Lydia was standing. She must have run the entire way. She was out of breath and seemed ready to burst into tears as she looked back at the two men. That is, until she pursed her lips firmly. She took brisk steps as she approached Edgar and grabbed his frock coat without warning, plunging her hand inside it. The pistol was located immediately, and she hid it behind her back before retreating from him.

“Didn’t you promise not to lie to me anymore, Edgar? I decided to trust that your proposal was in earnest, just as you claimed. And here you were, preparing to break your promise.”

“I haven’t uttered a single falsehood. That pistol is for self-defense. I simply forgot that I was still carrying it on my person.”

Lydia shook her head vigorously. “You truly are a liar. Raven was incredibly concerned. He said you had taken it with you. Mr. Tompkins mentioned that you weren’t yourself, and Raven seemed to know why but wouldn’t divulge anything. And then I wondered whether I was worrying over nothing, only to find you here and…” As if she could hold them in no longer, the tears began to spill out. She quickly turned her back to Edgar and clung to her father. “I was so unbearably frightened!”

Though clearly taken aback, the professor stroked his crying daughter’s hair. “Lydia, it isn’t me you should be seeking comfort from.”

“No, father. I don’t want to embrace Edgar!”

“I thought you intended to marry him.”

Lydia continued to cling to her father without a word for some

time. When she finally spoke, her delivery was decisive. “I’m going to marry him, yes. But I shan’t embrace him.”

With an awkward scoff, Carlton gently unpeeled himself from her petulant hug. He passed her a handkerchief, instructed her to wipe her eyes with it, then turned her so she was facing Edgar. “My daughter is incredibly willful, as can be plainly seen. However, I would be much obliged if you were to take good care of her, my lord.”

“Professor…” Edgar was on the cusp of asking for confirmation before realizing it was unnecessary and trailing off.

Naturally, Carlton would have taken the earl’s earlier confession into account before granting his permission. The man was giving away his beloved daughter to be married. His decision would not be based on a desire to be cordial or considerate. A sharp, academic perception and fair, unclouded sense of judgment had led him to trust Edgar. In turn, the earl vowed to himself that he would not change.

“Thank you.”

Carlton gently pushed his daughter in Edgar’s direction, then turned to take his leave. Edgar offered his retreating back a deep bow. Now that her father was gone, Lydia sat down firmly in a pew, seeming at once sulky and bashful.

“Lydia.”

“Stay away from me.”

“I apologize for worrying you.”

She replied without lifting her head. “The Prince is dead, isn’t he? And yet you don’t seem especially delighted. I shan’t pry. You may keep your silence until you feel fit to do otherwise. However, there is something about which I would like your reassurance.”

“Yes?”

“Promise me that you won’t vanish without a word.”

“I promise. I shall be forever by your side from now on. Even if you should decide at any point to flee, I shall pursue you to the ends of the Earth.” Edgar sat down beside her and placed his hand on hers, which were clenched tightly on her lap.

“There’s no need to go *that* far.”

“I shan’t let you go ever again.”

Perhaps Lydia slightly regretted allowing her father to leave. She looked around the empty chapel in a panic, then stiffly

returned her gaze to the floor. “Did I not just tell you to stay away from me? I’m still angry with you.”

“To the extent that you would still withhold an embrace?”

“Correct.”

When he brushed away the strand of hair that had fallen over her cheek, Lydia tentatively raised her gaze to him. Her mysterious, golden-green eyes, capable of perceiving fairies, swam with anguish as she looked back at him. At last, they were his: the paired gems he had sought for so long.

“Then I shan’t force you.”

Their lips brushed together gently, and Lydia quietly declared him a liar once more.

“Have I overlooked another falsehood?”

“You claimed we did this often. We hadn’t done it once.”

He had said so when he had kissed her after she had forgotten about their engagement.

Edgar laughed. “Ah yes, I remember.”

Lydia pouted as though she failed to see the humor in the situation. It was such an endearing expression that he was tempted to kiss her all over again.

“I wasn’t lying. Or rather, it won’t be a lie for much longer.”

“Edgar, we are in a *church*.”

“We are betrothed. We have the Lord’s blessing.”

Though she continued to frown, she didn’t evade him.



Edgar found himself battling a faint inexplicable aching in his chest. It would seem that even the tiniest rays of hope were enough to turn someone away from death. He would eradicate the Prince. He would do it as he lived. It might prove an impossible feat. His choosing to live might bring misfortune upon Lydia. Be that as it may, he refused to let go of her warmth. And so his only option was to keep fighting. He had faith that he could remain himself as long as he kept hold of his desire to see her smile.

Edgar pulled her delicate frame in closer.

Afterword

Hello. Thank you for enjoying *Earl and Fairy*, which is now on its tenth volume. This one was a climax to the series: Edgar's first encounter with his archnemesis. You saw how it ended. What's going to happen to him and the Blue Knight Earldom now? Will our betrothed couple make it safely to marriage? It seems like there are still many twists and turns coming up, so I hope you'll look forward to the story's continuation.

London Bridge featured in this volume once again. I wrote a little about it in the previous afterword, and I've got a bit more to say this time too. Have you ever wondered about the famous nursery rhyme "London Bridge is Falling Down"? I certainly have. What is the meaning behind "my fair lady," which comes up in the lyrics several times? She is mentioned without any warning or explanation, and I always wondered who she was. Have you? I've heard that she might have been a human sacrifice, but I'm not sure how accurate that is. The theory goes that the song is about these sacrifices that were built into the bridge to prevent it from washing away during floods. Nursery rhymes become more interesting when there's a bit of creepiness or mystery to them, don't they?

That was part of my inspiration for the story in this volume. I hope you enjoy it.

As always, Asako Takaboshi-sama has graced us with her wonderful illustrations. Nothing makes me happier than seeing Edgar and the others look ever more gorgeous as the volumes go on. It's my dearest wish that you will enjoy the story along with those captivating illustrations.

Mizue Tani, January 2007

Bonus Fairy Encyclopedia

Hello readers, and welcome to another bonus corner for *Earl and Fairy*! This time, we've got something a little different for you. We're going to be shining a spotlight on a few of the fairies that show up in the series and looking at some of the lore behind them. Then we're going to see how the background folklore differs from how these fairies are portrayed in the books. There are spoilers for some previous volumes below, just in case you're starting with this volume! If there's anything you'd like to see us cover in these bonus sections, please don't hesitate to reach out to us on the JNC forums. And with that, let's get started!

Kelpie

In the series, "kelpie" is synonymous with "water horse." This is true in British folklore as well, but did you know that there are several varieties of water horse? In *Earl and Fairy*, Kelpie is something of an amalgamation of a few famous ones, though he shares his primary characteristics with his namesake. Like in the series, kelpies are traditionally able to take on human form while normally appearing as horses. They eat humans and draw them into pools of water, sometimes tearing them up to feast on. They do this by luring the human to ride on their backs. One key difference that perhaps isn't especially surprising is that they're not traditionally handsome in their human form. Rather, they're "shaggy," something that fits a little more closely with the savagery they're known for. But for the love rival in a shojo series, perhaps this is a change we can forgive!

The Scottish each-uisge is a water horse that, like the kelpie, also comes from the Scottish Highlands but is known to be much more vicious. His human form *is* attractive, and what's more, he is known for his habit of eating entire humans save for their livers, something that's been incorporated into Kelpie's character. Also, while kelpies traditionally prefer lakes, the each-uisge tends to haunt lochs and larger bodies of water. In *Earl and Fairy*, Kelpie

settles in the Serpentine (a lake), so it seems he might not be entirely limited to rivers. That said, he certainly complains about it! As for his tendency to eat livestock, since he's on a human-free diet thanks to Lydia, this might come from the less prevalent Manx cabyll-ushtey, which is known to devour livestock, though it does eat humans as well.

One aspect that has yet to be touched upon in *Earl and Fairy* is the kelpie's magic bridle, which they are sometimes known to wear. Apparently, if this bridle can be removed and replaced by a man-made one, the water horse can be tamed and made to work. Time will tell if this tidbit ever appears in the series, but it's hard to imagine Kelpie doing as he's told!

Merrows

Merrows are portrayed very faithfully in *Earl and Fairy*. They are Irish fairies traditionally, and in this series, they live near a fictional island between Britain and Ireland. Essentially, they are the Irish equivalents of mermaids. As alluded to in volume 1, there are plenty of instances in folklore of merrows falling in love with humans—female merrows with fishermen—and their offspring are often covered in scales. Although female merrows are said to be very beautiful, male merrows are meant to be ugly. In the series, they aren't outright stated as such, but they do differ in appearance from the females. Their faces and arms are covered in scales, and they are more fishlike than human. In *Earl and Fairy*, merrows appear to be capable of taking on human form, but this isn't the case in the tales about them. Rather, it seems to be a characteristic of certain fairies that is sometimes freely applied to others when required throughout the story.

In addition, there does not seem to be any folklore connecting merrows and swords, and this appears to be something that was entirely made up for the series. The same can be said of sapphires, although this is less surprising, since each volume of *Earl and Fairy* centers on a particular gemstone.

Unlike in the series, merrows are sometimes known to have red feather caps which, if stolen, prevent them from returning to the sea. Though this isn't featured in the series, there is a parallel to be drawn with selkies and their skins, which we'll move on to now!

Selkies

As with merrows, *Earl and Fairy* portrays selkies very faithfully to folklore. Unlike a lot of fairies, selkies actually exist—sort of! Traditionally, in the Orkney Islands of Scotland, larger species of seal were thought to be selkies. They were said to have a human form but took on the form of a seal to traverse through the water. They share many similarities with merrows, being sea-dwelling fairies that would occasionally court and produce offspring with humans. These offspring would carry traits of the fairy parent—in this case, webbed hands and feet. In the series, this is something that's rumored about descendants of the merrows instead. One key difference between merrows' and selkies' relationships with humans is that it was usually the merrow women who fell in love with mortals. Meanwhile, the male selkies were the flirtatious ones, and the females were said to be taken forcibly by stealing their skins. In *Earl and Fairy*, the taking of selkie skins instead gives the possessor power to command the selkies, and this is a fate met by both male and female selkies. The light novel expands on this through the plot point of selkies giving their hearts to those they trust, but this does not seem to come directly from folktales.

Similarly, in folklore, selkies are sometimes said to be angels driven out of heaven, or originally humans who were banished out to sea. Meanwhile, in the series, they are said to be the incarnation of people who died at sea, hence how Ermine was able to return to life as one. But in both cases, they were once human. There also doesn't seem to be anything in folklore concerning a selkie's memories of its human life, nor its blood. It is possible that the blood being like beads of glass was purely invented for the light novels, but it might have been influenced by another piece of folklore. There are several components of *Earl and Fairy* that take inspiration from a number of different sources rather than any definitive one.

That's all we've got time for this volume! We hope you found it interesting. If you've got anything you'd like to add to the above musings, feel free to hop onto the forums and join the discussion. Thank you, as always, for keeping up with the series, and we'll catch you in the next one!

Sources:

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