
11
MIZUE TANI
Earl and Fairy
The Future Bride in a Labyrinth of Roses


11
MIZUE TANI
Earl and Fairy
The Future Bride in a Labyrinth of Roses


LUCINDA
A noble girl who has come to the same estate where Lydia will study before her wedding. She insists that Edgar proposed to her.
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.
ANNIE
Lucinda's handmaid.
LYDIA
A girl who can see and talk to fairies. Subjected to Edgar's manipulative flirtations ever since she began working as his fairy doctor, she eventually realized she wanted to stand by him as he fought the Prince. Thus, she accepted his proposal.
RAVEN
A mysterious boy, he is Edgar's servant. He is skilled with weapons, and his loyalty to his master is flawless. He is delighted at the prospect of Edgar and Lydia marrying.
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. Although he has succeeded in his revenge against the Prince, he is now set to marry Lydia while carrying his former adversary's memories.
Earl and Fairy
CHARACTERS

Table of Contents

Cover

Characters

The Woes of a Wedding

An Unexpected Education

Lost Regards

Unsightly Envy

At Odds

The Countess of the Blue Roses

The Fairies' Jewelry Box

Afterword

Bonus Fairy Encyclopedia

About J-Novel Club

Copyright

The Woes of a Wedding

With another year came another looming social season. The spring flowers were beginning to bloom in Her Majesty's capital, and the aristocrats were abandoning their country manors in droves to take up position in their London town houses. Though it was still too early for lavish evening parties, those who had spent some time away from the city were making their presence known through their attendance at plays and concerts.

That evening, an Irish harp concert was taking place in a luxury hotel. The hall that served as the waiting room was filled with the lively laughter of girls in gorgeous gowns. Among them were those preparing for their debuts this year, their eyes darting this way and that as they seemed ready to flee at a moment's notice. Until this point in their lives, they had been carefully brought up away from society at large, but from now on, they would be expected to search for a marriage partner at these bustling events. That said, they couldn't simply talk to any gentleman who caught their eye, and without being introduced by a parent or older relative, it was difficult even to make their interest known. This had the effect of them only becoming acquainted with men already approved by their parents. Nevertheless, their hearts were fit to burst with the hope that a wonderful gentleman might just fall in love with them at first sight and approach them of his own volition.

"Look! There's Lord Ashenbert!"

The girls' whispers gained an air of exhilaration as a strikingly handsome man entered the hall. He gave a rather mysterious impression, not least because of his title and background. He held the curious position of the Earl of Ibrazel, having returned to Britain after growing up abroad to claim the title, which had lain dormant for three hundred years. Add to that a head of dazzling blond hair and an elegance that permeated every word and action, and there

were few people he failed to charm, few heads he failed to turn, no matter where he was or what he was doing. The girls stared at him, hoping he might offer them a smile if only they could momentarily catch his eye.

That was all they could do: spend the short few moments before he passed them by fantasizing about his eyes meeting theirs and his heart immediately being captured. But they would come out the other side of it having learned that fantasies rarely translated into reality.

"I heard that his lordship is soon to be engaged. Would you happen to know anything about that?"

"No more than you, I'm afraid."

"It might be nothing more than a rumor. Nonsense spread by the tabloids."

"My dear aunt heard it from an acquaintance of hers. Apparently, Lord Ashenbert ordered a dearest necklace from a Bond Street jeweler."

"Goodness!"

The girls sighed, slightly disappointed and jealous of the young woman who had been chosen by the man of their dreams. Their envy was quickly overwhelmed by curiosity, however.

"I didn't realize that his lordship was already courting somebody."

"Perhaps it is that songstress. You remember the rumors, don't you?"

"I cannot believe that *she* will be the one to marry his lordship. The banker's daughter is a much more likely candidate if you ask me."

"I hear that she is already betrothed to another gentleman. Besides, if this talk of his lordship's engagement is true, then I am certain he will be marrying a noble girl."

"I suppose you're right. I wonder who she might be."

"Apparently, the necklace was to be inscribed with the initials 'LC.' I daresay they belong to the girl in question."

"I bet she's incredibly beautiful."

"As with any such marriage, it will be her standing rather than her looks that matter. And she must come from quite the impressive

family to be united with the philandering Lord Ashenbert."

The girls' gazes were still stuck on the distant earl, who was surrounded by noblewomen.

"It's me." The quiet statement came from one of the girls sitting at the edge of the group. "I am his lordship's fiancée."

"Why, Lady Constable. Do you mean that?"

"When did you make his lordship's acquaintance?"

"At a New Year's party," replied the girl, Lucinda Constable.

"*You* are his fiancée? That can't be right. You aren't..."

Though the other girl trailed off, Lucinda merely smiled graciously. She knew very well what had just gone unspoken. Her mother was a commoner. She was unsuited to marrying someone like Lord Ashenbert, whose name held particular prestige among Britain's earls.

"His lordship said there is no shame in my mother's union. That it is a legitimate marriage regardless of my parents' different stations. We have been writing to each other since the party, and I recently accepted his proposal."

Her friends were dumbfounded, and Lucinda was beyond elated to be at the center of so many questioning faces. She did indeed have the initials LC.

She waited for that fact to permeate the other girls' minds, then added humbly, "We have yet to make an official announcement. I hadn't expected the rumor to be picked up through the jewelers. May I ask that you keep it to yourselves for the time being?"

***

Any girl who dreamed of marriage was wont to fantasize about all sorts of things, even long before her husband was decided on. For example, a traditional white wedding dress paired with an orange bouquet, inspired by the wedding of Her Majesty The Queen. Or perhaps gillyflowers, which symbolized eternal love. It was said that by adding something blue, a bride would be blessed with happiness, so it was best to tie a blue ribbon around her garter. She would then walk up the aisle, followed by a long train embroidered with plenty

of lace. The reception would be held at the finest restaurant. The couple would travel to Paris, the City of Light, for their honeymoon, just as the bride had always dreamed. Naturally, the groom played a pivotal role in realizing these ideals. He therefore had to be appropriately wealthy and important. It was not uncommon for a well-to-do girl to have a firm plan for her wedding and future lifestyle in mind by the time of her debut. After all, she would have been educated daily in how to be a good wife for as long as she could remember.

Meanwhile, Lydia struggled to conjure up a clear picture of what marriage meant in her own mind. It had been three weeks since she had decided she would marry. Her desire to be by her partner's side was genuine, but it was still too soon for her to come to terms with the fact that she would become his *wife*. As a girl who was only just engaged, there should have been nothing more exhilarating than this period of preparation. However, the only emotion Lydia could muster was confusion. Ask her what sort of wedding she wanted, and her mind would come back with nothing. After all, until very recently, she had assumed that marriage was more or less an impossibility for her. If by some miracle, she did find herself a groom, it would be something that happened far in the future, beyond the scope of her imagination.

While these vague thoughts floated through her mind, her fiancé was smiling at her. He was Lord Edgar Ashenbert, the master of this mansion situated in Mayfair, London.

"What are your thoughts on this dress, Lydia? I think it would suit you. It is suitably modest." His jewellike, ash-mauve eyes simmered as he gazed at her.

The pair was in a small reception room equipped with exquisite furnishings. The Persian rug at their feet, the lavishly designed ceiling, the stately oil paintings on the wall, and the velvet curtains framing the window did nothing but enhance the earl's elegance, and he suited his surroundings perfectly. Exactly how Lydia had managed to find herself a fiancé of such caliber remained a mystery. Simply gazing at the tall piles of fashion plates and illustrations on the table was enough to exhaust her, but Edgar seemed to be

enjoying himself as he picked one out to show her. Neither she nor her father had any idea where or how to begin with the preparations, so she was grateful that the earl was overseeing their steady progress.

"Yes, it's lovely, but..." She had to wonder how much all that lace would cost.

"Too plain? You would like something slightly more elaborate, yes? Perhaps you would prefer this one. See these embroidered flowers made from pearls?"

"Pearls?"

A common girl had no business wearing such a dress. The Carltons would never be able to afford it in any case.

"I am hardly beautiful enough to wear something like that," Lydia said, casting a nervous glance at her father, who was sitting beside her.

"Come now, that's nonsense. Wouldn't you agree, Professor Carlton? Lydia, you are gorgeous enough to wear the finest dress and have it simply enhance your beauty. You ought to have more confidence in yourself. Professor Carlton?"

"Sorry? Oh, um. Of course..."

Lydia's father had fumbled his response, and it was quite clear that he was rather nervous. Perhaps he was beginning to regret giving his permission for their union so readily. The pair had recently visited their associate, a duchess by the name of Masefield, to ask her opinion on what preparations Lydia should make before marrying into a noble house.

Lydia had lost her mother when she was very young, and her grandmother had followed a few years ago, so she had no older female relatives to discuss such things with. Meanwhile, her father was as hopeless as could be when it came to the subject of weddings. The duchess knew Edgar well and had been happy to advise. One of the first things she had emphasized was that Lydia should not hesitate to rely on the earl. Meanwhile, Professor Carlton's spirits seemed to drop when Masefield politely told him how expensive the dowry and trousseau tended to be to marry into such a prestigious house. Apparently the numbers were even greater

than he had anticipated. Consequently, Lydia was thrust into the reality of it all without having the time for fantasies.

"My lord," her father said quickly, "that single dress is as expensive as the entire trousseau for a middle-class wedding."

At that, Edgar's attention was finally drawn to the professor's financial concerns. "Please rest assured, Professor, that you needn't concern yourself with the trousseau. I shall take care of the dress, and accessories, and so forth. I ask that you instead focus your attention on Miss Carlton's essentials."

"Her Grace did mention your lordship's very kind intentions to us, but as Lydia's father..."

"While I understand that it is considered uncouth to interfere in financial matters, I trusted that you would be able to consider the situation from a rational perspective."

Lydia's father was not one to overly concern himself with social etiquette. As an academic, his mind worked on the tenets of logic. It wasn't so much that he would feel shame in allowing the groom to take over the wedding preparations, but rather that he knew he wouldn't have done so had Lydia's mother still been alive.

"I wonder whether your lordship might at least allow me to prepare the wedding dress, if nothing else. As for the rest of it, I shall add what I can to the dowry, although it will only be a paltry amount..."

Edgar's stance was that Lydia should be dressed to the nines, as befitted a young woman about to become a countess. However, he chose not to turn down the professor's suggestion.

"Very well. Then I shall take care of the items that will be required after the wedding."

A trousseau included everything from table runners to linens. In short, it comprised items required in everyday life. It also included new clothing, shoes, hats, accessories, and cosmetics, which the bride would need for her new position. However, what a commoner might perceive as high quality and worthy for the trousseau was unlikely to be fit for a countess. Not only were the dresses and jewels appropriate for noble society beyond an ordinary man's reach, but Edgar's home was already equipped with luxury cloth and

tableware. It seemed that the Carltons would be responsible only for the wedding dress and minor essentials, just as Masefield had advised.

The butler arrived then to inform Edgar that he had a visitor. Once the earl had left the room, Lydia's father let out a weary sigh. He removed his spectacles and wiped them with his jacket sleeve. Lydia liked how unassuming he was in that way, even if it made him a touch slovenly. She liked his unkempt hair, his tattered shirt, and his pockets, bulging with pebbles he'd picked up just as a child would. That was why, as she gazed at him, she wondered whether the wedding preparations were moving along a little too quickly. Her father had seemed desperately forlorn ever since she had agreed to marry Edgar, and she was feeling slightly down about it herself. She had accepted the earl's proposal because she wanted to be with him. The fact that she would have to leave her father to do so hadn't crossed her mind at the time. Nor had she known that a marriage across classes would be quite so finicky.

"I'm sorry, father."

The professor turned to her and studied her intently for a moment before his eyes softened and his lips spread into a smile. "You've nothing to apologize for. You mustn't look so glum."

"Yes, father..."

"You are mistaken if you think that I am unhappy. His lordship is being very considerate of you."

The latter point had not gone unnoticed by Lydia. Edgar had foreseen the potential issues in arranging their union, which was why he had asked the duchess to be there for his fiancée and hadn't made any assumptions about what her father would provide. That said, the Carltons were relatively wealthy in the context of their rural hometown. Though the professor was wont to spend careless sums of money in pursuit of his research, they lived comfortably, if without extravagance. Moreover, he had properly set aside the funds required for his daughter's wedding. Had she been marrying within her station, she was certain that her father would have been able to manage the preparations without any sense of inferiority. The guilt made it difficult for her to feel excitement about the wedding.

Lydia lowered her head. Her father put a hand on her shoulder. "If his lordship is offering you dresses and accessories, you must allow him to indulge you as much as possible. It's incredibly important at this stage. As the years go by, you might find your husband is not as keen to dress you up as he once was," he said, forcing himself to sound cheerful.

"Goodness. Was that the case for you too, father?"

"For your mother. She put in an awful lot of effort at the beginning to sort out my appearance. It took about a year for her to give up."

At last, Lydia was able to manage a small smile.

The private happenings of the flourishing upper classes were of great interest even to London's common citizenry. Lord Ashenbert had appeared in tabloids time and time again due to his philandering ways, and once the rumors about his recent engagement started, the tabloids were filled with exaggerated conjecture surrounding his fiancée's identity. Lydia wasn't sure how she ought to feel about the fact that she hadn't once been named as a potential candidate. That said, she supposed she shouldn't have expected differently. She wasn't from noble stock, nor was she particularly beautiful. Her dull, russet hair had forever been described as "rust-colored" behind her back, and people seemed to consider her yellow-green eyes witchlike and disturbing. It wasn't just their color that gave such an impression, but the fact that they could perceive fairies, creatures that were invisible to the average person.

Britain had always been home to humans who could see and communicate with fairies. The fae were everywhere. They lived as neighbors to mankind, sometimes generous and sometimes mischievous. They were often the culprits behind various problems, such as illness among livestock, lack of milk in cows, and missing children. However, this was usually due to the fact that the humans had broken one of the fairies' established rules, and it was these cases that required the help of a fairy doctor: someone with a close link to the fae who was able to mediate between them and humans.

These days, the number of people who believed in fairies was

limited, and fairy doctors were falling into obscurity. Nevertheless, Lydia—who had inherited her abilities from her mother—had decided to pursue that waning path. That was how she had met Edgar and become the consulting fairy doctor to his earldom. He was the Earl of Ibrazel in name only and lacked the abilities of his ancient predecessors, who had been well-versed in fairy magic. In his place, Lydia had dealt with the fairy-related issues that occurred within his territories. Meanwhile, he had fallen in love with her, or so he claimed. He famously enjoyed the company of women, and there used to be no end to the scandals and rumors. Naturally, this made Lydia uneasy, but her only recourse now was to trust that he would be faithful.

What relationship had Edgar had with the potential fiancées the tabloids were guessing at? Had he really cut ties with the other women in his life? Lydia pushed the uncertainties of these questions away as she got to her feet. Edgar had yet to return from greeting his guest, and her father had left, saying he had work to get to. Disinclined to study the fashion plates on the table alone, Lydia approached the window for some fresh air just as a gray cat dove in through it.

Nico was an old fairy friend of hers, and he appeared with a tabloid in one paw and an announcement that she wished he'd kept to himself. "Lydia, the earl's picking up more and more possible fiancées by the day. There was a whole list of them this time, ordered from most to least likely. It's unfathomable that your name hasn't been mentioned yet." The fairy cat stood on his hind legs. There was a needlessly smug air about the way he set one paw on his hip and looked up at her.

Lydia averted her eyes from the newspaper he thrust in her direction and sighed. "Isn't it about time you stopped reading those rags, Nico?"

"Excuse me? If you have any doubts about these women, *now* is the time for you to be interrogating him, not after the wedding. I'm bringing you vital information!"

There will be no end to it if I interrogate him about every single name.

"It's nothing more than speculation."

Nico thrashed his bushy tail. "What I cannot understand is why these articles are running rampant. Why doesn't the earl simply announce that it's you?"

"Edgar hasn't decided on an announcement date yet."

"Why? He isn't dallying with the outfits and the trousseau, that's for sure."

"The outfits will take some time to tailor."

"I must say this all sounds very fishy to me, Lydia. Are you sure there isn't a reason the earl is putting off the announcement?" Nico said, combing his whiskers and looking very much like the cat that got the cream.

"For example?"

"For example, because he's promised his hand to another woman and he needs to settle things with her before he can tell the world he's going to marry you."

As much as Lydia didn't want to believe it, she couldn't discount the possibility. This was Edgar they were talking about.

No. I mustn't allow myself to doubt him. I have no other choice but to trust him.

"Not so, Nico. I still lack the required knowledge and etiquette for my debut in the upper class, so Edgar is postponing the date until I am ready."

Besides, Lydia had more pressing concerns to be grappling with. From tomorrow, she would be staying at Masefield's estate, which was where she would be taught about noble life, etiquette, and customs. However, no matter how much she learned, there was no changing the fact that she was of common birth and upbringing. She wasn't confident that she could ever make for a suitable countess.

"Anyway, have you seen the eye-watering figure they've reported for the dowry?" Nico continued.

Lydia glanced at the newspaper in his paw. There was an estimate for the dowry in the prominent headline that made her hang her head. If *that* was how much it cost to marry a noble, exaggerated or not, the earldom was in for a huge financial hit by taking Lydia as its countess.

“Human marriages truly are bothersome, aren’t they? Maybe you should elope like your father did. There’d be no need for dowries or trousseaux then.”

Now that Lydia thought of it, perhaps her parents’ elopement was just another reason her father was clueless about the wedding preparations.

“I wouldn’t say no.” Edgar had returned to the reception room. He wore a bright smile as he approached. “However, I do think it would be much nicer to have our loved ones celebrate with us. Wouldn’t you agree, Lydia?”

“Yes,” she stammered. He was conducting his usual habit of moving far closer to her than she was used to, even now.

“Has Professor Carlton gone home?”

“Yes. He said he had classes this afternoon.”

“I see. You must be tired.”

She hesitated. “Somewhat. I didn’t realize that a wedding could be so much work.”

Edgar was peering at her from such a close distance that she couldn’t help but keep her gaze stuck to the floor. She would feel better able to look at him if only he would take a small step back.

“You needn’t worry about the more bothersome tasks. Just leave everything to me.”

There was no question that he cherished her. And it wasn’t as though she didn’t want to marry him. She wanted to be with him, because that was what made her happy. Her own uneasy behavior despite that was making her feel guilty, so she did her best to give him a small smile at the very least.

“I don’t find it the least bit bothersome. It is just that I’m still bewildered because I’ve never done any of this before.”

“That’s really all it is?”

“Yes. I cannot tell you how ecstatic I am, being able to select as many dresses and accessories as my heart desires. However, I lack a sense for what is considered fashionable, least of all among the upper classes.”

“There’s no need to think too seriously about it. Anything you choose can easily be altered to your tastes.”

Lydia nodded and raised her gaze slightly to find a gentle kiss being planted on her cheek.

"Although I daresay I shall have my own thoughts to share on the subject."

Lydia watched the swaying of his glossy blond bangs as his ash-mauve eyes softened and he showed her a blissful smile. She wondered when exactly he had become capable of such an expression. While he had been fighting for his life in a battle thrust upon him by the cruelty of fate, he had never shown a glimpse of weakness, not even when he joked or smiled. Nothing made Lydia happier than the thought that she could bring about such contentment within him. She hoped that her presence would encourage him to enjoy their peaceful days ahead and gradually shake free from the ruthless and calculating side of his persona. This period was one of preparing for their eternal happiness. What was there to be anxious about?

"Lydia, I want our preparations to be complete and for us to be married as soon as possible."

"Yes... When do you think would be a good time for the wedding?"

"In three months, perhaps? That ought to give us just enough time."

"Three months?!" *Isn't that a little soon?*

Lydia was still struggling to comprehend the reality of their engagement, and she doubted that a three-month deadline would assist her in getting her thoughts in order.

"That isn't enough time for me to learn to be a countess," she said quickly. "I still have yet to begin my education on noble etiquette and convention."

"You can learn all of that *after* the wedding."

"Perhaps, but three months... What about six months? Or a year?"

Suddenly, Edgar's tone was firm. "I cannot wait that long. In fact, Lydia, three months might be my limit." He shook his head. "Not even that... The truth is that I am exerting a considerable amount of willpower every time I lay eyes on you."

Now he had lost her. Getting the sense that it would be in her best interest, Lydia took a small step back as he continued.

"The duchess admonished me thusly: A gentleman who truly values his bride must not lay hands on her before the wedding. Of course, she wasn't nearly so blunt or direct about it. Anyway, she's rather straitlaced, don't you think? Though I can certainly understand the moral argument. I wouldn't want you to feel guilt-laden when the time comes to exchange our vows before God. You are an honest and earnest girl, so I'd wager you would find more contentment in remaining pure than in giving yourself over to passion. It is therefore my intention to be as gentlemanly a fiancé as possible, for your sake. But I am sure that I shan't be able to endure it for longer than three months."

Edgar spoke at length in what seemed to be a single breath, and Lydia was only half sure that she understood him. What she did grasp was that this wasn't something he was able to compromise on, so she could only nod her agreement. He responded with a relieved smile and pulled her into an embrace, but she moved her face out of the way before he could kiss her.

"Edgar! Not when people are watching."

"What people?" He looked around the room. "I only see a cat."

Nico had taken up position on the sofa and was still absorbed in his tabloid. But at the earl's utterance, his ears twitched, and he turned around. "As I must have told you a thousand times, I am *not* a cat!"

Recently, Edgar had taken to kissing her at every opportunity, regardless of their surroundings. Lydia therefore needed to be careful not to let such an opportunity present itself when there were other people around. With only Nico in the room, she had let her guard down, but his presence was still enough for her to feel embarrassed.

"You've nothing to worry about, Lydia. How I kiss you in front of others and how I kiss you in private are two very different things."

She couldn't believe he would say something so outrageous within earshot of Nico. Her panic gave Edgar the opening he needed to give her a rapid peck on the lips. Nico sighed. Lydia blushed.

"Edgar, I think you could stand to restrain yourself a little more..."

"Never have I restrained myself more before you."

And yet you still kissed me?

"However, Lydia, I hope that my restraint does not give you the impression that my feelings for you are devoid of passion. I can show you to what extent the opposite is true the moment you so wish."

"Um, no thank you." Though she tried to squirm free, he had her tight in his grasp.

"If...yes, for example, you also find yourself unable to wait for our wedding night, you have only to leap into my arms without hesitation."

"But, I..."

"Difficult to admit, isn't it? Then perhaps I shall make it a habit to extend you an invitation to my chambers every night, lest I miss the moment the mood strikes you."

Lydia despaired at how casually he was able to spout such impropriety. She never knew whether his words were in jest and he was simply teasing her or whether he was being serious. The embarrassment was getting to be overwhelming.

"Here I was, relieved that he wouldn't be endlessly trying to seduce you anymore. But now he whines on and on that he cannot wait until the wedding," Nico muttered.

"Can you blame me? It relates to one of my keenest interests."

"An interest. Is that all this is?"

"Fear not, Lydia, for I have decided that I shan't flirt with any other woman but you for as long as I live!"

In other words, she was going to have to put up with this for the rest of her life.

"You have my condolences," Nico said, vanishing the moment the words were out of his mouth. Lydia had been abandoned.

"But Edgar, we are only just engaged! I'm not used to being...alone with you, and I believe such familiar behavior to be improper given that we have yet to even announce our betrothal," she said in a panic.

His arms were still wrapped around her back. Being alone in his

presence made her anxious. It meant that she couldn't be too conspicuous in avoiding his stare and that she couldn't deny him kisses. It wasn't that she disliked his embrace or the loving feel of his lips, of course. Rather, she had yet to determine how she ought to respond to his displays of affection. How were lovers supposed to behave toward each other when no one else was present? All of this was new to her, and the thought that she wasn't reacting how Edgar would have liked her to when he held or kissed her made her seize up. She struggled to even look at him directly.

"Ah, yes, the announcement. We shall hold it immediately after your audience."

She blinked. "Audience?"

"Am I right in thinking that you will no longer shy away from my kisses once our engagement is common knowledge?"

"Edgar, by 'audience,' you cannot mean..."

"Yes, with Her Majesty, just before your debut."

"I can't meet the *Queen*! I'm a commoner! It will never be allowed!"

"I am sure I shall be able to sort something out." Edgar smiled warmly even as Lydia backed away in a hurry. When he promised to make something happen, it happened, no matter what (underhanded) means he had to employ.





Lydia shook her head emphatically. “You don’t need to go to such lengths for us to be married, surely!”

Even with her wealthy, bourgeois father, the upper classes treated her like she was nothing more than a merchant’s daughter. She shuddered to think how she might be vilified if she met the Queen.

“Your father graduated from Cambridge and teaches at the University of London. He might not be of the gentry in a technical sense, but he ought to be regarded as such in a professional capacity.”

Perhaps, if he were a bishop or a barrister. Her father’s profession might just about put him at the same level of social standing, but it was such a stretch that it seemed to her even more audacious to expect an audience with the Queen.

“Would you truly find it so shameful to announce your engagement to me before my debut?” Lydia asked.

Edgar’s brow furrowed.

“In that case, perhaps you ought to find yourself a wife among the aristocracy instead,” she went on, knowing as she spoke that she was being utterly unreasonable.

Unable to bear things any longer, she rushed from the room.

***

It had been one Lord Constable who had marched most indignantly into the Ashenbert estate about half an hour earlier. Despite having shown up without announcing himself, he had shouted at the butler to summon Edgar as though he were the one being slighted. Tompkins hadn’t had a choice but to interrupt the earl during his meeting with his fiancée and her father. Knowing how much influence Constable had in political circles, Edgar had chosen to see him rather than turn him away.

“I must insist that you take responsibility” were the first words out of his mouth.

“Regarding what matter precisely?”

“I shan’t be told that you have forgotten that you seduced my daughter.”

"I was quite unaware that you *had* a daughter."

Constable's face turned a bright red, an apparent mixture of rage and embarrassment. "Lucinda is a purehearted girl, and she is currently preparing for her debut this year. You have shamelessly taken advantage of her naivety, and I certainly hope you do not expect your show of ignorance to release you from all culpability!"

The man thrust a book in Edgar's direction. The cover was bordered with ribbon, identifying it as a diary belonging to a young girl. He confirmed as much verbally.

"She has written about the love letters you sent her and the occasion on which you came to see her in secret."

"Is it not a breach of privacy to read your daughter's diary without permission?"

"I am her father. It is my duty to know everything regarding her."

"In any case, I have never once sent correspondence to your daughter," Edgar said with confidence. Nowhere did his power of memory excel more than in his dealings with women. "If you are upset that your daughter has been made impure before her debut, I suggest you confirm the details with her before casting aspersions."

"Impure?! You mean to say it went further than a kiss?!"

Edgar stared at the man blankly. He hadn't realized that what they were discussing was so trivial. "You would ask a gentleman to take responsibility for a mere kiss? In that case, I must have at least fourteen different women whom I am obligated to marry before your daughter."

The comment had half been in jest, but Constable looked even more enraged than when he'd arrived. It was in that state that he went home again.

"My lord, I believe that fourteen is a rather modest estimate," Edgar's servant said on his return after seeing Constable out.

"Do you really?"

"Insofar as I am aware—"

"You may keep that knowledge to yourself, Raven. And I would especially ask that you not share it with Lydia."

"I shan't under any circumstances," Raven replied, his tone unusually firm. It must have been borne of the anxiety he

doubtlessly felt every time he witnessed his master upsetting Lydia.

Depression turned to disgruntlement as Edgar recalled his unpleasant guest, and an enraged Lydia left him alone in the smaller reception room. He had no knowledge of what Constable was accusing him of, so it didn't matter how the man vented his anger. He and his daughter would be the ones to lose face. Edgar couldn't foresee it becoming a problem. That was, as long as Lydia didn't find out about it. While she didn't seem to be having doubts, she was rather sensitive at the moment, and the last thing he wanted was for her to suffer unnecessary anxiety about the wedding. In that sense, the matter became one he would need to navigate carefully. It wasn't, however, the most pressing matter afoot.

"Perhaps I really won't be able to convince her to see Her Majesty..."

Lydia was as stubborn and inflexible as ever. Edgar had thought that she would become more trusting of him in his capacity as her fiancé as he worked through the wedding preparations. Though she was still awkward when it came to receiving his affections, he had expected her to thaw, little by little, and for their hearts to grow attuned and ready for the ceremony. The reality was very different. Things were becoming more complicated from one moment to the next.

He didn't doubt that an audience with the Queen would be a heavy burden for Lydia to bear. The reason he wanted to insist was because of the inherent significance of Lydia debuting in high society as Professor Carlton's daughter. It would be meaningless for her to have such an audience after becoming a countess. A woman who just so happened to marry into nobility was not viewed as equal to a woman who was born worthy of her title. He wanted Lydia to have a place in his circles without encountering hostility there, and now was the time to make it happen.

"Miss Carlton has gone home, my lord," Raven remarked as he entered the room. The boy rarely showed emotion, his expression generally impassive, but his apprehension was all too clear to Edgar.

"She has. The idea of an audience with Her Majesty upset her." Though Raven's expression didn't so much as twitch, Edgar

suspected the news had discouraged him. “How do you suppose I might persuade her, Raven?”

“I don’t suppose that you can,” he said plainly. He never had known how to soften the blow.

“Oh?”

“Miss Carlton’s opinions do not change all that easily.”

On that point, the servant was absolutely correct. If Edgar stuck to his guns about the audience, she would likely be even more convinced that he was overly concerned with appearances.

“My lord, I ask that you try not to upset Miss Carlton too much.” Raven’s face was grave. It seemed he feared that Lydia might change her mind about the wedding completely.

Edgar was confident that Raven was just as happy about the upcoming union as he himself was. Should things fall through, the boy might come to resent him. Never had Raven rebelled or interfered in Edgar’s business, but it seemed he was so eager for the wedding to come to fruition that he was prepared to at least state his opinion.

“I simply wish to do as much as possible before any unpleasant happenings,” Edgar said. “I want to give her everything I can.”

Edgar had a powerful enemy. He had sought the title of Earl of Ibrazel in order to protect himself from that enemy, and it was during that time that he and Lydia had met. Her abilities as a fairy doctor had saved him then. He had determinedly kept her by his side to fight against the hostile organization, which was capable of commanding the Unseelie Court. And over the course of their time together, he had fallen deeply in love with her. Presently, and no matter what should happen, he wanted her to stay with him, not for her abilities but because of who she was. For her kindness and the peace he felt when she was by his side.

The leader of the society that had killed his family and tormented him for many years, was dead. His memories, however, which were linked to the core of the organization, remained. They had survived because Edgar had taken them in. Edgar had become the society’s leader: the Prince. He had no idea what would happen now, whether the curse that had given birth to the Prince would alter him or

whether he would act as a seal for those memories and be able to remain himself. In any case, he found himself unable to let go of his hope of a future, including his marriage to Lydia, and he had therefore continued with the wedding preparations without being able to disclose the truth to her. He would marry her and give her everything that was in his power to do so. That ought to protect her, he reasoned, and it was why he was in such a hurry. And a place in aristocratic society was among the things he felt he could give her.

"There shouldn't be any unpleasant happenings. From this point forward, your lordship will be able to live a peaceful life alongside Miss Carlton." Raven was the only one who knew the full details of what had happened. His matter-of-fact assertion gave Edgar courage.

"Yes, you're right. Regardless, I shall be sure to pacify her."

"I do not think she would appreciate it if you were to express too much keenness." The intricacies of emotion eluded Raven, and he spoke even his harshest opinions as plainly as he thought them.

"I know," Edgar said after a pause. Lydia no longer reacted with anger when he touched or kissed her, so he would have liked to think that their relationship had progressed. Why, then, did she seem less receptive than ever when the two of them were alone together? Though Edgar felt his spirits starting to fall again, he didn't have the time to think things through at length. His butler had come to announce the arrival of another visitor.

"My lord, there is a young woman here to see you. Shall I tell her you are absent?" Tompkins asked calmly.

Recently, the estate had seen the odd lady caller. No doubt they came seeking the truth regarding the recent rumors about the earl's betrothal. He had never done more than flirt with any of these women, but he wasn't confident that he would be able to resist thoroughly seducing them when they were present and interested. He was therefore refusing to see them.

Tompkins, Edgar's talented butler, was someone else who was looking forward to seeing Lydia become his wife. He was being careful not to lead his master into temptation and was already eager to see this latest visitor away.

"Yes, please do," Edgar said.

Tompkins therefore seemed puzzled when he was stopped again.

"Did you happen to ask her name, Tompkins?" Edgar knew that his butler would not have forgotten to pass on the visitor's name. Rather, he must have judged that the information was best kept to himself. The earl trusted Tompkins enough that he wouldn't have felt the need to ask but for the calling card in the stout man's grasp. It had the same pink-ribbon border as the diary that Constable had brought with him.

"It is Lady Lucinda, daughter of Lord Constable."

It was just as Edgar had expected. Had she perhaps come to explain her father's misapprehensions? What sort of girl was she, anyway? The earl found his curiosity piqued.

"Show her through to the drawing room."

"Is that wise, my lord?"

"She came wishing to discuss something with me, did she not? I have no intention of being unfaithful to Lydia, Tompkins."

Lucinda was a fair-skinned girl with black hair that had been tied back. She had company in the form of a young, red-haired maid, and she seemed to have been waiting for the earl somewhat restlessly.

"A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Lady Lucinda."

She jumped to her feet like a tightly wound spring. "Good afternoon, Lord Ashenbert." She paused. "I do beg your pardon, but this is not the first time we have met. I wonder if your lordship recalls Her Grace's New Year concert?"

Now that Edgar studied her face, he realized that he did recognize her. She was a rather beautiful young woman. However, he couldn't recall having exchanged more than a few words with her.

"Forgive me. I spoke to quite a number of women at the duchess's party. I am sure I would have remembered your name had I heard it, however."

Neither of them had been introduced to one another. It was why he hadn't been aware that Constable had a daughter.

Lucinda, looking rather bewildered, approached Edgar and

clasped her hands together pleadingly. “I’m sorry. I can only imagine how angry you must be. I haven’t forgotten our promise, and yet I came to see you anyway. But Father saw my diary, and...well, I had written about your lordship...”

Though things were taking a turn for the worse, Edgar remained calm in his response. “Your father called to discuss the matter of your diary. I must confess I could make neither heads nor tails of it. I am not well-acquainted with you, nor do I recall making any promises. As I explained to Lord Constable, I have no recollection of exchanging letters with you either.”

“Your lordship has come to despise me. That’s it, isn’t it? I suppose your proposal was not in earnest either...”

“I’m sorry? I am already betrothed.”

“Impossible... Does your lordship mean to say that I am not the fiancée you have been waiting to name?” Lucinda buried her face in her hands and started to sob.

Bewildered, Edgar tried to pacify her and offered her a seat. He was patient in drawing out information from her and eventually learned that she truly believed she had been exchanging letters with “Lord Ashenbert.” The first letter had arrived without warning. The sender had apparently become enamored with her at first sight at that party in London and had sought her name in order to send her a love letter. It had been signed only with the gentleman’s initials, which were the same as Edgar’s, so Lucinda had been sure it had come from him. The pair had been in correspondence ever since.

“My maid had been receiving his lordship’s letters and sending my responses at the assigned location. He said he wanted to keep our correspondence a secret for the time being.”

“I suppose you are the maid in question?” Edgar looked at the girl Lucinda had brought with her, who gave a modest nod. “Where were the letters sent?”

The maid remained silent.

“Annie hasn’t been able to say a word since birth. She cannot speak, but she can make simple intentions known with hand gestures. I had her take me to where she was delivering the letters,” Lucinda said.

Annie had been taking and receiving the letters at a pub until one day they had come to a sudden halt. The establishment was in the same town where Lucinda lived, on the outskirts of London, and when she had asked the staff, all she had found was that the letters had been picked up by someone who looked like a servant. She had promised the earl that she wouldn't send any letters directly to his estate, so she had been able to do nothing since then but fret.

Personally, Edgar could see no reason for a man to keep such a relationship secret unless he was planning to eventually break things off without creating further trouble for himself. It was pure folly to trust a man like that.

"I was under the impression you had met this gentleman," said the earl. After all, according to Constable and the diary, the pair had kissed.

"Yes, once...under the cover of night."

Apparently, the mysterious man had snuck into the garden of her estate in the dead of night and called to her where she sat beside her window. In truth, Lucinda knew nothing of her lover, including his appearance, and had assumed him to be Edgar the entire time.

Although the earl struggled to contain his sigh, he managed to remain courteous. "While it pains me to be the bearer of bad news, I am not the gentleman you have been corresponding with. There is a strong possibility that you have been deceived."

Lucinda's face turned pale. "Deceived? Does that mean I kissed a stranger?" She trembled, shaking her head as if to deny it while clutching her handkerchief. "I shan't believe it. When we first met, some girls I am acquainted with were speaking ill of me because of my mother's station. I was so upset that I couldn't bear it, and I ran from my seat only to almost collide with your lordship. You spoke so kindly to me then that I fell in love with you."

Now that he was reminded of it, Edgar did have the sense that he had consoled this girl after she was spoken badly of. He also recalled rumors that Constable's first wife had been his younger sister's governess. The governess in question must have been Lucinda's mother.

"I beg you tell me the truth, my lord. What was it about me that

you found so distasteful?"

Edgar had no sympathy for her. Not at their first meeting or now. "If you do not believe me, you are welcome to compare my handwriting to that from the letters."

"I no longer have any of the letters. I was instructed to burn them and dispose of the ashes each time so that our relationship would not be discovered. Only what I recorded in my diary remains, and those entries lack much detail."

The gentleman truly was meticulous, asking her to burn the letters as though they contained classified information. Meanwhile, Lucinda was happily writing about them in her diary, which her father had gone on to read.

"In any case, if you are adamant that I am the man you have been corresponding with, our only option is to make this public and seek judgment from an impartial party. Any further discussion will only prove fruitless."

"No... Nobody must know." She was a young woman from a well-to-do family. For her to have met a gentleman in secret was simply scandalous, so it was no wonder she would rather the matter be kept private. Anxiety hardened her features, and she got to her feet without warning. "I understand so very clearly, my lord. My heart will remain broken whether you are speaking the truth or not. There is nothing left to be said."

Lucinda lowered her gaze as if holding back tears before turning on her heel. There was a pause, as if she was waiting for Edgar to stop her, but he did not.

"Farewell, Lord Ashenbert. I wish you and your fiancée all the best," she murmured, sounding for all the world like she really was breaking up with a lover. Then, she hurried away.

Goodness me.

Edgar stood by the window, exasperated. "That's all very well for her, but I doubt she will be endeavoring to clear me of these false allegations. It was quite the affront."

"Might there be trouble ahead, my lord?" asked Raven, who had been watching over the proceedings quietly. He was concerned about Lydia catching wind of the whole thing and inevitably

assuming that Edgar had indeed seduced Lucinda.

"I am entirely innocent. There is to be no trouble. This young lady has simply jumped to conclusions."

"But this talk of secret letters and sneaking around at night is all very familiar."

Raven's unusually sharp memory could be quite the nuisance. Edgar grimaced.

"That was a long time ago. In America, no less, and I was simply relieving a married woman's boredom... *Anyway*, on this occasion, I am guiltless. There is nothing for you to worry about."

Lucinda might have wanted to believe that she had been corresponding with Edgar, but she seemed to have accepted that he was engaged. Perhaps optimistically, he doubted he would be seeing her again.

An Unexpected Education

"You will have to forgive me, Miss Carlton," Masefield said as she and Lydia sat before their afternoon tea.

The duchess was a gentle elderly woman who had taken a liking to Edgar and looked out for him like she would a grandson. Shortly after arriving in Britain, he had been seen cozying up to her to help establish himself as an earl in the aristocracy, but as she had been treating him as family since then, Lydia supposed she didn't consider herself to have been manipulated. Or perhaps it was down to the earl's expertise with women.

Edgar had been open with the duchess about the girl he had set his heart on and had asked her to act as a guardian of sorts to Lydia even before the pair had officially been engaged. That was why the fairy doctor had been staying at the duchess's estate to learn how to be a lady for three days now.

"I have yet to teach you anything, and here I am sending you off to another estate by yourself where you don't even know a soul..."

"Please do not worry, madame. I was due to go next week regardless."

The original plan had been for both of them to travel to the noblewoman's estate. Apparently, she had a well-established reputation for teaching young ladies how to behave in proper company, and Masefield had felt that Lydia would benefit from a brief period under her care. However, the duchess had received news this morning that her eldest daughter had suddenly been taken ill, and she now needed to travel to Derbyshire to see her. There was no telling when Masefield might be back in London, and it wasn't as though she could leave Lydia in the lurch for all that time. So the plans had been moved up, and Lydia would be going to train under the reputable noblewoman almost at once.

"Lady Oughtred is both uncomplicated and kind. She expressed in

her letter that she would be delighted to have you, and I am sure that the same will hold true even if you must see her a little earlier."

"Yes, madame. Please do not overly concern yourself with me. I only pray that your daughter will recover quickly."

"Thank you, Miss Carlton. I shall send her ladyship a telegram as soon as possible. May I ask that you be ready to travel to Somerset tomorrow?"

Somerset was a county in the west of England and far removed from London. It struck Lydia that she wouldn't be seeing Edgar for some time. That said, she hadn't seen him since she had lashed out at him over the proposed audience with the Queen. He would have known that she was at the duchess's estate. Ever since she had accepted his proposal, he had shown up uninvited at her house every single day, even on the Sabbath. There must have been a reason that he wasn't doing the same here. Maybe he had decided that it was best to give her some time to clear her head.

"Lady Oughtred's recommendation should make it easier for you to obtain an audience with Her Majesty, Miss Carlton. It would behoove you to make a good impression."

Lydia's head shot up. It was obvious now that she thought about it, but of course Edgar had discussed her establishment in noble society with the duchess. No wonder Masefield was determined to see her education through, even if it meant sending her to another estate. Having Lydia meet with the Queen was no mere whim on Edgar's part. He had no intention of changing his mind. That was why he hadn't come running to console her. Again, Lydia was reminded that she was marrying into nobility. She was marrying an *earl*. The question wasn't whether it would shame him to marry a girl from the upper-middle class. Rather, she had no choice but to put in the effort required to blend into the aristocracy. If she didn't, there would be no place for her by Edgar's side. Unless he decided that he would keep his title but step back from high society in order to be with her, *she* would have to be the one to overcome the class barrier between them.

"I shall do my utmost." Lydia was surprised by the note of determination in her voice. For all she knew, all of this was beyond

her.

Masefield smiled brightly. “That is wonderful to hear. Oh, one more thing. It concerns your escort to Somerset. Since I shall be traveling to Derbyshire, I am a little short of hands...”

“I shall be perfectly all right traveling alone, in that case.” She often traveled by herself from her Scottish hometown to London, after all, and the capital to Somerset was a much simpler journey.

The duchess gently dismissed the notion. “I have taken charge of you, Professor Carlton’s most precious daughter. It would be remiss of me to send you off alone, especially when you are unmarried. It just so happens that a maid of mine is transferring to Somerset, so I shall have her accompany you to Lady Oughtred’s estate.”

Lydia realized that no matter how used to taking trains alone she was, it wasn’t a fact to be shared with other people.

“Lord Ashenbert confessed to me that he is perfectly content with you just the way you are, Miss Carlton. He has not entrusted you to me that I might change you. You simply need to learn the behavior required in certain situations. It isn’t that you are not permitted to travel alone, but you must learn how to conduct yourself flawlessly around those with whom you are less acquainted. That is what it comes down to.”

“Yes, madame.”

The problem was that the idea of being flawless sounded rather daunting. She wondered whether she could manage it. What if Lady Oughtred took a disliking to her? When she tried to quash her anxiety, she found herself longing all the more to see Edgar before she left. But she hesitated to go and meet him herself. She still wasn’t confident that she would be ready to enter his level of society as he expected her to. If she went to see him now, wouldn’t he think that she was giving up all hope? They were engaged, having ascertained their feelings for one another. However, Lydia had not yet reached the stage where she would understand that it was all right to confess one’s fears and doubts to one’s lover and want nothing more than comfort in return.

The next day, having failed to muster up the courage to see

Edgar, Lydia boarded a train with Masefield's maid. The scenery past the window consisted of vast layers of tranquil, green hills. Even within England, there was a particularly rich tapestry of fairylore originating in Somerset. Though it was Lydia's first time visiting the county, it somehow felt as though she was returning after a long spell away. Perhaps it was because she could sense the presence of fairies in every unobtrusive hillock or thick, isolated forest that she saw.

"You come from Somerset yourself, don't you?" Lydia asked the maid. Masefield had mentioned that she had let the girl go after she had expressed a desire to find employment in her hometown. "Do you know the Redshanks? Or you might know them as the Danes?"

Her companion gave a puzzled frown but nodded all the same. "My grandmother told me about them once. She said that they've hidden treasure and that coming upon it would make one gloriously wealthy."

"Yes, they are real chatterboxes and liable to let slip about that treasure. But even if you were to glean any information from them, I would think twice before attempting to take the riches for yourself. If you promise them instead that you'll keep what you've heard to yourself, they will grant you one wish."

"But Miss Carlton, it's just a fairy tale."

It was far from a surprising response. The number of people who believed in fairies was steadily decreasing. Lydia let the subject go with a noncommittal smile. The only circumstance under which it was safe to bargain with the Danes was when one knew the location of their treasure. It was unwise to make any request of them without holding that secret to give in exchange. It essentially unlocked their magic to the haggling human. But if that human instead made a request on a whim, the contrary fairies were likely to use that magic for much less pleasant purposes. The safest option was therefore to ignore any information the talkative Danes might let slip. The maid might well have heard the same from her grandmother, but she probably wasn't interested either way.

"Miss Carlton, you're referring to the Vikings when you speak of the Danes, aren't you? If it is true that they were once in Somerset,

then it's possible that the treasure they pillaged is hidden somewhere nearby."

"No, I do not mean Vikings, although that is a common misconception. I mean the ancient fairies believed to have a connection to the goddess, Dana."

"I see..."

It was just as Lydia decided to drop the matter, since the conversation was going about as well as she had expected, that the conductor arrived and saved her the trouble. She let out a sigh of relief. They would soon be pulling in at the station.

As they alighted, the maid checked the clock on the platform. "We've arrived rather late, haven't we, Miss Carlton?"

"So we have. And you have another train to catch, don't you?"

The maid was due at her new place of employment immediately. The plan was for her to accompany Lydia to Lady Oughtred's estate between her trains, but doing so at this point risked her missing her connection.

"Yes, and it's the last train..."

She was looking rather guilty, and Lydia didn't see that there was a need to force her to come to the countess's estate. The fairy doctor had been told that it would be nearly an hour's journey to get there. Surely it would be permissible to let the maid continue on her way, given the circumstances? Lydia decided she would take the carriage to the Oughtred estate alone. The maid saw her to the carriage, which she took from the station by herself.

Lydia couldn't see a single building, even after the carriage passed through the gate into the grounds. They continued through thick groves for some time. She was aware that country houses tended to be magnificent structures situated on impossibly large plots of land. However, she had also heard that Lady Oughtred was a widow and lived alone, and it crossed her mind that to live in such an environment under those circumstances must feel all the more isolating.

When they finally arrived at the house itself, she was greeted by a male servant, to whom she explained that she was there at Masefield's request. He asked that she wait before disappearing

inside. At length, an older woman in plain navy clothing emerged.

"What's your name?"

"Lydia Carlton."

"Mine's Boyle."

Not Lady Oughtred, then.

"You'll be answering to me from now on. All right?"

This woman must have been charged with Lydia's education. Instructing her new student to follow, she set off at a walk. Given the size of the estate, its corridors and stairs were naturally vast, but for whatever reason, Boyle instead started down a particularly narrow passageway. Lydia's dress wasn't especially extravagant, but a woman in a proper gown would surely find her frills and ribbons rubbing against the walls. And even Lydia needed to hold down her skirts to pass through.

"Your last place must've been quite comfortable. Don't expect the same here." The glance Boyle threw at what was among Lydia's best dresses bordered on disgust.

The fairy doctor had judged it polite not to arrive at Lady Oughtred's estate overdressed. She must have overlooked something.

"Seems like there are a lot of maids who grow bigheaded from being granted their mistress's hand-me-downs, but that doesn't happen here. First things first, you'll need to change into something more modest."

"Maids?"

Lydia still didn't understand by the time they had climbed a long flight of cramped stairs and come to what appeared to be an attic.

"This is your room. Come to see me in mine once you've changed. It's under the stairs."

With that, Lydia was left quite alone in the tiny attic room. There was a shabby bed by the small window, a writing desk and chair, and nothing else, for there simply wasn't the space for it. There was no doubting the fact that this room was meant for a servant. She wondered whether there had been a mistake. Or perhaps she had been assigned this room according to Lady Oughtred's instructions. She endeavored to convince herself that this was part of her bridal

education, or possibly a test to see whether she was suitable to marry into nobility.

"Yes, her ladyship must have discerned that it will behoove me to experience life as a servant."

In any case, she mustn't let her dissatisfaction show. Both Edgar and Masefield were relying on her completing Lady Oughtred's education and earning the countess's approval. It was as she was affirming to herself her desire to succeed that the door opened, revealing an apron-clad maid behind it. She handed Lydia a similar uniform in silence. Then, she turned on her heel to leave.

"Excuse me, but who is Miss Boyle, precisely?"

"Mrs. Boyle. She is the housekeeper at this estate."

"I see. She seems rather strict."

"We must avoid idle chatter during work hours." The maid left promptly then, without giving Lydia a chance to ask her remaining questions.

There was one thing, however, that had become clear. The housekeeper's word was law. It seemed that Lydia really was to be treated like a servant here. She couldn't help but be a little bit doubtful of Lady Oughtred's methods, if that was indeed what this was. But pondering it would solve nothing, so she changed into the maid's uniform, left the room, and started down the long stairs again.

"Dawdling, weren't you? You'll have to get dressed faster than that or the sun will have set by the time you get to work."

Lydia shrank back. It had taken no time at all for her to earn a scolding from Mrs. Boyle. The housekeeper's eyes were sharp as she examined Lydia's clothing for the slightest speck of dust. The fairy doctor had put her hair up into plaits, feeling she ought to have it out of the way. Mrs. Boyle took one between her fingers and declared that they should be done up more tightly.

"You won't be receiving special treatment just because you're a maid. I'll be putting you to work elsewhere when her ladyship has no use for you."

It transpired that Lydia would be attending to Lady Oughtred personally. It made sense if she supposed that the countess had an

ulterior motive in having her work as a servant.

"Forgive me, but it was Lady Oughtred who asked that I be hired as a maid, wasn't it?"

Mrs. Boyle frowned as though it were a foolish question. "Of course it was. Now, I'd like you to deliver the tea to her ladyship. She takes it at this time every day, so you'd do well to remember that."

"Yes, madame."

"I should mention that her ladyship has been confining herself to her chamber for a number of days now. When she is in her chamber, you mustn't go further than the antechamber. Don't open the door, but announce yourself, then leave the tea outside it."

"Why is she staying in her chamber?" Lydia asked, surprised.

"Don't ask prying questions."

"Yes, madame..."

"When you serve her ladyship's meals or tea, you must always ask if there's anything else you can do for her. You must *not* address her at any other time, no matter how urgent things are. Do you understand?"

It sounded as though Lydia wouldn't be meeting Lady Oughtred at all, much less be given an opportunity to ask about this apparent education of hers. Not to mention that, from what she had heard of the countess, she hadn't imagined for one moment that the woman would be holed up in her room. Masefield had spoken of her as a paragon of an upper-class woman. Though she had withdrawn from society after the death of her husband, she had continued her friendship with the royal family and was still well-known as an excellent teacher of proper etiquette. She was supposed to be both refined and of an outstanding nature, the sort of person everyone could aspire to be. Perhaps, then, she was suffering from illness. But if that were the case, wouldn't she have refused to take Lydia on when the duchess asked?

Ever more confused about the curious and unexpected situation she had found herself in, Lydia took the tea tray and headed to the mistress's chamber as instructed. It was on the second floor on the southern side of the building.

Once she had made it as far as the antechamber, she called out. "The tea is ready, my lady."

Though there came no response, she could hear stirring from deep within the room.

"Is there anything else I might do for you?"

"No! Away with you!"

It was a much scratchier voice than Lydia was expecting. She had heard that Lady Oughtred was around forty, but the voice sounded more like it belonged to an elderly woman. She grew anxious that the countess might be ill after all.

"Forgive me, but are you feeling unwell? My name is Lydia Carlton. I am here to study etiquette, and—"

"Quiet! How dare you speak out of turn? You would do well to leave at once, lest you wish to face the consequences!"

Along with the shout came a violent kick at the door that made Lydia jump, and she hurried away at once. She couldn't for the life of her understand what was happening. Was the woman she had spoken to *really* Lady Oughtred? Despite her doubts, it wasn't as though she could force the bedroom door open and let herself in. Even if she did, she didn't know what the countess looked like.

As she was descending the stairs, she heard a commotion from the reception room by the entrance hall. It seemed there was a guest, or perhaps guests, and Mrs. Boyle and a number of senior servants were off to greet them.

"Excuse me, but could you carry that for me?"

Lydia turned around to see that it was a black-haired girl who had addressed her. The girl was pointing at an ivory box in the reception room.

"It's a lovely jewelry box, don't you think?" she went on. "I have decided to borrow it during my stay, so I would like for you to bring it to my room. My maid has her hands full already."

The maid in question appeared to be the ginger-haired girl who was dipping her head apologetically. The box must have been valuable indeed. Roses were engraved on it, and it was bordered with silverwork. Mrs. Boyle looked anxious when Lydia lifted it with both hands.

“Do be careful with that, Lydia. Lady Lucinda has the guest room at the end of the third floor, on the left.”

Lydia was still unused to her new role, but she managed a nod despite her continuing bewilderment.

“I am going to rest in my room for a short while, father.” Lucinda was addressing a rather rotund gentleman.

“Will you be coming down for supper?”

“No, I haven’t much of an appetite today.”

“Oh? Well then, rest for as long as you need to.”

Lucinda was dainty and fair-skinned, and Lydia thought that her somber air only added to her eye-catching beauty. Even the way the girl slowly climbed the stairs was calculated as to make the hem of her dress sway most elegantly. Her maid followed as silently as ever.

“Your name is Lydia, yes? Have you been employed at this estate for long?” Lucinda asked as they walked.

“No...” She faltered in her response. She hadn’t come here expecting employment, so she hesitated to announce herself as a new maid. “Are you perhaps a relative of her ladyship’s?” she asked, genuinely curious, but her question seemed to cause offense.

“Goodness! You don’t know who I am?” Though Lucinda retained a gentle tone, her smile was evidently artificial, and there was displeasure deep in her gaze.

Lydia struggled with her response. Lucinda might have looked like the docile daughter of a nobleman, but perhaps she was rather haughty.

“Never mind. Lady Oughtred is my dear aunt. Lord Constable is my father. Do be sure you do not have to ask again.”

“I’m very sorry.”

Apparently, the noble girl deemed it unacceptable that Lydia should go another second without knowing everything that was impressive about her, and so she continued. “I shall be debuting this year, so I have come in the hopes that my dear aunt can teach me all I need to know. Once I have her approval, there will be no one in society left ignorant of my worth.”



In that case, perhaps she would be beginning her education as a maid just like Lydia. Or perhaps not, since she was a relative and not a commoner marrying an earl.

Unsurprisingly, the guest room that Mrs. Boyle had chosen for Lucinda could not even compare to Lydia's attic room. It was a bedroom equipped with a dressing room. The fairy doctor supposed that there really would be no greater affront to a noble girl than to expect her to work as a maid.

"And that isn't the only reason I have come here either," Lucinda went on. "My *fiancé* will be arriving very soon."

"Is that right?"

"We have been exchanging correspondence for some time now. He will be coming to discuss the proposal he made to me with my father. We came up with the plan together. My father would only be suspicious if he came to our home directly, so if we have him come here instead and pass it off as a coincidence, things should unfold much more smoothly."

"How wonderful."

"Father, however, is of the opinion that I am still a child. I am not entirely confident that the plan will prove successful."

"I am sure you have nothing to fear. He is your father; he ought to understand."

As she spoke, Lydia was reminded of her own situation. She lowered her head to conceal her blushing cheeks. She had expected her own father to think her too childish to marry, but he had been surprisingly quick to grant his permission. He had said that she always seemed happy whenever she spoke to Edgar. As far as she was concerned, rather than making her happy, the earl's presence still sent her heart into disarray. She could be all manner of things, from nervous to embarrassed to bewildered to irritated to completely overwhelmed. But her father's words had her thinking that perhaps that was what happiness was. That was why, despite not understanding Lady Oughtred's intentions, she wanted to give her all to the challenge facing her.

"Yes, you might be right. I do hope I can rely on your assistance should things go awry."

Lucinda was more talkative than Lydia had assumed she would be. Meanwhile, the maid by her side had yet to utter a single word for some reason.

"Would you put that jewelry box underneath the bed for me?"

Lydia did as she was told, wondering whether the jewels Lucinda intended to place within it were so valuable that they warranted hiding. When she stood up, she inadvertently met the other maid's eyes. "Might I ask for your name?" she tried.

The maid's eyes widened in surprise before she shook her head slightly, keeping her silence.

"Her name is Annie. She cannot speak," Lucinda replied in her stead. "Anyway, Lydia, can you tell me what sort of person my dear aunt is?"

"I'm sorry?"

"You may be surprised to learn that I have never met her. She and father didn't get on very well, so this is my first time coming to her estate. Father understands that her support will contribute to my future, so he decided to make amends."

"I have only just arrived today myself."

"Really? Why, that's a pity. I had thought this would be the perfect opportunity to learn all about her, seeing as she has been bedridden for some time now. I suppose you don't know anything about her regard necklace either, in that case?"

A regard necklace was a pendant decorated with a variety of gemstones, and the first letter of each of them spelled out a word of significance. As the name suggested, "regard" was the most conventional word spelled out on these types of necklaces, imbuing them with a message of affection and respect.

"I hear it is so splendid as to leave one wide-eyed," Lucinda said. "My dear aunt has so much jewelry that she has never worn the same piece twice, and yet apparently that necklace is particularly wonderful. It uses flowers in its motif and contains hundreds of gems of five separate types. Have you not seen it?"

Lydia shook her head. She hadn't even been in the countess's room.

"It was a gift from her departed husband. I was wondering

whether I might borrow it when I go to the royal court."

Lydia couldn't even begin to imagine the splendor of such a necklace. And high society was where so many of the girls adorned in such jewelry gathered. Edgar wanted to bring Lydia there and have her be a part of it, but she wondered whether she was worthy when she couldn't even provide her own dress, shoes, or accessories by way of a trousseau.

Once she had started to think, she was struck by a possibility. Perhaps Lady Oughtred had no intention of allowing her, a middle-class girl, to enter society's upper stratum. What if the countess had invited the noble-born Lucinda and her fiancé here to show Lydia an example of what a *proper* aristocratic marriage should look like? If her ladyship had the fairy doctor working as a maid in order to teach her her proper place, then it wouldn't matter how hard Lydia worked—the countess would never approve of her.

No, that cannot be the case. I am sure she will recognize my efforts, if only I do my utmost.

Lydia chased away the impending gloom by choosing to be optimistic and left Lucinda's room behind her. However, she was unsuccessful in concealing her sigh.

"This certainly wasn't the education I expected," she murmured to herself. Realizing she had spoken aloud, she checked to make sure that there was nobody nearby. Then, she sighed again.

It was as she trudged along the hall's perimeter that she heard the sound of a carriage approaching the porch. Assuming another visitor, she directed her gaze outside the window. It must have been the gentleman whom Lucinda told her about. Vaguely curious, Lydia kept watch. The moment the carriage door opened and the man stepped out of it, she had to bring her hand to her mouth to stop herself from crying out. She was very familiar with his slender figure, even from the back, and how he was dressed flawlessly from the top of his hat to the tips of his shoes.

"Edgar?" Flustered, Lydia hid herself behind the curtain. Presently, he approached the entrance hall with Raven. He wouldn't see her from this angle. "What is he doing here?"

She tried to quash her agitation and remain calm. Just because

he was here didn't necessarily mean he was Lucinda's fiancé. In fact, he *couldn't* be the man she spoke of. He was engaged to Lydia. Edgar knew that she had been planning to ask Lady Oughtred to educate her. He might only be here because he had business with the countess. Or perhaps Masefield had been in touch with him and he was here to see how Lydia was getting on.

"Yes, he might be here to see *me*."

The idea wasn't exactly cause for enthusiasm. She really didn't want him to witness her undertaking servant work. And, even if this *was* a vital facet of Lady Oughtred's education, a part of her would rather not have to see him unless she was wearing something halfway pretty. Never before had she been so conscious of her attire, and she remained unaware of the fact that her feelings for him had deepened to the extent that she feared an unsatisfactory appearance might make him fall out of love with her. All she knew was that she didn't want him to see her as she was.

Lydia rushed into the servant's quarters just as she heard a butler welcoming Edgar into the building.

***

Edgar's meeting with Lady Oughtred had been planned for some time, and he was still under the impression that Lydia wasn't due here until next week. Securing the good word of an older noblewoman was indispensable if they hoped for his fiancée to be welcomed into the upper classes. Edgar had never been granted the opportunity to meet Lady Oughtred directly, so he had asked Masefield to organize Lydia's education in his place. However, he had also wanted the chance to speak with the countess face-to-face. Not only that, but someone of vital importance was due to be visiting this estate imminently.

There were a number of threads that Edgar planned to bring together in coming here, but he found himself at a loss when he was informed upon his arrival that he wouldn't be able to meet with the countess for some time. It was something to do with a chronic illness, apparently. However, he was caught even more off guard

when it transpired that Constable *also* had a party staying here. The older earl was likely still under the impression that Edgar had attempted to seduce his daughter. Lucinda hadn't seemed inclined to convince him otherwise. Edgar would have liked to have explained the situation to Lady Oughtred before Lydia's arrival to avoid any misunderstandings, but it seemed there would be no chance of that now.

He sighed as he looked over the estate's vast gardens through the window and murmured, "I wonder what Lydia is up to at the moment..."

Raven, as earnest as ever, checked his pocket watch. "I daresay she will be having tea." Lydia's timetable at Duchess Masefield's estate was highly regulated, so the servant was likely to be right.

"No, Raven. I was actually wondering whether I am presently occupying Lydia's thoughts just as she is mine."

"That," he hesitated, "is a difficult question to answer."

Edgar couldn't blame his servant. Edgar and Lydia might have been engaged, but he still wasn't certain exactly how she felt about him. He had worked hard to win her heart. Naturally, he believed that she did hold affection toward him and that her acceptance of his proposal hadn't just been a case of him wearing her down. However, he didn't get the sense that her heart was aflame with passion for him. For example, she had never declared her love for him, and he seemed to be the only one eager to be alone together or to be in physical contact with her. For her part, she merely seemed to be going along with his desires. It must have been because they were engaged now that she felt unable to respond with a firm rejection. But, Edgar thought, perhaps it didn't matter so much after all. Wanting more from her was nothing but selfishness on his part. It was enough that she was by his side. That ought to be the desire that trumped all others.

"It is a basic rule of romance that kindness does little to encourage affection. I suppose this is simply a natural consequence of having fallen for her before she did me."

Previously, Edgar had enjoyed romance like it was a game to which he could apply certain principles. However, his feelings for

Lydia were different. Though he wanted her to love him, he wasn't prepared to act as if his own love had grown cold to achieve it. The matter was settled by the fact that he enjoyed watching her try to act as a lover should, despite being at a loss. She was as dear to him at the height of her bewilderment as she was at any other time. He wasn't especially inclined to employ any of his usual tactics when it came to her. While he might have withheld kisses under normal circumstances, doing so in her case seemed like a ridiculous notion, and he was similarly loath to limit his time with her. That wasn't to say that he was entirely satisfied with the way things were, however.

"If only she would ask to see me, I would come running."

Though they hadn't seen each other in some time, Lydia had yet to say she missed him.

"In that case, why did you not go to see her, my lord?" Raven asked, slightly miffed at his master's inaction.

"I shall want to kiss her if I see her again. Was it not you who warned me against expressing too much keenness?"

"Keenness itself ought not to be a problem as long as it remains within the confines of what Miss Carlton is comfortable with."

"Lydia is not uncomfortable in my presence, Raven. She is merely a trifle shy."

"I see," he responded hesitantly.

"And the more she expresses such shyness, the more tantalizing I find her. It is therefore unreasonable to expect me to restrain myself when she stands before me." She could, however, stand to look just a little bit happier about his affections.

In the rolling gardens below, there was a maid drifting about the far-off shrubbery, her hair in plaits. She seemed to be lost. Unaware that he was watching his fiancée, Edgar found his mind wandering to Lydia, who had seemed similarly downcast as of late.

***

There hadn't been enough roses to decorate the supper table, and Lydia had been sent out to the gardens to fetch some more. Unsure where they were grown, she had been roaming in search of

them.

"These gardens are far too big."

There wasn't even anybody around to ask where the rosebeds were. It was as she was reconsidering her options that she spotted a wild rabbit running through some nearby flowers.

"Excuse me! I have a question!" she called, chasing after it.

The rabbit stopped and turned around. "You can see me?"

In fact, it was a fairy wearing a rabbit pelt. To an ordinary person, it would look just like an animal.

"I was wondering whether you might tell me where I can find the rose garden," Lydia said.

"The rose garden? Steal our precious roses, will you?"

"I'm sorry? I don't wish to steal anything."

"Hogwash! Why else would a *human* be asking after the rose garden?!" The fairy, itself the size of a rabbit, thrashed about, the ears on its hat swaying, its brown-furred cloak fluttering, and its large, rabbit-foot boots stomping. Its wild movements revealed the red hair covering its shins.

It's a Dane!

Lydia kept a close eye on it as she softened her tone. "I am a fairy doctor."

"Hmph! That doesn't make you more trustworthy than any other human! Not one of them knows when to keep their mouths shut! No chatterbox like that is going to get into the rose garden!" With that, the fairy vanished among the roots of a nearby thicket.

"Fairies are far more loose-lipped than people are," Lydia muttered to herself bitterly.

"Why are you talking to a rabbit?"

Panicked, she spun around to see a young male servant standing behind her. "Oh, I wasn't—"

"You were talking to yourself? I understand wanting to complain. Mrs. Boyle is quite strict." The young man was clearly taking an unauthorized break from his duties. His short hair and jacket were covered in grass and he smelled of tobacco. "You're the new maid, Lydia, aren't you? I'm Billy, a footman." He had a rugged air about him, but there was something affable in the way his face creased

when he smiled.

"It's nice to meet you," Lydia said.

Billy studied her like she was a curiosity. "Likewise, but I have to wonder how long you'll last. Most of the maids move on very quickly."

"Do they?"

"Mm. Her ladyship's a strange one, isn't she? That's why the estate's always looking for new hires."

Lydia wondered whether she was partly being used to alleviate the staff shortage.

Billy grabbed her hands while she was thinking. "These are very clean hands. I suppose you're a middle-class girl who's been forced into servantship for some reason? Honestly, there was no need for you to be sent here of all places."

Lydia was swift in pulling her hands away. "Where is the rose garden?" she asked quickly.

"Just keep following that gorse-lined path."

"Thank you. If you will excuse me, I ought to return to my duties."

Lydia rushed away. The path didn't bend for some time, and she could feel Billy's eyes on her all the while. Nevertheless, the rose garden emerged at its end as promised. Roses climbed up white stone pillars, creating an arch above her head. She took a step through that entrance and discovered a fountain featuring a statue of the Virgin Mary that was surrounded by countless flower beds. It was a beautifully tidy garden. But all of the roses had yet to bloom. Now that she thought about it, it was a little early for roses. She would have been better off going to the greenhouse. However, she stayed where she was, for something had caught her attention at the garden's far end.

There was a tall tree, and from the gloom behind it came a faint glow in all the colors of the spectrum. Lydia approached it, her curiosity piqued. She squeezed herself into the shrubbery beyond the tree and soon found herself in a deep thicket where ivy entwined itself around the roses. As soon as she moved past that, there was a change in elevation beneath her feet. That was what she

immediately thought it was, at least, but the very next moment, she was tumbling into what seemed to be a pitfall.

The landing didn't hurt, because the bottom was covered in a soft carpet of grass. The pit itself, however, was a curious thing indeed. There were stone steps going up one side, so narrow that Lydia could only imagine fairies using them. The hole was just slightly deeper than the height of a human, and the rainbow light glowed only at its opening. It must have been a fairy spell designed to conceal the pit, visible to Lydia only because she was able to see fae. And, at the far end of the hole, there was a long, deeply dug, winding trench. It was undoubtedly a fairy path.

Now that she had found it, Lydia wanted to see how far it went. And so, she began to walk down it. The dirt walls on either side were covered with short blades of grass. The farther she went, the more the grass and the vines among it covered the area above her to block out the sky. The trench had turned into a green tunnel. Still, she continued.

Eventually, she started to see a white light in the gloom ahead. Recognizing it as a probable exit, she upped her pace.

"Oi. What's your wish?" came a disembodied voice.

Lydia could only assume it was a Dane that had spoken. Now that she thought about it, the one she had encountered earlier had lost its temper when she had asked for directions to the rose garden.

"I suppose there's nothing for it now that you've found this path. I'll grant you one wish, but you have to leave immediately!"

It sounded like she would be entering the Danes' territory if she went any farther—and like they wanted to chase her out. As a fairy doctor, however, Lydia was already well aware of what she ought to do next. She needed to ignore the fairy. It and its brethren were engineering a chance to cast a spell that would teach the intruder a lesson.

"The wish can be anything you want. Just say whatever's on your mind and I'll grant it right away."

Any human who couldn't keep their silence at this point would be unable to enter the rose garden. The Dane she had spoken to earlier had said as much. Indeed, it was tempting to speak. Many people

would voice their wish, even if they didn't believe it would be granted, simply because of the *possibility* that their desire would be entertained. But doing so would give the Danes a chance to cast their spell and lead to nothing but tragedy. Lydia kept her mouth firmly closed and took another step toward the whitish light. She had no doubt that the Danes' secret rose garden lay beyond.

Countless roses were in full bloom beneath a layer of white mist. Each flower seemed to be emitting its own soft glow. When Lydia touched one, the cool, silken petals seemed to stroke her fingers gently in return. The roses' light was iridescent in a way that was reminiscent of seashells. Some of them felt like they were made of pure velvet. Others had petals as translucent as if they were made of glass. As Lydia progressed through the garden, the fairies and their presence vanished completely, as though they knew they couldn't stop her anymore. It was the perfect opportunity for her to wander as she pleased.

"How wonderful," she breathed. Her work forgotten, she stared at the flowers, transfixed.

"Well, isn't this a surprise. It appears we have a guest."

Lydia turned around and was surprised to see a woman rather than a fairy standing behind her. "I'm so sorry. I ought to have asked permission before entering..."

She was middle-aged with sun-kissed skin. She wore a straw hat and a dirt-covered apron, and held a watering can in one hand. Surrounded by the red roses and with a wreath of colorful flowers around her neck, she suited the garden strangely well.

"Please do not concern yourself with that. I am simply the gardener."

Lydia had never heard of fairies employing a human gardener.

"I must confess that this is my first time meeting anybody else here."

The fairy doctor was also surprised to find another person there. "This rose garden belongs to the fairies, doesn't it?"

Naturally, the gardener was well aware of that. She nodded with a smile. "You knew how to reach this place, I suppose?"

"Yes. I am a fairy doctor."

“My, I didn’t know fairy doctors existed. I assumed they were a thing of fairy tales.” She studied Lydia curiously with light-brown eyes before gesturing to a cabin in the corner. “Would you care to join me for some tea? I only have rose tea, though, I’m afraid.”

“I adore rose tea.”

“Oh, good! I do apologize, but I didn’t catch your name.”

“It’s Lydia.”

“I am Virginia. It is a pleasure to meet you.”

Though Lydia had expected the cabin to be a practical structure for holding gardening tools, the inside was neat and tidy, and there was a charming selection of potted herbs and dried flower wall ornaments. It was like a small home one might find in the countryside. There was a comfortable warmth about the log table and chairs, and a ladderlike staircase led up to the attic, which suggested a bedroom might be hiding there.

“To tell you the truth, this is my home,” Virginia said before Lydia could ask.

“Do you live by yourself?”

“I cannot leave until a new variety of rose blooms.”

“Do you mean to say you are trapped here by fairy magic?”

Virginia nodded and turned her gaze to a narrow vase holding a coral-colored rose. She went on to explain that she loved cultivating roses and selectively bred the flowers to develop new colors and shapes, all while managing the estate’s rose garden. One day, the master—presumably the late Lord Oughtred—had informed her that the fairies had their own garden somewhere on the grounds.

“I was told that I must wear this should I ever try to enter the garden in question,” Virginia brought a hand to the flower wreath around her neck, “and that I mustn’t give voice to my wish even if the fairies asked me to do so. For a long time, I never believed that there was such a garden, until I tried following the instructions I had been given. Only then was I able to stumble upon this place. That was when I started to come by here almost every day.”

According to Virginia, the roses bloomed all year round here. The mysterious flowers would wither at once if they were brought back to the human world. Even the seeds wouldn’t bud if they were sown

outside. She expressed her disappointment at being unable to properly study such a rare kind of rose.

"Eventually I wanted so keenly to be able to cultivate these curious flowers and watch them bloom from my own efforts that I expressed as much to the voice asking for my wish."

Her wish had been granted, and she had become the Danes' gardener. The fae were likely aware of her passion for roses and her skill in nurturing them. That was why they had warped her wish into a contract rather than subjecting her to the horrors of their magic.

"That isn't to say that I dislike what has become of my life. The fairies are ever so delighted when a new variety of rose blooms. That is when I am able to go back to the human world and my ordinary way of life. But I inevitably come to miss this place each time and return of my own volition."

Presumably, she would likewise long for the human world again after a while and cultivate a new rose species accordingly.

The tea had a sublimely rich fragrance. It was like a sigh from a rose that had just awoken and opened its petals. For a short spell, Lydia's tired, anxiety-laden mind was afforded some respite.

Lost Regards

Naturally, Edgar was aware that Constable would be seated at the same supper table. But the younger earl had no reason to run and hide. Though meeting him would no doubt be uncomfortable, Edgar had no intention of withdrawing while he waited for a chance to speak with Lady Oughtred and the arrival of the very important guest. And so he sat down at the dining table.

Constable, who was already seated, glared at him sharply. "It's certainly a surprise to see you here, Ashenbert. I wonder whether you've had a change of heart? If you are here to apologize to me and wish for my dear sister to assist in bringing you and my daughter together, then I shan't stand in your way."

Edgar smirked inwardly. "Ah, yes. Lady Oughtred *is* your sister, isn't she? Although I understand that her late husband wasn't particularly fond of you."

Constable was visibly displeased. "My sister and I were estranged. It was nothing deeper than that."

"I do have to wonder about your reasons for wishing to reconcile with her ladyship now. There are rumors circulating that you have your eye on her fortune."

The older earl was growing more disgruntled by the second. "Is this an attempt to humiliate me?"

"I am simply repeating the rumors that I have heard."

"I might ask the same of you: Why have *you* made contact with my dear sister? One hears of these scoundrels who attempt to seduce elderly widows for the sake of gaining a better reputation."

"My fiancée will soon be coming to receive an education from Lady Oughtred. I have come to make her ladyship's acquaintance beforehand."

Although it was rumored that Edgar was engaged, Constable seemed surprised to hear it confirmed by the man himself. He had

fallen silent. Unfortunately, any expectations of a peaceful supper were cut short.

"You are unscrupulous beyond belief!" Constable cried suddenly. "You are engaged, and yet you would write to my daughter and—"

"Can you really be certain that everything Lady Lucinda wrote in her diary is the truth? Diaries are not meant for the eyes of others, and I am sure that some people use them to explore fantasy."

"My daughter's dissipated fantasies could not have come from *nothing*."

"I see. So either your daughter has been partaking in dissipated activities, or she has merely been having dissipated fantasies. Would it not be more comforting to believe the latter?"

His face bright red, Constable shot to his feet. "I am afraid to say that this supper has become unpleasant. Do not think that you will get away with your impropriety, Ashenbert." With that, the older man left the dining room, leaving the remainder of his food uneaten.

While Edgar would rather not make enemies out of fellow noblemen, in this instance he considered it unavoidable. Quite apart from anything else, he was totally innocent of what Constable was accusing him of. And even if he weren't, he was confident that he could spin things so that he was in the right. He had plenty of tools at his disposal. Even if Constable insisted on creating a scandal out of the issue, Edgar knew how to fight back in a way that would prevent the older man from ever being able to show his face in noble society again.

However, he *really* didn't want Lydia to learn of this. It seemed that she was finally starting to believe that his feelings for her were genuine, and this risked it all coming to naught. Fortunately—or so he thought—he still had a few days' leeway before she was due to arrive.

"At last, I am able to enjoy the food before me," Edgar murmured to himself, calling the butler over to pour him some more champagne. He studied the liquid. "Yes, this is just the quality I would expect from Lady Oughtred."

"You flatter us, my lord."

"The food is just as excellent. It truly is a shame that her ladyship

no longer hosts parties since being widowed. I've heard that the cook's food and the overall hospitality here is of a level that one is hard-pressed to find at other estates."

"Her ladyship may indeed not host such parties, but we see countless visitors who come out of adoration for her. Our duty is to work to such standards to ensure that her ladyship's reputation does not come under scrutiny." Though he spoke humbly, the butler seemed undoubtedly pleased with Edgar's praise.

It was often said that in order to enjoy one's stay at another's estate, it was important to leave a favorable impression on the staff. More so, even, than on the master and mistress themselves. Not only that, but Edgar reckoned that his own good impression would work to damage the impression of the haughty Lord Constable. Slighting the estate's staff was unwise. The opinion of a longstanding, senior servant was capable of influencing that of the master or mistress themselves. At this rate, Edgar should be able to ensure that Lady Oughtred would take his side if Lucinda's mystery correspondence became an issue.

"Might I ask for a splash more of this Genovese sauce?" said Edgar.

The butler shot a glance at the servant who was standing with the tureen in hand, only for it to go over the latter's head. Only when the staff member next to him whispered "Billy!" did he snap back to his senses. He must have been relatively new to his position. When he eventually did come over, he was rather clumsy in his use of the spoon. Gazing at his scraggy hands, Edgar had the sense that something wasn't quite right. They were quite obviously hands that handled weaponry, not those suited to service.

***

Annie was tying Lucinda's hair. She picked up the brush as carefully as she could.

"Ouch! That *hurts*!"

The maid jumped, but then lowered her head slightly in apology. Lucinda grew irritated. It didn't matter how carefully Annie was

working—she was making a pig's ear of it.

"You need to be making these curls neater. Do not forget that I am going to be meeting *Lord Ashenbert*."

Lucinda had been looking into where he would be calling and when. The connections between noble houses formed a complex web. All she needed to do was visit a house he was acquainted with and ask. Someone there would inevitably know something. The Ashenbert estate was of interest to most everybody. Even just paying attention to hearsay could teach one which houses the earl was close to or with whom he had recently been in frequent contact with, as evidenced by how often servants were seen coming and going from his estate. As such, Lucinda had learned that he was due at Lady Oughtred's estate today, and she was eager not to waste the opportunity. She'd changed her own plans at the last minute in order to engineer a "chance encounter."

"Not *that* ornament, Annie. I said I wanted the coral one!"

Flustered, the maid searched around for the coral hair ornament. As completely useless as she was, Lucinda had grown fond of the recent hire. She didn't need her lady's maid to be clever or competent. Annie was slow and unable to ponder complex matters, and that was fine by Lucinda. Best of all, she was incapable of spilling secrets. She wouldn't tell that the girl's diary was filled with lies, nor would she explain that Lucinda had deliberately let her father see its pages to make him think she was in a relationship with Lord Ashenbert.

As far as the earl was concerned, Lucinda was a pitiable girl who had been taken advantage of. When she led him to believe that even a kiss was enough to agitate her, he was bound to pity her even more. She smiled at her reflection in the mirror. It was a perfectly timid and fragile smile, and she knew well that it enhanced her beauty. She was confident that she would be able to arouse any gentleman's interest after her debut.

"While I am sure that this knowledge will prove useless to you, Annie, I want you to know that marriage can be likened to competition. The girl who captures the heart of the most sought-after bachelor is the winner. Having an esteemed husband is enough

to earn the respect of the upper class at large."

Annie had at last found the coral hair ornament, which she quickly put into place.

"His appearance matters just as much as his position, of course. And Lord Ashenbert is impeccably handsome. There are several girls who harbor a secret affection for him." Lucinda stood up to scrutinize her dress in the full-length mirror. The skirt's organdy frills swayed gently when she turned. "But if I am too passive, I shall never become any closer to him. Lord Ashenbert, more than most, is constantly approached by girls who wish to know him better. With this, I should now have a clear advantage over them."

Marrying a man who was the envy of everyone was the perfect form of revenge. The other girls all thought that Lucinda couldn't possibly marry well due to her mother's station. She would have them eating humble pie. She had latched onto her lie as soon as she'd learned that her initials were identical to those of Lord Ashenbert's fiancée. It had been exhilarating to be at the center of all those envious stares, even if she knew she was being dishonest. It was too late to back out now. Her only option was to turn her fantasy into reality. She had intended for her aunt to assist, but that would probably be impossible if Lady Oughtred was ill. Lucinda would have to put her plan into motion by herself.

"The only question that remains is what to do about his lordship's fiancée." If the rumors were to be believed, she wasn't of noble birth. After all, no one in the upper class had been overheard discussing such an engagement. "I shan't have anything to fear if she is a common girl."

Her mother notwithstanding, Lucinda was undoubtedly the daughter to an earl. She had much more value than a commoner, plain and simple. Not to mention that her aunt was Lady Oughtred, a woman who had dealings with the royal family. Lucinda was of the belief that a gentleman's heart could be swayed by appearance and prestige alone.

***

When Edgar returned to his chamber after supper, he found Lucinda waiting there for him. More specifically, she was in his dressing room, which doubled as a lounge. That did nothing to change the fact that it was a gentleman's private space. The majority of noble girls wouldn't dare enter, with or without a maid. Raven was standing idly in one corner of the room.

"Please forgive me for calling at this late hour, Lord Ashenbert," Lucinda said.

"I was under the impression that you'd forgone supper in order to rest," Edgar replied, standing in the doorway without closing it.

"I dearly wished to speak with you once more. I believe it is God's will that we just so happened to be staying at this estate during the same period."

Edgar would rather have been considered a heathen than worship the god that had arranged this encounter.

"I am in love with you," Lucinda went on.

"Why, thank you."

"I couldn't simply allow you to slip through my fingers..."

"The gentleman with whom you exchanged letters and fell in love wasn't me. Remember?"

"I replied to them because I believed it was *you*."

"In that case I can only apologize. I am already engaged."

Though Lucinda dropped her gaze forlornly, she wasted no time in carrying on. "I have heard that you have had many love affairs, my lord. I am sure that you are presently seeing many lovers as well. It is not uncommon for men to see other women even once they are engaged, but I suppose your fiancée must not approve of that, seeing as you haven't sent any further letters."

"I never sent you any letters in the first place."

"I, on the other hand, am much more forgiving."

She obviously wasn't listening. Edgar was being cornered by a most vexing girl indeed. Perplexed, he ran his fingers through his hair. "You wouldn't be so forgiving if you truly loved me."

"I adore you from the bottom of my heart. That, I am sure of." Lucinda stepped gracefully toward him till she was right by his side. She lowered her gaze and whispered, "If your lordship were to kiss

me, I would be able to tell whether the gentleman I met with that night was you or not."

"You are a bolder girl than I gave you credit for."

"Indeed, falling in love emboldens one."

Her request was undoubtedly a ploy to make him kiss her. However, and much to his discomfort, Edgar did not find it unpleasant to be openly desired, even under such a pretext. What was wrong with indulging a girl who sought a fleeting romance from him, even if she was in love only with the idea of love? And if they became lovers, there would be no reason not to give her everything she wanted, from kisses to time spent alone together.

Edgar looked down at Lucinda, who had her eyes closed and was stretching up slightly. He couldn't help but wonder why she wasn't Lydia. He *wished* that Lydia would want him like this, even if she felt obliged to hide it behind an endearing excuse.

Lucinda claimed to be in love with him. He wondered whether Lydia loved him just as much. Perhaps it was more of a tender affection that she felt for him, knowing his weaknesses and suffering as she did.

"My lord," Raven said firmly. He must have feared that Edgar was at risk of mindlessly kissing the girl in front of him.

Or so the earl thought until he raised his head and noticed his servant's gaze was focused beyond the open doorway. Edgar unconsciously caught Lucinda as she fell against him, then turned as best he could to find a maid standing in the door. Only it wasn't a maid. It was Lydia, rooted to the spot, her eyes wide with shock.

"Um, I... Forgive me." Lowering her head, she hurried away.

What is Lydia doing here? He didn't know, but he did know that he couldn't let her be.

"Deal with this for me, Raven."

Pushing Lucinda away, Edgar rushed after Lydia.

What on earth did I just witness?

As Lydia ran, the image of Edgar and Lucinda on the verge of kissing flashed through her mind, sending her spiraling into confusion. When Lucinda had spoken about her fiancé, had she

meant Edgar? It wasn't out of the question. The earl had had many lovers in the past, and it was quite possible that he had gotten overly zealous in exchanging letters with Lucinda and that they had become overly flirtatious. But even if that were true, the fact remained that he had told Lydia he'd cut ties with all other women. It had looked like Lucinda was being the insistent one. Perhaps Edgar had tried to break things off with her but she was refusing to let him. She had seemed to be taking an assertive attitude with the way she had closed her eyes first...

Though Lucinda didn't seem that far removed from Lydia in age, she would have learned long ago what being a lady meant. She knew how to present herself as beautifully as possible. She would already have been thinking about marriage and knew what the ideal picture of a nobleman's wife was. There was no doubt either that she knew much better than Lydia how to behave when one was being courted. Lydia couldn't imagine herself waiting for a kiss like Lucinda had.

Lucinda was far superior than her in so many ways that Lydia could not avoid the crushing weight of defeat. She sought refuge in a dark hall and, finding it deserted, was finally able to pause for breath. Her eyes found the apron she was wearing, a sight that stilled her thoughts all of a sudden. If she was honest with herself, it was quite possible that she was being ridiculous. She had to be mad to compare herself to a beautiful girl born into nobility. And Edgar may well have found his heart swayed by the advances of someone so perfect. When she considered what she might do in such a situation, she was too weary to come to any other conclusion than that she would just have to accept it. Just as confirmation of their engagement had thrown her into bewilderment, Edgar must have been starting to realize that she was unsuitable to become a countess.

"That must be it. Despite Edgar's apparent enthusiasm, he is exasperated at my inability to properly prepare for our union."

She heard his voice then. "That isn't so. In truth, I do not want anything more than for you to become a part of my household."

As Lydia stepped back, he stepped forward until she had her back

to the window and he was standing immediately before her.

"Why do you keep your distance from me?" Edgar asked.

They were in a dimly lit room with no one else around, and it made Lydia vaguely uneasy. While she knew she oughtn't think of her fiancé as dangerous, it seemed to be something instinctual that was making her act this way.

"I am surprised to see you here, Lydia. I thought that you were due to arrive next week."

He was probably upset at her for failing to keep in touch with him. On top of that, he must have been vexed at the guilt he was made to feel because he had met with Lucinda without knowing that Lydia was here. Whenever Edgar was in such a poor mood, he took on a quietly aggressive air. It was the reason Lydia didn't feel entirely comfortable at present. It was also why she unconsciously turned her gaze away from him.

"It was a very sudden decision. Her Grace's eldest daughter was taken ill, so it was decided that I would impose on Lady Oughtred earlier than planned."

"I see." Edgar placed his hand on her shoulder. "As for the young lady you saw me with—"

"She seems rather fond of you," Lydia stammered.

"She is under a misapprehension. She has been corresponding with a gentleman who shares his initials with mine, and she believes him to be me."

Lydia resisted the urge to ask whether he was *certain* he hadn't been the one writing letters to Lucinda.

"Though I have told her that it wasn't me, she is refusing to believe it, and now I find myself in a fix. She even came to my chamber without permission, as you saw."

Be that as it may, it hadn't seemed like he was treating her like a stranger.

"However, as long as she is Lady Oughtred's niece, I have to maintain a certain level of cordiality." He was preempting Lydia's doubts and making excuses to refute them, something that only made her doubt him all the more. "That is all there is to it. Please do not think that my eyes are wandering. There is no room in my heart

for anyone other than you."

"I know," Lydia responded after a beat. Since their engagement had been confirmed, she had decided she must trust in every one of his words, no matter how suspicious they seemed.

"You aren't angry with me?" Edgar asked.

"What is there to be angry about?"

His eyes seemed to be searching hers for something.

Is he going to kiss me?

Lydia started to panic. She wasn't like Lucinda. She didn't have it in her to simply close her eyes and wait. It was dark and they were alone. Edgar being Edgar, he wouldn't refrain. But Lydia never knew what to do when he kissed her in such circumstances. There was something suffocating about it. She was struggling to hide how flustered she was, and she was sure that he could sense she was becoming restless.

Edgar took his hand away from her. As uncomfortable as she was, she was more bewildered by the fact that he *wasn't* kissing her, and so she found herself glancing at his face. He still seemed very much put out.

"Why aren't you angry? You are well within your rights to suspect something."

Unsure of the intention behind his words, Lydia remained silent.

"What you witnessed didn't call for you to apologize and flee. You saw another woman in your lover's chamber. You ought to have struck me and chased that woman out."

He spoke as though it was something that happened to him on a regular basis.

"If you would lose your temper, I would apologize as many times as it took for you to forgive me. Then we would put it behind us. Isn't that how these things work?"

"But you haven't done anything wrong..." she stammered, trailing off.

"You are not jealous at all?"

It isn't that I am not jealous*, exactly...*

"I'm..." She paused. "It would be strange for a maid to display such outrage."

It was only then that Edgar seemed to remember how she was dressed. "Oh, yes. Why are you dressed like that? Are you not supposed to be here as a guest? I thought the duchess introduced you."

"I am not entirely sure, but I trust in Lady Oughtred's intentions."

"It was her ladyship's idea? Is she *really* having you perform the duties of a maid?"

"Her ladyship is presently unable to converse at length. I suspect that the housekeeper, Mrs. Boyle, was instructed to treat me as a maid before my arrival."

With a sigh, Edgar took one of Lydia's braids into his hand. "As endearing as this hairstyle is, I cannot say that I am all too happy with you being made to work. Let us return to London posthaste."

"We cannot just leave, Edgar," she protested.

"Her ladyship is bedridden and will be of little use as a teacher. You came here to be educated in etiquette, not servitude."

"I do not know what her ladyship's intentions are. And until I do, I cannot do something so uncouth. She might think I haven't any manners at all." If so, it would also reflect extremely poorly on Edgar.

"But just look at your hands."

Lydia had a great number of scratches on her hands from picking the roses. "This is nothing to raise a fuss over," she said, hurriedly hiding them from view.

Meanwhile, she wondered whether Edgar had refrained from kissing her because of her current appearance. Perhaps he had been taken aback by the sheer difference between her and the perfect Lucinda. She didn't suppose she could blame him, even if she was technically his fiancée.

"I'm afraid I still have work to do." Lydia turned on her heel, eager to get away as swiftly as possible. Edgar grabbed her arm to stop her. Just then, from upstairs, there came a scream as grating as the turning of rusty wheels.

The cry's echoes lasted for some time before petering out. A horrible clattering sounded at the same time, and it all seemed to be

coming from Lady Oughtred's room. When Edgar and Lydia arrived, out of breath, Constable was already there. His guest room was situated close to the countess's chamber. It seemed the older earl had tried to open the door in the antechamber but found it locked.

"Do you know what happened?" Edgar asked.

Constable shot him a disgruntled glance. To his credit, he did give a response, if a little brusquely. "No. I did ask through the door, but there wasn't a peep to be heard."

"Is something the matter?" Billy the footman had joined them. It seemed he had also heard the scream at a time when the majority of the servants should have been downstairs. Lydia suspected he had once again been wandering around somewhere instead of performing his duties. It was a wonder that he hadn't been let go yet.

"The door won't open," Edgar explained, "and something might have happened to Lady Oughtred. Is there a spare key?"

"I shall call for the butler." Billy quickly turned on his heel. Edgar's eyes were strangely piercing as he watched him go.

The butler came at once and unlocked the door. The room was in a hair-raising state, its contents illuminated by the red of the burning fireplace. The chairs and tables had fallen on their sides, the rug had been turned up, and the floor was littered with table clocks, vases, vanity cases, slippers, and whatever else. As for occupants, however, the room was deserted.

Seeming oddly composed, Constable approached the inner door to the bedroom itself and flung it open. "Lady Oughtred?"

It seemed strange to hear him address his sister as though they were barely acquainted, but perhaps it was a result of their estrangement. However, there came no response, and the bedroom was also a mess. Edgar approached the bed, frowning as he spotted something there. Lydia peered past him. There was a rabbit carcass with a knife stabbed into it.

"Who would have known that her ladyship was a rabbit all along?"

No one laughed at Edgar's witticism.

"Come now!" Constable huffed. "Where is my dear sister?!"

"Her ladyship cannot have left this room," said the butler. "It was locked from the inside."

"What about the window?" Edgar asked.

It had been left open. Billy took a look out of it. "I suppose her ladyship *could* have jumped onto the second-floor roof and escaped that way."

"I suppose that is what she must have done."

"What do you mean 'escaped'?!" Constable shouted fiercely. "What reason would my dear sister have to slaughter a rabbit and then run away?"

"The possibility has been raised. Nothing is certain yet." Edgar studied the dead rabbit. "Does this knife belong to her ladyship?"

"I cannot say that I recognize it," the butler replied.

"This carcass is too cold for it to have been slaughtered when we heard the scream. The knife handle, however, is warm. Someone must have been gripping with so much force that their palm was sweating. Recently, at that."

"This entire situation is utterly absurd! Who screamed in your version of events exactly?"

"A fairy," Lydia said, speaking for the first time since they had come upon the scene. She was close to wanting to hide as a number of disbelieving gazes fell on her, but Edgar's encouraging nod gave her the courage to continue. "I believe that a fairy has been occupying this room and pretending to be Lady Oughtred. Her ladyship has been acting oddly for a number of days, isn't that right? It has not been her cooped up in this room, snapping at people, and eating her meals and taking tea, but a fairy."

"So this fairy was also the one who screamed?" Edgar was the only one taking her explanation seriously. Nevertheless, Lydia could only share what she knew. She had picked up on things that only a fairy doctor could.

"Yes," she continued at pace, "someone must have come in here. That intruder...stabbed the fairy—which was using magic to disguise itself as Lady Oughtred—with that knife. I believe that was the moment it screamed. The attacker must have been so shocked to see who they thought was her ladyship making a mess of the room

that they fled."

"A '*fairy*'? Ridiculous! My dear sister is afflicted by an illness that makes her shout suddenly and behave strangely. I can understand why her staff is eager to conceal the truth, but blaming it on fairies is a step too far, wouldn't you say?" Constable glared at Lydia and then at the butler before leaving the room.

"This is a dead fairy, then, and not a rabbit?" Billy asked. He seemed to have passed the stage of bewilderment and now sounded amused.

"The fairy was wearing the rabbit pelt. It lost its temper when its furs were damaged, caused a ruckus, and then vanished."

"Then what of her ladyship?" the butler asked. It seemed he was so concerned about Lady Oughtred's disappearance that he was willing to take Lydia's story at face value for the time being.

"I'm not sure. But if a fairy has taken her ladyship's place, then it is quite possible that she is now in the fairy world."

"The fairy world? Would her ladyship be safe there?"

Lydia hesitated. "Supposing that she made a promise with the fairy that it might occupy her room, it would consider that promise broken by the intruder's interruption. Fairies do not easily forgive broken contracts. It is possible that it will attempt to harm Lady Oughtred."

The butler's shoulders drooped as any optimism left him.

"Let's forget about this fairy business," Billy said. "All we know for certain is that someone entered this room with intentions that involved a knife."

"For instance, murdering her ladyship or stealing her possessions." Edgar turned to the butler. "Is there anything missing?"

The servant glanced around before opening the chest of drawers beside the bed. "Her ladyship's regard necklace is missing. It is usually kept safely in this drawer."

"Might her ladyship be wearing it?"

"It is quite a sizable piece. It is extravagant too, covering the entire chest area of an evening gown, so it would be inconvenient to wear or to carry on one's person on a day-to-day basis."

"In which case, it holds enough value to appeal to a thief. We ought to check whether her ladyship's other jewelry has been taken."

"Her ladyship keeps her other jewelry beyond that door."

In one corner of the bedroom sat what appeared to be a bronze relief of a rose but was in fact a door. It was so small that an adult would have to stoop to pass through it.

Edgar tried what seemed to be the handle to no avail. "Locked."

"I believe the regard necklace itself acts as the key," the butler said.

"I see. Perhaps that is why it was stolen, although it would seem the thief hadn't the time to unlock this door. Are you sure it is wise to give such information away to her ladyship's guests?"

"That the regard necklace is the key is common knowledge within the estate. Only her ladyship knows the particulars of its use."

Edgar looked at the bed again. Then, he approached the window and reached for the latch. "How many dark-haired maids do you have at the estate? There are several long, black hairs caught here. They might have been caught during her escape. Lady Oughtred doesn't have dark hair, does she?"

The butler gave a thoughtful nod. "I would suggest asking Mrs. Boyle about the maids. Could you call for her, Lydia?"

"Certainly." Lydia gave a small shake of her head at Edgar, who looked like he wanted to make a remark to the man who had just given her such an order.

"I'll come with you," said Billy. "It won't do to let a girl wander about alone when there's a thief on the loose. We ought to call the police too."

Edgar glared at the footman but raised no objections. "I suppose the possibility is high that the attacker is hanging around. In fact, calling the police should be a priority. At the very least, we should have them find out whether her ladyship is still on the premises or not."

The butler took a moment to think things through. "If I may, my lord, I think this matter would be better dealt with internally. May I ask that you keep it to yourself for the time being? Naturally we shall search the estate, but we have special instructions from her ladyship

on what to do in the event of her sudden disappearance. We are to refrain from notifying anybody for at least a month, lest she finds herself unable to return."

"Does her ladyship often vanish without a trace?"

"Not Lady Oughtred specifically, but the late Lord Oughtred would. And there were certain cases from the previous generation..."

It sounded to Lydia as though this household had been dealing with the Danes for a number of generations. It wasn't unusual for someone to believe they had only been with the fairies for an hour or so and return to find they had been gone from their home for several days.

"But what if the attacker *is* still hanging around?" Billy asked. "Doesn't that mean letting them roam loose?"

"I implore you to follow her ladyship's instructions, Billy," replied the butler. "The Oughtreds have been dealing with this secret for generations. There is no telling what disaster might befall her ladyship if we attempt to meddle."

"I am also of the opinion that waiting is the best option," Lydia said.

If Lady Oughtred had indeed been taken by a fairy, causing a fuss would do more harm than good. It seemed that the Danes had considered these grounds and gardens to be their playground for a long time now. If swathes of people began traipsing through it, they would likely feel their territory was being ravaged. In the worst-case scenario, they would leave altogether, sealing up the entrance to the fairy world and ensuring no human could ever return here.

"*I'm* going to investigate as best I can," Billy insisted. "It won't take much to catch a petty thief. Those black hairs might have been planted to make it seem like the attacker was a lady, which would only go to cast our guests under suspicion."

Taken aback, the butler gave Edgar an apologetic look. Billy made to leave with Lydia in tow.

"You are rather willful for a mere footman." The wan smile on Edgar's face made it clear that he disliked Billy's attitude. Rather than finding him suspicious, the earl was incensed about his fiancée being escorted by another man. "Supposing the culprit *isn't* a lady,

that puts you under suspicion as well."

Billy pretended not to hear him.

***

It ultimately transpired that the regard necklace was the only item missing from Lady Oughtred's chamber. The owner of the dark hairs had yet to be identified. There were several maids with such hair at the estate, but they had all been downstairs in the servants' quarters at the time, and there had been no suspicious behavior from any of them. It was dubious whether the necklace had even been stolen or the countess had it with her. Though every nook and cranny of the estate was searched, there wasn't a clue to be found regarding her whereabouts.

As Lydia had been tidying Lady Oughtred's chamber that morning, she had been keeping an eye out for anything that might allow her to make contact with the fairy that had been here. Unfortunately, she had yet to find anything worthwhile. She was sitting on the floor, gathering up the petals from the potpourri, when she heard a familiar voice.

"I've been looking for you, Lydia. What are you doing up here?" Nico had slipped in through the window and was standing in front of her haughtily with his paws on his hips.

"I didn't realize you had followed me to Somerset, Nico."

"That's a fine way to greet me now, isn't it? I came because I thought you might be lonely out here by yourself!"

She *had* been lonely, but after all the chaos since her arrival, that was the least of her worries.

"Why are you dressed as a maid? Is this all part of learning to be a lady?"

"I suppose it must be."

"This room is *covered* in fairy footprints," Nico said, throwing himself into the finest chair there was. "There are even marks on the ceiling and the walls."



"Of course! Nico, you are much more sensitive to traces of fairy activity than I am. I believe that the lady of the house might have been kidnapped by Danes, and I wish to talk to them. Would you be able to lend me a hand?"

"Danes, is it?" The fairy cat narrowed his eyes and twiddled his whiskers thoughtfully. "They abhor humans. They think you're greedy creatures who are only after their treasure. Get too close to them and they'll immediately treat you like a thief."

"But it sounds as if they have been in Lady Oughtred's room. I am sure she must have spoken with them."

"Without knowledge of their secret, you have no chance of properly conversing with the Danes. They will either completely ignore you or go out of their way to pester you."

"That secret being?"

"The whereabouts of their treasure, of course."

"But the only way to find that out is to accidentally overhear it from their conversation." It was doubtful that she could gain their trust without repeating the secret in question back to them. "That reminds me! There is someone else at this estate who has exchanged a contract with the Danes."

Lydia turned her gaze out of the window. There, she saw the little path that led to the rose garden. In front of it was a hedge, along which Edgar was walking. Just then, a girl in a red dress ran out from the house. She called out to the earl, beaming as she addressed him. Eventually, the pair began to walk side by side. Lydia couldn't see Edgar's expression, but she had no doubt that he was wearing a cordial smile.

Yesterday, Edgar had claimed that Lucinda had mistaken him as the man she was writing letters to, a man who shared his initials with the earl. Lydia wondered whether that was all there was to it. He had a particular fondness for women who had taken a liking to him. If nothing else, he was unlikely to spurn any woman who approached him. He likely wasn't thinking too much of the situation. She assumed he thought nothing of smiling at the girl or walking in step with her. Lydia therefore couldn't say she felt upset. Losing her temper and chasing Lucinda away seemed like an overreaction to

the girl being in Edgar's room. After all, it wasn't like she had caught them exchanging a kiss.

She wasn't *upset*. But she did feel somewhat dispirited. The girls who approached Edgar tended to be those aglow with confidence—Lydia's total opposite.

"The earl's here too, is he?" Nico remarked as he leaned out of the window. "So, while he's off on a lovely walk with that girl in the red dress, you're stuck here in a maid's uniform to learn etiquette and whatnot?"

"There's no helping it."

A girl like Lucinda would have learned how to be a perfect noble wife long ago. All she needed to concern herself with now was her debut.

"Anyway, Nico, can I ask for your assistance? I'm going to finish tidying up as quickly as possible and then there is somewhere I would like to go."

"Excuse me? I am the gentleman and you are the maid. Why should *I* be assisting *you*?"

"I am desperate, Nico."

"Oh, so I am your last resort now, am I?!"

Once she had finished cleaning Lady Oughtred's chamber, Lydia headed for the rose garden with Nico to see Virginia. She pushed through the shrubbery just as she had done yesterday. Before long, the pair were standing in the fairy's rose garden, where the mysterious flowers were in full bloom under a gauze of mist. There didn't seem to be anyone present, so Lydia approached the log cabin.

"Hello, Virginia," she called, and the door opened.

"Why, Lydia, what a pleasant surprise. Oh, and you've a cat with you!"

"I'm a fairy, not a cat," Nico said.

"You speak, I see. And you walk on your hind legs. I daresay you're a cheeky character." Virginia leaned down to ruffle the fur on Nico's head. It seemed her serenity sapped him of the will to be angry.

“She definitely seems the type to live in a fairy’s garden of her own volition,” the fairy cat grumbled.

“It looks like rain. Do come in.”

The pair entered. Indeed, it wasn’t long before a light drizzle started falling outside the window. Nico had taken a seat and was repeatedly smoothing down his fur. Lydia watched as Virginia prepared the rose tea, but the matter at hand was too urgent to wait for her to serve it.

“I have something to ask of the Danes,” the fairy doctor said. “I thought you might have an acquaintance or two among them, given that you have spoken to them a number of times.”

A troubled frown rose to Virginia’s face. “I cannot say that my ties to them are all that close. They have taken a liking to my skills with the roses, but when they speak to me, I only hear their voices. They do not show themselves.”

“Does that mean they won’t come if you call for them?”

“At times they do and at others they don’t. Something seems to be afoot with them today, however. Though a new rose of mine bloomed this morning, I didn’t hear a peep from them. I haven’t been able to leave the garden yet either.”

Placing the rose tea on the table, she pointed at a flowerpot by the window. There, a tiny golden rose had bloomed. It was translucent and almost looked like a tortoiseshell. The soft petals sprang back against Lydia’s fingertip as she touched it.

“It’s beautiful,” she breathed.

“Thank you.”

“I’m afraid I might know why the fairies have kept their silence.”

“Why?”

“A thief broke into her ladyship’s chamber. However, it was not her ladyship, but a fairy who had been cooped up there. All that was left was a rabbit carcass, which the robber had stabbed with a knife. No one knows where her ladyship is, but I was hoping the fairies might.”

Virginia frowned again as she pondered this. “A knife, you say? How very frightful...”

“Indeed it is. It would seem that the intruder was either after her

ladyship's life or her valuable jewelry."

"The regard necklace, I presume?"

Although it initially struck Lydia as odd that the gardener should know about the pendant, the doubt was swept away as a new voice joined the conversation: a fairy.

"Humans are nothing but liars, Virginia."

Both women were startled into silence. Nico's ears twitched, his teacup frozen on its way to his mouth.

"The promise was broken, and we were chased from that room."

"We've been friendly with this house's humans for a long, long time. But we cannot trust you anymore. We're going to close this space and leave."

"I see," Virginia murmured with a sigh. She must have known that changing the minds of fairies was no mean feat and that neither words nor sentiment would be enough to keep them there.

But Lydia was a fairy doctor. It was her job to negotiate with fairies on others' behalf, no matter how difficult the task promised to be. "You are mistaken, Danes. Lady Oughtred did not break her promise. It was a thief who entered that room."

"A thief? It can't be! We have to hurry or the thief'll be at our rose garden!"

Now I've done it!

As panicked as she was, Lydia knew she had to do something. "What about Virginia? A new variety of rose bloomed this morning. I ask that you allow her to leave."

"The contract was broken last night. Virginia can't leave."

At this rate, the gardener would be buried with the rose garden. Lydia had to think of something. Not only that, but if the fairies left, there would be no way to find out where Lady Oughtred was, and she too would be trapped somewhere in their domain forevermore.

It was all or nothing. Lydia got to her feet, facing herself in the direction of the voice. "Hear me, Danes. I am a fairy doctor and I know your most treasured secret!"

Nico slammed his teacup down in a panic. "Lydia!"

"What?! You do?!" The Dane sounded just as flustered as she'd hoped. "All right. Go on and share a wish with us. We'll fulfill it in

exchange for our secret."

But she couldn't voice a wish yet. Not when she didn't actually know their secret. It was all an attempt to buy them some time.

"I haven't thought of one yet. I'm afraid you will need to stay at the estate until I do. If you were to leave before then, I might just let your secret slip."

There was a pause. "You have until the dawn after the full moon in five days' time. We can't wait longer than that."

"Then it's settled," Lydia replied, swallowing her doubts.

There then came the sound of tiny footsteps scampering away from the attic above.

Nico spoke up after a safe period of silence. "What on earth did you do that for, Lydia?! Have you got any idea what'll happen if they find out you lied?!"

"There was nothing else for it, Nico. We shouldn't have any problems if I find out where their treasure is hidden before they catch on."

"Oh, and how do you suppose you'll do that?!" The fairy cat was standing on his chair, so irate that he was ruffling up his own head fur in frustration. "You *never* look before you leap, do you? Your thoughtlessness beggars belief!"

"But Nico, there was never any way of earning the Danes' cooperation without learning their secret in the first place." Lydia turned to Virginia and smiled. "I'm going to get you out of this fix. Don't you worry."

"You mustn't concern yourself with me, Lydia. I have been coming and going from this garden fully aware of how dangerous it can be to form a deep connection with fairies. It is just a shame that I was never able to see my friend again..."

"Your friend?"

Virginia's eyes softened wistfully as she stared off into the distance. "It wasn't going to be long before she came here. I sent her a letter promising that we would meet once I had cultivated a blue rose. We haven't been able to see each other in ten years. I promised to grow that rose for her to ensure I never forgot our friendship, even while we were apart. And she promised to come

and see me once the rose had bloomed, no matter how difficult it might prove."

A blue rose? Lydia had heard before that no one had ever been able to produce a blue rose.

"Did you manage it?" she asked.

The gardener stood up and beckoned Lydia outside. At some point the rain had stopped, and a rainbow now stretched over the garden. The pair climbed up a few stone steps to an elevated part of the plot where a single rose bush had been planted. The numerous buds on it were beginning to swell.

"They will flower when the full moon rises in five days' time, and they will undoubtedly be blue."

It suddenly struck Lydia that the reason Virginia continued to return to the fairies' garden was because she didn't believe she would be able to cultivate blue roses anywhere else. Despite the danger, she had continued gardening for the Danes to fulfill her promise to her friend.

"You mustn't come back to this garden again, Lydia. In regard to the countess, what will be will be. If someone should come to the estate asking after blue roses, please tell them nothing more than that they have bloomed."

There was a firm finality to the gardener's tone.

Unsightly Envy

"I didn't realize that you and Lord Ashenbert were acquainted, Lydia."

Lydia had returned from the rose garden, and now Lucinda was standing in her way, smiling brightly.

"Well...I suppose we are."

"Then the estate you worked at before must have had connections with him. Is that when he made you his mistress?"

"Mistress?!" While the very implication made Lydia blush, Lucinda seemed utterly unconcerned.

"I suppose you must have lost your employment over it, poor thing. While it seems rather common for gentlemen to fool around with a servant or two, a servant defiled in such a manner will never find true respect again no matter where she is employed."

"That wasn't the nature of our relationship."

"Oh, there isn't any need to hide it. I shan't be telling my dear aunt anything." It seemed that Lucinda wasn't yet aware that the countess was missing. Presumably, Constable had been keeping it from her to avoid causing any undue anxiety. Her promise to keep quiet about Lydia's supposed circumstances suggested that she was scheming something, and indeed, she smiled as she sidled up to the fairy doctor. She then started to whisper like she was sharing a secret. "My dear father refuses to grant his permission for Lord Ashenbert to marry me. It seems his lordship has caused offense by sending correspondence to me behind my father's back. And then there is the matter of his proposing without permission too."

Edgar, at least, had done nothing of the sort.

"Now father refuses to speak to him. He even said that he would not sit down to supper when his lordship is present. And I cannot depend on my dear aunt's assistance when she is bedridden."

"How unfortunate..."

"Lydia, I was wondering whether you might explain to father that his lordship really is head-over-heels for me."

"I beg your pardon?!"

"I don't expect you to recite a script. Just say whatever comes to mind. Hearing it from a third party might work well to change his perspective."

Lucinda was under the impression that she held an inconvenient secret of Lydia's, while also seeing her as a rival for Edgar's affections. As such, she was attempting to use the fairy doctor to secure her relationship with the earl. She was hoping that this would drive a wedge between them. And why shouldn't it, when Edgar's interest in Lydia was shallow to begin with?

The fairy doctor fell silent. Naturally, she felt rather indignant at being considered her fiancé's mistress. Would this have happened had Lucinda not thought her a maid? How long was she expected to keep pretending?

Unfortunately, the fact remained that Lady Oughtred was missing. If Lydia stopped the act without permission, she risked missing out on the countess's backing and disappointing Edgar as a result. Quite apart from anything else, she wanted to rescue Virginia, and she was curious about Lady Oughtred's whereabouts. In any case, she couldn't just up and leave as long as there were fairies involved in the entire mess. At the same time, she wasn't keen on being bossed around by Lucinda either.

"He said he had no room in his heart for anyone other than me," Lydia said, utterly thoughtlessly.

Those words of Edgar's were all she presently had to rely on. It was less about her trust in them and more about the fact that if she didn't cling to them, she would only end up wrapped around Lucinda's little finger.

The dark-haired girl's face turned red with rage. Raising a hand, she struck Lydia across the face. "You are a maid! Know your place!"

A nobleman's daughter was as much a human as any other girl. It was that expression, twisted with rage, that made Lydia think so even as she reeled from the shock. With that, Lucinda turned and stalked away with her silent maid in tow.

Just as Lydia was leaving the scene, she heard a voice from the top of the stairs.

"Are you all right, Miss Carlton?" A dark-skinned boy was watching her.

"Did you witness all of that, Raven?"

"Not all of it. I was only just passing by." Raven wasn't the type to lie about such things. However, he would have seen Lucinda hit Lydia. "His lordship is searching for you. He wishes to speak with you."

"I am not leaving this estate." Lydia started walking away.

Raven followed her. "The dangerous party might still be loitering. There is a high chance that somebody will be putting on an innocent act only to turn and attack at a moment's notice."

"The attacker might just as well have been an intruder from the outside, in which case they will be long gone. None of the dark-haired girls in the estate gave any cause for suspicion."

"Lady Lucinda has dark hair."

"Raven...what reason would a girl have to attack her own aunt?" While Lydia recalled that Lucinda had mentioned wanting to borrow the countess's regard necklace, it didn't suffice as a motive for theft.

"They have been estranged on account of her father and aunt's strained relationship. There may be hidden discord that we as outsiders are not privy to."

"You two should feel free to return to London if it frightens you so."

"His lordship is frightened only of the possibility that you should come to harm."

This was clearly Raven's heartfelt opinion. Although Lydia couldn't deny that she was pleased by Edgar's concern, her cheek was still stinging where Lucinda had struck it. She didn't blame him for what had happened, but there remained a lingering uneasiness. As far as Lucinda was concerned, Lydia would never measure up to her, no matter how hard she tried. Even without the pretense that she was a maid, it would be difficult for the fairy doctor to mix with the upper class as she was now, let alone marry an earl.

"I am not leaving the estate," Lydia repeated after a pause.

"Then at the very least, would you consider abstaining from working as a maid and being open about the fact that you are Lord Ashenbert's fiancée?"

Perhaps that would stop Lucinda from pursuing him. However, Lady Oughtred might take it as a sign that Lydia had rejected her education. She theorized that working hard to get to grips with the duties she was so unused to would serve her well in coping with whatever unexpected troubles noble life might throw at her. That may well have been what Lady Oughtred was testing her for too.

"I cannot do that as long as her ladyship is absent."

"Please do not be so stubborn. His lordship cannot keep an eye on you unless you stay by his side."

Incensed, Lydia stopped in her tracks. Stubborn, was she? "This is what Edgar wanted, isn't it? Shouldn't he be happy that I am receiving Lady Oughtred's education so that I might prove a suitable countess? Or would he rather I gave up all on some whim of his?!"

Lydia stalked off again at pace, but Raven would not be left behind. He followed and, when he was in reach, grabbed her by the arm.

"Unhand me."

"No. I ask that you come with me."

"I have work to do!"

"Oi! What do you think you're doing?!" Billy had emerged from the courtyard. Though Raven turned to face him, he kept a grip on Lydia's arm. "You don't work at this estate. Who are you?"

"I serve Lord Ashenbert."

"I see. A philanderer serving another philanderer. I'm afraid I can't allow you to seduce one of our maids."

"He isn't... He is an acquaintance of mine, Billy," Lydia said.

"Come." Raven tried to escort her away, only for the other man to grab him by the shoulder.

The boy spun around at once. His iron grip found Billy's arm and pulled it up.

"Raven, stop!" Lydia cried, frightened the footman would have his arm broken.

But Billy fought back, striking upward with his knee. Raven evaded it by darting around his back. The footman swiveled round and the pair stared each other down, both ready to attack again. The tension lasted for some time until it was broken by the arrival of the housekeeper.

"I've been looking for you, Lydia. What are you doing out here? We've no time to rest!"

"Ah...forgive me, Mrs. Boyle." The fairy doctor glanced at Raven and whispered to him, "Please, Raven. Do not tell Edgar every little detail about what I am up to."

With that, she hurried away after the housekeeper. He made no move to follow her this time.

***

When Lucinda had warned Lydia to know her place, she hadn't intended for that to be the last of it. Following the day of their altercation, the fairy doctor found herself ignored by the other servants, who were also speaking ill of her behind her back. It seemed that Lucinda had told everyone that she had been fired from her previous estate for having an improper relationship. The housekeeper had immediately questioned her about it. Though Lydia had denied everything, Mrs. Boyle hadn't seemed to believe her.

"I haven't got the authority to dismiss a maid, so I'll have to keep you employed until her ladyship returns. But I'm not going to tolerate any behavior that brings the repute of this estate into question." The housekeeper's firm tone made it clear that were it up to her, Lydia would have been forced out at once.

She'd had no choice but to nod obediently. It appeared that Lady Oughtred had told Mrs. Boyle nothing more about her than that she was a new maid, and Lydia had no recourse as long as that remained the case. As frustrating as it was, at least it gave her the chance to search for the countess and dispel these misunderstandings. As for the gossip, she simply needed to ignore it.

The rumors, however, were not discussed exclusively behind her back. It only took a small group of maids forming for the topic to

come up, whether or not Lydia was in earshot.

"I heard she approached one of her mistress's visitors at her previous estate."

"Goodness me, how shameless!"

"I bet she'll try the same thing here."

"She might've already started."

"On her ladyship's brother, do you think?"

"Probably with that young nobleman. He was asking me about her, you know."

Of all the times for Edgar to interfere...

"But I heard he was engaged to Lady Lucinda."

"And yet *she's* trying to tempt him away. What's she trying to pull?"

For once, Lydia was relieved to be called away for work. It didn't last, however, as it transpired that she was to be assisting Lucinda. For reasons unbeknownst to Lydia, all of the noble girl's requests were being assigned to her. In fact, it was because she had fewer duties now that Lady Oughtred was missing.

As Lydia crossed the courtyard to go to Lucinda's room, she felt a single drop of water fall onto her hair.

Rain?

She looked up, but the sky was clear and pale blue. Suddenly, a strong scent of perfume hit her, making her furrow her brow. Someone must have just tossed it out of a window. Though unpleasant, Lydia didn't have the time to wash herself. She arrived at Lucinda's room, only to receive a glare from Mrs. Boyle.

"You were responsible for making Lady Lucinda's bed, weren't you?"

"Yes, madame."

"Then how do you explain *this*?"

The sheets were covered in dirt and mud.

"I'm...not sure."

"No one else has been in this room except for you."

In that case, it was obviously Lucinda herself who had done it. Lydia looked at Lucinda, who was predictably feigning ignorance.

"You will tell the truth, Lydia," the housekeeper said.

"Please do not be too hard on her, Mrs. Boyle," Lucinda chipped in. "I am sure she is just a little envious that I am to marry Lord Ashenbert. She seems to have a certain fondness for him, in spite of her station."

"I did not do this."

Lydia could scream, but she held it in, knowing that an outburst was just what Lucinda was hoping for.

The other girl approached her, smiling. "Oh? Is that perfume I smell? Why, I believe that's *my* perfume!"

What?

"Lydia! Did you use Lady Lucinda's fragrance?" Boyle pressed her.

"I did not," she stammered.

"It is as though she wishes to be me!" exclaimed Lucinda.

Lydia could think of little worse. Exasperated, she took a deep breath, which was when her eyes happened to meet those of Lucinda's maid. The latter looked away in a manner that Lydia found rather suspicious. Studying the maid's nails, the fairy doctor noted that there was dirt on them. Lucinda must have ordered her to do this. But she couldn't humor the idea of pointing it out even for a second. If she brought attention to Annie's nails, Lucinda would immediately pin all of the blame on her own maid. Annie's inability to speak would leave her unable to defend herself.

"I am satisfied, Mrs. Boyle. I shall have someone else clean up my bed," Lucinda said suddenly, apparently having noted that Lydia was studying her maid's hands. It seemed she was keen to end things there.

The housekeeper gestured for Lydia to leave, and she did so in silence.

Lydia came to a fountain in the gardens, where she took a seat on a stone wall and let down her hair. She started rinsing the ends in the running water, eager to rid it of the perfume's cloying stench. The sound of the fountain intertwined with the giggling of the fairies that were frolicking among the foliage. Lydia often spotted fae in these gardens. The Danes, however, were more elusive. She had hoped that she would be able to eavesdrop on their conversations to

learn their secret, but she had yet to find success. Though she walked the gardens whenever she had a break in her work, if she did manage to spot the Danes, they would immediately hide from her.

"Goodness, am I hungry..." she murmured with a sigh.

There had been an insect in her porridge that morning. Although she knew it had been placed there by someone out of spite, she hadn't been allowed a fresh serving. She scanned the nearby trees, but it was too early for them to have any fruit. She did, however, spot Nico plodding toward her on his back legs.

"I think you're out of luck, Lydia. There's no chance you'll learn the Danes' secret in time. They don't even let other fairies anywhere near them. They're desperate to protect this generations-old treasure of theirs from thieves."

Ever since Lydia's bluff had managed to gain some extra time from the Danes, Nico had been working to try to learn their secret. However, it seemed that he hadn't made any progress either.

"I say we run for it. The gardener didn't seem too averse to being buried with the roses. She even told you not to go back there. You aren't under any obligation to concern yourself with the countess's whereabouts either."

Lydia turned her gaze toward the sky and didn't respond.

"Did you just stick your head into the fountain or something?" Nico asked.

She sighed. "No."

"The Danes aren't going to be in there, silly." The fairy cat chuckled to himself. He was utterly failing to read Lydia's emotional state. "Ah, here comes the earl."

With a start, the fairy doctor looked up to find Edgar standing before her. He took the opportunity to come even closer as she was jumping to her feet. Though she tried to take a step back, the fountain blocked her way. His arms came around her back to support her before she could lose her balance completely.

"At last, we can be alone," he said.

"I suppose I don't count?" Nico huffed and dropped his chin to his paw.

"I wonder if you might be kind enough to make yourself scarce," Edgar said with just a hint of irritation in his tone.

"It would be my pleasure. Do try not to fall out, won't you?" With that, the inconsiderate fairy cat left them to it.

The earl pulled Lydia closer, scrutinizing her with his ash-mauve gaze. "Why have you been avoiding me?"

"I haven't," she lied. "I've just been busy."

"I want you to be truthful with me, Lydia."

While relieved that it seemed like Raven hadn't reported her fracas with Lucinda to his master, that fact only made it all the more difficult for her to explain. She didn't want Edgar to know about the harassment she was suffering. The nasty rumors, Lucinda's bullying and scorn... It was all a result of her own cowardice, and that was something she would rather keep from him.

Growing up, most of Lydia's time had been spent with fairies, and she had always struggled with human relationships. If she was to marry Edgar, however, she would have to learn how to get along with other people. She would be expected to navigate the ladies and gentlemen of the upper classes, and she didn't want to give her fiancé the impression that she was incapable of doing so.

"I've been busy. That's truly all it is." Squirming, Lydia managed to free herself from Edgar's grasp. It would spell disaster if someone were to see them there together. The servants were all under the impression that Lucinda and Edgar were betrothed, and the gossip would only get more biting if Lydia was seen to be "seducing" him.

"I intend to remain here and keep watch over you for as long as you insist on staying. I cannot do that whilst you avoid me."

"There is no need for that. The thief was after her ladyship's jewelry. There is no reason that a servant should come to harm."

"That is just one of my concerns. Another is that you are undertaking work that you are unused to. If there is anything that is causing you trouble or anxiety—anything at all—I want you to tell me."

"Well, I'll have you know that I've nothing to tell you!"

"You are only here because I asked a favor of the duchess. I would despair were it to create a rift between us."

“Edgar, someone’s coming.”

Lydia took another hurried step away from him as footsteps sounded from the other side of the shrubbery. It was Billy who eventually made an appearance. She had to wonder why they constantly seemed to be running into each other.

“Fancy seeing you here.” Edgar echoed Lydia’s thoughts. However, his tone was incredibly icy.

“Hello,” Billy replied curtly, clearly aware that the earl did not want him there.

“I was under the impression that footmen tended to have duties. Perhaps I have been misinformed.”

“I was looking for Lydia.” He smiled at her before holding up a small paper package. “The cook gave me some slightly burnt cookies. I’m not one for sweet things, though.”

“Are you sure I can have them?” To her empty stomach, it was like a gift from Heaven.

But when Billy stepped forward to hand them over, Edgar stuck out his leg. The footman let out a cry, pitched forward, stumbled, and ended up in the shrubbery. The cookies fell from his grip, the package unraveled, and the contents ended up scattered over the ground.

“What was that for?!” he exclaimed.

“I thought you would have your guard up.”

Billy goggled at him. “My profession does not require such developed reflexes. Your lordship’s servant seems to be an exception.” He indignantly started brushing the leaves from his jacket.

“And yet you seem unusually capable for a footman. Ah, I know. The next time I have a guest I don’t care for, I shall have you wait on us during supper.”

“Seems to me it would be better not to invite such a guest in the first place.”

“There are certain people to whom I wish to serve poison,” Edgar clarified.

“I’m not going to be complicit in that.”

While the men glared at each other, Lydia lifted the paper

package from where it had caught on the bush. There wasn't a single cookie left inside. She suddenly felt all the more hungry for the promise of food having been snatched away from her. And now she was growing irritated.

This is all Edgar's fault.

She marched up to him. "Look what you did! You wasted all those cookies! You never learn! You always act according to your own interests without understanding my feelings in the slightest! I wish you would stop seeing any gentleman who acts with the slightest hint of kindness as an enemy! It's abhorrent!"

Tears pooling in her eyes, Lydia turned on her heel and rushed away, leaving Edgar and Billy stunned.

***

The night was wearing on, and the moonlight was spreading its sheen over the estate's roof. Nico plodded along atop it until he reached a skylight at its very edge, where he slipped through into an attic room. This was where Lydia slept, and it utterly failed to impress him. Not only was it too cramped, but there wasn't so much as a sofa or a cushion for him to rest on. Nevertheless, he had come back here to retire for the night.

Lydia was curled up and fast asleep. Nico ensconced himself in the corner of the bed and helped himself to some of the blanket. He and Lydia used to share a bed when she was a child, but she had a frightful tendency to toss and turn, and the bigger she'd grown, the more liable she'd been to kick him onto the floor. He had eventually grown indignant and refused to sleep with her any longer.

This night in particular, however, he was rather concerned about her. She had seemed a little weary during the day. He could well imagine how difficult it must have been to juggle her duties with an investigation into fairy secrets. She had a bad habit of taking on too much, and it worried him to no end. He had thought his responsibility to look after her would have ended now that she was engaged, but she was continuing to take on burdens by herself. It seemed that despite her love for the earl and her promise to marry

him, she would continue to keep her heart partially closed before him.

"Psst, Lydia. Are you crying?" Nico whispered. He had thought that she was asleep until he noticed the almost imperceptible trembling of her shoulders.

But she didn't respond, or even so much as twitch. Perhaps she was asleep after all. Nico went to peer at her, but she had the blanket right up over her head, and there was nothing to be gleaned. He tried scooping up some of the russet hair that had fallen on the sheets, giving it a couple of gentle tugs. There was still no response. However, he noticed that the hair was a little moist. Why? He didn't expect that she had stuck her head in the fountain again.

Nico was at a loss. It seemed Lydia would keep crying despite his efforts to console her. And he knew she would, because she was just like her mother. From now on, there would only be one person capable of clearing the clouds from her heart.

***

"There were four servants hired at the same time as Billy, himself included. As for other outsiders, there are a number of laborers who have come to transplant trees in the garden, but they sleep in a cabin away from the estate and would have been unlikely to enter it."

Edgar was spending his morning listening to Raven's report. Meanwhile, Lydia's outburst troubled him, and he had been wondering about its cause ever since it had happened. Had she really been that eager to eat those cast-off cookies? Enough to denounce him as abhorrent?

"Billy's three contemporaries are not footmen like him, but it does seem the four of them were acquainted before their arrival. It would appear that they have been keeping in frequent contact ever since that night. That is, since Lady Oughtred went missing."

Lydia had seemed utterly delighted when Billy had offered them to her too...

"They have also been making inquiries of the maids who have

served here for a long time, asking about the regard necklace. It is unclear whether they are asking in earnest or if they see this mystery as an interesting pastime."

Edgar had never seen her look so happy to receive a gift from *him*. He would very much like to send Billy to an early grave.

"Lord Ashenbert."

"I'm sorry? Oh, of course. Her ladyship's missing regard necklace. It was the key to the door behind which she keeps all her other jewelry, yes?"

When Lady Oughtred was actively participating in upper-class society, she was known for her collection of jewelry. If that vast array of gems was hidden behind that door, then anyone who sought them would naturally begin by targeting the regard necklace.

"I would think it prudent not to discount the possibility that Billy and his three contemporaries—and perhaps a number of others—make up a group of thieves. However, I have yet to find any concrete evidence of that."

"I do find it unnatural that Billy, as a footman, was in the vicinity of her ladyship's chamber that evening. It creates the possibility that he was the thief, escaping through the window and traversing the roof to reenter the estate through a different window. That, or he was standing watch for his dark-haired female accomplice."

Supposing Billy was guilty, it would explain his tendency to loiter in Lydia's vicinity. She might have been a new hire, but she was responsible for tending to Lady Oughtred's needs. Perhaps he thought she might hold information about the countess's jewels.

"For the time being, can I ask you to keep your wits about you to ensure that Lydia doesn't come to any harm, Raven?"

"Yes, my lord. At this time of day, she normally accompanies Mrs. Boyle in her work, but I shall keep her in my sights whenever she is likely to be alone."

"Please do."

It was all Edgar could do. Lydia inevitably fled whenever she caught sight of him. He had the impression that she didn't want him to see her working as a maid. Not to mention she might have started doubting him again, what with all this nonsense relating to

Lucinda. The result was that she was avoiding him. He lamented too that she did not appear to be jealous. Though she claimed to trust him, he wouldn't be able to bear it should it transpire that her feelings for him had waned.

Before Edgar's spirits could truly sink, he was interrupted by a yowl.

"Oi, Earl! I'm in a fix, and I need your help!" Nico had rushed into the room.

Edgar waved a dismissive hand. "Ask me again later."

"Lydia cried the whole night through. You have to do something!"

"What?!"

"She's been down for a while now. I'm sure something must have happened. She's never cried over her work as a fairy doctor, no matter how tough it's gotten. She's been working hard to look for the countess too, pestering me about it every half-second... *You* haven't been doing anything to upset her, have you?"

"I wouldn't—"

"Because if so, you have to apologize! Tell her you'll be faithful from now on!"

"I will thank you not to make assumptions about my loyalty to her."

"Why *is* she so upset, then?"

"If I may..." Raven spoke up tentatively. It was highly unusual for him to do so. "Please forgive me for not mentioning this earlier, my lord, but Miss Carlton asked me to keep my silence..."

He went on to explain how Lucinda had grown envious of Lydia, subjecting her to all sorts out of spite, including the spreading of nasty rumors. It seemed that was part of the reason that the fairy doctor was avoiding Edgar.

"Yesterday, I saw her discarding a piece of bread covered in dirt. I believe it was done by the maids responsible for setting the table."

The earl leaped to his feet. "Does that mean that she isn't eating properly?"

"That was the only incident I witnessed."

"You should have told me about this sooner, Raven!"

"Forgive me, my lord. I found myself in a bit of a quandary."

And yet he had chosen to honor Lydia's request and keep his silence. Previously, he had been content to follow Edgar's orders alone. However, he was now beginning to respect what the fairy doctor asked of him as well. It represented a leap of progress for Raven, who never even saw humanity in anyone other than his master.

"You aren't at fault," Edgar said.

He was the one who needed to take responsibility. He had been preoccupied with the thought of Lydia finding herself in danger. And yet it was not the jewelry thief who was harming her, but a series of spiteful pranks. She wasn't really a maid. She was just experiencing what it was like to be one as part of Lady Oughtred's education. However, the countess's absence left no one with knowledge of Lydia's true station to defend her. There was no one apart from Edgar who knew that her poor treatment at the hands of others was totally unjustified.

"It *is* my fault after all, Nico. I made Billy drop those cookies right in front of her. It offended me that she would be so delighted to take treats from another man."

"Oh, yes. She had so been looking forward to those."

"Indeed, and she stormed off in a raging temper."

"Whatever will you do now, Earl? Slights involving food are the least easily forgiven!"

"Perhaps in your case, Nico."

"In Lydia's case too, I'm sure!"

"Your thoughts, Raven?"

"I would bear such a grudge till the day I died, my lord."

His servant's most earnest opinion sent Edgar's spirits plummeting. However, this was no time to let low spirits stop him. He strode from the room, determined to convince Lydia to drop the pretense of being a maid at once. Unfortunately, that was when he spotted a plump man marching down the corridor toward him. The timing could not have been any worse.

Although Constable had been talking about leaving with Lucinda in tow, he had yet to fulfill that promise. His daughter's reluctance to go was an obvious factor, but Edgar had to wonder if the man

himself had an ulterior motive for staying—one that superseded his dislike for the younger earl.

It was common knowledge among London's elite that Lucinda had a private tutor. She must have had suitors who thought too highly of themselves and those who daren't approach her in equal measure. Perhaps Constable even considered the fake Lord Ashenbert's involvement a welcome change of pace, enough that he still wanted Edgar to take responsibility despite the contempt he suffered.

All things considered, Edgar was less than pleased when the older earl stopped before him. "Ashenbert. I hear you are acquainted with my sister's handmaid."

He was of course referring to Lydia.

"She is quite the scoundrel," he went on. "She pilfered my Lucinda's brooch!"

"She is not of a character capable of such an act."

"Feign ignorance if you will, Ashenbert, but as her acquaintance, I hope you will find it within you to advise her to return the brooch at once."

"I have to wonder why your daughter has made this false change against her."

"'False charge,' you say? The maid in question was aware that Lucinda was keeping a certain ivory jewelry box under her bed."

Was that his sole piece of evidence? Edgar was exasperated, but Constable held fast to his indignation and rattled on.

"We shall be searching that maid's room, and we would like you to be there as a witness."

It seemed this was the reason Constable had come looking for him. Lucinda was hoping to humiliate Lydia in front of Edgar.

The earl immediately called for Raven. After whispering briefly into his ear, Edgar set off with Constable. Naturally, he had no intention of allowing Lucinda's plan to unfold according to her whims. There was no evidence and therefore no reason to be searching Lydia's room. Had Lady Oughtred been present, she would have almost certainly put a stop to this as the fairy doctor's temporary guardian. Unfortunately, in her absence the decision came

down to the housekeeper.

Edgar had entrusted Lydia to Lady Oughtred's care because he trusted the countess. He had not entrusted her to the housekeeper. He should have recognized the position she had been placed in at once, even if it had come totally unexpectedly. He had every intention of obstructing the search of Lydia's belongings. With the countess gone, responsibility for her fell to him. And he was not prepared to sit back and let his fiancée be insulted.

At the top of the servants' stairway was the attic room where Lydia was sleeping. She and Lucinda were waiting in front of it. With them were the housekeeper and butler.

"Father!" Lucinda clung to Constable, wiping tears from her eyes. "You brought me that wonderful brooch from Venice!"

"Don't worry. I'm sure we will find it before too long."

Though Lydia's face was pale, her posture was straight and resolute. However, she wasn't so much as glancing in Edgar's direction. Perhaps he had expected a pleading look for help. Her behavior, as though the pair weren't acquainted in the slightest, hurt. It was as if she was refusing to rely on him.

Edgar was the reason she had come to stay at Lady Oughtred's estate in the first place. Perhaps Lydia blamed him for Lucinda's envy, and she may well have been holding on to a grudge regarding the cookies too. Either way, she had built a wall between them. Edgar struggled back against it, going over to stand by her side.

"I ask that you cease this at once," he began. "Not only have you accused her without any evidence, but you would go so far as to dig through her room? Is that any way to treat an innocent lady?"

"We shall see how innocent she is after our search," replied Constable. "There is no shortage of servants who are light-fingered. It is best to investigate these things as soon as possible."

"I shan't allow you to carry on like this, Lord Constable, for she is __"

"It's all right," Lydia interrupted firmly. "I shall allow my room to be searched as thoroughly as is necessary. While I appreciate your lordship's support, it alone cannot clear my name."

At that, Edgar had no choice but to fall silent. Quite apart from

anything else, he couldn't recall her referring to him as "your lordship" for the entirety of the time they'd known each other. He now had to suppress a mass of irritation and disappointment mixed with the urge to forcibly remove her from the situation.

Lucinda's brooch did not make an appearance. Though Lydia seemed relieved, Edgar doubted this would lead anyone to trust her. Lucinda was adamant that the brooch should have been there and was presently reproving the housekeeper and butler for "not looking properly." Constable was busy consoling her and showed no indication that he was planning to apologize to Lydia. The fairy doctor was still refusing to look at Edgar, withholding from him the opportunity to speak to her. It was as she was leaving after the housekeeper that he quickly grabbed her arm. She turned to him, seeming more frightened than angry. It was as though *he* had been one of the parties suspecting her of theft, and the idea of it panicked him. What had started as a small disagreement had ended up with her distancing herself from him by a considerable amount.

"Let me talk to you," he pleaded, at the end of his tether.

"Later."

"When? You must tell me an exact time. Otherwise my hand will be forced."

Lydia knew what he was capable of, and it seemed to do the trick. She gave him the time she would be finished with work. In truth, Edgar didn't want to let her go. However, he was left with no choice when the housekeeper called from downstairs.

Edgar went outside, at which point he was approached by Raven. The servant opened a hand before him. In it was a brick-red cameo brooch.

"It was in Miss Carlton's attic room."

"I see. Thank goodness you found it in time."

"I witnessed Miss Lucinda's maid leaving the room covertly."

"No surprises there."

"If you wouldn't mind, my lord..." Raven beckoned him farther down the covered walkway.

He concealed himself behind a pillar, then pointed beyond a thick

growth of shrubs in the courtyard. There was a voice coming from the other side. The bright colors of a stylish dress were just visible between the leaves. There stood Lucinda and her handmaid.

"What happened, Annie? Are you *certain* you placed the brooch in Lydia's room?"

It seemed the maid was nodding.

"Well, it wasn't there. If you've stashed it away somewhere, you had better give it back." There was a pause. "You can't tell me you don't have it!"

The maid was now desperately shaking her head. Lucinda continued to disparage Annie for some time until, after the loud *slap* of her striking the girl across the face, her voice grew silent. She must have gone. Her maid was left rooted to the spot. It was as if she were waiting for her mistress to vanish from her sight completely. And then she opened her mouth like she could no longer bear to keep it closed.

"Foolish wench. I'll make sure she comes to regret holding me in contempt!"

Edgar had not misheard. The seemingly silent maid had spoken.

***

Lydia had promised she would speak with Edgar once her work was done. However, there was no guarantee that she would be finished on time. Nevertheless, he appeared before her at the time she had given him, on the dot. It just so happened that she had been given an extra task that day and was washing dishes at the well behind the kitchen.

"I couldn't bear to wait any longer," Edgar said.

"I still have yet to wash all of this. It might take me a while. Sorry."

Beside the well was a pile comprising a large barrel and several sizable pots and casks. The kitchen itself was dark, and the other servants had all retired to their rooms. Lydia was working only by the light of a small lamp, which she pushed away from her slightly so that Edgar could not see her squatting form clearly.

"Isn't this a task that ought to be done by the scullery maids?" the earl asked.

It was, but it was also Lydia's punishment for that morning's brouhaha surrounding the brooch. She was not the thief, but Lucinda had demanded she be punished anyway, so it had been done. Knowing that *someone* must have stolen it, the noble girl declared that she would have liked to strip every last maid of her belongings. However, since she suspected Lydia, she had promised Mrs. Boyle that she would push the matter no further as long as the fairy doctor faced punishment.

"It is a task that cannot be left *undone*," Lydia replied.

She stood up to draw more water, hiding her bruised knuckles from the astute Edgar. They had been caned to correct her "light fingers." He seemed to see everything she would rather he didn't. Just this morning, he had witnessed her being treated like a petty thief. Although he had tried to defend her, she had been loath to let him announce that the wretched girl at the center of everyone's suspicion was in fact his fiancée. It was why she hadn't been able to bear looking at his face. Had their eyes met, everything she had been trying to suppress might have spilled over, and she would have ended up throwing herself into his arms. The same sentiment was continuing to plague her now, leaving her unable to look at him still. And she was exhausted.

Though Lydia only staggered slightly, she was immediately caught by a pair of arms from behind. Those limbs tightened, and the warmth from his body made her heart thunder and her body freeze.

"Please stop putting yourself under so much undue stress."

"I'm fine," she stammered. "I'm not—"

An unusually fierce, passionate kiss landed on the back of her neck. When she hoarsely asked that he stop, he refused in a whisper.

"Are you under the impression that you may treat me as you like because I am a maid?" Lydia asked.

Edgar relaxed his grip on her and sighed. "You are not a maid."

"As things stand, and at this estate, I am."

"Could you not rest, even just for a moment? I know you are

tired."

With that, Edgar led her to sit down on the barrel like a true gentleman would. Taking the scrubbing brush from her hand, he replaced it with something wrapped in a handkerchief. Inside was a cookie with a buttery fragrance.

"Have you lost your faith in me, Lydia?"

"Are you referring to yesterday's incident with the cookies? Because I wasn't quite myself..."

"If you say that you haven't, I would like you to look me in the eye." He leaned toward her. True to recent form, she averted her gaze slightly.

"Haven't *you* lost faith in me?" She asked the question that had been plaguing her for so long. "I have nothing to offer you. All I have to my name is my betrothal to you. It has all been made very clear since I've come here."

Lydia was a commoner. As such, no one thought it strange to see her among the maids. Everyone believed Lucinda when she said that *she* was Edgar's fiancée, but no one would believe Lydia if she claimed the same. She doubted she would be able to become the countess that Edgar envisioned.

"I have nothing either," he said, "other than a charming fiancée. Neither my name nor my title are genuine. It is because you have been supporting me—a man worth nothing—that I have come to think of you as irreplaceable."

His words made her endlessly happy, and yet Lydia didn't know why she struggled to delight in them completely. Rather than having lost faith in Edgar, perhaps she had really lost faith in herself. As much as she wanted to give things her best, all her efforts proved fruitless.

Edgar got to his feet. Lydia watched him cautiously, afraid that he would leave now that it was clear she couldn't look him in the eye. Instead, he removed his jacket and hung it on a nearby tree, then began to use the brush he'd taken from her to scrub a cask.

"Don't do that, Edgar!"

"Why shouldn't I? I shall be finished by the time your break is over."

“You can’t...”

“I’m sure I can do a better job at it than you.” He smiled at her, lifting up one of the larger pots with ease. She had struggled with that one. He then splashed it with water, seemingly unconcerned about wetting his perfectly polished shoes or well-starched shirt. “I once did this to earn some pocket money.”

No wonder he seemed so used to it. Although Edgar was born into a noble home, his parents had been killed and he’d been kidnapped and taken to America. He had escaped his captors on his own strength and fought for survival in the slums. What Lydia was going through now couldn’t compare to how the earl had suffered during his early life.

“I daresay I wouldn’t mind working long days as a farmhand if that was what it took to be with you.”

Edgar’s slender frame lent itself to his air of nobility. But now Lydia could see the surprising broadness of his back, his sturdy shoulders, and the supple muscle of his arms. He was perhaps more masculine in physicality than she had given him credit for, and she wasn’t sure what she felt as she struggled to take her eyes from him.



If only he hadn't been a nobleman, perhaps she would have felt less reticent and more comfortable being his fiancée. But no matter what he did and how quietly avid he was in his work, she could all but guarantee that his mind would whir. He would be scheming how he might rise in society or strike it rich overnight. After all, the reality was that he *had* become rich and even wrested a new title for himself.

"No one would mistake you for a farmhand even if you were to till the fields, Edgar."

It was those tendencies of his that had allowed him to return to noble society. As Lydia watched him, she realized that everyone had an environment that suited them best.

"It is for precisely the same reason that no one suspects I am your fiancée."

Edgar paused in his work and looked back at her in surprise. "You and I are to be married. That is a truth that exists between us, and it is neither here nor there whether anyone else believes it."

"A truth, is it? I find myself doubting it sometimes, for it has become clear to me that I was woefully uninformed when it came to the subject of marriage."

When he had proposed to her, Lydia had read into it no further than that he was asking her to stay by his side forever, and she had graciously accepted. She had failed to take stock of the reality of it: that it meant becoming a countess.

She stood up, unwilling to allow Edgar to do everything by himself, and started dragging away the pot he had finished cleaning to get it out of his way.

"You sit back down and don't worry about that."

"I have had enough of a break."

"The ground is uneven there."

Lydia let out a cry as she fell, having failed to notice the bump beneath her feet.

What on earth am I doing? I cannot even adequately carry out the duties I have been assigned.

Rather than the pain in her foot, it was a devastating exhaustion that prevented her from standing immediately. Edgar had rushed

over in shock. He picked her up and sat her on the stone wall surrounding the shrubbery.

"Did you sprain your ankle?"

"Of course not," Lydia replied quickly. Edgar was kneeling in front of her and it had sent her into a panic when he had touched her ankle.

"Well, you've certainly grazed it slightly."

He looked up at her, and their eyes met. His gaze held just a touch of anger to it, and she suddenly felt frightened. Perhaps her helplessness really was beginning to irritate him.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"Why are you apologizing?"

"Because I am completely unfit for noble society. It shouldn't... It shouldn't be too late to annul our engagement..."

Lydia's fear had yet to abate. Nerves pulsed through her body, and she regretted her words the moment they came out of her mouth. What if Edgar really was disappointed or exasperated with her? What if he jumped at the chance to call off their engagement? She didn't want to bear witness to his reaction.

While he didn't respond in any of the ways she had feared, he *did* look angry as he gazed back at her. And then, quite suddenly, he slid his hand further up her leg. He pushed up the hem of her skirts, revealing the pale legs that were supposed to be kept hidden from others. Lydia's breath caught in her throat. His warm palms spread themselves over her knees, which was where they came to rest. A man was touching her legs, her drawers, and she was so horrified that she couldn't make a sound. She simply froze.

Edgar was staring up at her intently. "What are you thinking about presently? That you might flee from me? That, in truth, you do not need me? Or that I am too inept to support you through your suffering?" His gaze downcast, he planted a kiss on the fabric over her thighs. Then he muttered, his voice taut, "Do you find my touch unpleasant and nothing more? Though I kiss and touch you, your feelings when I do so continue to elude me. I am always wanting more of you. Do you not feel the same about me?"

Everything burned. His words, his touch, the gaze that had found

her face again. Though that same heat smoldered within Lydia, she struggled to give herself over to it completely. It was all she could do just to take another breath.

Edgar hesitated. "It isn't as though you *must* feel the same way. I do not wish to lose you. That is all I mean to say."

With that, he gently removed his hands from her.

At Odds

Lydia hadn't slept that night. There had been too many thoughts occupying her mind. Edgar had said they ought to return to London the next day. Nothing had been solved, and though Lydia didn't want to abandon Virginia or Lady Oughtred, she didn't see what she could accomplish by staying. Besides, she no longer believed herself capable of defying Edgar any further and carrying on by herself, and she worried that any more stubbornness on her part would only hurt him more than she already had. The only reason she had mentioned canceling their engagement was to give him a chance to reassure her that he wouldn't. And although he had done so, she knew that even suggesting it had hurt him.

"What are you thinking about presently? That you might flee from me?"

That hadn't been anywhere near the content of her thoughts. Rather, she had been marveling at how small her kneecaps must have been to fit in his hands. She wanted to become the girl that *he* wanted her to be, but she just didn't know how. Hoping that Lady Oughtred's education would be the key, she had devoted all her efforts to it. When it had fallen apart, she'd felt less deserving than ever of becoming Edgar's wife. By the time the sky started to lighten, her mind was still stuck fast between the options of leaving and staying.

"Wake up, Lydia." Nico was knocking on the skylight.

She had to force herself to sit up. "I *am* awake."

"Come quickly! I've found where the Danes gather!"

That had her casting her blanket aside. She was dressed and out of the room at once. She followed Nico into a cozy study with a terrace that overlooked the courtyard.

"See the fairy footprints all over this room? A lot of them are fresh. Seems they come and go all the time."

Lydia couldn't see fairy footprints especially clearly, but she believed Nico when he said they were there. She surmised that this was the study of a previous generation's earl. It was very tidy and without a hint of dust, but the well-used armchair and desk spoke to outdated tastes.

"The Danes have had a connection with the head of this estate for several generations. I wonder if they come to this room to remember those who used it previously."

Lady Oughtred had no children, so her late husband's earldom would be passed to his kin. Lydia didn't know whether the kin in question would hold any fondness for the land their ancestors occupied, but she foresaw the fairies struggling to accept someone who had long left this place as head of the household. Either way, the Danes may have felt that leaving was their only choice. What sort of contract had Lady Oughtred made with them exactly? Where had she gone and why, going so far as to leave a fairy in her place? Was there something with which she required their help before they left? Perhaps that was what had led her to make such an irresponsible promise.

Lydia looked around. She wondered if the portraits on the walls were of the estate's former inhabitants who had created close links with the Danes. It would explain why they frequented the room. Her eyes eventually fell on one particular painting that featured a lady in rather old-fashioned clothing with a wreath of flowers around her neck. The flowers were of all different colors, and Lydia was surprised to find that she recognized the wreath—it was the same one Virginia had been wearing. The variety of flowers, their sizes, and the order of the colors... What could it mean? Had it resisted wilting all these years to end up adorning the gardener's neck? Had Virginia made a new wreath based on the one in the portrait? What for?

Lydia realized she was assuming they were real flowers when they could have been artificial.

"Wait a moment...'regard'?" she murmured.

The rubies were the crimson roses, the emerald the green leaves, the garnet the scarlet amaryllis, the amethyst the violet forget-me-

nots, and the diamond the white roses. Taking the first letter of each of those gems spelled out a message of affection: REGARD.

Did that make the *wreath* Lady Oughtred's regard necklace? Virginia had said that wearing it allowed her into the fairies' garden. Fae and flowers held a strong connection to one another. Lydia had assumed that wearing it simply made finding the garden's entrance easier. However, if it was actually the regard necklace that had been passed down through generations, it potentially symbolized that its wearer had permission to enter the Danes' garden. According to Lucinda, the necklace used flowers in its motif, and the butler had said that it was too splendid to wear on a day-to-day basis.

"Nico, I have come to a realization."

"What's that?"

The gardener, Virginia, *was* Lady Oughtred. That was why she was now trapped in the rose garden, because the fairy that had taken her place had been chased away. The regard necklace had not been stolen. Lady Oughtred still had it.

"I know where her ladyship's regard necklace is. But I would like to go and confirm my suspicions."

It wasn't uncommon for noblewomen to enjoy gardening, and this countess's specialty lay in roses. She must have tended the rose garden as a matter of course.

"Go where, Lydia?" Nico asked.

If she was right and the gardener and the countess were one and the same, then it was clear what she must do. Grasping at that glimmer of hope, Lydia rushed for the study door but stopped in her tracks as someone appeared right before her.

"Hello. Starting early this morning, are we?"

It was Billy. He kept one hand on the door and didn't move from her way. She wondered whether he had overheard what she'd said to Nico. Most people heard the fairy cat's speech as mewls, so it would have sounded like she was having a peculiar conversation with herself.

"You too, I gather?" she said.

"I was just about to come looking for you. Might I have a word?"

"Can it wait?"

"It won't take long. One of the maids found Lady Lucinda's brooch. She wished to apologize to you, for she believes you wouldn't have come under suspicion if she'd returned it sooner."

"Oh..."

"Will you see her?"

Lydia nodded. The mornings before their duties began tended to be the only free time afforded to junior maids. Casting Nico a look to instruct him to wait for her, she followed Billy from the room.

"Mr. Nico, your breakfast is ready. Are you dozing, perhaps?"

The mention of breakfast woke Nico up quickly. He had been waiting for Lydia by the study window when he had fallen asleep. The chairs here were exceedingly comfortable.

"Oh, it's you, Raven. I suppose I am hungry. Hold on, where's Lydia? Hasn't she come back yet?"

"I was actually searching for Miss Carlton myself."

"I remember now! A servant called Billy called her away. He was saying something about a maid picking up Lucinda's brooch."

"What did you just say?"

It wasn't Raven who cried out, but Edgar, who had appeared in the doorway. He must have been searching for Lydia alongside his servant. His face was pale as he swooped in to pick Nico up by the scruff of his neck.

"Nico, surely you cannot be telling me that Lydia went somewhere with Billy and has yet to return?"

"Oi! Unhand me! Why must you get so unreasonably jealous of every man who comes within a stone's throw of her?"

"Did she say anything else? For example, anything concerning Lady Oughtred's regard necklace?"

"She did, as it happens. She said she'd come to a realization about where the countess's necklace was. It was all very sudden."

Edgar clicked his tongue and practically tossed Nico to one side. "Raven, find Billy and Lydia as soon as you can."

"Yes, my lord."

"How dare you *throw* me!" Nico wailed. "Jealousy has twisted you! You are a petty fiend of a man!"

"This has nothing to do with jealousy. Lydia is in danger," the earl explained urgently.

Lydia followed Billy behind the stables. There wasn't a maid to be seen. Instead, she found herself confronted with two male servants, neither of them high-ranking. The three men surrounded her before she could even guess at what was happening.

"You're not really a maid, are you, Lydia?" Billy asked. The look on his face was utterly terrifying, and she couldn't understand why the discovery of her secret should warrant it. "Where is Lady Oughtred?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Where is the countess? And where is her regard necklace?"

"Who *are* you people?" Lydia asked.

"You don't need to know that to answer my questions."

Billy was overbearing in his assertiveness, and Lydia found herself backed up against the wall. Even so, she shot back, "I suppose you aren't really a footman either."

"No, I'm not. So I suggest you take me seriously." Billy slammed his hand at full force against the wall behind her. "You're the one who abducted Lady Oughtred and fabricated that little trick with the rabbit in her chamber, aren't you? I never swallowed that slop about 'fairies,' unlike the superstitious old butler."

Lydia looked up at him in surprise. "I did no such thing."

It had been the work of whoever was after her ladyship's jewels.

"I know you were chasing those rabbits around the gardens. And we discovered a dead rabbit in her ladyship's room. It must have been you. But you can't have acted alone. Who are you working with? Where is the countess?"

"I don't—"

"You can't tell us you don't know." One of the other men flashed a knife right in front of her eyes.

"We know you've been snooping around the estate whenever you're not on duty," Billy went on. "I imagine you've failed to find the necklace even after locking up her ladyship? You've been looking for it ever since, haven't you?"

In truth, she had been searching for the Danes. However, it seemed that Billy had decided that *she* was the thief with her eye on the countess's jewelry. These men appeared to be after it too.

"Billy, are you—and these men—are you a group of thieves? Were you pretending to be servants so that you could steal Lady Oughtred's jewels?"

The man with the knife opened his mouth to speak, but Billy gestured for him to keep quiet and answered in his stead. "You're working with that blond earl, aren't you? Well, the man pretending to be an earl, I suppose. Any 'nobleman' whose servant holds that much unconcealed blood lust can't be who he says he is."

Lydia forced herself to think. Whoever had snuck into Lady Oughtred's room with a knife wasn't affiliated with these men. Did that mean there was *another* thief after the countess's jewels? Or was it instead an attempted murder?

"If you talk, Lydia, we'll share the spoils with you. You'd rather that than us killing you here, wouldn't you?" Billy offered calmly, his eyes oddly soothing as they peered at her.

She glared at him and kept her mouth firmly shut.

"You were let go from your previous estate because you seduced a man, is that right? I can't imagine that from a girl who looks like you."

Lucinda's lies had apparently made their way to him too. There was no greater humiliation for a young woman than to be seen as a temptress. Lydia could barely contain her frustration. She was trembling with rage, which Billy seemed to interpret as fear.

"I'm not opposed to girls like that, you know. I don't push them around either. You'd have a much easier time of it with me than that blond scoundrel." He touched her cheek, sending goose bumps along her skin.

"Don't you dare touch me!" Lydia raised her hand to strike him, but he caught it before she could.

He pinned her wrist against the wall before continuing, the words he spat out landing somewhere between persuasion and threat. "We don't take kindly to those who steal what is ours from under our noses. It won't be long before your companion ends up as fertilizer

for these gardens either. Is he really worth risking your life over? I doubt *he* cares about what's happening to you right now."

Lydia's hand still bore the red marks from yesterday's punishment. Billy studied them pityingly. Sensing that he had let his guard down for a moment, Lydia tried shoving him away. She struggled as best she could, trying to escape, but it was no use. One of the other men hooked his arms under hers from behind and held her tight. Billy's hand came to rest on her throat.

"Listen to me. That fop you're hanging around is probably only interested in your looks any—"

Billy suddenly jumped backward. The man behind Lydia collapsed, and she almost went down with him, until a dark-skinned boy darted in to support her.

"Raven?"

He looked at Billy and one of the other men, the threat clear in his eyes.

"You really have no idea how to seduce a woman, do you?" Edgar had appeared from the other side of the stables, dragging with him a man whose hands were tied behind his back—presumably another one of Billy's associates. He was staggering and struggling to stay vertical, having clearly suffered a substantial beating. A cold smile rose to Edgar's lips as he showed the man's condition to Billy. "Not to mention the foolish courage it must have taken to try to seduce my fiancée in the first place."

Edgar kicked the bound man to the ground, and Raven immediately pushed Lydia toward him in a manner that seemed planned. The servant leaped at Billy in the same movement. The footman moved his hand toward his inner pocket to draw a weapon, but Raven was faster.





The boy kicked upward, and a pistol went flying out of Billy's hand. Lydia tried to duck around the footman, running toward Edgar who was reaching out for her. Suddenly, however, a wave of dizziness washed over her. She lost her footing, the world spinning around her.

Edgar cried her name. It sounded so far away.

***

Lydia was struggling to summon strength to her muscles. It felt like her taut nerves had snapped all too suddenly. All her recent anxiety and exhaustion had come to the surface, and she didn't know what to do with her body, which refused to listen to her. Instead, she did what she could to maintain consciousness. Her eyes wouldn't open, so she considered where she might presently be lying. The freshly washed linen, feather pillow, and soft mattress meant she definitely wasn't in the crude bed of her attic room. Someone was holding her hand.

Edgar?

Though her lips moved slightly, her voice wouldn't come. But it was enough to restore a tiny portion of her strength. She managed to crack her eyelids open. Edgar was looking at her intently with a grave expression on his face, stroking her hand as he held it in his. Embarrassed as she recalled the marks that still covered it, she wanted to pull away, but she didn't yet have the strength. This must have been Edgar's guest room. His chamber. Despite being unable to move, she grew flustered.

Edgar stood up then. Her heart lurched, but then she realized that he had turned toward the door. He had a visitor.

"Has the doctor arrived yet?" he asked.

"I beg you forgive the trouble we have caused you, Lord Ashenbert. We shall carry Lydia to her room. Your lordship will not need to trouble yourself over her any longer."

The fairy doctor was finally able to move her head. She saw Mrs. Boyle ushering in a junior male servant.

"You will do no such thing without my permission," Edgar said

firmly.

"A maid cannot be allowed to occupy one of the guest rooms."

"Bring the doctor here at once."

"This is common with maids. She will be right as rain tomorrow."

"Oh, she will, will she?" Perhaps something had snapped inside Edgar at the thought of the housekeeper moving his fiancée without so much as calling a doctor. He had taken a much darker tone than usual. He might have raised his voice if he wasn't under the impression that Lydia was asleep.

"Listen closely. Lydia is not a maid. She is my fiancée. I shall *not* abide anything untoward happening to her. Should that happen, both you and the maids who harassed her will find yourselves buried. Alive." Edgar stood in front of the bed, preventing the servant from taking so much as a step toward her. It was evident that his patience had run dry.

The housekeeper looked both pitying and conflicted all at once. The earl's infatuation with a mere servant seemed to have bewildered her.

"My lord," she began hesitantly, "Lydia is an employee of this estate. She must be treated in line with the other servants, else it would set a bad precedent."

"I do not know what Lady Oughtred told you about Lydia. However, I did not entrust her to *you*. I entrusted her to her ladyship, in whom I have confidence. I should have put a stop to this ordeal much sooner, given her absence. Never did I anticipate that my fiancée would be exposed to such cruelty."

"Lydia might have been tasked with attending to her ladyship directly, but I am the one who is ultimately responsible for and holds authority over her."

Edgar only grew more irritated as the housekeeper failed to grasp his point. "As I have already explained, Lydia is *not* a maid in any capacity. I asked the duchess to request that Lady Oughtred educate her, so that she might be prepared to enter into upper-class society. Her ladyship kindly accepted. I fail to see how that gives you responsibility or authority over Lydia. I shall have you know that her ladyship was to potentially recommend that Lydia be allowed an

audience with Her Majesty. You understand the gravity of that, don't you? I held my tongue, believing that this was all a part of her ladyship's education, but I refuse to stay silent any longer!"

Lydia caught a glimpse of the butler standing in the doorway. He must have heard the commotion in passing and stopped to see what was going on. Edgar continued berating the housekeeper regardless.

"What is more, I might ask for an explanation as to the caning she received. That is how one punishes a common thief, is it not? Were you the one responsible for that? Was it not proven that Lydia was innocent of pilfering Lady Lucinda's brooch? Well? You do realize *whose* hand it was that you marked so brutally, don't you?"

Although Mrs. Boyle had been dauntless in refuting Edgar's words just seconds again, now her expression was gradually growing more anxious. "I knew we were receiving a very important young lady, but I thought she was due to arrive tomorrow."

"Her arrival was moved up due to unforeseen circumstances on the part of the duchess. She must have sent word."

"Lord Ashenbert, I must beg your forgiveness," the butler cut in hurriedly. "We did receive such a telegram, and it was delivered to her ladyship's chamber. I believe it is quite likely that she was never able to read it. It is still among the unopened letters in her room, so she must have already been absent at the time of its arrival."

"But if not Lady Oughtred, who decided that Lydia should work as a maid?"

It was a pertinent question, Lydia realized, and she put her hazy mind to work.

"Ah, yes..." Mrs. Boyle began, but then she faltered. She frowned as if still struggling to comprehend the situation.

The butler answered in her stead. "The new maid has just arrived. The collapse of the main bridge meant the road was closed for quite some time."

At that, the housekeeper swooned. If the butler hadn't been standing behind her and caught her, she might have hit her head.

As Lydia understood it, Lady Oughtred had not ordained that she become a maid. Because she had switched places with the fairy and been in the rose garden, she had missed the news that Lydia was

due to arrive early. The fairy doctor had just so happened to come on the day the new maid was due, leading to the housekeeper's misapprehension.

"I beg your pardon?! Did you not think to *check*? And now Lydia has been taken ill! This is no insignificant mistake!"

"Edgar..." Finally able to speak, Lydia managed to shift herself up slightly. "I ought to have checked myself. I simply assumed that it was all a part of my training..."

"Do not push yourself, Lydia. You need to remain lying down."

"I'm fine. But none of this is Mrs. Boyle's fault."

In fact, she couldn't blame the housekeeper at all for her mistake. A young noblewoman from a respectable house would normally never have arrived by herself and without a lady's maid. Nor would she have simply accepted being mistaken for a servant. None of this would have happened if Lydia wasn't a commoner.

"I—" she tried again.

"All right. I shan't blame her any further, so lie back down. Your countenance is still rather concerning."

"I feel fine. Just a little weak."

Edgar knelt down and peered at her anxiously. "When was the last time you ate something? You haven't been taking meals regularly, have you?"

Now that she thought about it, he might have been right. "I ate the cookie you gave me. Well, as much as I was able to..."

The earl drew his hand over her cheek before pulling her into a comforting embrace. He looked over his shoulder at the housekeeper and butler. "Summon a doctor and bring her some food. Posthaste."

Edgar left the room to allow the doctor to examine Lydia. Apart from the relief, which had been a long time coming, he also found himself saddled with an unmanageable rage. Despite his proximity to Lydia, he had been unable to protect her. It had been difficult to intervene when everyone thought her a servant. He was an earl and she a maid. It had essentially left him powerless. The more he'd tried to help, the more the other maids had grown jealous and spread those unseemly rumors about her.

Ultimately, he'd had to make her true position known just to get the housekeeper to summon a doctor. The experience had reminded him that Lydia was liable to continuously encounter similar hardships when she entered noble society. There was no getting away from the fact that he was an aristocrat and she wasn't. He could stand up for her all he liked, but it would do nothing to change things. That was precisely why he had wanted to raise her status as much as possible before announcing their engagement.

If he could make it so her father's respectable profession outweighed her upper-middle-class position, it would give her a much easier time when she did enter upper-class society. That was the last trick he held up his sleeve. But he wasn't sure he could still use it, given that Lady Oughtred was missing. And he was starting to wonder whether it even mattered.

He didn't want to force Lydia into anything. Leaving London once they were married and living out the rest of their days peacefully on his Isle of Mannan was also an option. While he wasn't sure how long he would be able to maintain his sanity, it was an area teeming with fairies, so it would be a comfortable environment for her.

He wanted to give everything of his to her before disaster struck. That had been his intention this entire time. In a sense, he considered noble society a potential weapon for keeping her safe, hence why he wanted to carve out a place for her there. But if it proved too difficult, there would be nothing to be done. He had witnessed Lydia collapse from exhaustion right in front of him, and it had sapped him of the motivation to keep forcing things to progress.

"I am back, my lord."

Edgar turned his gaze from the window to his servant. "And what of Billy and his men?"

"I threw them into the manure pit by the stables."

"My heart breaks for them," Edgar said, quietly thinking that it was what they deserved. "Did they talk?"

"No, my lord. They gave me the impression that they would die rather than let anything slip."

In other words, they had been trained. It didn't surprise the earl, given his first impression of Billy. Raven was capable of immediately

identifying whether threats were enough to extract information from someone or whether it would require a special kind of torture. Discerning that this lot fell into the latter category, he must have given up trying to question them. It would have taken a specialized location and tools to get anything from them, neither of which existed within the estate. Edgar suspected that they had been more than just a gang of thieves.

"My lord, they were not the ones responsible for entering Lady Oughtred's room with the knife, were they?"

"It would seem not, and I have my suspicions surrounding that maid. Perhaps this estate has been penetrated by two separate gangs."

Edgar had been looking into Lucinda's maid as much as he had Billy since yesterday. He had learned that she was not plotting something alone, but had been keeping in frequent contact with somebody: one of the men staying in the cabin on the grounds, hired to transplant the gardens' trees. It was possible that they were all her accomplices. Lucinda believed the maid to be mute, and the girl would have had to exercise extreme caution not to break the illusion. She had likely targeted Lucinda upon hearing that she was Lady Oughtred's niece and would be staying with the countess to prepare for her debut. No one would have questioned her wandering the estate as the young lady's maid, and it would have given her the opportunity to get closer to the countess too.

"What about Lady Lucinda herself?" Raven asked. "The mystery of the dark hair has yet to be solved."

Edgar had been observing the girl in question for some time from the window. She was carrying a whitish box—most likely the ivory jewelry box—in her arms. The box from which Lydia had allegedly stolen her brooch. The butler had said that it belonged to Lady Oughtred and had been out on display when Lucinda requested use of it. The girl was carefully observing her surroundings as she entered the domed greenhouse with it. When she emerged again, she held nothing. What could she be scheming this time?

"A pertinent question. It is difficult to know how to interpret her movements."

That said, she seemed to be putting most of her efforts into harassing Lydia rather than anything as audacious as jewel thievery or making an attempt on a noblewoman's life.

"In any case, Raven, it is no longer feasible to bring Lydia back to London too soon. We ought to thoroughly dispatch these dangerous parties first."

"Yes, my lord."

"It is my impression that Lady Lucinda's maid is likely to be more loose-lipped than Billy. Your thoughts?"

"I cannot foresee extracting information from her to be too difficult a task, given she can speak after all."

"She might also know whether or not Lady Lucinda was involved in the intrusion of Lady Oughtred's room, which would eliminate the need to question the girl."

Raven had probably already deduced everything Edgar was thinking. He nodded obediently, then turned on his heel.

Lydia had made herself take a little soup despite her lack of appetite and was now feeling somewhat calmer. The doctor had said that her dizziness was likely a result of exhaustion and stress, and that she would recover after a period of rest. The news had finally wiped away the grave expression on Edgar's face. The earl was presently sitting by her on the edge of the bed and studying her thoughtfully.

As usual, witnessing his handsome features in all their intensity at such proximity was making her restless. She nonchalantly averted her gaze, her hands fiddling aimlessly with her duvet. "I wasted vast amounts of time and effort, didn't I? My stubbornness caused you no end of trouble. I was foolish."

"I do not feel inconvenienced in the least, Lydia."

"But everyone knows that we are engaged now. There is no shortage of maids who still believe I stole Lady Lucinda's brooch either."

"Let them believe what they wish. I know better than anyone else that you are innocent."

"I made you wash those pots and casks..."

“There is nothing I wouldn’t wash for you.”

“And now I am monopolizing your bed.”

“You are very welcome to. It grants me a pretext to sleep beside you.”

“You... You intend to sleep here?”

She grew flustered, eliciting a sigh from Edgar, but it was not without amusement.

“I wish that wouldn’t frighten you so. I am your lover, not a wolf.”

“I know that,” she stammered.

It was *because* they were lovers that Lydia struggled with her response. She could no longer rely on temper and rejection to cover for her embarrassment and awkwardness, but she was still unused to being in love, so it was equally difficult to give herself over to the amorous mood. The more she panicked, the more ungainly her behavior became.

“That was in jest. I shall be sleeping in the room next door.”

Lydia knew her relief was palpable, and she could sense the resultant frown on his face.

“You still won’t look at me. Do you perhaps blame me for all that has happened? Or do you perhaps blame the fact that we are engaged?”

“No...”

“Then, do you suspect there is something between Lady Lucinda and me?”

“You never wrote her any letters. She only assumed it was you. What is there to suspect?”

“That I might have taken advantage of her fondness for me?”

The thought hadn’t eluded Lydia. “Did you?”

“Not in the slightest.”

She fell silent. As she recalled, they *had* almost kissed. But perhaps that was to be expected. Any man would have been swayed were he desired so earnestly.

“Lady Lucinda is rather beautiful,” Lydia said, “and she has confidence in herself. I should think it would only be natural for you to develop an interest in her, given that she is so fond of you.”

This time, Edgar was silent. He seemed to mull over her words

for a spell. She suspected that she had hit the nail on the head, but he came out with something rather unexpected.

"Personally, I would find it most unpleasant if you were to develop an interest in other men," he grumbled.

"But it is impossible to have full control over one another's hearts, no matter how close we are as lovers."

He let out a long sigh, and she could only wonder at the emotion that had elicited it. Her gaze was downcast, so she couldn't see his expression. But she heard his words.

"Lydia. I want all of you."

That was what she wanted from him too. That was why she had agreed to marry him. No other man had ever reached her heart like he had. So why did he speak as if such a risk existed?

She let her eyes creep upward, hoping to catch a clue in his countenance. She couldn't yet bring herself to look him in the eye, so she let her gaze settle on the almost translucent golden hair by his ear. He reached out for her, tilting her chin upward and resting his thumb on her lips. Perhaps he was waiting to see if she would pull back. But he soon brought their lips together, pressing his softly against hers.

Lydia struggled with their kisses when they were alone. Edgar liked them to last, and she never knew what she was supposed to do. When she stayed still, she was bewildered by the unfamiliar feelings within her. There was something akin to sadness, helplessness, a fear that she might lose herself, and an exhilarating urge to know what that would feel like. It was the utter confusion of it all that paralyzed her. Her nerves were locking her limbs in place.

There came a knock at the door. Edgar ignored it and gently deepened their kiss, pulling her in tightly.

A maid called to them from outside. "Lord Ashenbert? Lady Lucinda is here to see you."

No... Don't stop.

Surprised at the thought that flitted across her mind, Lydia turned her face away thoughtlessly. It seemed that Edgar wasn't satisfied, because he continued to rain kisses on her cheeks and ears as the maid knocked again.

"Edgar, the door..."

"What reason have I to respond?"

"Well, it might be important."

He was peering at her, and she was made to look away once again. He got to his feet with a quiet sigh. "I shan't be long."

The chamber door closed behind him. Edgar must have let Lucinda into the dressing room, because Lydia could hear her voice.

"I require your assistance, Lord Ashenbert! Annie has gone missing!" Her voice was thick with tears.

"Annie? Ah, you must be referring to your maid."

"I sent her to father's room for an errand, but he said she never arrived. It has been an hour now, and I've seen neither hide nor hair of her!"

"Perhaps you ought to wait a little longer. She might merely be taking a break somewhere."

"My lord, this is a first for her. I can only think that something dreadful has happened, especially with that jewel thief lurking about the estate!"

Lydia gasped as something in her chest jolted. Lucinda didn't know that someone was after Lady Oughtred's jewels. So when she said "jewel thief," she must have been referring to the fairy doctor.

"Annie took the jewelry box with her. I thought it best to leave it with father, given all the trouble we've been having. Yes, I'm sure of it! Lydia must have stolen the box from Annie!"

"Lady Lucinda, you may recall that we proved Lydia's innocence yesterday."

"I am certain that she merely hid the brooch elsewhere."

"She would never do such a thing."

"My lord, why do you defend her so? Well, I suppose I do understand to some extent. Gentlemen prefer to keep several lovers, don't they? A maid must make for a fun, casual diversion. And if her presence should cause problems, one has only to dismiss her."

There came the dragging of fabric over the floor. Presumably, Lucinda had just drawn closer to Edgar. Uneasiness bubbled up in Lydia's stomach.

"I understand that ladies tend to be very tolerant when it comes to such matters. However, my lord, a nobleman must choose a woman from a respectable family to marry so that his estate may be passed on to an heir of suitable caliber."

"And you consider yourself to be just such a woman?"

"Well, my offspring would certainly be fit to inherit an earldom."

"You might have put that more euphemistically."

Lydia wondered if Edgar was presently enjoying himself. She knew that he would never spurn a woman who approached him so forthrightly. As much as she tried to resign herself to that fact, the irritation started to build within her. Not to mention that the conversation was moving on from the topic of Annie's whereabouts. It was apparent that Lucinda was only using her maid as an excuse to flirt with Edgar.

"I do believe myself capable of choosing maids who are both obedient and endearing," Lucinda went on.

Edgar hummed. "In other words, you would permit disloyalty with women of your choosing."

What a scoundrel! Why had that made him chuckle? Lydia grew all the more irritated.

"Yes. Why, there are plenty of maids much lovelier than Lydia."

Are there now?

Before she knew what she was doing, Lydia had risen from bed and flung open the dressing room door. "That's enough! I do not care how much you adore Edgar—you will stay away from him! I would rather he fool around with a thousand different women before *you*!"

Lucinda stared at her, dumbfounded. Then, after a moment of studying Lydia—who was still in her maid's uniform—she seemed to return to her senses and shot back. "'Fool around,' you say? I am daughter to Lord Constable! I am *not* to be fooled around with! And who are you? A mere *maid*!"

"I am no maid. I am Lord Ashenbert's rightful fiancée. I may not know how prestigious your name is, but no one will become his mistress without my acknowledgment!"

"Lydia." Edgar extended his arms toward her as she staggered.

For some reason, the very sight of him made her rage peak, and she raised her hand thoughtlessly. “Don’t touch me!”

Her strike hit its mark. The *smack* that resounded through the room pulled Lydia back to reality. Lucinda’s eyes were stretched wide in surprise.

Her behavior was most improper, she realized. Not only had she quarreled with Lucinda immediately in front of Edgar, she had then gone on to strike the earl. The truth felt unbearable when it hit, and she made to flee, only for Edgar to grab her arm. He pulled her back and into his embrace. She struggled and hit his chest in protest, but he wouldn’t let go.

“Forgive me, Lydia.”

Just like that, the tension left her. And then, for reasons unbeknownst to her, tears sprang to her eyes.

“I have erred,” he went on.

She couldn’t see that he had. Lydia had been the one to insist he answer the door, and he had responded to everything Lucinda said as inoffensively as possible. And then the fairy doctor had gone and taken her anger out on him. Yet he still apologized and caressed her hair soothingly. As mortified as she felt, she found herself clinging to him as desperately as she possibly could.

“This girl seems to have taken leave of her senses, my lord. To think she fancies herself your fiancée!”

“She is my fiancée.”

“Please. I can only imagine the horrendous upbringing she had, given she finds it perfectly acceptable to strike a gentleman!”

As far as Lydia was concerned, Lucinda could say whatever she liked.

It seemed Edgar didn’t agree. “I shan’t allow you to deride her any further. Away with you.”

Lydia found herself sitting on the sofa, her face buried in Edgar’s chest as she cried. At some point, Lucinda had left. She didn’t know when.

“I’m sorry for upsetting you so.”

“It wasn’t you. I...”

“Please, Lydia, don’t try to shoulder this burden by yourself.”

His countless apologies made her feel that she ought to stop crying, but her tears would not be stemmed.

"I was just so uncertain... I really wanted to work as hard as I possibly could here, but I found it impossible, and then I was at a loss..."

"You are already doing what you ought to be."

"I am still so far from what a fiancée should be in any sense of the word."

"You are enough as you are."

"I am not. I do not know how to be a lover. I know full well that I fall short. I thought that if I undertook Lady Oughtred's education, then perhaps I might be able to change..."

"Did I not tell you that I would be satisfied so long as you stayed by my side?"

The more tightly she clung to him, the more tightly he embraced her. Every apology he whispered into her ear seemed to push out another wave of everything she had been holding back. Her anxieties about the wedding. The inferiority she felt as a commoner. The harassment she had suffered at the hands of Lucinda and the maids. Billy's violence. All the frustration and pain that she couldn't carry by herself. She was beginning to realize that Edgar was there to share it with her, and now she no longer felt the need to force her tears to stop. She clung to him as closely as she could, ridding herself of her weighty burden and feeling it grow lighter.

She had feared giving him too many reasons to be disappointed in her. She had wanted to hide her weaknesses from him, but he had said he wanted all of her. Perhaps that meant he desired her vulnerable side too. It would explain why he didn't seem the least bit troubled or exasperated. He was smiling tenderly.

Once Lydia had expressed everything she needed to and her tears had dried, she looked up slightly. Edgar returned her gaze as if he were regarding something most precious.

"Allow me to keep holding you for a while."

She stared at him blankly.

"It brings me no end of joy when you cling to me like this."

"Oh?"

He didn't seem inclined to loosen his grip on her, so she wrapped her arms around his back once more. Knowing that it delighted him so much made her want to do it.

"Might I ask you something, Lydia?"

"Of course," she replied quietly.

"Would you allow me to be unfaithful to you, if only with a woman you approve of?"

She paused. "I only said that in the passion of the moment. In truth, I couldn't fathom such a thing."

"You would rather I remain faithful, then."

"Well, naturally," she stammered, then hardened her tone. "Edgar? Why are you laughing?"

"Because that is exactly what I was hoping you would say."

Sometimes, he could be more child than adult. Lydia couldn't help but think so, despite the fact that she herself had been wailing like an infant just moments ago. At last, she found herself able to look him in the eye. His smile widened and he pecked her on the forehead, just before something seemed to catch his eye outside the window. Lydia heard the sound of a carriage approaching the front of the estate.

"She came, despite Lady Oughtred's absence?" It sounded like Edgar knew the visitor's identity. Then, he blinked in realization and murmured, "Ah. Of course. That would explain the tight-lippedness."

Lydia could not begin to guess what he was referring to. Suddenly, she remembered that she had her own important news to share, and her head snapped up. "Edgar, I know where Lady Oughtred is. She has been trapped in the fairies' rose garden. I must bargain with them and rescue her at once!"

When she tried to get to her feet, Edgar stopped her.

"You still need rest. Besides, if you must bargain with the fairies for her, I cannot imagine that bringing her ladyship back will be particularly simple."

Lydia faltered. She had yet to obtain the secret that would allow her to negotiate with the Danes in the first place. "We are running short on time. Striking a deal is the only remaining avenue, regardless of whether I prove capable or not. The fairies are angry

and have concluded that humans are not to be trusted. They intend to bury the rose garden with Lady Oughtred in it. They are only willing to wait until dawn tomorrow, after the night of the full moon."

Edgar nodded, then turned to look out of the window in thought for a while. "Billy and his men are not the only dangerous parties lurking within this estate. It was someone else who entered her ladyship's room with a knife."

Indeed, Billy thought it was Lydia who had done so.

"The chances are high that this other party is also targeting her ladyship's jewelry."

"But stealing the jewelry is impossible. Lady Oughtred is still in possession of the regard necklace that acts as the key."

"Do you mean to say it is in the fairies' rose garden?"

"Yes. There are rules to entering that garden, and attempting to do so without knowing them is dangerous. The fairies will call to one and promise to grant a wish, but they mustn't be answered."

"I see. Then, her ladyship will not come to any harm tonight." It was clear from Edgar's expression that he had started plotting something. He might have seen this as an opportunity to relieve the resentment that he had built up since his arrival here. "Lydia, I shall make a decisive move against the villain who targeted her ladyship before dawn. You must wait until then to make your rescue attempt, lest her escape from the garden places her in even greater danger."

"Very well, but will you have Raven as your sole ally?"

"You needn't worry about that. I should be able to procure extra assistance. For the time being, just focus on resting. Will you do that for me?"

The Countess of the Blue Roses

Raven entered the room and shut the door firmly behind him.

"The preparations are complete, my lord," he said in a low voice.

Lydia was in the room next door and she had just begun to doze. Though it was unlikely that she would overhear them, Edgar's servant seemed to sense that he didn't want to take the risk. Raven had come a long way, showing her such consideration now. Slowly but surely, he was acquiring human emotions and growing used to a life of quiet. Edgar certainly had his scruples about asking him to assist in something so brutal.

But be that as it may, the earl was still engaged in a fight for his life, and Raven was his soldier. He knew that his servant would follow him to the ends of the Earth. It was his belief that the orders he gave as a master formed the firm bond between them, and that was why he pressed on.

"Does Annie seem afraid?"

"Not particularly. She continues to be stubborn in the pretense that she cannot speak."

"Apply a little threat."

Lydia would detest what Edgar was doing. However, he had no other methods available to him. He had chosen the most effective way to protect those close to him and retreat from his enemies as he had always done and would likely continue to do. He intended to be thorough, even if he was dealing with nothing more than a gang of thieves.

"Please take a look at this, my lord," Raven continued, holding up a bunch of red hair. Annie's presumably.

"You scalped her?"

"It is a wig, my lord."

It was still a little early to expect Raven to understand jokes.

"And Annie's real hair is?"

"Dark."

With that, everything fell into place at last. Annie had been the one to sneak into Lady Oughtred's room. All Lucinda had done was hide the jewelry box so that she could try to pin more blame on Lydia.

"Well discovered, Raven. We know now what we need to do."

The boy stayed quiet, apparently waiting for him to elaborate.

Instead, Edgar muttered something quite unrelated. "You know, Raven, I think Lydia has fallen for me more than I realized."

His servant merely looked at him, clearly unsure how to respond. Edgar had partly been talking to himself, but he felt now that some sort of excuse was in order for what was about to happen.

"She has put in an awful lot of effort for my sake. No matter how she suffered, she didn't yield, endeavoring to become the fiancée she felt I wanted."

Naturally, Edgar recognized that Lydia was also concerned about the vanished countess in her capacity as a fairy doctor, but her insistence on continuing as a maid was likely for his sake. He didn't think it was conceitedness that had him believing he was becoming more important to her. There was an innocence to her utterance that she was not fit to be his fiancée, and he now realized that he might have been hurrying her too much. It would likely take a long time for her to understand how passionately he felt, but Edgar was more than happy to wallow in his impatience.

"Theorizing romance is nothing short of nonsense. He who loves most loses most? I am sure that the opposite holds true when it comes to Lydia."

Edgar would do whatever it took to protect her. That sentiment ought to be enough to keep his selfish desires, a result of his curse, at bay. He wanted to believe that having people to fight for—his lover, his family, his companions—would save him from any impending corruption.

He got to his feet. "Shall we begin?"

As Edgar approached Lucinda's room, he heard her shrill voice spilling out into the corridor.

"Explain yourself, father! Where is Annie? Won't you tell the butler to go and look for her?"

"I am sure that she will return eventually."

"She went to replace the water in my vase and has yet to return! Yes, she has a habit of slacking sometimes, but it's almost noon! I cannot abide this!"

To think she had clung to Edgar crying, so *anxious* about her missing maid. In reality, it sounded as if she wouldn't shed a tear even if Annie never came back.

"I have treated her only with kindness despite her muteness, and yet I am sure she secretly regards me as a fool!"

Edgar stopped in front of the door. It opened without him having to knock. Lucinda, prepared to rush out, halted just before she walked into him.

"Lord Ashenbert... What can I do for you?" She looked away, clearly not having forgotten how he drove her out earlier. Her glances, however, spoke of expectation.

"I beg you forgive my earlier impertinence, Lady Lucinda."

She frowned, a poor attempt at suppressing a smile. "Indeed, never have I been subject to such impertinence. To think that an *earl* would see fit to come to a maid's defense!"

She was unbelievably pompous. Edgar had to suppress his own smile as he continued meekly.

"I have found your maid by way of apology. It proved to be quite the endeavor."

"Your lordship found Annie? Where was she and what was she doing?"

"You mentioned you had tasked her with taking your jewelry box somewhere, yes? However, she didn't have it with her. I am currently investigating whether she might have hidden it somewhere."

"Lucinda, did Annie attempt to abscond with your jewelry?" Constable sounded surprised as he approached.

"Oh, well..." The sudden idea of her maid being treated as a thief seemed to have Lucinda panicking.

"We must interrogate her at once. I'm very sorry for the trouble my daughter has put you through, Ashenbert. Where is Annie?" The

older earl was being unusually amenable. He must have truly believed that Edgar had searched for Annie for Lucinda's sake.

"I would be happy to show you to her. I have someone keeping an eye on her to ensure she doesn't attempt to flee."

Edgar led them to a room at the farthest edge of the estate. It didn't seem to be oft visited, so they wouldn't attract attention should they cause a disturbance. He opened the door without knocking. Raven was waiting for them by the lit fireplace.

"Annie..." Lucinda murmured.

It was no wonder that the blood drained from Lucinda's face. Her pale, downcast maid was tied to a chair. Raven's light threats had proven effective. Merely inflicting pain on someone did not amount to torture. It was less the physical sensations and more the possibility of upcoming agony that sent people falling into a bottomless pit of terror. That was why instruments of torture tended to be so exaggerated in appearance. It wasn't difficult to devastate someone by describing in graphic detail what would happen if they didn't comply. One didn't even need to lift a finger.

"Your mistress has come for you, Annie. Perhaps now would be a suitable time to beg for her assistance."

The maid looked at Edgar, her eyes fearful, but she didn't so much as spare a glance for Lucinda.

"The ivory box that contains Lady Lucinda's jewels. Tell us where you have hidden it, and I am sure she will come to your aid. You would do well to speak sooner rather than later," Edgar went on.

"Lord Ashenbert!" Lucinda called, bewildered. "Annie cannot talk. She has never been able to utter a word since her birth."

"Is that so? I wonder. Have you ever tested that theory?"

"Tested it? It was how she was introduced to me."

"You haven't, then. I must say that seems rather careless of you. Has it never occurred to you that she might be feigning her muteness? If so, I would wager she has all sorts of interesting tales to tell."

"Nonsense..." Lucinda was clearly dismayed. Presumably, she had told Annie all sorts of things that she would rather not be passed on.

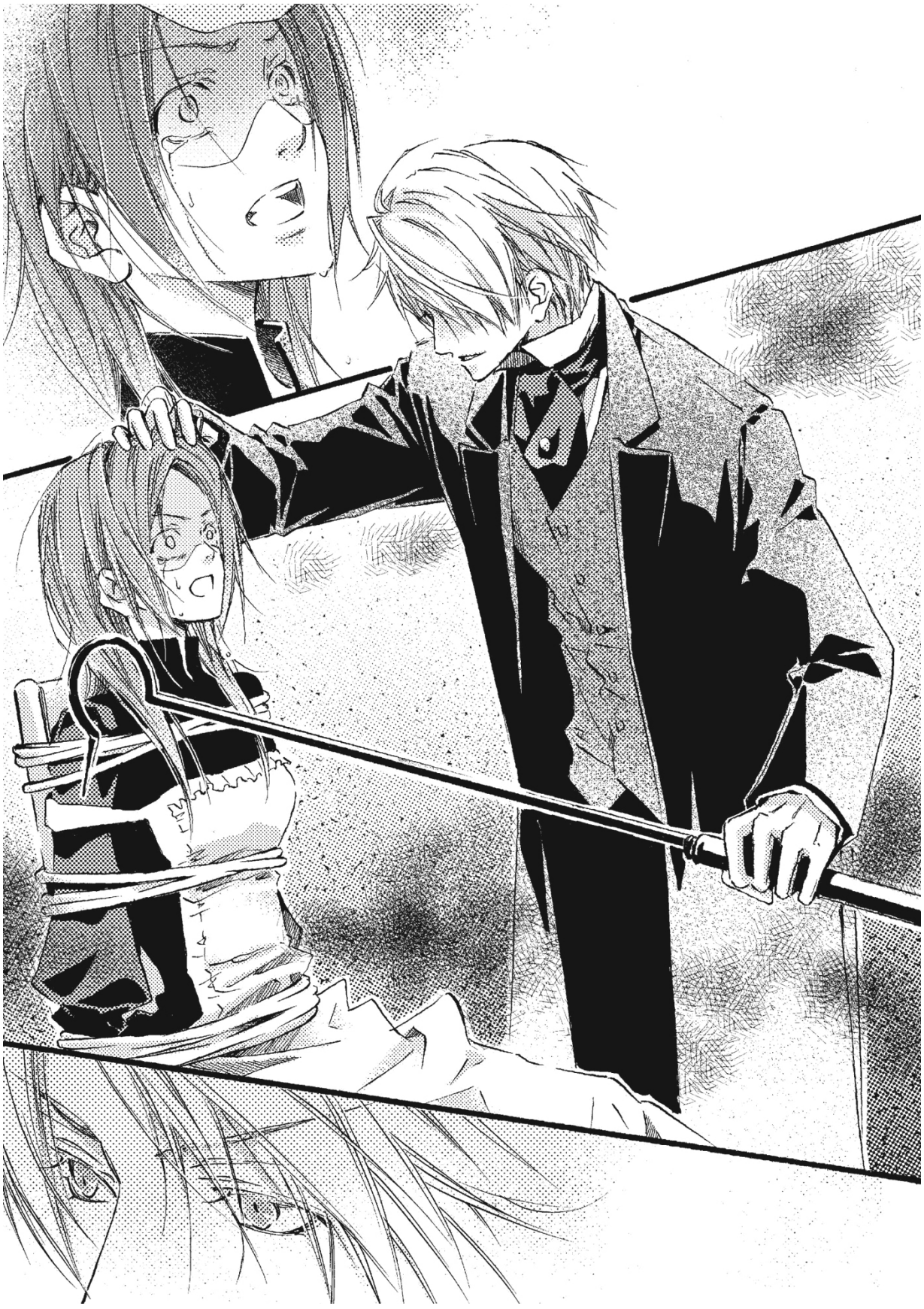
"It is unwise to be too trusting of others. We must therefore test

whether she can speak or not for ourselves," Edgar said, approaching the hearth. He pulled out the long, thin poker skewered into the red-hot firewood.

Annie started to tremble, no doubt at the image of that scorching metal being pressed against her. Edgar nevertheless continued.

"Do you know how they used to torture people? They would use these to tear flesh from the cheek, burning it all the while. Apparently, any witnesses would wear earplugs, because the resultant screams could be quite unpleasant. I daresay we won't have to worry about that, seeing as Annie is without voice."

The maid writhed against her restraints while Raven kept her in place from behind. Lucinda and Constable stayed silent, as if they couldn't believe what they were seeing. Edgar took hold of her head and, unable to move, Annie let her gaze meet his. Her eyes widened with fright, and he had to wonder what she found there. A demon, perhaps?



Edgar had been here several times before. He recognized that this was the decisive moment.

"No, *stop*! Help!" Annie was screaming before the poker came into contact with her cheek. "I don't know where her jewelry is! It's probably all fake anyway!"

Once she started, she didn't stop, as if clinging to the belief that she would be saved by her own words.

"I'm sure she just hid the box somewhere herself! Just like how she lied about the brooch being stolen!"

Lucinda had spread those nasty rumors about Lydia on purpose. Annie had been ordered to put the brooch in the fairy doctor's room. She went on to tell how Lucinda had involved her in all sorts of schemes, and she did so with glee. Not only that, she revealed that the letters from the man with Edgar's initials, as well as the girl's nighttime meeting with "him," were all fabrications. Lucinda had written those tales of the fake man into a diary and purposely left it for her father to find.

"Stop this, Annie!" the maid's mistress cried. "Why must you spout such outrageous lies?!"

"They're no lies! The only reason you wanted a mute maid in the first place was so that no one would find out about your goody-two-shoes act! How many times did you tell me you were tired of having to vilify your handmaids and drive them out every time they threatened to snitch on you?!"

Constable put a firm hand on the shoulder of his chalk-faced daughter. "Is this true, Lucinda? Did you in fact have no correspondence with Ashenbert?"

"Father..."

"Come." Sensing his daughter's embarrassment, Constable made to lead her from the room.

"What shall I do with Annie?" Edgar stepped in to ask.

"Whatever you like. She is hereby dismissed."

It seemed a rather high-handed reaction to him. "She has yet to reveal the location of Lady Lucinda's jewelry."

"And what of it? It's all worthless, I'm sure."

Edgar's eyes widened. It seemed Annie's assertions about the

jewelry's authenticity were true. Not that it particularly mattered.

He turned back to the maid. "The jewelry is no longer of any concern. The ivory box, however, is a different matter. Lady Oughtred's regard necklace is hidden within it. That is why you took it, no?"

Annie and Lucinda both reacted with shocked expressions that Edgar pretended not to notice. It seemed Constable was too enraged to hear what he had said. He dragged Lucinda out of the room at once. Nevertheless, Edgar was satisfied that she would spring his trap. There was no doubt in his mind that she would go to retrieve the hidden jewelry box. Annie and her accomplices would be waiting for her to do so. Naturally, the regard necklace was not in the box, but both girls now seemed to believe it was. And with that, Edgar was poised to round up the entire gang of thieves.

***

Lydia woke up in the evening having regained much of her strength. A maid had been assigned to her room. An older one, not one of the ones who had grieved her. She brought porridge as soon as the fairy doctor was up. Mrs. Boyle must have chosen her because she and Lydia had never met.

Lydia stirred through the porridge just in case it contained anything it shouldn't but, finding nothing, she was satisfied and began to eat. Now that her exhaustion had gone and her mind was clear again, she became concerned for Lady Oughtred. Tonight was the full moon. She needed to act before dawn, but Edgar had told her to wait until he had expelled the gang of thieves. She was at a dead-end in any case, because she had yet to discover the secret of the Danes' treasure.

Be that as it may, she could see a small glimmer of hope. If it was the regard necklace that allowed entry to the rose garden, then perhaps the Danes considered it precious. Lydia believed it might have been a present from them to the Oughtred estate, a sign of their trust. The Danes despised having humans in their garden. The one Lydia had met had become enraged and accused her of being a

thief. It followed that their treasure may well be hidden in the garden. The question was where. Perhaps it was buried, much like traditional treasure.

She would only get one opportunity to bargain with the fairies. There was no room for failure. And that was where her thoughts grew stuck. Perhaps negotiating with them and rescuing the countess was all beyond her. She had been without confidence for a long time, and the desire to give up on everything was growing. But she was a fairy doctor. She wanted to do everything within her power to resolve the matter. She still had yet to do that, even if it transpired that she couldn't save Lady Oughtred after all.

That was when she recalled the countess's blue roses. They were supposed to bloom when the moon rose tonight. Now that she thought of it, the estate had received a visitor that day. It must have been Lady Oughtred's friend, the one with whom she had exchanged the promise about the roses. The friend must have read the letter and come today to see them, and the countess had asked Lydia to pass on the message that the roses had indeed bloomed. But, the fairy doctor realized, it might not have been too late for the visitor to see them for herself.

Lydia got out of bed and put on her own dress. Should her first introduction to this noblewoman be in her maid's uniform, she doubted anything she had to say about fairies would be listened to. She might not be taken seriously even in her usual attire, but she was determined to try.

"Her Grace, the Duchess Brightberry, will not be disturbed."

There was a private flight of stairs leading to the noblewoman's guest room. When Lydia attempted to climb it, however, she was warned by a woman coming the other way. Though she tried to explain herself, the woman would not have it.

"Should Lady Oughtred not return by tomorrow morning, Her Grace will be taking her leave. As discourteous as I realize it is, I must insist that no one sees her."

Rather than the duchess's lady's maid, Lydia had the impression this woman was a family member or acquaintance who had traveled

with her. She was dressed modestly, but her speech and carriage suggested nobility through and through.

"I must speak to Her Grace regarding Lady Oughtred. I have a message from her ladyship."

The woman scrutinized Lydia. The fairy doctor wished she had tied up her hair and perhaps put some gloves on. The woman had probably recognized at first glance that she was a commoner, and what would a commoner be doing with a message from a missing countess?

"My name is Lydia Carlton. I am imposing on her ladyship in order that she might teach me proper etiquette."

"I shall hear the message."

It didn't sound as if Lydia would be able to speak to the duchess directly, but she would rather recount the countess's sentiment here than let it go unexpressed.

"Lady Oughtred has succeeded in cultivating the promised roses. However, certain circumstances mean she is unable to return to the estate, and so she tasked me with telling Her Grace that the blue roses have bloomed."

"Have you seen the roses for yourself?"

"Yes. Well, not quite. They were still budding. But they will bloom tonight, and only tonight." Lydia hesitated for a moment before steeling her resolve. "Lady Oughtred is in a fairy rose garden. That is where the blue roses are. I am not sure whether Her Grace will believe me, but if you would be so kind as to pass it on..."

Though she had prepared herself for the frown of someone regarding a lunatic, the woman made no such expression.

"Am I to take it that you have been to this garden yourself?" she asked quietly.

"I have. I am a fairy doctor. However, I lack experience, and do not believe I will manage to rescue Lady Oughtred from the garden. The fairies intend to close it off at daybreak, and I fear there is nothing I can do. Her ladyship has resigned herself to sharing its fate. She seemed so dejected to miss the opportunity to show Her Grace the roses. It was all she could do to leave me with a message." Lydia spoke as quickly as she could, hoping to express

everything before the woman became disinclined to believe her.

"The rose garden ought still to be accessible before dawn. I would be able to lead Her Grace there. However, it exists within the fairy world. There is no knowing what will await us there, and there is a possibility of danger. So while I cannot recommend such a course of action, I am willing to do anything that is required of me."

The woman waited patiently for Lydia to finish. Her response was perfectly composed. "Very well. Please show me to the garden."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I am Brightberry."

***

Edgar didn't get his opportunity to learn about Annie's accomplices and thieving schemes from her. Constable returned and escorted her away too soon. Despite his earlier dismissive attitude, he seemed to have changed his mind, perhaps wanting to rid Annie of the chance to disparage his daughter further. He had given Edgar a tongue-lashing when he did so, looking at him as if he were the root of all evil for exposing the maid's falsehoods.

"Ashenbert, I'm afraid I was woefully unimpressed to see you all but torture a delicate young lady, maid though she may be. Bearing witness to it all has left Lucinda terribly frightened too. All this talk of tearing away flesh with a burning poker... It is abhorrent, even if you never intended to go through with it."

"Oh, but I had *every* intention of doing so. She merely spoke before I had need to."

Constable peered at Edgar's eyes as if trying to ascertain whether the younger man was joking or not. He only let their gazes lock for a moment before looking away again, muttering something about insanity before roughly grabbing Annie's arm.

"How is Lady Lucinda faring?" Edgar asked.

"I shall have her keep to her room for the time being. While I apologize for the inconvenience she has caused you, I shall thank you to stay away from her in future."

Constable seemed to be implying that an insane man was not a

suitable fit for his daughter. Edgar was happy for him to think so if it would spare Lydia from Lucinda's jealousy. He nodded with a smile.

Constable fled from the room with Annie in tow. It didn't matter to Edgar precisely what her accomplices were planning. He would have them act as *he* wanted them to. And so he had set the trap with Lucinda as the decoy. He had intended to release Annie without much of a fuss so she could make contact with her companions, but Constable had saved him the trouble by leading her away anyway. The older earl likely meant to force her to keep quiet about the scandal with Lucinda before dismissing her and driving her from his estate. But that was probably what Annie was hoping for. Once she was free, she would inevitably leak the lie to her accomplices that Lucinda had hidden Lady Oughtred's regard necklace.

Edgar would need to make his preparations hastily if he hoped to capture the gang of thieves. He decided to visit the Duchess Brightberry at once. He had met the woman before. The fact that she was using a pseudonym told him that she wasn't here to see any other nobles, but this was an emergency. He *must* see her.

To his surprise, he was allowed into her room simply by stating his name. He was equally surprised to see her attendants rushing to and fro, an unusual sight for the woman he knew, but he waited obediently nonetheless. Eventually, it was not the duchess herself, but one of her ladies-in-waiting who appeared from the room's far end.

"It is a pleasure to see you again, Lord Ashenbert."

He had met this older noblewoman several times as well. He gave a courteous response, after which she spoke in a hurried manner.

"My lord, I intend to place my confidence in you and ask for your assistance. Can you give me your word that you will not disclose what I am about to tell you to anyone else?"

"Most assuredly so. Is something the matter?"

"She has gone missing."

"Do you mean Her Majesty?"

Though Edgar hadn't exclaimed particularly loudly, the lady-in-waiting lowered her voice further still.

"I mean Her Grace, who is traveling incognito."

"I understand. Do you mean to say that she took leave of her room without notifying anybody?"

"It would appear so. Furthermore, the guard that was supposed to arrive before us also vanished shortly after our arrival, and I found that rather curious. We were aware of Lady Oughtred's disappearance, but Her Grace insisted on coming in order to fulfill a promise. We did advise that she not leave the room, given how dangerous things are, but before we realized it, she had vanished."

"If one of the guards in question was named 'Billy,' then I happen to know where they are."

The lady-in-waiting's eyes widened in part surprise and part expectation. "Your lordship knows Lieutenant William Ramsey?"

That must have been his full name. He was a serviceman appointed to Her Majesty The Queen. No wonder Edgar had suspected that the man was no mere footman. He and his companions must have been there for some time preparing for the Queen to arrive incognito.

"Yes, I do. And I'm afraid I must apologize. I mistook the good lieutenant and his three subordinates as thieves targeting Lady Oughtred's jewels, apprehended them, and subsequently confined them. I found it suspicious that they were so private with their identities, but I did realize on Her Grace's arrival that I might have been mistaken."

"Your lordship captured them? By yourself?"

"In truth, the deed was not done by me, but my servant."

"Goodness. He must have the build of a strongman!"

Perhaps she felt rather conflicted upon learning that a whole group of military personnel had been dealt with by the single servant of a nobleman. Edgar decided to let the subject of Raven slide past and instead give a summary of the particulars.

After Lady Oughtred's room was ransacked, Billy and his men had set about trying to rid the estate of the gang of thieves. Unfortunately, since they had mistaken Edgar and Lydia as the guilty party, they had ended up in the manure pit.

"I wasn't aware there were thieves about. Only that Lady

Oughtred has been missing for some time. I suppose the lieutenant and his men must have grown desperate when they learned that Her Grace would not be canceling her visit." Although the woman seemed sympathetic to Billy and his companions, she did not say anything that would place the blame on Edgar.

"Indeed, and so I had a humble request to make of Her Grace. I would like to borrow the assistance of Billy—rather, Lieutenant Ramsey. I understand that he might be reluctant to help me of all people, but I have reason to believe that the thieves will take action tonight. I do not have enough hands to subdue them as things stand."

"Very well. I shall have the colonel speak to them. It does, however, make me all the more frightened for Her Grace's safety."

"I can promise you that we shall conduct our search with great haste. Might I ask that you prepare a bath for Lieutenant Ramsey and his men forthwith?"

"Ah, yes. It wouldn't do for Her Grace to retreat from them."

The lady's maids around them giggled. It must have brought them some measure of relief to know that the guard was safe.

Lady Oughtred and the Queen had been close friends since before the latter ascended the throne. However, following a change of government, the countess was made to keep her distance from the Queen, as her family held close ties to the previous regime. Regardless, it was unlikely that anyone who knew them doubted the bond between them. Although Lady Oughtred had withdrawn from society when she was widowed, it was common knowledge among those in the know that her introduction held great weight with the royal family, at least when it came to women, who were estranged from the political sphere. That was why Edgar had hoped to rely on her to help prepare a place for Lydia within Britain's aristocracy.

Edgar didn't know of the promise held between them, nor that they would meet on this very day after so many years apart. He had known only that Her Majesty would come to the Oughtred estate and that she would be incognito. He'd been planning to introduce Lydia to the Queen here and have her virtues be recognized.

It didn't matter to him anymore. He didn't want to put Lydia

through any more unpleasantness. Quite apart from anything else, he needed to get her to safety as soon as he could. Unfortunately, she wasn't in her chamber. She was supposed to have been resting, but it seemed she'd wandered off somewhere.

While he recognized this was likely no emergency, Edgar couldn't help but worry that she might collapse again, and he hurried off in search of her. He stopped when he came upon Nico. The fairy cat was dozing leisurely on a window-side sofa. It exasperated Edgar that he did absolutely nothing but eat or sleep, leaving Lydia to get herself in trouble.

Edgar prodded Nico's nose. When the drowsy fairy cat licked his fingertip like it was a tasty treat, he grew incensed and pinched hard instead. Nico's face twisted in anguish, his eyes snapped open, and he swiped Edgar's hand aside in a flurry.

"Cripes, *what* are you doing, Earl?! That *hurts*! Try to murder me, will you?!"

Edgar briefly wondered whether fairies could suffocate. "Where has Lydia gone? Don't you realize it's dangerous for her to be wandering about by herself?"

"What? She isn't by herself. She told me she was going to the Danes' rose garden with this noblewoman she'd found. I was going to go after her later. I'll thank you to let me sleep a little longer." Nico made to bury his face in the cushion again, only for Edgar to grab him and lift him clear from the sofa.

"A noblewoman? Not one with dark hair, surely?"

"Dark hair, yes. That was her."

"And the Danes' garden is where Lady Oughtred is, isn't it?"

"*Yes.* Would you let me down? The noblewoman is most likely Virginia's friend. Lydia was insistent she reunite them, if only briefly."

It seemed that Her Majesty was presently with Lydia. Edgar considered whether he ought to have Nico lead him to the rose garden. But then, there was no telling when the gang of thieves might make their move. While the Queen might be safe from the burglars in the rose garden, he also recalled Lydia mentioning that the fairies would close off the garden at dawn, a time limit that was fast approaching.

"Lord Ashenbert," Raven had joined them, "might I ask that you unhand Mr. Nico?"

The boy seemed concerned to see the fairy cat writhing disgruntledly in Edgar's grip. The earl acquiesced, marveling at Raven's rare display of sympathy.

"I didn't realize you had a fondness for cats, Raven."

"Not especially, but for my friend, Mr. Nico."

"Ah, I see." Edgar seemed to have overlooked the formation of said friendship.

Recognizing he had a powerful ally on his side, Nico stood proudly by Raven's feet, puffing out his chest and smoothing down his coat.

"Did you have something to tell me?" the earl asked his servant. Raven was supposed to be keeping an eye on Lucinda, who was presently being disciplined by her father.

"Yes, my lord. Lady Lucinda has slipped out of her room."

The wheels were starting to turn. Edgar could no longer let his mind wander about the rose garden. He would purge the thieves from the estate while Lydia was absent.

"Lieutenant Ramsey ought to be ready about now. Where is he?"

"Present and prepared for duty, thanks to your lordship." Billy was standing in the doorway wearing a fresh change of clothes and a sullen expression. "I have stationed my men to watch over the greenhouse in which you suppose Lady Lucinda has hidden the jewelry box, as requested."

"I see. Oh, I shall have to ask that you don't come any closer. The smell is lingering."

Though Billy's eyebrows knitted together in anger, he managed to restrain himself. "I'll point out that it's the fault of your servant."

"You would admit that you were bested by a mere servant?"

He paused. "I simply let my guard down."

"Well, I must ask that you keep it up going forward. Her Majesty's safety is at stake."

Billy seemed to pull himself together at that, despite his mood. "We'll have to conduct the search for her covertly. I cannot have *all* of my men focused on driving out the thieves."

"There is no need for any search. Her Majesty has gone out due to certain circumstances, but she shouldn't be in any peril. I believe Lydia is accompanying her."

"Lydia?"

That's Miss Carlton to you, Edgar thought, offended. He recalled how Billy had flirted with her, if only in jest. The earl went to stand before him, at some distance, and glowered.

"You will not call my fiancée by her first name. And I shan't apologize for our misunderstanding. Given what you did to her, I had every right to beat you to a bloody pulp."

Though Billy opened his mouth to retort, he ultimately kept his silence.

"The gang is to be lured into the greenhouse and ambushed. You will command your remaining men."

The lieutenant gave a reluctant salute before turning on his heel and leaving.

"Your lordship would stop at words?" Raven murmured in surprise after Billy had left. He must have expected Edgar, who invariably had little patience when it came to slights against Lydia, to strike the man.

"I suspect that much of their uncouth behavior toward her was also an act, given they were playing the part of thieves to keep their identities a secret. His flirtations were not serious, and I am therefore willing to show some leniency."

***

The hedges of the estate's rose garden had yet to bloom with the flowers, and above them a white moon was beginning its ascent into a sky streaked with purple. In the middle of a ring of shrubbery, arranged as if to conceal its middle, was a hole covered in grass accompanied by stone steps. As they proceeded down a ditch-like path with grass-covered walls on either side, Lydia explained to Brightberry that they were nearing the fairies' rose garden. The duchess showed no signs of nervousness or, indeed, disbelief. She simply nodded at what the fairy doctor told her.

"You will hear a disembodied voice in just a moment. Please do not respond to it under any circumstances or there will be trouble."

"Did Virginia answer, perhaps?"

Indeed she had, but in Lady Oughtred's case, the outcome hadn't been so dire. The Danes had recognized her talents.

"Lady Oughtred is a curious lady, isn't she?" Lydia said. "It is as if her hands are enchanted that she is able to cultivate such beautiful roses. It is no wonder the fairies should be so fond of her. Unfortunately, it is people such as her who get a little too close to them..."

"And these people find themselves in danger?"

"Yes, ma'am. Fairies are much like fire and water. Their existence can be as pleasant to humans as it is disastrous, and they have neither good nor ill will."

"Just as water can quench one's first, so too can it engulf and drown one, yes? It rather sounds as if you are close to the fairies yourself, Miss Carlton. Is that not dangerous?"

"It certainly can be. My lack of experience sometimes means I struggle to hold my own against them."

"You have a fiancé, if I am not mistaken. I might suggest that you be a bit more careful." The woman chuckled gently as she admired the moonstone ring on Lydia's hand.

The fairy doctor was a little surprised to learn that the duchess could see it. She'd had a fairy cast a spell on the ring to make it invisible to others until she and Edgar were ready to announce their engagement officially. There had been no other choice. The earl was the only one capable of removing the ring, and he had shown no inclination to do so.

Brightberry must have been a woman not easily deceived by fairy magic. As taken aback as she was, Lydia took heart in that. It lowered the chances of trouble befalling them once they were in the fairies' realm.

"My knowledge of fairies is my sole virtue, and it is my hope that it might be of use to my betrothed," she said.

"I daresay that most gentlemen wouldn't take such things into consideration when choosing a fiancée."

"Yes, I suppose beauty and sociability are far more important." Lydia paused. "My father is a university professor and I am not of the upper class. That is why I fear I cannot fulfill my fiancé's expectations."

"Then you must rely on him to do what is beyond you. You are to be married to him, are you not? He ought to be happy to do for you that which you find difficult."

Perhaps, but it wasn't as if Edgar could have her audience with the Queen for her. Although Lydia still had her doubts, the duchess's tone was absolute. She therefore allowed Brightberry's statement to bolster her somewhat.

It was as they were speaking that the end of the grassy tunnel came into view. The sun was starting to set, and when they stepped out into the pale purple smolder of the evening, they saw before them the fairies' vast rose garden. Though the voice came to test the intruders, Brightberry did as she was told and did not answer, instead walking forth into the mysterious enclosure.

There wasn't so much as a breeze, and clad in the leftover light of the setting sun, the multicolored roses seemed strangely stoic. The moon was yet ghostly in its whiteness, having only just started to rise, its light still too weak to cast upon the Earth.

Finding Virginia was the most pressing matter. Lydia hurried over to the log cabin, but the gardener wasn't there either. Lady Oughtred's notebook sat atop the table, and the duchess gazed at it pensively. It was packed to the brim with entries about the selective breeding of roses. Perhaps Brightberry found nostalgia within that handwriting.

"I wonder if she has stepped out," the duchess said, sparking a realization in Lydia.

"I know! She must have gone to the hill."

The moon was rising. There was no question that Virginia would have gone to see whether the blue roses would bloom. Lydia rushed toward the hill, climbing the stone steps with Brightberry. Sure enough, Lady Oughtred was standing in front of the rose bush.

"Virginia!" Lydia called on her approach, and the gardener turned around in surprise.

“Lydia? Didn’t I say you ought not to come here anymore? Why...” She trailed off, having caught sight of the woman coming up behind the fairy doctor. “Alexandrina?”

“You are looking well, Virginia. I have come to see you, as promised.”

“But, I... I never expected you would come *here*.”

The duchess approached Lady Oughtred with eager footsteps and joyfully took up the other woman’s hands in her own. “Did we not vow that our friendship would remain forever unchanged? That while our circumstances might prevent us from meeting, it would ultimately be irrelevant? Just as you promised to succeed in cultivating blue roses, so too did I promise to come to meet you when you had, regardless of how inconvenient that might be.”

“Yes, never once did I forget. The roses you desired to see, if only once in your life, will bloom imminently.”

The women turned to look at the rosebuds before them. The way they held hands like they were young girls again, captivated by the promise of flowers, inspired a spark of jealousy within Lydia. To her, the world of the upper class was something unique. She had considered it a place where one’s position in the hierarchy was determined by the social standing of their family, whether from birth or the house they had married into. From there, one was expected to form inoffensive relationships suited to their station. She hadn’t realized that precious bonds could form beyond what circumstances might or might not allow.

Now that she had witnessed such a thing, she realized there was no reason for her hesitancy. She would join the upper class because Edgar was there. Not everyone would look on her unfavorably for it.

“Thank you so much for bringing Alexandrina here, Lydia.” Virginia extended an inviting hand toward the fairy doctor, who had been watching from a short distance away, “Without you, I would never have been able to fulfill my promise.”

“That isn’t true, I’m sure,” she replied, feeling nothing but guilt. “My lady, I was unable to uncover the means to protect this garden. Bringing Her Grace here was the only thing I could think of to do.”

Lady Oughtred didn’t seem all that disappointed. “You realized I

wasn’t a mere gardener, did you?”

“Yes, my lady, when it struck me that your wreath was in fact the regard necklace. There is a portrait of one of your predecessors wearing it.”

The countess looked down at the chain of flowers around her neck and nodded. “I must apologize for deceiving you. I am unable to give my name when a fairy takes my place. I also feared disappointing you, for I cannot teach you etiquette for as long as I am trapped in this garden.”

“Your ladyship knew I wasn’t a maid?”

“I suspected as much from your name after our first meeting. Quite apart from anything else, you are exactly as you were described to me. A sweet, kindhearted girl more deserving of the title of the Countess of Ibrazel than anybody else.”

“Goodness, Miss Carlton!” Brightberry exclaimed. “I didn’t realize Lord *Ashenbert* was your fiancé.”

“Yes, he is,” Lydia stuttered, embarrassment turning her cheeks red.

“Say, Alexandrina, doesn’t seeing this innocent young lady remind you of when we were preparing for our own weddings?” Lady Oughtred asked.

“It certainly does, Virginia.” The pair exchanged another lighthearted laugh.

The countess put a gentle hand to her wreath, a memento from her late husband. That was when something struck Lydia as strange. Lady Oughtred’s regard necklace was supposed to be formed from gemstones crafted into flower motifs. And yet the petals seemed to spring back softly against her fingers, as if made from freshly blooming roses.

The Fairies' Jewelry Box

The moment Lucinda set foot in the glass greenhouse, she found herself surrounded by deeply vibrant verdure everywhere she looked. Though she found the strong, humid scent of unfamiliar flowers quite unpleasant, she continued on. As she recalled, it should be hidden among the roots of a large fern. She approached the tall, eye-catching plant, crouched down, and started to rummage around its leafy base.

Lucinda lifted the jewelry box with both hands. Decorated with ivory fretwork, it was gorgeous enough to be admired as a work of art independent of its contents. No wonder it had been chosen as the hiding place for Lady Oughtred's splendid regard necklace. Lucinda was almost certain it had to have a fake base. That, or there was another sort of trick to it that opened up a hidden compartment. She tried shaking it and turning it upside down among other things, but she was unable to find the necklace.

"Perhaps I shall need to break it."

It was highly ornamental. But while the box itself was very expensive, the necklace should be even more valuable. Besides, Lucinda was desperate to try it on for herself. Surely her aunt wouldn't mind her borrowing it, since she wasn't in a position to ask permission anyway. And while the jewelry box belonged to Lady Oughtred too, Lucinda would simply blame Annie for any damage she did to it. The maid was to be dismissed in any case, leaving her with no opportunity to defend herself.

Lucinda surveyed her surroundings for a means by which she might break the box. Her eyes fell upon the stone wall that surrounded a nearby flower bed. A knock against that might well suffice. She stood up and made to raise the box above her head. That was when she heard footsteps approaching from behind her. Startled, she tried to turn around, only for her arms to be taken into

a tight hold. The box fell from her grip and its lid fell loose, but it remained intact.

A man picked it up and sneered at her. "This is the box with the regard necklace, right?"

She now realized she was presently surrounded by a number of unfamiliar men. "Who are you people?!"

"Oi, hurry up and break it open so we can see what's inside."

A hand was clasped over Lucinda's mouth, and now she could only watch as the man struck the box against the stone wall. Its shards flew every which way. The men gathered around it to check under its base, behind its lid, and anywhere there might be a hidden seam.

"It's not 'ere," one eventually muttered.

"I don't see no necklace," another agreed.

That can't be right, thought Lucinda.

"Where'd you 'ide it?"

She trembled as a knife was pulled on her. "Nowhere! I don't know! Help!"

"What's this all about, Annie? You said this wench hid the necklace."

Annie? Lucinda dared a glance. The girl with them was dark-haired, but the face was undeniably her maid's.

"That's what I want to know," Annie said. "Come on, Lady Lucinda. If you don't want to get hurt, you'll tell us where the necklace is."

"What are you doing, Annie?"

"What, you don't understand why your former maid's in the company of ruffians? I'm one of them, that's why. We drew up a plan to burgle this estate together."

"You're... You're a thief?"

"I suppose that's what you'd call me. The reason I approached you in the first place was so I could get here without drawing suspicion. I was once hired here temporarily, but I got driven out right away for stealing some pocket money. That was about the time I heard there were lots of valuable jewels here, though."

It was then that she'd decided to disguise her hair color, pretend

to be mute, and become Lucinda's handmaid. As a guest's servant, neither Lady Oughtred's butler nor housekeeper would have any reason to look into her background or keep a close eye on her. Annie always kept her head down, so there was no chance of anyone here recognizing her as a former employee.

"I knew you were looking for a maid who couldn't speak, so that's why I put on the act. I pulled it off well, don't you think?" Annie looked down her nose at her former mistress. She was a far cry from the girl who trembled at every little scolding. She was even smiling scornfully.

To think she was one of these jewel thieves! Lucinda was too shocked to know what to say, which was when one of the men struck her impatiently.

"Where's the regard necklace? You can say you dunno, but then we won't 'ave a reason to keep you alive no more."

Having fallen to the ground, Lucinda tried to pull away, only for the men to surround her. "Please, Annie, let me go. Remember all the treats I shared with you?"

Annie laughed and trod on Lucinda's skirts. "You tossed your leftovers on the floor and told me to pick them up. I don't call that 'sharing.' What a stupid thing to say. Now you've reminded me, I just want to teach you an even harsher lesson."

"You would kill me simply because I am a nuisance?" Lucinda's only recourse now was to sob.

"That's enough, you scoundrels!" came a sudden cry.

There were some familiar faces at the greenhouse entrance: a group of the estate's servants, inexplicably armed with pistols. Among them was a tall, slender figure with golden hair.

"There is no escape for you now, and there's no point resisting either. Drop your weapons." It was the short-haired servant who spoke, but Lucinda only had eyes for one of the men.

"Lord Ashenbert!"

When she tried to stand, Annie pushed her down by the shoulders. The former maid pressed the knife against Lucinda's cheek and raised her voice.

"Damn it all! That was your game, was it? That earl tricked us!"

What is she talking about?

"This was a trap! There is no regard necklace in that box!"

"You certainly took your time coming to that conclusion."

Lucinda gazed at the handsome earl's faint smile, her mind in disarray. He'd lied about the regard necklace being in the ivory box? Had Lord Ashenbert been dishonest? He knew that she had hidden it. He knew that if she heard the necklace was within it, she would retrieve it, and that Annie and the thieves would follow. He had revealed that Annie could speak because he knew she was part of the gang.

The former maid backed away, still using the stunned Lucinda as a shield.

"God's sake! You don't care what 'appens to the girl? Why don't *you* lot drop your weapons?!" one of the men shouted, rousing his companions to fight.

The servants continued to inch forward regardless, pistols at the ready. Lucinda felt Annie's grip tighten on the knife, and she panicked.

"Stay back! She's going to kill me! Oh, Lord Ashenbert, save me!"

The earl, a man who by all rights should want to be her fiancé, merely smiled when she cried out in terror. Not only that, but he was smiling at Annie, not her.

"You must be aware that you are acting in vain, Annie."

The former maid jumped as he named her specifically, no doubt due to her memories of the burning poker. Lucinda grew frightened as well. Lord Ashenbert had not shied away from cruelty. He was telling Annie that there was no point in using a hostage as a shield. In other words, it didn't matter what might befall Lucinda; he was interested only in apprehending the thieves. The noble girl understood Annie's fear so completely that she herself was struck silent.

"If you would, Lieutenant," the earl said calmly.

"My lord, the hostage..."

"Your mistress's safety, weighed against the life of that hostage. I daresay you are in no position to hesitate."

"Fine."

The servants stepped forward just as a shattering of glass sounded from behind Lucinda. A shadowy figure came flying in, kicked down one of the men before her, and used that momentum to tear her away from Annie. That was when the brawl began. Lucinda cowered at the crack of a gunshot but was immediately pulled up again by the dark-skinned boy who'd saved her. She recognized him as Lord Ashenbert's servant.

"Out!" He all but pushed her through the hole in the glass and out of the greenhouse. She ran without looking back.

Although the earl hadn't technically left her to die, she struggled to recognize it. When she brought her hand up to her painful neck, she realized she was bleeding. The servant's rough handling had led Annie's knife to skim her. One misstep and she would have been dead. She suspected that Lord Ashenbert wouldn't have shed a single tear for her, even though he had once defended her mother from criticism. She now realized that it had only been because he was reminded of his own fiancée, a woman below his station. Still, she had thought herself more worthy of him than a commoner.

Lucinda continued to run until she was out of breath and her steps were sluggish. Judging that she had come far enough, she stopped. As she caught her breath, she looked around and tried to identify where she was. She couldn't initially, because she had run thoughtlessly at full pelt through the vast gardens. They were growing gloomy, with the moon as their sole light. Lucinda touched a nearby hedge, only to withdraw her hand in pain. It was a rose bush. In fact, this was a rose garden. The thorny flowers sat in every direction.

Now she thought of it, she had heard that her aunt was fond of cultivating roses. It shouldn't be a curious thing for a rose garden to occupy these spacious grounds, and yet the ghostly stone pillars and the flowers curling around them unsettled her. The wind blew, and the thorned foliage shook as if laughing at her.

The rose, the queen of flowers, was so beautiful as to draw every eye toward it, much like Lucinda herself. She wanted to obtain a husband of whom everyone would be envious and get back at the girls who spoke ill of her. She had thought it would be a most simple

matter. And yet, Lord Ashenbert was attracted to that common girl who was ordinary in every way. Lucinda couldn't understand how she had lost out. And now the foliage, free of flowers but with plenty of thorns, was mocking her. It threatened her with its spikes, telling her she was no flower, no exalted rose, and that she would leave if she knew what was good for her. Unable to bear it any longer, she tried to run, only for a figure to emerge between the hedges and block her path.

"Annie..."

"You're not going anywhere. I've still got a lesson to teach you."

Lucinda broke into a run. Annie pursued. When the former tried to dive into the garden's thicker shrubbery, the latter grabbed her by the hair. Lucinda was frantic as the pair grappled. Suddenly, the ground beneath her feet vanished. Losing her balance, she tumbled into the apparent pitfall, still gripping Annie. She slammed onto the ground, the former maid's weight trapping her, having no energy to brace herself against the pain that rippled through her entire body.

"What *is* this place?" It was no wonder that Annie marveled. The meandering, gutter-like tunnel looked like it continued on and on forever. The dirt walls on either side were covered with grass, the ceiling a woven patchwork of thick growth, like a cavern made of plant life instead of rock.

Annie stood up, keeping a firm grip on Lucinda's arm to prevent her from running. "This might make a good spot to hide out. Just remember that you're dead if they find us, yeah? If they're going to kill me, I'm taking you down with me."

Lucinda had hurt her leg and was forced to limp as Annie dragged her deeper into the tunnel's depths.

***

It didn't take very long to capture the gang of thieves. Billy's men and Raven beat them until they couldn't stand before tying them up. It was only then that Edgar noticed Annie's absence.

"It seems we are down one woman, Lieutenant," he said.

"Annie? What's a girl going to be able to do by herself?"

"She is a capable girl. She was fully prepared to assault Lady Oughtred by herself. It would be prudent to locate her as soon as possible."

"Oi, Earl!" Nico called. He was peering into the greenhouse through the smashed glass. "The girl you're looking for went running in Lydia's direction! She's wandered into a fairy passage with Lucinda in tow!"

"What?! Where is this passage, Nico?"

"At the end of the rose garden. It leads to the Danes' garden. I was following it to get to Lydia, only for those two to fall from above! I hid myself posthaste, but that maid had hurt the girl and was saying something about dying together. 'That's strange,' I thought to myself—"

"You can talk to cats, my lord?" Billy interjected. To his eyes, Edgar was communicating with a gray mewling feline.

The earl turned around. "Her Majesty and her ladyship are in danger. Annie is moving toward them." He then peered at the lieutenant, who looked suitably dubious. "Are you aware of my official title?"

"The Earl of Ibrazel..."

"Precisely. And you will know that this is no cat, but a fairy gentleman."

Billy still looked somewhat unconvinced.

"Come, Raven," Edgar said. He turned on his heel, and Nico ran forth on his hind legs to lead the way.

As their surroundings grew darker, the moonlight grew brighter. Lydia and the two noblewomen stared transfixed at the rose bush before them. The moonlight hit, and the blue bulbs raised their heads like they were awakening. Then they shuddered as if overcome with joy. They swelled up before the women's very eyes, and their petals pushed outward so far they seemed to be at risk of falling loose and scattering. The flowers bloomed one after another, their blue spreading out from within and curling subtly into their full elegant form. Such was the speed at which the fairy roses opened, and presently they peered up at their observers with pride.

Lady Oughtred broke off one of the branches and passed a large

flower to Brightberry.

"Thank you, Virginia."

"As lamentable as it is, these roses cannot be removed from the garden. Regardless, this rose is for you."

The countess had explained before that the flowers wilted when taken to the outside world. It was likely because the fairies wanted to keep them here. If only there *were* a way to take them back.

Lydia had been considering the matter for some time. Was the flower wreath made from gems after all? At this moment in time, they looked like natural rippling flowers. Perhaps it was a consequence of being in the fairy world.

"What a curious color," Brightberry said. "Like the vivid blue of turquoise."

All the roses here were similar. The white of pearl, the pink of coral, the yellow of tortoiseshell... Where could the Danes be hiding their treasure? Somewhere within this magical rose garden? Or perhaps...

A sudden rumbling interrupted Lydia's train of thought.

"What was that?" the duchess asked.

"I'm not certain. It sounded like something breaking," Lydia said, though she felt a keen sense of foreboding.

"Look." Lady Oughtred pointed at a section of the garden that could be seen from upon the hill where they stood. The rosebed that should have been there was now enveloped in darkness. "What is that, Lydia?"

"It can't be... I think the rose garden might be crumbling!"

The fairies had threatened to bury this place. Had they grown impatient and decided not to wait until dawn after all?

"Explain yourselves, Danes! It is too early for you to close the garden!"

After a short pause, a disembodied voice replied, "We have to start now to have the garden buried by dawn, Fairy Doctor."

I thought they would be starting *at dawn!*

That was why it was so important to be cautious when making promises with fairies. Still, lamenting would do nothing to solve the situation.

"In that case, I ask that you go about your work as slowly as you can," she said.

"We can't do that. There is a thief trying to enter the garden."

"The girl who tried to stab the companion who took Virginia's place," another fairy elaborated.

What? "That cannot be," Lydia protested. "A thief should not be able to find the entrance."

"She is with Virginia's blood relative."

"The path is open to the humans from the house, but we accidentally let in the blood relative."

"The thief is holding her hostage."

Taken aback, Lydia turned to the countess. "Did you hear that, Lady Oughtred? Lady Lucinda is in danger!"

Her face ran pale. "Goodness me! I hadn't even realized she had come yet!"

"We will stop the intruders, Fairy Doctor," a Dane said.

In other words, they would offer to grant the girls' wishes in exchange for them turning back. However, regardless of what the thief did, there was a risk that Lucinda would answer the voice at the garden's entrance. That would put her at the mercy of terrible fairy magic.

"No, Danes, *I* shall drive the intruders out. Do not ask for their wishes just yet."

There was no response. The fairies must have already been on their way to the entrance.

Lydia turned to the noblewomen and spoke rapidly. "Please stay where you are. The thief in question could be armed."

"We cannot let a young lady such as yourself brave such danger either." In what was a surprisingly valiant action, Lady Oughtred lifted a large shovel over her shoulder.

"But this is the Danes' territory. It is very different to the human world. I shall rescue Lady Lucinda one way or another." Lydia turned on her heel, raced down the hill with the blue roses, and made for the garden's entrance.

As she followed the rose hedges across the grass, the earth trembled again. Another section of the garden must have crumbled.

If she didn't act quickly, there would be no time left to escort Brightberry out. The green tunnel came into view when she at last reached the flagstone path. There were two figures standing just in front of it. One was Lucinda, and the other must have been the thief who tried to attack Lady Oughtred.

"Annie?"

The maid was holding Lucinda at knifepoint, a realization that made Lydia stop in her tracks. When Annie saw the fairy doctor approach from the other side of the shrubbery, she visibly braced herself and pulled her mistress in closer.

"You— Lydia. What are you doing here?"

As surprised as Lydia was to hear the supposedly mute maid speak, she was also being presented with a much more shocking truth. "Annie, are you truly the thief who assaulted Lady Oughtred?"

The girl merely clicked her tongue.

"Help me, Lydia..." Lucinda called out feebly.

Annie gave an exaggerated scoff. "You really think she'll help you after you tried to make it look like she stole your brooch?"

As I suspected. Despite the realization, Lydia couldn't bring herself to lose her temper with Lucinda at present. "I ask that you unhand her, Annie."

"No. I'm being pursued."

"I promise to let you go if you unhand her. Just please refrain from hurting anyone else."

Annie glared at her in disbelief. Then, her lip curled. "Oh, I remember now. You and that earl were very *familiar* with each other. This is perfect. You take this wench's place; she's a rubbish hostage. The earl doesn't seem to care if she dies."

"Exactly, Lydia!" Lucinda stammered. "His lordship wouldn't allow *you* to die!"

It sounded as though Edgar was Annie's pursuer. That would explain why Lucinda's life was at risk. This new information made Lydia hesitate. But there was no time to lose in any case. She needed to get Annie out and stop the fairies from destroying the garden.

"Very well. I shall take Lady Lucinda's—"

The ground rumbled again before she could finish her sentence, and she drew back in panic. A deep crevice had opened up between her and the other girls. The Danes must have been trying to prevent Annie from taking a single step into the garden. The next thing Lydia knew, a great number of the fairies were surrounding them. They were all looking their way, some from the gaps in the leaves, others from the branches of trees, and yet more from the roots of the rose bushes. They wore the pelts and feathers of small animals and birds. Since they were in the fairy world, Lucinda and Annie should have been able to see them too. They both seemed stunned into silence.

"Wh-What are *those*?" Annie managed.

"Listen well, humans. We'll grant you one wish, but in return, you must leave here immediately!" The Dane's voice resounded clearly through the moonlit night.

They were only capable of casting their magic on someone who made a deal with them. That was why they were the first to offer.

"A wish?" Lucinda murmured, raising her head. She seemed to be on the verge of wishing for help.

Lydia began to panic. "No! You mustn't respond!"

"Precisely. You have just one wish. You ought to put due consideration into it," came Edgar's voice. He appeared with Raven and Nico from the gutter-like tunnel.

Annie turned, her expression freezing, then pulled Lucinda in to shield herself before covering the girl's mouth.

"What will you do, Annie? Or shall I speak first and wrest the wish from you?"

Edgar?! Lydia made to speak up, but stopped short when she felt a cautioning hand on her shoulder. Brightberry was standing behind her. She and Lady Oughtred had come down from the hill, both of them watching the scene before them with bated breath.

"I am permitted to state a wish too, am I not, fairies?" Edgar went on.

"The right is granted to anyone who sets foot here."

Lucinda was moaning incomprehensibly behind Annie's hand, apparently trying to voice a wish.

"Allow me to think for a moment. As I recall, there is a legend

that states you fairies have hidden vast quantities of gemstones on this land for generations now," Edgar began.

"Those gems are ours!" Annie shouted suddenly. "They belong to us! Fairies, are you? You say you can grant any wish, so give me every last jewel! Embellish my entire body with them!"

A pillar of light enveloped her then. It was so bright that it forced everyone to avert their gaze. When it died down and Lydia was able to look again, the great light pillar had become one of crystal.

"Annie..." Lucinda murmured, and only then did Lydia realize that the structure was shaped like the former maid.

"We embellished you as you asked. You're satisfied, yes?" one of the fairies said before they all burst into laughter. "Humans are nothing but masses of greed! They can't hold their tongues once they think their wish'll be granted!"

"They can't *ever* hold their tongues. They'd be much happier without them!"

Lydia couldn't help but see the irony in the Danes, of all fairies, accusing others of being loose-lipped. Then there was Annie, who had pretended to be mute all this time, only for such a fate to befall her when she finally opened her mouth.

Nevertheless, Lucinda was now safe. Released from her captor's grip, she cowered on the ground. Lydia let out a sigh of relief that they had avoided the worst-case scenario as she watched Lady Oughtred leap boldly over the deep crevice and run to Lucinda's side. The strength left Lydia, and she was on her way to collapsing when someone caught her arm, and she looked up hastily.

Edgar's face was positioned close to hers, looking a touch angry. "You failed to spare a single thought for me, Lydia."

She could only falter in return.

"You may be softhearted, but that doesn't excuse your eagerness to take Lady Lucinda's place. Should anything ever happen to you, I would be unable to carry out the rest of my life alone."

He must have heard me! she lamented.

Brightberry let out a chuckle. Embarrassed by Edgar's open display of affection, Lydia flushed. But then, the ground shook again. Panicking, she clung to her fiancé. The shaking continued violently,

widening the crevice before them.

"The thief is gone, Danes! Do not destroy the rose garden!" she called.

"We are going to leave at dawn in any case," came the response.

"If you really know our secret, Fairy Doctor, then hurry up and state your wish."

The pressure was so great that she struggled to reply.

"Forgive me, Duchess, but might I ask you to jump to the other side at once, lest you are unable to return to the real world?" Edgar urged in a display of quick thinking. "My servant will assist you."

After exchanging a glance with Raven, who stood on the other side of the crevice, Edgar pushed the duchess forth. The boy caught and steadied her before leading her to safer ground.

Edgar took hold of Lydia's arm. "Come."

However, the ground would not stop rocking, and when they made to step forward, it crumbled beneath them. They drew back, only for the crevice to open up further and make leaping across difficult.

"You can still make it, Lydia," Edgar urged.

"It is too late; the rose garden will continue to collapse. I must bargain with the Danes." It was the only way to save Lady Oughtred.

"Can you do it?" he asked.

"If I cannot, you will meet your end here with us," she replied.

"There is nothing I desire more than to share my fate with you." Edgar squeezed her hand and smiled, his presence calming her. Lydia was filled with the belief that what she could not achieve alone, she could achieve with him.

"Hear my words, Danes!" she called out to their surroundings. "You will return everyone here to the human world unharmed! That is the wish I shall exchange for your secret!"

"Do you *really* know our secret?"

"I do."

"Then we will accept your terms. You will forget our secret, Fairy Doctor, and we will release everyone here."

Lydia nodded and closed her eyes. She focused on the thoughts that had been so close to coming together moments earlier. Where

was the Danes' treasure hidden? The fairies had kept close ties with the masters of this estate for several generations. They opened the path to the rose garden to anyone wearing Lady Oughtred's regard necklace: the very same necklace that opened the door to the magnificent jewelry the countess once wore when socializing.

Where did that bronze door lead to anyway? If the regard necklace was the key to both that door and to this garden, then perhaps going through it would allow one to reach this place. And suppose that here, the countess's necklace transformed from an intricate item of jewelry to a ring of living flowers?

"You do not keep your treasure hidden, Danes. You cultivate your jewels and watch them bloom. Is that not what these roses are? Though each flower that blooms in this land eventually withers, each one of them is formed by genuine jewels!"

The fairies fell silent, and Lydia feared she might have been mistaken. Edgar took her into a protective embrace. But then, the Danes started to panic.

"What?! She knows our secret!"

"Who told her?!"

"How many times have we said to keep your mouth shut when in the human world?"

"We have to run! Quickly!"

"We'll have no more business with you, Fairy Doctor!"

There came a gust of wind that swept the Danes' chattering away into the rustling of the nearby foliage. It whipped leaves into the sky that blocked out the moonlight and plunged the area into a split-second darkness. The wind and the noise calmed, the quiet moonlight returned, and everyone who had stood in that mysterious space was now in the estate's ordinary rose garden, joined by the statue of Mary.

Brightberry stared curiously at the object in her open palm. It was the blue rose. But rather than the flower Lady Oughtred had cultivated, as it appeared in the fairy world, here it took the form of an intricate turquoise piece.

"It is precisely the same color as your roses, Virginia," the duchess said.

"Goodness!" Lady Oughtred exclaimed.

"It must be a gift from the fairies," Lydia said, and Brightberry nodded in agreement.

Surely, the countess had grown so many flowers for their pleasure that to show their appreciation, they had allowed her to take just one of the blue roses from the garden—the variety she had put more effort into than any other.

***

Lydia dreamed that night. She was attending a ball in a large hall that she didn't recognize. The room was so vast that she could not see any one of its corners, and men and women in extravagant attire passed back and forth before her. The gold and silver ornaments on the impossibly high ceiling reflected the light of the chandelier. She stared up at it, entranced, as a noble woman came to stand beside her.

She felt she ought to recognize the woman, but no name came to her. Regardless, she could not take her eyes from the turquoise rose that adorned the woman's breast. The craftsmanship was so exquisite that it could easily be mistaken for a real flower.

It was then that Lydia realized she was getting several looks. Either it was because of the noblewoman speaking to her, or it was because...

I'm wearing an ordinary dress rather than a gown.

It was no wonder she was being laughed at by these guests in their splendid evening wear. Her hair wasn't even done up. The thought made her feel awkward, and she turned her gaze to the floor.

The woman with the blue rose said something to her. Lydia looked up in the direction she was gesturing and saw Edgar there. He approached them, then surprised her by getting down on one knee. He then kissed the back of her ungloved hand as though she were a princess.

"Might I request this dance, Miss Carlton? As your fiancé?"

Her hand in his and the way he looked so intently at her was

enough to make Lydia dismiss all embarrassment regarding her inappropriate attire, for Edgar would make her shine brighter than even the most splendorous jewel. As long as he treasured her so, the spell that transformed her from an ordinary girl into a princess would never break, even if the clock struck midnight.

"Lydia," came Edgar's whisper into her ear, "you may leave to me the things with which you have trouble. You are perfect the way you are. My task is to create the magic that will make you appear more suited to these lavish surroundings than anybody else."

She felt his hand on her cheek. His kiss on her forehead. Edgar's ash-mauve eyes softened as he smiled at her. When he pulled away, there was a quiet clinking sound. The sound came from the waking world, and it broke through Lydia's doze. She cracked her eyes open to see the bedroom door closing quietly.

Edgar?

She no longer became indignant when he entered her chamber without asking. She supposed he had come to check on her out of concern since she had collapsed yesterday.

The sun was already high in the sky. The light glowing through the curtain told Lydia that she had been asleep for quite some time. When she moved her head, she heard another *clink*. She brought her hand to her chest, where her fingers came into contact with a necklace. Fully conscious at last, she sat up and picked up the hand glass from her bedside table. The necklace was set with a row of six types of stone. Each of them was suitably sizable and none outshone the others.

Diamond, emerald, amethyst, ruby, sapphire, and topaz. Taking the first letter of each stone in the order they were placed spelled out "dearest." It was a regard necklace.

Never had Lydia expected to receive one. She smiled as she ran her fingertips over the chain.

I must get up at once and go to thank him. I pray that I shall be able to convey my delight without embarrassment.

By the time dawn broke, Lydia and everyone who had been in the rose garden had entirely forgotten about the Danes' secret. Any

memories they did have were hazy and could easily be mistaken for a dream. Nevertheless, Lydia did remember speaking to the fairies and striking a deal with them. Lady Oughtred, too, did not doubt that she had spent time among the fae. Here in the human world, her regard necklace had returned to an intricate arrangement of gemstones. Each of its flowers was substantial, their petals embedded with countless tiny jewels. But for all that, the door that it should have been able to open remained tightly closed.

A closer inspection of the door in question revealed that there was no gap between it and the wall. Rather, it was a decorative piece embedded into the wall itself. The countess expressed that she couldn't be certain whether it *had* opened before, or whether she had simply been dreaming. Apparently, it had led to the gutter-like path that took one to the rose garden. Wearing the regard necklace opened the door, allowing access to the fairy world. The diverse jewelry the countess was famed for wearing had always come from her late husband, who fetched the pieces from beyond the door. Similarly, he would return them there when she was finished with them. Perhaps he had simply borrowed them from the Danes.

But now the door wouldn't open. It was possible that the fairy rose garden beyond it no longer existed. Although Lady Oughtred seemed to lament the loss of flowers, there was a briskness to the smile she showed Lydia, as if she was ready to put it all behind her. She had succeeded in cultivating a blue rose, fulfilling her promise to her closest friend. Though Lydia sensed that part of her wanted to return to the garden if she could, the countess admitted that she doubted she would ever have cultivated a finer rose, even if she'd had all the time in the world there.

"I'm very sorry, Lydia. You've been through an awful lot on my account." Lady Oughtred had invited Lydia and Edgar to the parlor that afternoon. "Not to mention my dear niece..."

The countess had heard Lucinda insist that the fairy doctor take her place as Annie's hostage. She had also questioned her niece about the various schemes she had pulled that caused trouble for Edgar and Lydia.

"Lucinda's mother comes from the upper-middle class. She

worked as a governess. My dear brother married her, but when our elder brother, heir to the county, suddenly died and the title fell to him, he drove her out. I ought to have spared a thought for Lucinda before estranging myself from him. She was only two years old at the time."

It seemed the countess felt greatly responsible for her niece's poor attitude. "Although it took me far too long, I have decided to reeducate Lucinda in the matter of decorum. She will be staying here until she has learned how to behave like a perfect lady and is ready for her debut. I vow that I shall have her apologize to you one day, but for the time being, I ask that you overlook her impudence."

"Gladly." Lydia nodded. "I was also somewhat belligerent and immature in my interactions with her."

"Come, you must be strong in spirit. You are going to have to drive away countless women who have eyes for your fiancé."

"Please, Lady Oughtred. I shan't be putting her through such anguish," Edgar said, sounding very much like he meant it.

"Oh, really?" the countess responded with a giggle.

Just as doubtful, Lydia grimaced. "Forgive me, but is your ladyship still willing to teach me in the ways of etiquette?"

It was why she had come here in the first place. Now that Lady Oughtred had returned safe and sound, she was preparing herself to begin her education in earnest.

"I would like for Lydia to return with me to London," Edgar interjected.

"I beg your pardon?" she asked. He was looking at her anxiously. "There is no need for that. I shan't be throwing myself into any more danger."

"That isn't the reason." Edgar turned his gaze to Lady Oughtred. "We are preparing for our wedding, and I realized that it is in Lydia's best interest to spend that time as peacefully as possible. She has greatly pushed herself without relying on me at all, and I fail to see the sense in that. My intention was to quell any anxieties she might have harbored before our wedding, but I would rather she find comfort in my presence, whether we are before other noblemen and women, or Her Majesty herself. I shall endeavor to ensure she can

do so."

Lydia felt as if he had said just that in her dream. Or perhaps he had spoken those words to her by her bedside while she was only half awake. His sentiment seemed to settle deep within her chest. The situation hadn't been entirely his fault. It was also because she had struggled to accept his help.

"I understand," Lady Oughtred replied. "Besides, Lydia, I do not have anything to teach you. You display a great degree of compassion for others. That is the very lesson I teach the young ladies who come to see me: that compassion is far more important than proper etiquette or indeed anything else." She picked up a card from the table beside her chair. "This is from Alexandrina. She had to leave early this morning, so she asked me to pass it on to you."

"Her Grace has gone already?! But I wasn't able to see her off!"

"She didn't wish to wake you. You were unwell to start with, yet you persisted in your 'duties.' A good period of rest was long overdue."

Edgar, who was flawless when it came to his social dealings, had naturally been there to give the duchess a proper goodbye. "You will be able to see her again in London. She has invited you to a ball as a show of gratitude."

The card was the invitation in question. It was signed Victoria R.

"Isn't it wonderful, Lydia?" he went on. "Not only will you have an audience with Her Majesty, but she has personally approved of your debut."

Her Majesty?

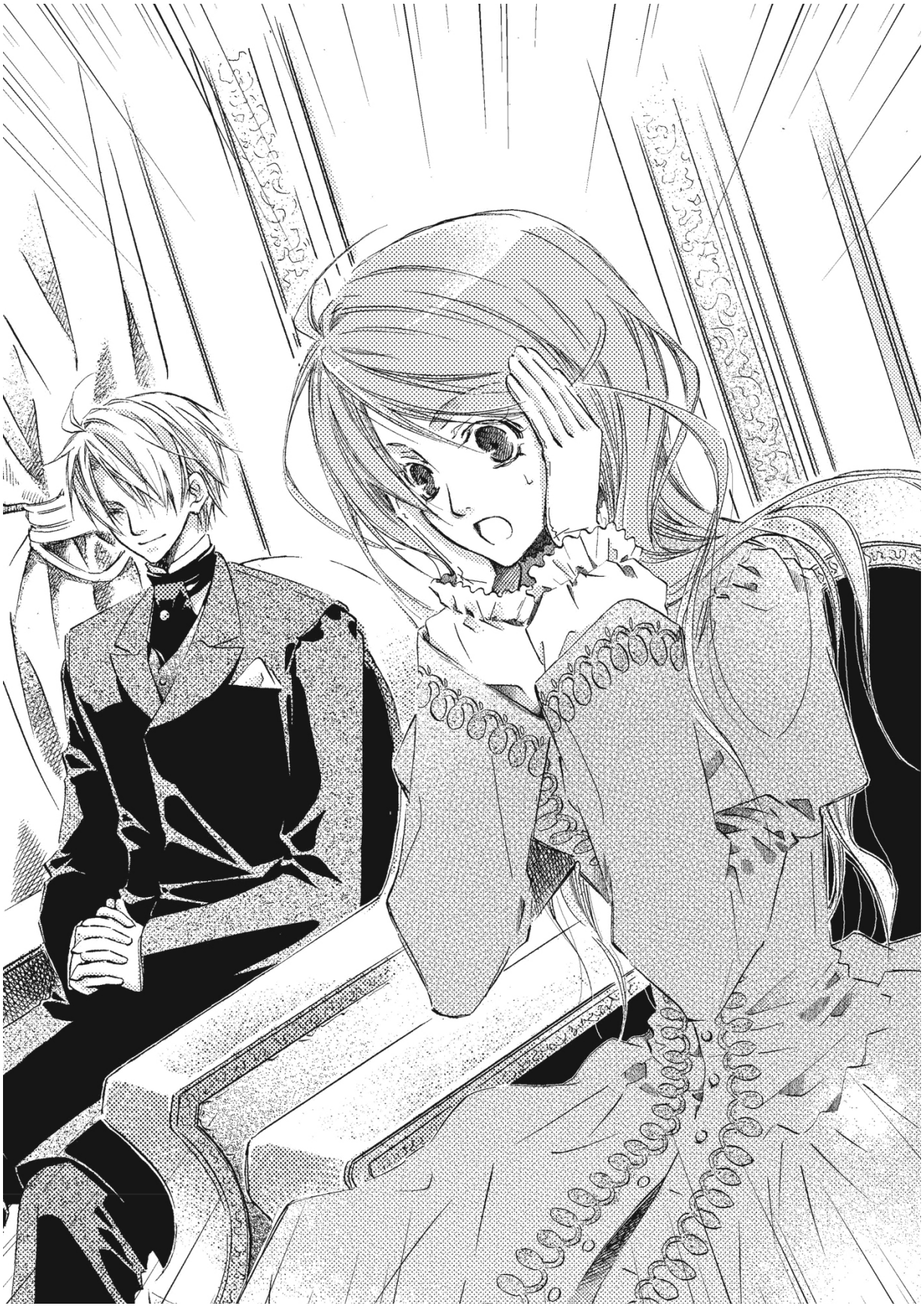
"She was visiting Lady Oughtred incognito."

"Incognito." Lydia tried to make sense of the word. "Your ladyship referred to Her Grace as 'Alexandrina.'"

"Yes," Lady Oughtred replied. "She is Alexandrina Victoria."

"But, but..." Lydia stammered, pressing her hands to her cheeks and freezing. "You mean to say that Her Grace is..."

She was horrified by all the things she had said to the Queen so thoughtlessly, including grumblings and complaints. She hadn't even seen Her Majesty off.





"I was able to introduce you to Her Majesty, and you were able to speak with her," Edgar said. "All you need do now is to present yourself proudly to the court with that very special invitation in hand."

"But I haven't the first idea about etiquette—"

"You ought to be fine knowing only the fundamentals. Duchess Masefield will be able to teach you in plenty of time once she returns to London. Besides, Lydia, the other guests will be more concerned with my behavior than yours, for I shall be the one asking for a dance from the young lady favored by Her Majesty The Queen."

It all sounded very familiar to Lydia. Could her dream have been prophetic? She was beginning to feel dizzy.

"Then you must rely on him to do what is beyond you. You are to be married to him, are you not?"

As she recalled Brightberry's words, she found she was most grateful for the sympathy behind them.

"It would appear that everything is in place for the two of you to announce your engagement. I daresay Lucinda will not be best pleased," said Lady Oughtred.

"I would not be concerned for Lady Lucinda," Edgar replied. "She was taken with my appearance but little else."

Lydia wasn't sure she approved. It sounded as if he were admitting to allowing Lucinda to be taken in by his features before deliberately crushing the fantasies he had encouraged. "Edgar..."

"What is it?"

She hesitated. "We shall discuss it later."

It wasn't as if she could ask him what he had done to Lucinda and Annie in Lady Oughtred's presence. The countess seemed to misunderstand, however, and offered a smile as she left the room to give them some privacy.

"Were you eager for us to be alone?" Edgar asked.

"No!" Lydia stammered.

"I was."

He leaned toward her and scooped up a lock of her hair, as he seemed to enjoy doing. Though she called it russet, he alone described it as caramel-colored.

"Say, Edgar, why would Annie take Lady Lucinda as her hostage? For whatever reason, she seemed frightened that you would kill them both."

The earl began to play with her hair between his fingertips, as though he had no knowledge of what she was asking him. "There was a minor incident."

She couldn't be confident that there was nothing more to it. Edgar was very good at *planning* incidents, after all. He was ruthless when it came to his enemies, hence why he hadn't hesitated to put Annie in danger by encouraging her to give voice to her wish. Unable to rid himself of that cruelty, he remained on guard and ready to fight should the need come. As such, he had yet to commit himself to a tranquil lifestyle. Lydia was certain that he had more than just their upcoming wedding on his mind, even now. Which begged the question.

"Edgar," she began, "did you perhaps know that Her Majesty would be visiting the estate?"

"How could I have known?" he responded with a smile.

She knew he was being dishonest, and she had to wonder how he had come into possession of what would have been a state secret. The dizziness that overcame her had all sorts of causes.

"It would seem that Lady Luck herself looks favorably on us," he stated.

Wouldn't that be something? Lydia raised her head, only to see that familiar smile immediately before her. It was perhaps the expression most characteristic of him: cheerful, yet utterly shameless.

Edgar's archnemesis was dead, and yet he continued to fight. She didn't know why that should be the case, and she only prayed that she would be able to support him fully when the truth came to light, that the day would come when he didn't feel the need to conceal his scheming and suffering behind that smile.

It was for these reasons that she struggled once again to convey how happy and grateful she was for her regard necklace. That said, she still wanted Edgar's desire for her own, and so she dared to squeeze the hand that held hers.

Afterword

Hello. Did you enjoy the story?

I've been suffering from hay fever as I finished writing. It will be the season for June brides when this volume comes out. Lydia's still in the stages of learning how to be a wife. I wonder which month she'll end up marrying. Edgar seems eager for it to happen as soon as possible, lol.

June also brings with it the muggy rainy season. In Europe, however, it's supposed to bring the pleasant climate of early summer, bright and clear and perfect for weddings.

Speaking of weddings, how about those white wedding dresses? Although they're traditional now, Queen Victoria was apparently the first to wear one. Before that, white was seen as the *last* color you wanted to get married in. It was the Queen's influence that had every girl dreaming of a white dress on her wedding day. The tradition continues on to this day.

If you look at older illustrations of wedding dresses, you'll see that there is no trend toward a particular color. The garment's extravagance was probably more important. The Queen popularized British jewelry and lace, which is probably why the fashion and lifestyle of the royal family has always been at the center of such admiration.

Apparently, honeymoons also became a staple around this time, as transportation systems developed and it became easier for ordinary people to go on trips. The large tiered wedding cakes that are still popular now are said to have come into fashion in the nineteenth century too. The custom of distributing cake at a wedding was apparently also common in Ancient Greece. Sweets used to be a luxury, and therefore a symbol of wealth. In any case, whether the white dress or the extravagant cake, it was during this period that many of the familiar customs of the Western wedding

were cemented.

Now, about the story itself. With things settling down, I wanted to shine a light on just how crazy the pair are about each other...but neither of them have made much progress! Edgar is eager to press on, leaving Lydia bewildered. He has been behaving as if they were lovers for a long, long time already, so I wonder if she'll be able to keep up. Despite it all, I do think there was plenty of sweetness between them; they just express it a little differently.

Though this story was slightly removed from the overarching plot, I still felt it important to include in the sense that, after what they have been through, the pair needed a more solid foundation to set off from. I'm sure more trouble awaits, and I wasn't sure if I'd be able to write about their wedding preparations at length, so I wanted to include that in this story too. I hope you all enjoyed it as a bit of a breather and that it brought you plenty of smiles.

I do feel for Lydia, who seems a bit perturbed to suddenly find herself about to be married. I don't think that couples "dated" during this time period in the way we know today. Instead, a confession was as good as a marriage proposal, and the engagement period was the equivalent of modern dating. In practice, it was often the parents who selected a marriage partner, so a young woman was probably prepared to get engaged at any time, as was the norm. As a late bloomer, though, I would bet that Lydia is quite flustered at having things move so quickly. It would have been unthinkable for a girl *not* to be excited for her wedding. Or at least, she would have been thought strange. I hope you can therefore understand why she's in so much anguish over it.

And that's how this story came to be! Nothing would make me happier than if you enjoyed your time with Lydia, Edgar, and the fairies. As always, I am grateful to Asako Takaboshi-sama for the illustrations. She will be drawing the jacket for the drama CD too, so I'm very excited to see two lots of colored artworks from her in June: the book and the CD.

I'd like to ask you all to listen to the drama CD! It really is so wonderful to hear the characters come to life and speak their lines out loud. There, I've advertised it to you now.

I pray that, fate willing, we will meet again in a future afterword.

Mizue Tani, April 2007

Hello, and welcome to another bonus corner for *Earl and Fairy*. How time flies! We're already on volume 11! Just like last time, we're going to be looking at some of the fairies in the series, laying down some trivia, and talking about how their portrayal compares to real folklore. If you've read the full volume already, you might have an idea of which fairies will be featured. If you haven't, be warned that there are spoilers ahead for this and previous volumes! As always, the team is available to contact via the J-Novel Club forums if you have anything you would like to see in these bonus sections. So without any further ado, let's make a start!

Danes

First up, we're going to be talking about the Danes, the main type of fairy featured in this volume. In *Earl and Fairy*, they're described as chatterboxes who hide their treasure. It is only safe to bargain with them when you already know where their valuables are hidden. The maid at the beginning of the story thinks that Lydia is speaking about Vikings at first, as in the Danes tribe hailing from Scandinavia, but the fairy doctor corrects this and attributes their name to the Celtic goddess Dana. She also refers to them as the Redshanks.

Volume 11 is set in Somerset, which is indeed where the folklore surrounding the Danes originated, and the confusion between them and Vikings is not limited to *Earl and Fairy*. The fairies were said to have buried their treasure on Dolebury Hill, an ancient fort in the county, and the name "Redshanks" might have come from their shins turning red and windswept, or because they were seen to wear all red. Incidentally, there is also a bird with red legs known as a redshank (a real bird, not a fairy bird!). The Danes' relation to the goddess Dana is also based in folklore. In tradition, Dana is said to be the mother of the daoine sidhe, and in *Earl and Fairy*, Gwendolen, the Blue Knight's wife, is also a member of this race of fairies. By extension, so was Lady Gladys. Dana's link to the daoine sidhe might be clear, but there doesn't seem to be a specific explanation for how she relates to the Danes.

Aside from the above details, the rest of their behavior, as well as their tendency for talkativeness, seems to have been embellished for the light novel. This includes the detail of learning the location of their treasure and using it as a bargaining chip, and the way they exploit the visitors to the rose garden by coaxing them into voicing their wish. The latter seems to be inspired instead by the craftiness of fairies in general.

In short, while most of Lydia's explanation about the Danes to the maid are rooted in real-life folklore, everything that comes afterward at Lady Oughtred's estate is fictionalized, or perhaps inspired by tales of other fairies.

Badb

You might remember Badb from volume 9. Strictly speaking, she isn't a fairy, but an Irish goddess of war who is herself a being comprising three goddesses: Neamhan, Morrigu, and Macha. According to *Earl and Fairy*, there is a tradition that states fairies are gods who lost their powers and grew smaller. The three goddesses were contained in three diopside stones that, when brought together, would resurrect Badb. And one of those diopsides turned out not to be a stone, but Raven himself. Lydia explains that the trio often take on the form of hooded crows. A Rakshasa of Ceylon (a former name for Sri Lanka) was also featured in this volume. This does not seem to have been inspired by any specific legend or folklore, but rather by general Hindu mythology.

Badb is a real figure in Celtic tradition, where she is also known as an amalgamation of the three goddesses, who indeed appear as a "hoodie crow" or Royston, which is another name for the same bird. Something that wasn't covered within the volume is that each manifestation of Badb is said to hold a different function. Neamhan, sometimes called Neman, is "confounder of armies." Macha "riots and rebels among the slain." In one particular tale, Morrigu, sometimes called Morrigan, is known for infusing Badb's human ally with supernatural strength. Although these aspects weren't touched

on within the light novel, it seems fitting that Morrigu is the third goddess that was found within Raven, given the superhuman agility he shows throughout the series. Whether Morrigu was selected specifically to be the goddess within him isn't clear, but it would align with the attention to detail that goes into *Earl and Fairy*.

As for the connection between divinity and fairies, it would seem that the origin of fairy kind among the gods is mostly fictionalized. Often, fairies are instead regarded as spirits that made it into neither Heaven nor Hell, nor even became fallen angels. In that sense, they are seen as spiritual creatures, but not outright gods—something that may have been influenced by Japanese mythology.

After some time, the real-life mythology surrounding Badb faded away, with crows coming to represent banshees instead. That makes it one of the more obscure folktale references to be featured in the series!

Dobie

Let's talk a little bit about the dobie, a fairy that appeared in volume 6. One thing to bear in mind is that a lot of the "housekeeper" fairies (e.g., brownies, hobgoblins, and the dobie) have similar roots in folklore, and a lot of their lore is very similar or identical to one another. Some sources might treat brownies and hobgoblins—and then goblins!—as one and the same, or describe one as being a subset of another. It often depends on where in the UK the folktale comes from, as there is a lot of regional variation in fairy lore. Another potential spanner in the works is that the same fairy might be known by several different names or spellings. In *Earl and Fairy*, where spellings vary and the Japanese doesn't dictate one in particular, we tend to use the spelling given as the entry title in Katharine Briggs's *An Encyclopedia of Fairies*.

First things first: There is such a thing as a dobie and as a dobby, and they are considered separate. We won't get onto the subject of the "Dobbs" for now, which is sometimes a synonym for dobby—and sometimes isn't. A dobby is categorized as a hobgoblin, but one with

a mischievous bent.

Meanwhile, a dobie is a type of brownie. In general, it is the same as a brownie but rather less intelligent, to the extent that "dobie" could be used as an insult. Where people living on the Scottish-English border used to bury their valuables and have a brownie look after them, a dobie was given the task instead when none of their smarter counterparts were available.

Brownies tend to be male, while the dobie in *Earl and Fairy* is female. One of the first things Lydia notes about it is that it "resembles" (rather than is) a brownie but is less intelligent. While the dobie in the series swapped its baby out for a human child, the act of leaving a changeling does not seem to be a phenomenon associated with any specific fairy type.

We hope you found the above notes interesting! No doubt there will be plenty of new fairy introductions in the volumes to come that will give us lots to chew on in these bonus sections. We hope you're enjoying the *Earl and Fairy* volumes in English and are looking forward to future releases!

Sources:

Briggs, Katharine. An Encyclopedia of Fairies. Pantheon Books, 1976.

"Dolebury Hill Fort." *Visit Somerset*, 13 Mar. 2021, www.visitsomerset.co.uk/discover-somerset/fascinating-somerset-facts/dolebury-hill-fort.



Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!
Newsletter

And you can read the latest chapters of series like this by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:
J-Novel Club Membership

Copyright

Earl and Fairy: Volume 11
by Mizue Tani

Translated by Alexandra Owen-Burns Edited by RSN

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

HAKUSHAKU TO YOSEI © 2007 by Mizue Tani Illustration by Asako Takaboshi First published in Japan in 2007 by SHUEISHA Inc., Tokyo English translation rights arranged with SHUEISHA Inc., Tokyo and J-Novel Club LLC through Tuttle-Mori Agency, Inc.

All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property.

J-Novel Club LLC
j-novel.club
The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.
Ebook edition 1.0: September 2025
Premium E-Book for cbg