

4 MIZUE TANI



# Earl and Fairy

The Spectral Lover



# Earl and Fairy

## CHARACTERS

### 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. He flirts with her constantly while plotting revenge against his former captor, and she doesn't know how seriously to take him.

### RAVEN

A mysterious boy. As Edgar's servant, he is skilled with weapons, and his loyalty to his master is unwavering.

### LYDIA

A girl who can see and talk to fairies. After helping Edgar to secure an earldom, she ended up as his fairy doctor, after which they entered into a false engagement to fool some fae. Now she has been kidnapped and subjected to the occult...





## OSCAR

Younger cousin to Theresa, the girl whose ghost possesses Lydia. However, he seems unconvinced that spirits can be called back from the dead...

## SUSIE

Maid to Mrs. Collins, a woman who seeks to bring her daughter back from the dead. She asks Lydia for help, worried that her mistress is being manipulated by the medium.

## 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.



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# Unsavory Rumors

The silent night blanketed the city. Within the shadows of darkness, there was a building a small distance from the main road, into which gentlemen were slipping one by one. She spared these men only a glance before stepping in through the back door.

This was the meeting place for London's Spiritualist Society, and there was to be a séance that night. The participants would summon the spirits of the dead to call on their powers and communicate with them. Recently, such meetings had become more common among those with an interest in psychic phenomena, and she was the medium who had been invited to conduct tonight's proceedings.

Though she claimed to be a famous name in America, she knew better than anybody that she possessed no spiritual power. Up until now, she had never even *pretended* to take on the role of a medium. Still, the stage was already set for her. Her only choice was to pull off a convincing act.

She and the elderly woman accompanying her were shown to a waiting room, where she took a deep breath to try and alleviate her nerves. The brightness of the gas lamps did nothing but make her even more tense.

"There is no need to be so nervous. I know you are capable of this, Seraphita," the old lady said, turning down the lights.

The aristocratic guests were gathering in the next room, where the séance would take place. Their eager whispers were only just audible on the other side of the door. She could picture the gentlemen milling about in the low light. No doubt they held a mixture of anxiety, guilt, and curiosity in their hearts over what was about to happen.

She wondered if there would be a familiar face among them. In fact, she was certain that he would be here. Daring to find out, she approached the door and opened the peephole a crack. He stood out to her immediately, even among the ten or twenty men who were there. Her heart thumped loudly.



He had always been difficult to overlook. Even in that dark room, where every window had been blocked out by thick curtains, and the only source of light was a single candle, his golden hair shone with all the brightness it could steal. His was a handsomeness and elegance that showcased his high-class lineage, even when he was just standing there. His tattered coat seemed to be an attempt to fit in, but even then, he was clearly of a different caliber than the destitute nobles gathered here.

Nothing had changed. Even in the dilapidated houses of the slums, where he ate and slept with vagrant children, he commanded respect from everyone he met. The Queen's English, which he had learned since his youth, his upper-class mannerisms, and his proud noble spirit put him on equal footing with the most important faces of society's underbelly. If not for his pursuers, he would likely have been able to rise through the ranks with his own group of young followers.

He was surveying the room now. Though at first glance his gaze seemed completely nonchalant, he would doubtlessly pick up on even the slightest change in his surroundings. And if that gaze should fall on her, he would at once see through her disguise. What would he think, she wondered.

"Lord Ashenbert..."

Hearing Seraphita's murmur, the elderly lady raised her head as if to say something, but eventually decided against it.

Edgar Ashenbert. That was his current name. The earl was already famous among London's high society and had likely come here *knowing* it was a trap. The question was how *much* he knew.

Seraphita followed his gaze to a middle-aged woman. The lone woman at this gathering, Mrs. Collins was sitting silently in the corner and keeping her eyes pinned to the floor. Tonight's séance was to be held for her sake. She was a wealthy woman, whose husband owned several cotton mills in Manchester, and had come to London seeking a suitor for her daughter. It was getting more common for the nouveau riche to search for an eligible peer by offering up a sizable dowry in exchange. Meanwhile, there were the noblemen who were now struggling to afford the lifestyle to which they had become accustomed and were looking to find themselves a rich commoner bride. The problem in



Mrs. Collins's case was that her daughter was dead. That made this séance a rather curious event. The spirit of her daughter would be called upon to choose for herself a groom out of the noblemen so desperate for money that they would marry a ghost.

Seraphita couldn't believe that the young earl would wish to be betrothed to a spirit, and she knew that he wasn't wanting for money. Having said that, he had a habit of trying to seduce every woman in sight. So perhaps the girl who no longer lived had piqued his interest.

As she closed and stepped away from the peephole, she was informed that they were ready to begin as soon as she was. It was almost midnight: the perfect time for a séance. She concealed her face beneath a black gauze veil.

"Come, Seraphita." Stepping before her, the old woman opened the door to the next room. Every eye was trained on Seraphita from the moment she did so.

The medium let her gaze wander beneath the veil as she proceeded into the room. In order to make the night a success, she needed to know who was occupying which seat. But as soon as she looked at *him*, his eyes seemed to bore right back into hers, trapping her. Though she had intended to keep her guard up, she couldn't tear her gaze away. He shouldn't have been able to make out her face, yet her heart was thundering, her fingers trembling.

Until this very moment, she'd had the feeling that she wanted him to recognize her. Now, however, the thought frightened her. That she still wanted to speak with him despite the contempt he was holding in his gaze disgusted her.

Somehow, she managed to wrench her eyes away from him. She was unable to look at him for the rest of the night.

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The platform at Victoria station was bustling with passengers and their loved ones who had come to see them off. There were peddlers carrying large cases, families reluctant to part, and noblemen and women preparing for a short trip away. Among the people boarding the steam train for any number of reasons, Lydia stood nodding for the umpteenth time. She'd lost count of how many



times her father had said exactly the same thing.

“You *will* be careful, won’t you, Lydia?”

“Yes, father.”

Professor Carlton, a natural historian, was going to an academic conference in Paris. He would only be gone for three weeks at most, and yet he seemed reluctant to leave her, even as he kept an eye on the time.

“You have nothing to worry about,” she said. “I was perfectly fine living alone in Scotland.”

“It is safe there, and you know everyone. London is *dangerous*.”

“I shall be far from any danger. The housekeeper will take care of me at home, and I never leave the estate when I am at work.”

“The estate... His lordship’s estate... Now, I know he is a reliable man; however...” Her father seemed to mutter something about *him* being even more dangerous.

Lydia was a fairy doctor, meaning she could see and talk to fairies. She had been hired as a consultant by Edgar Ashenbert, the Earl of Ibrazel. His territory, which lay in the world of fairies, had been passed down for generations, and its lords were well respected as well as having a special relationship with the creatures. Even now, the lineage’s moniker of Blue Knight Earl was widely known among fairykind, more so than the name of any other human. However, the true bloodline had ended hundreds of years ago, and Edgar had obtained it by means other than succession. Since he did not possess the powers to communicate with the fae, he had hired Lydia for hers.

But it was the earl’s personality that truly worried her father. Edgar was rumored to be an outrageous philanderer, and those rumors were well substantiated. It was no wonder Professor Carlton was anxious about leaving his lone daughter in the care of such a man.

“My morals are not as loose as you seem to suspect, father.”

“I know that, of course. That reminds me...I had something I wished to give you before my departure.” He produced a small box from his jacket and handed

it to her. “Your mother gave this to me before she passed. She asked that I pass it on to you when you were old enough to start considering marriage.”

The sudden mention of matrimony had Lydia panicking. Surely he hadn’t heard?

“Oh, but I am far from considering marriage yet!”

“Your mother seemed to think that sixteen or seventeen was old enough. Personally, I would like to think it is a little early, but you *are* employed now. I cannot keep pretending you are a child forever.”

It had only been a month since Lydia had tried to flee to the world of fairies when one of them had proposed to her. Although she had returned almost immediately, the fact remained that her abilities made her different from other girls. Fairies did not work by the same rules that people did. If one were to take her for its bride, her father would not have the opportunity to celebrate her marriage. She could imagine him fretting over whether now was the right time to pass on his late wife’s gift, and it seemed he had finally come to a decision.

Not sure how she ought to feel, Lydia opened the box. Inside was a pendant, its clear stone tinted with light blue.

“It’s an aquamarine,” her father explained.

“It’s the color of seawater...”

“Your mother got it from her mother when she was around your age. Her mother got it from *her* mother, and...well, I think you understand.”

Lydia’s parents had essentially eloped, and she had never seen the place her mother had grown up. Nevertheless, her father’s words filled her with longing for that distant island in the north.

“Thank you, father. I shall treasure it.”

“Well. Off I go now.”

“Have a safe journey.”

Her father gave her a kiss on the cheek before boarding the train. She watched as the steam train set off, right on time for its journey toward the English Channel.



The pendant's box contained a letter from Lydia's mother.

*"My dearest Lydia,*

*I wonder what your life will be like when the time comes for you to read this. You always spoke of becoming a fairy doctor like me. Is that the path you eventually followed? It is a highly specialized profession in which one is unable to depend on anybody other than oneself. Although I fear that the road will not be easy, please do not forget that before you are a fairy doctor, you are a woman. The real treasure can be found in the man who stands by your side and supports you."*

Although the letter was short, her mother's love warmed Lydia's heart. She must have anticipated that her daughter would meet someone and fall in love, much as she had with her husband. Or perhaps she had realized that Lydia lived in a time when people no longer believed in fairies and wanted her daughter to pursue the same happiness as a normal girl would instead of following in her footsteps.

"Maybe mother thought I wouldn't be suited to becoming a fairy doctor."

Inexperienced as she was, Lydia often felt the same way. However, now that she had set foot on that path, she wished to see it through to the end.

The main work of a fairy doctor was to advise and assist those who found themselves in trouble due to the creatures' mischief or magic. Conversely, there were also times at which they helped fairies harmed by humans. In that way, a fairy doctor could earn the trust of the fae, allowing them to negotiate to protect human interests.

"With all that to contend with, I don't have the time to consider marriage," Lydia muttered to no one in particular, casting her gaze up at the sky from where she sat on a park bench.

The sun shone brightly at its peak, giving radiance to the short British summer. Under the cover of a tree, she was surrounded by open sunlight without overheating. It was enough to make her forget she was in the great city of London. Because she had seen her father off that morning, she was only

expected to be at work that afternoon.

She took a deep breath, ready to unwind for a bit. Her office at the estate was perfectly pleasant, but there was little she enjoyed more than the smell of the trees and the whisperings of the wind.

“He’s in the papers again, Lydia. Two of them. Everyone’s always fawning over him.”

Lydia looked up to see a gray cat sitting on a tree branch above her. He was her companion; a fairy. Although he looked like a long-furred feline, he spoke and walked on two legs. Even now, he was sitting politely with his back straight, exactly as a human would. Folding up the tabloid he had been reading neatly between his paws (it was almost as big as he was), he tossed it in Lydia’s direction.

*Again?* she thought, studying it.

Lately, Edgar had been the subject of several gossip papers. A young, handsome earl, he had made his way into the conversations of countless women as a smooth-talking philanderer. One would be hard-pressed to find anyone in high society who did not recognize his name. His unique position as the Earl of Ibrazel invited further interest, even from commoners. As this interest increased, journalists who had never even met him jumped at the chance to write up dubious tales of love affairs the earl had apparently been involved in.

To Lydia, however, the tales weren’t that dubious. According to this one, Edgar had dueled another nobleman over a beautiful widow and gravely injured his opponent. The other article claimed he had tried to seduce a medium at a séance held by London’s Spiritualist Society. Both of these stories were the kind to appeal to the masses.

“Fabrications, both of them,” came a sudden voice.

Edgar was standing right behind the bench, smiling down at her. Before she had any time to process his arrival, he had slid around the bench so that he was sitting next to her, as close as a man would with his beloved.

“May I help you?” she stuttered.



“I simply wanted to see you, and I knew I would find you here.”

His golden hair was as dazzling and his ash-mauve eyes as mystifying as ever. His perfect smile suggested he *knew* how good-looking he was, and Lydia had to shake her head to stop herself from being charmed by it.

“It’s rather pleasant conversing outside for once, isn’t it?” he continued. “You are always so engrossed in your work at the estate that you rarely have time for me. It’s such a waste, given that we are recently engaged.”

Clenching her fists in her lap, Lydia attempted to remain calm and lowered her tone. “As far as I am concerned, we are not engaged.”

Their “engagement” was nothing but foul play on Edgar’s part. It had, however, allowed them to return from the fairy world, and so Lydia could not refute it too loudly. Knowing this, he had since acted as if they *were* engaged—perhaps in an attempt to brainwash her—and had been flirting with her ceaselessly.

“Would you like to go to the seaside, Lydia? These British summers are over nearly as soon as they begin, and it might be nice if you were to take some leave from work. Even Professor Carlton is currently in Paris, isn’t he?”

Go traveling with Edgar while her father was away? Lydia could only see it leading to some outrageous misunderstandings.

“No, thank you.”

“I do so adore it when you are antisocial. On this occasion, however, I would like to insist. It would provide the perfect opportunity to cultivate our love.”

*What “love”?! You are nothing but a philanderer!*

She glared at him and took a deep breath. His motivations for keeping up the pretense of their engagement lay far from love. He just wanted a way to keep her by his side because he considered her useful. It didn’t matter what he might profess into her ear. She couldn’t take him seriously.

“How many lovers *do* you have, exactly? Do you even know?” she asked.

“You mustn’t put stock in what the tabloids say. You agree with me, don’t you, Nico?” Edgar looked up at the branch above them.

“I do. They’re full of lies, just like you.” With a click of his tongue, Nico disappeared, leaving Edgar to shrug and Lydia to sigh.

And now they were alone together. By the time she realized he had purposely exasperated Nico to drive the fairy cat away, his hand was already on her shoulder.

“Edgar—” she began, bracing herself for a flurry of sweet talk.

“Pardon me, Lord Ashenbert...” A plump man had appeared in front of them.

“And who might you be?” Edgar replied shortly, clearly considering him an unwelcome interruption.

“Your lordship’s butler said I might find you here.”

The man introduced himself as an inspector from Scotland Yard. Though Lydia was starting to feel anxious, Edgar remained as arrogant as ever.

“Would your lordship happen to know of a seamstress named Maggie Morris?”

The name of yet another woman. However, a policeman asking about her meant that things were a little more serious.

“I am afraid I don’t. Has there been an incident involving this woman?”

“We discovered a body in the Thames the other day. According to Miss Morris’s work colleagues, she mentioned something about a ‘Lord Ashenbert.’ She had gone to meet you but never returned.”

“She cannot have been referring to me. I have heard of unsavory types usurping my name in order to attract women.” Edgar looked at Lydia while he spoke, as though he wanted to convey to her that these were the very men responsible for the scandals in the newspapers.

“I see. Even the Yard has heard the romantic rumors of the handsome earl, the ‘jewel of high society,’ the mysterious nobleman from Fairyland... It would indeed be the perfect ruse to lure in unsuspecting women.”

“So, as you can see, I am unrelated to this case.”

“Miss Morris had taught herself the speech and mannerisms of an upper-class



lady in order to realize her dream of marrying a rich gentleman such as yourself. She was wont to tell lies. For example, that she was born to a family of note, but that her father passed away. In truth, her parents are alive and well; her father is a heavy drinker. She was reasonably pretty, so many men were inclined to believe her tragic tales, but she was invariably spurned when they found out the truth. On this occasion, however, she had apparently found a nobleman with whom she believed it could work. It had her in high spirits, and she was even prepared to abandon her family for him. The name she repeated to those around her was yours. She spoke of the gentleman's blond hair, his earldom, and his youth—all characteristics which you possess. Are you sure you do not know anything, my lord?"

"Nothing."

"It is a recurring pattern with young girls prone to daydreaming. They see their parents' warnings as mere annoyances and follow after these unsavory men regardless. My sympathies lie with those mothers and fathers."

"As do mine."

*Unbelievable!* Lydia thought. It had only been a few moments since Edgar had suggested taking a trip in her father's absence, after all. What made him think he was better than the men the inspector spoke of?

"I have to ask just in case, my lord. Where were you on Friday night?"

The earl pondered the question for a moment before replying. "I was having a picnic in the suburbs."

"At night?"

"Is that against the law?"

"Were you accompanied by anyone?"

Edgar listed a number of names. Mysteriously, they were all men. Lydia could hardly believe he would partake in anything so unrefined, which was when she found herself looking at the newspaper that still lay on the bench. The name of the man Edgar was said to have injured in a duel was among those he had just given. Could this "picnic" really have been a duel?

“I thought you said these articles were untrue! Does this mean the story about the widow is also—”

A hand was placed over Lydia’s mouth before she could finish.

“What’s all this about a widow?” the inspector asked.

“Merely something we were discussing before you arrived. Anyway, the gentlemen I have just mentioned will be able to corroborate my alibi.”

If the alternative was admitting to an illegal duel, these men, who presumably consisted of the injured party, seconds, and witnesses, would probably be more than happy to go along with Edgar’s midnight picnic story.

Still, Lydia couldn’t believe that he would partake in something so dangerous.

She pushed his hand from her lips. “How could you?! What if you had *died*? You do realize what you were risking, don’t you?”

“Yes, but I was confident in my victory.”

“What utter foolishness! Even if you hadn’t died, you could have been gravely wounded!”

“I appreciate your concern. Genuinely.”

She wouldn’t have gone so far as to call it *concern*, exactly...

“I’m sorry. I vow that I shan’t do anything that may grieve you ever again,” Edgar whispered tenderly.

It took a moment for Lydia to return to her senses. “I do not wish to hear your ‘vows’!”

“Was this picnic really that dangerous?” the inspector cut in.

Lydia pressed her lips together, suddenly realizing what she had done.

“Yes. We feared the arrival of spirits,” Edgar said.

“Spirits, eh? You and your friends are interested in the occult, I see.” Apparently deciding it was best to leave the nobleman to his curious pursuits, the inspector pushed no further. “Thank you for your cooperation, my lord.”

“Should the culprit be this man who has usurped my name, I ask that you



catch him with all due haste. I do not want these tabloid stories causing my fiancée any further concern.”

“Your lordship is engaged?”

“To the lovely lady sitting next to me.”

The adoring eyes with which he looked at her prevented Lydia from coming up with an immediate response.

“Oh, I see. Congratulations.” With that, the inspector left. It seemed as though he didn’t believe for a moment that they were engaged.

At first, Lydia was shocked to think they might look so unsuited to each other, but she supposed she shouldn’t be surprised. Her dull, rust-colored hair was unstyled, she wasn’t especially pretty, and she wasn’t a noblewoman able to wear the latest fashion.

“It should be clear to you by now that no one would ever believe you would marry me. I wouldn’t even be worth an article to a tabloid journalist.”

“The romance is lacking, that is all. Perhaps if you were to let me kiss you, things would be different.”

Alarm bells ringing, Lydia tried to get to her feet, but Edgar grabbed hold of her arm.

“Wait. Please allow me a chance to explain.”

“Explain what?”

“The widow.”

She could feel the irritation rising. He could say whatever he liked; at the end of the day, he was a man totally given to frivolity. She *knew* that, and yet she was still getting angry.

“She is a friend of mine and nothing more. She came to me seeking advice after that gentleman refused to end their relationship. I attempted to act as an intermediary, the situation turned complicated, and things concluded as you read here.”

“I was under the impression you could not abide a woman’s friendship.”

“There are times when friendships form naturally and contrary to one’s original intentions.”

Meaning he *had* been involved with the widow at some point!

“In any case, I should like you *not* to count me among your numerous female friends or lovers, or whatever they may be!”

“I am not romantically involved with any of them anymore.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“I called things off with them. After all, I am engaged to be married.”

*No, you’re not.*

“Is it not natural for one to have had a romantic relationship or two in the past? Are you so concerned by that which has come to an end?”

First of all, “the past” to Edgar was the six months since he had returned to Britain. Secondly, his relationships had to have numbered more than one or two. His claim to have ended them was also dubious. Lydia didn’t know which contradiction she ought to point out first.

“You’re the only one for me.”

*As if I’d believe that.* “Oh yes? Not the medium? Or the dancer from Soho? Or that banker’s daughter?”

“Those are all lies told by the papers.”

“That *would* be convenient, wouldn’t it? But I know full well that *you* are a liar. I wouldn’t be surprised to find you haven’t ended anything with anyone; you’re just hoping that I shall never find out!”

Despite her fervor, Edgar merely smiled at her.

“Has something I said amused you?”

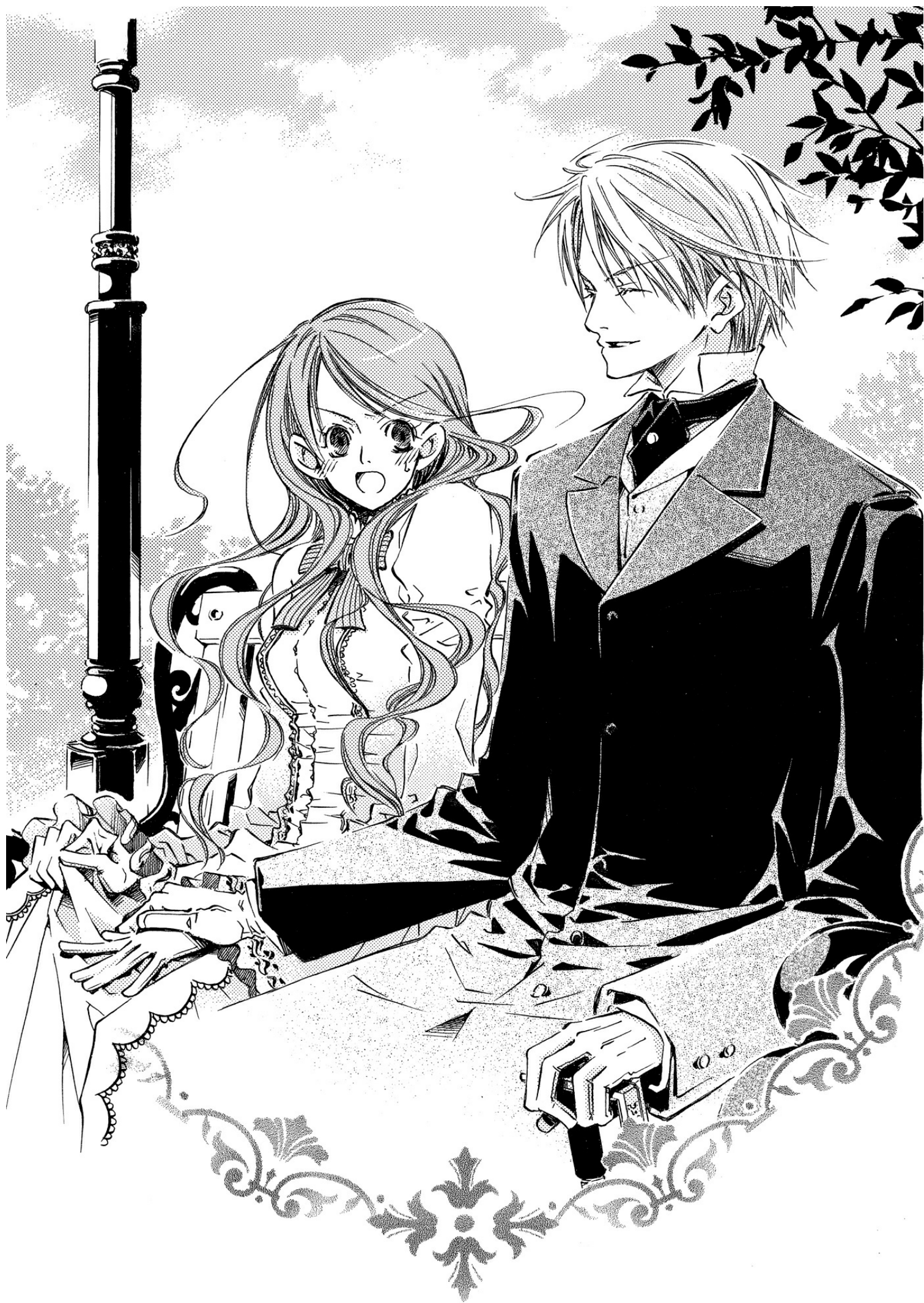
“Not particularly. I am simply enjoying this lovers’ quarrel.”

“Excuse me?”

“Who would press me so spiritedly with accusations of infidelity but my lover?”

Lydia was quickly pulled back to her senses. Truly, it shouldn't matter to her how many women he was seeing, past or present. "I wasn't being at all spirited. It is none of my business, after all. If only you had left the subject alone, I wouldn't have said a thing!" She paused, grasping for words. Her unnatural fretfulness was only confusing her further. "And you wonder why I cannot trust you!"





“You are awfully endearing, even when angry.”

Lydia was starting to wonder whether she would last until her father returned home. She was overcome with an intense sense of anxiety and exhaustion all at once.

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The gentlemen’s club, its membership available only to those of the highest social standing, was heaving with idle patrons coming to be entertained through the night. Liquor, tobacco, and opium were all on offer. The men were free to socialize with their friends or game and gamble in the lavish, comfortable rooms. The only entertainment missing in this establishment was women.

Ordinarily, women were not permitted in such clubhouses. For one reason or another, British gentlemen liked to gather without the involvement of the fairer sex; Edgar could not understand it.

This evening, however, he had come to the club out of necessity. He had business here. He was shown to one of its private rooms, where he was greeted by the owner, Slade, and the painter Paul Firman, also known as Paul O’Neill.

“How did you find last night’s séance, my lord?”

“Did you learn anything about the medium?”

The men were quick to get the formalities over and done with so that they could launch into their questions. It was they and Scarlet Moon—the secret society they were a part of—who had tipped Edgar off about the medium.

They looked at him with such earnestness that he couldn’t help but tease them. “Oh yes, she was quite beautiful. I could tell, even beneath her veil. Her figure, too, was perfect.”

“You are missing the point, my lord!” Slade gave an exasperated sigh. “We need to know if she is working with the Prince!”

Paul made to placate him. Edgar, meanwhile, was satisfied enough that he had tripped the owner’s short fuse.

“The Prince’s involvement is undeniable. As far as he is concerned, he has

likely completed the first stage of his plan to lure me in.”

The Prince was Edgar’s nemesis and lived in America. It was he who had killed the earl’s family and forced him into slavery when he was just a child. Though Edgar had managed to escape to London, he doubted he would be permitted a life of freedom. At this point, he was expecting to be set up, with some sort of trap at any moment. He was ready to meet the Prince head-on and fully intended to bring an end to him, organization and all.

Scarlet Moon loathed the Prince as he did. That was why he was cooperating with them to find out what they could. Their investigation had led to a man who had been sent from America and was working in London on the Prince’s behalf. That man’s name was Ulysses. He had received a large sum of money from a lender known to deal with the Prince. Whatever Edgar’s enemy was scheming, it was obvious how it was to be funded.

Edgar was familiar with the name “Ulysses;” he had heard it during his captivity. He couldn’t put a face to the name, but he was confident that this man was one of the Prince’s closest allies. Ulysses himself was slippery; he seemed to keep to the shadows, and they had no information about *who* he actually was.

The one clue they had eventually come across was the medium he supported financially. What the Prince’s underling might need a medium for wasn’t clear. However, she claimed to be an acquaintance of Edgar’s and had been fraternizing with the occult-loving upper classes. It was likely that she was being used to lure the earl out.

And so he had presented himself, knowing it might have been a trap. He wanted to make it clear that he was not so frightened of the Prince as to spend his life fleeing. If there was any way to oppose his enemy and find a chance to win, the first step was to have courage.

“The purpose of the séance was to select a groom for a departed young lady,” Edgar explained.

“Yes, I heard,” Slade said.

“Did your lordship actually see the ghost?” Paul asked.



“I...” Edgar paused. “I am not convinced that I did. Anyway, there were four would-be bridegrooms, including myself. We are likely to be summoned again on another occasion. One of those men gave his name as Ashenbert.”

“Could he have been Ulysses?”

“I cannot be sure yet.” With that, Edgar cast his mind back to the events of the séance.

Edgar arrived at the séance hosted by London’s Spiritualist Society with his letter of introduction in hand. It had been prepared for him by Scarlet Moon, and he was here posing as a viscount by the name of Middleworth.

The room he was led to had thick curtains covering every source of outside light. A round table sat in its center. Despite its occupants, the room was deathly silent, assisted by the carpet that drowned out even the heaviest footfalls. With the only illumination coming from a single candle, it was difficult to make out the other gentlemen’s faces. However, Edgar had established beforehand that he wasn’t acquainted with any of them. High society—where the earl spent much of his time—was all about money. These nobles didn’t have enough to spare on social gatherings.

It wasn’t long before the door opened and a petite elderly woman came in.

“Thank you all for your patience. We are ready to get started, so please take your seats.”

The men followed her instructions quietly. Next, the medium entered, her face covered by a black veil that made her age and visage impossible to ascertain. She wore a dress in the same shade. Edgar could just about make out the outline of her delicate cheeks, from which he deduced she was likely fairly young.

Taking a seat at the one remaining chair, the medium began to study each man in turn through her veil. She seemed to hesitate when she reached Edgar, almost as if the sight of him bewildered her, but he may have been imagining things. His piercing gaze seemed to have put her off; she didn’t look in his direction again.

“Is everyone ready?” the elderly woman asked from her spot standing behind

the medium. “Tonight we shall be calling on the spirit of Mrs. Collins’s daughter, Miss Theresa Collins. Mrs. Collins has come to London in search of a talented medium. It can only be the work of the spirits themselves that Miss Seraphita here was in Britain at the right time to undertake this task.”

Seraphita, the name of a beautiful angel. It seemed to hold much significance, but no doubt the medium would continue to keep her face and voice a mystery.

“Please cast away your doubts and wish from the bottom of your hearts that Miss Collins will grace us with her presence.” Seraphita placed her hands on the table and took those of the men sitting on either side of her.

The other attendants linked hands in a similar fashion. When the elderly woman left, the candle flickered out, despite the absence of wind, and the room fell into total darkness. For a spell, silence dominated. It was just as this stillness was beginning to unnerve the participants that there came a voice, fainter than the ringing of ears.

It was the medium who spoke, her voice low and monotonous, as if she were chanting a spell. Something in the corner creaked, its sound soon lost to Seraphita’s whispering. Then, there was a banging against the wall. It moved around the room, occasionally knocking the wall again as if to announce its position.

Edgar felt the men on either side of him stir anxiously. Darkness had a tendency to disturb the mind. It was quite reasonable for one to assume that these noises were being produced by a spirit, but the earl was well-practiced in suppressing fear and anxiety. Lack of light in itself was not dangerous. It was this rationality that allowed him to consider that the elderly lady might have slipped back into the room.

Once the banging had subsided, there was the sound of rustling fabric nearby, as though someone was walking past them. The medium had stopped whispering, and now only the presence circling the table was perceptible.

Supposing a departed soul *was* capable of being summoned back to the mortal world like this, what sense was there in mourning the dead? Edgar thought back on those he had lost—his mother and father, and the companions with whom he had fled from the Prince; Ermine, who had confessed her

betrayal and thrown herself into the sea moments before he would have secured her freedom.

Every time he thought of her, he was filled with the regret of being unable to save her, even after all this time. The Prince had treated her much more cruelly than he had Edgar. That was why the earl had been blind to just how deeply those sinister roots had penetrated her soul. If only she could return from Hades—*truly* return, and not as part of a farce like this one.

All of a sudden, his mind was pulled back to the present. Whatever had been moving around the table, it had now stopped behind him.

*Ermine...*

For reasons unknown, her name echoed in his mind. He felt a hand softly touching his cheek then. He hadn't the wherewithal to identify it either as the hand of Miss Collins's ghost or that of a deceitful human.

*Can you forgive me, Ermine?*

When the candle flickered back to life, there was no sign that anyone had been there at all. Nor could Edgar feel any traces of the hand on his cheek. The air was filled with the fragrance of jasmine, as though that would suffice as evidence of the ghost's visit. Mrs. Collins was sobbing. She must have believed that presence had truly been that of her daughter.

The door at the far end of the room opened, and the elderly woman came in once more. "Did any of you gentlemen receive a sign from Miss Collins? Those are the men with whom she would like to meet at a later time."

Edgar frowned. It sounded like they would actually be *seeing* this ghost.

"What sort of sign?" somebody asked.

"She may have touched you or spoken to you," the woman explained.

"In that case, I believe I received such a sign." Edgar raised his hand.

"Might I ask your name?"

"Middleworth."

The woman nodded, and then some other men raised their hands. When one



of them introduced himself as Ashenbert, Edgar turned his head slowly to look. It was a man in his midtwenties, and he wasn't *unattractive*. Apart from his blond hair, he bore little resemblance to the real earl. His name caused a stir among the other gentlemen; Edgar heard them asking what a comfortably rich nobleman was doing here. Once it was brought up (with some exasperation) that Lord Ashenbert was indiscriminately fond of women, the matter seemed to be settled.

*I am not so wanting for female company that I would resort to a spirit*, Edgar thought to himself.

"I shall be in touch with the four chosen gentlemen in due course," the elderly woman said.

The medium dipped her head toward the participants, then took Mrs. Collins by the hand and led her to the door, which she opened. The light of the gas lamps outside the room seeped in and through the thin material of her veil, giving a sudden clear view of the face beneath.

Edgar was immediately captivated. She was the spitting image of Ermine. Before he knew it, he had rushed up to her and taken her hand.

"Release her, my lord!" The elderly woman tried to cut in to no avail.

Edgar drew closer. "Miss Seraphita. Was the hand that I felt against my cheek really that of Miss Collins's spirit? Was it not these delicate fingers?" He lifted her hand to his face, comparing the sensation to what he had felt in the darkness. It was indeed the same.

His eyes met hers beyond the veil. For a split second, she froze before hurriedly shaking his hand off and slipping away in silence.

Either she was Ermine or she was her doppelgänger. The Prince's use of her was a clear display of his power, one he was no doubt rather smug about. But Edgar could not allow himself to fall prey to sentiment. When the servant brought him some gin, he swallowed it quickly to calm himself.

"I trust you will be obtaining a register of the séance's participants from the Spiritualist Society? I should like you to look into the Collins family and the

other three men who were chosen.”

“And what do you intend to do, my lord, should they summon you again?”  
Slade asked.

“I shall go.”

“In that case, you ought to take a guard. That means we shall be able to stay in contact with you too.”

“Raven will be enough. I do not wish to be responsible for the safety of extra heads.”

Slade pursed his lips, apparently displeased by the notion that his elite Scarlet Moon members would be a burden. Some were indeed skilled with a weapon, others capable of braving danger. Many of the group’s ancestors were artists who had been tasked with infiltrating and spying in important homes, after all. However, Edgar expected nothing more of them at the moment than information gathering. He didn’t want any of them to end up dead if he could avoid it.

Raven was Edgar’s most trusted servant and capable of protecting himself. Not to mention, he was worth a number of guards all on his own. Taking him along would mean cutting down on numbers, allowing for more ease of movement.

“Very well. We shall move forward according to your instructions, my lord.”

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*“A Spectral Lover for Lord Ashenbert.”*

The headline adorning that day’s tabloid, spread out on her desk when she arrived at work, threatened to make Lydia frown. Crumpling it up, she tossed the paper into the wastebasket.

“You do not have to present me with each and every article, Nico.”

“I thought you might like to know.” The tea-loving cat invariably arrived at the estate earlier than she did to enjoy the quality Ceylon brew prepared by the staff.

“I have told you countless times that they do not concern me.”

“Then there is no need to get so worked up over them, is there? I am merely keeping an eye on the earl in case he is planning something dangerous again.”

The only thing he was keeping an eye on was the gossip. Whatever Edgar might be scheming, Nico’s favor could easily be bought with food or alcohol. The fairy cat may have been Lydia’s closest companion, but he was far from reliable.

He was holding the teacup up to his nose delicately and inhaling the aroma when she had a change of heart and approached him, clearing her throat.

“Did you read it?”

“Hm? Well, I skimmed it.”

“What did it say?”

“If you really want to know, you should read it yourself.”

“I am not all that interested. But you have to agree that I spend a lot of time with Edgar. It could cause misunderstandings if we were to be seen together at the wrong time, and I should like to avoid doing anything with him that might lead us to being in the papers.”

“I doubt you have much to worry about. You’ve managed to avoid it so far, haven’t you?”

It sounded like Nico was confirming her suspicions that she and Edgar didn’t look like lovers in the least, and she found herself growing indignant. Not that it mattered to her. Her concern was that she lacked the beauty and charm to ever find a lover of her own; she was merely worried about her *future*.

Lydia plucked the newspaper from the wastebasket, trying not to alert Nico. She smoothed out the creases on her desk and began to read: a wealthy woman had requested a séance to find a marriage partner for her deceased daughter. “Lord Ashenbert” had taken part as one of the eligible bachelors. He had seemed “infatuated” with the “gorgeous ghost.”

“Unbelievable,” Lydia muttered. She knew Edgar wasn’t picky when it came to women, but one would think even he would draw the line when the woman lacked so much as a pulse.



“This should be welcome news,” Nico said. “If he marries that spirit, you’ll be free.”

“Yes. I shan’t have to play along with this farcical engage—” She hurriedly cut herself off and peered out the window. Her concern was a certain fairy who could not be allowed to learn that their engagement wasn’t genuine.

“If you’re worried about that kelpie, he isn’t in London at the moment.”

“Really? Did he go back to Scotland?”

“Who knows? He might just be in the suburbs somewhere. He was grumbling about London being too hot and smelly or something.”

Lydia’s temporary engagement to Edgar had partly been a way to annul her engagement to Kelpie. As long as the water horse was nearby, she couldn’t let slip that there was no sincerity to the arrangement. Since he wasn’t present, now might be the perfect opportunity to have Edgar concede that they would *not* be getting married.

“Where are you off to, Lydia? You know the earl isn’t at home?”

“Yes, and in his absence, I am going to come up with an argument to convince him to give up on the engagement.”

“You would try to convince a smooth talker like him with *words*?”

Lydia knew it was a big ask, but that was why it would take some planning. She left the estate behind and made her way to a nearby park. The outdoors calmed her, and she found it much more pleasant when she needed to think something over. Before long, she had caught sight of the trees beyond the gray buildings, but something stopped her in her tracks: a quiet voice asking for help.

She listened more attentively. Though faint among the city’s hustle and bustle, she heard it again. It almost sounded like the wind—no, the lapping and rumbling of waves. Such a voice most likely belonged to a fairy.

Lydia followed the voice as best she could, allowing it to lead her onto a side road. There she found a woman, crouched down and curled up in the shadow of a streetlamp. She was middle-aged, plump, and dressed in fine attire. Lydia couldn’t hear the voice anymore, and she wasn’t sure whether this lady had

anything to do with it.

“Excuse me. Are you all right?”

There was a heaviness to the woman’s movements as she looked up at Lydia and nodded. Her face was pale. “I suddenly felt rather unwell. I suppose I just need to eat something.”

Even if it wasn’t serious, Lydia couldn’t simply leave her. “Might I know where you live? I can see you home, if you like.”

The woman’s face twisted into a tearful expression. “That’s very kind of you, my dear. You know, if my daughter were still with us, she would have been around your age...” She took Lydia’s hand, her eyes clouded with distant memories.

The woman introduced herself as Mrs. Collins. She was staying at a luxury hotel that looked out onto Hyde Park. Lydia hailed a cab that took them there, and Mrs. Collins invited her up to the spacious floor where she was staying.

The woman must have been rather well-off. Her room was so extravagant that it seemed closer to a parlor than something in a hotel. Her young maid welcomed Lydia with the utmost hospitality, but when the fairy doctor tried to leave, Mrs. Collins insisted on offering tea and snacks.

“I’m afraid I simply must be going,” Lydia said.

“I really would like to show you my gratitude.”

“I appreciate that. However, your words of thanks are more than enough.” She got to her feet, but when she hesitated at the door, she noticed the maid suddenly looking very tearful and clutching at her apron.

“Miss Carlton,” the maid pressed, “if you might do something for me... Would you speak with Lady Collins? I know full well how discourteous I am being in making such a request of a stranger, especially after you showed her such kindness, but I do not know where else to turn. Perhaps you might be able to change her mind...”

“What precisely is the matter?” Lydia never could turn down a soul in need.

She couldn't stop herself from seeking out the details.

"Lady Collins lost her young daughter, Miss Theresa Collins, more than ten years ago. She has never once forgotten about her, but lately the mistress's heart seems to be aching more than ever in a manner that is quite concerning. She has been gathering a dress and things for a wedding, truly believing that her daughter will return and be in need of a husband."

Indeed, one of the first remarks Mrs. Collins had made to Lydia was about her daughter.

"It all started with the arrival of that medium," the maid went on.

"Medium?"

"Yes. The medium claimed she could bring Lady Collins's daughter back. But such a thing is far too terrible to comprehend. I fear that it insults the will of God."

"Yes, it certainly does."

"I worry that Lady Collins's health will only suffer further. She sees her daughter in you, Miss Carlton. That is why I believe you might have success in bringing her back to her senses." The freckled maid seemed to adore and worry for her mistress from the bottom of her heart.

"Does Mrs. Collins have no one in her family who might support her? Are you her only servant?" As a stranger, Lydia wasn't sure it was her place to get involved.

"The master is busy with work, and although Lady Collins's nephew has accompanied her on this trip, he is but sixteen years old and is concerned mostly with entertainment..." The maid left it there, apparently unwilling to speak ill of her mistress's family. "I lost my parents at a young age, and Lady Collins has been taking care of me ever since. I am only her maid and yet she taught me to read and write, and to sew, all so that I might have the opportunity to marry above my station..."

"You just want your mistress to be well, don't you?"

The maid nodded, wiping at her eyes.

“I do not mind speaking to her, but I cannot see that it will do much good.”

The maid might only have been looking for someone to support her. At a loss, she had chosen to confide in Lydia, a girl similar in age. The fairy doctor gave her answer more for the sake of the maid than her mistress.

“Thank you. I shall go and see how Lady Collins is faring.” The maid curtsied, seeming genuinely relieved, then hurried from the room.

Sitting back down on the sofa, Lydia touched her mother’s pendant, which she wore under her clothes. She had lost a parent, just as Mrs. Collins had lost a child. If she could be of help to the woman, then maybe their meeting had been preordained. Perhaps not by God, but by a fairy. Lydia still hadn’t worked out where that voice had come from, and the door opened without warning almost as soon as she remembered it. She turned her head to see a maid, a different girl than the one she had spoken to.

“Please save us,” the girl begged, keeping an eye on the door through which she had come. “Save us, fairy doctor.”

*How does she know I’m a fairy doctor?*

The voice with which the maid spoke closely resembled the one from before.

“Are you a fairy?” Lydia asked.

“I am a selkie.”

Selkies were said to possess human form beneath their sealskins. Lydia had also heard that without their skins, they couldn’t return to the ocean and would become trapped in servitude to the person who had stolen them. However, she had never seen a selkie before, so she found the maid’s sudden claim difficult to believe.

The maid was indistinguishable from a human. When the majority of fairies took on human form, there were certain tells. Selkies, however, were said to be the incarnations of people who had died at sea, so that might explain it.

“Is the young lady I spoke to before also a selkie?” Lydia asked.

“No, she is human. We have had our skins stolen by wicked men. Please, fairy doctor, set us free.”

To do so, she would have to retrieve those skins. What on earth was happening around Mrs. Collins that she kept the company of both mediums *and* selkies?

Suddenly, the selkie's body burst into white flame.

"Aah... My skin is burning..."

The flames were an illusion; there was no heat coming from them. But if the selkie's skin was being burned, someone was trying to destroy her soul.

"Where is your skin?" Lydia stood up. She needed to find the true flames and extinguish them.

"It is too late. He must know I am speaking to you. You must leave before he arrives."

"What? But—"

"There are several of us who have been captured. We have been put to work in a villa. I believe he has hidden our skins there. Please..." The selkie's body suddenly started to fade, and the next moment it was swallowed up by the flames.

Knowing she needed to do *something*, Lydia rushed from the room in a panic, which was when she felt a presence behind her. Before she could turn around to see who it was, she was caught in a pair of arms.

"Unhand m—" The next thing she knew was a chemical scent, and then darkness.

"Foolish selkie, so desperate as to seek a fairy doctor's help. What on earth did she think a little girl like this could do?" The voice seemed to come from far away. "This must be the fairy doctor from Lord Ashenbert's estate. A fairy doctor in name only, and hardly capable. I hadn't thought she would be a threat. Now, what shall I do with her?"

*Name only? I am a fairy doctor through and through, thank you very much...*



# The Secret Art of Resurrection

Although he had only seen her face through the veil, Edgar was convinced that the medium looked just like Ermine. The tides of the merrows' sea had never returned her body. That fact had instilled in him a faint hope that she might have been alive somewhere. But if that was true, why had she not returned to him? Was it because she had been unable to shake free of the Prince's shackles? If that medium really was Ermine, it meant that his underlings were still using her.

"My lord, I am wholly unconvinced that my sister is alive."

That was the first thing Raven said when he brought tea to Edgar's study. Apparently, Ermine had been on his mind as much as his master's.

"If you were to meet her, you would find yourself more hopeful."

"Her face and voice might be identical, but I can only imagine that to be a coincidence."

Ermine was Raven's half-sister; they shared only their mother. Although related, Raven's dark skin identified him as Asian, whereas Ermine could be mistaken for Caucasian.

Edgar intertwined his fingers on the desk and looked up at Raven. "Explain."

"I do not believe she would be working under the Prince again. She has no reason to, and I cannot believe that she would hold her life so dear were she to find herself in that situation. Not after giving it up so willingly before."

Ermine had allowed the Prince to control her and betrayed her master all for the sake of staying with Edgar. On the run, the three of them had only had each other to rely upon; everyone else had been potentially hostile. However, Ermine believed that once Edgar had obtained the earldom, that would change, and she would no longer be special to him. So she had leaked information to the Prince to slow down their escape. Though Edgar had run and run, he had remained in the clutches of his enemy.

That had all changed when he had met Lydia. Her abilities had finally allowed him to achieve the impossible task of becoming an earl. Ermine had then killed herself to free Edgar from the Prince's dominion. It was unthinkable that she should appear before him again, and Raven couldn't see why she should want to return to the Prince if she *were* alive.

"There is a way to be sure whether it is truly her." Edgar pushed a letter over to Raven's side of the desk. It had only just arrived. "That is an invitation from Mrs. Collins. It would seem that the doubts I voiced were not enough to have me stricken from the list."

The letter, addressed to Lord Middleworth, had of course been delivered to a different address.

"Mrs. Collins writes that we shall have the opportunity to meet her daughter at her villa near Hastings. Therefore, the medium should also be staying there."

"Will you go, my lord?"

"Naturally."

"Understood." Raven's impassive expression remained unchanged as he offered his master a crumpled-up newspaper. "This was on the floor in Miss Carlton's office."

It was a tabloid featuring a nonsense story about "Lord Ashenbert's" undying love for a ghost. Even if the Ashenbert who had attended the séance was a fake, the article still made Edgar shake his head. Evidently, Lydia had read it and been repulsed enough to scrunch up the newspaper.

"This may pose a problem."

"Yes, my lord."

With a weary sigh, Edgar threaded his fingers through his bangs. "Where on earth does Lydia come into possession of these papers?"

Such tabloids were aimed at the working class and were not something that Lydia's upper-middle-class household would entertain. The stories about him had been rather excessive for a while now, but he had been confident that she would never find out about them. However, the opposite was true, and it

seemed very few of them escaped her notice.

“I believe it stems from the fact that Mr. Nico reads these papers on a daily basis,” Raven said.

*That cat.*

“He plays the gentleman and yet he enjoys these rags?”

“I have been reliably informed that it is not uncommon for fairies to take an interest in the meaningless gossip of humans.”

“I ought to go and smooth things over with her.” Just as Edgar was getting to his feet, the problematic cat in question came rushing into the study on his hind paws.

“Oi, earl! Lydia went out earlier, but she hasn’t come back yet.”

Edgar did not like the sound of that one bit—especially not when one of the Prince’s underlings was active.

“When precisely did she leave?”

“This morning. She had some thinking to do, so I suppose she went to the park, but all the brownies there said they hadn’t seen her. I had a look for myself and couldn’t find her and now I’m rather worried. Would you assist me in my search?”

“Thinking? About what?”

“Oh, well... I should hardly think it matters.” Nico drew a paw over his ear awkwardly.

Edgar stepped toward him and plucked him up from the floor while his guard was down.

The cat growled. “What are you doing?! Put me down!”

“What did she go to think about?” Edgar scratched gently at Nico’s neck.

The cat’s eyes softened as he thrashed about. “Don’t! Stop! I’ll talk, all right?!”

The earl let go, and Nico slumped against the wall and smoothed out his fur.

“It must be rather unfortunate to so despise being pampered.”

The cat glared at him bitterly. “How many times do I have to remind you *not* to treat me like a cat!”

“What was on Lydia’s mind? Tell me.”

“She was trying to come up with a way to get out of her engagement to you!”

*How troublesome.* Edgar folded his arms.

“Just help me find her!” Nico urged.

“Of course. Raven, call for the butler.”

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She awoke to find herself in a dark room illuminated only by the light of a single candle. She was sitting in a chair, and there was a hand on each of her shoulders. They belonged to the person standing behind her, and their slenderness suggested that person was female.

“How are you feeling, Miss Collins?”

*Miss Collins?*

That must have been her name. In fact, she quickly grew more confident that it *was*.

“You have been reborn. You have been returned to this world and your dearest family.”

She turned her head slightly and was finally able to make out the person standing behind her: a gorgeous woman with skin so white it was almost translucent. The speaker, however, was the elderly lady standing next to her; she was simply nodding along.

*Reborn?*

She did have the sense that she had been somewhere else entirely not too long ago. Somewhere bright and warm, and far from darkness like this. It was clear to her that being reborn was not a particularly pleasant experience.

She raised her right hand. The candle’s glow revealed that of a slim young girl. A hand that had never known work.

“Aah, Theresa!” A cry sounded from a gloomy corner, and then a plump woman was rushing breathlessly toward her. “You’ve finally come back to me! It’s me, your mother! Do you remember?” The woman sat down on the floor and held her hand tightly.

*This woman is my mother?*

She wasn’t sure what to do as she looked down at the crying stranger.

“I...um...” It took her a while to realize that the voice was hers. That was how little she found she knew about herself.

“Spirits tend to struggle to remember their lives, Mrs. Collins. You must reteach her, little by little,” the elderly woman explained.

Mrs. Collins—her mother—nodded, the large gemstone on her necklace swinging.

“You are...my mother?”

“Yes, Theresa. If there is anything you want, you need only let me know.”

*I must have come from a wealthy family.*

“Anything? Even pretty dresses? What about jewels?”

“There are several dresses waiting for you in your wardrobe. If you do not like them, I shall buy you more. The same goes for jewelry.”

*What a wonderful mother I have. I am blessed to have returned to this world.*

Her mother embraced her. It was then that she spotted one more figure in the dark. It seemed to belong to a man, but he made no move to step closer to the light, nor did he speak a single word. She couldn’t see his face or expression, only that he appeared to be staring at her intently. At once, she was anxious, and her joy at reuniting with her mother dampened.

“Are you awake, miss? I have run you a bath.”

Lydia was drawn out of her sleep by a young, spritely voice that clearly did not belong to her family’s experienced housekeeper. The bright morning sun streaming in through the window made it immediately obvious that this was



not her urban, west-facing bedroom either. Sitting up with a start, she looked through the huge glass panes to see a sparkling ocean, and she had to wonder whether she was still dreaming. This certainly wasn't London.

"Oh yes, I was drugged..."

Did that mean she had been kidnapped? If so, she was being treated rather well. The bedroom was spacious and stylish, the bed feather soft, and the sheets fresh. She had been dressed in comfortable linen nightclothes.

*What on earth is going on?*

She could recall the selkie asking for help, and its skin was subsequently burned. In other words, the selkie had been killed, and its murderer had kidnapped Lydia. That much she was certain of, but it didn't answer the question of where she was now and why. Still confused, she got to her feet.

"I shall fetch you a change of clothes, miss."

When the maid came into the room, Lydia's eyes widened. It was the same maid who had begged her to speak to Mrs. Collins about her daughter. Things were only getting more perplexing. What if this girl was linked to the kidnapper?

"Have you taken leave of your senses? I do not know who put you up to this, but you ought to be aware that kidnapping is a crime!" Lydia stepped pointedly in the path of the freckled maid, who dropped the unassuming outfit in her hands. "How could you deceive me with those tales of yours? What do you mean to do with me here?!"

"Might you be...Miss Carlton?!" The maid stared at her in panic.

"What is this place? Wherever it is, I am returning to London."

"Are you not Miss Collins?"

"I beg your pardon?" Without waiting for an answer, Lydia slipped past the maid and went for the door.

The maid panicked, rushed to close the door, and then fell to her knees. "Please forgive me! I knew it was an awful thing to do, but I felt I had no alternative. But please do not leave—not yet! If you try to do so, you will be

killed!”

Things weren’t as peaceful as their surroundings would make it seem. The maid, too, seemed utterly desperate, and Lydia felt herself calming slightly as she realized the girl might not be at fault.

“In that case, could you tell me what is going on? It is apparent to me that the blame does not lie with you.” Lydia crouched down and took the maid’s hand in her own. “Might I ask your name?”

“It is Susie.”

Susie went on to explain that, when she had returned to the reception room, she had found Lydia collapsed. She had rushed to call for help, at which point the medium had appeared and said they would be leaving the hotel. Although she had known it was wrong, Susie had assisted in putting the unconscious Lydia in a wheelchair, after which the group had boarded a train. The medium had explained that they needed a vessel for Theresa Collins in order to bring her back to life. It had to be a girl the same age the departed would have been were she still alive. It was wrong, but such was Mrs. Collins’s unhealthy attachment to her lost daughter that she accepted everything the medium said. There was nothing else Susie could have done once they were told that Lydia would need to be killed if she were deemed unsuitable.

They had arrived at Mrs. Collins’s villa in the proximity of Hastings, where Theresa’s spirit had been called down to possess Lydia’s body the previous night. Apparently, Lydia had acted just like the departed, but she couldn’t remember a thing. Unsurprisingly, Theresa had not seemed to know anything about herself and was quick to accept what she had been told: that she was a spirit come back to life.

“For the time being, could I ask you to pretend that you are indeed Miss Collins? It will only be until Miss Seraphita—the medium—leaves and you are out of danger. Please. I truly believe that she would not hesitate to kill you.”

Lydia wondered whether the medium might have been responsible for capturing the selkies—but she thought that the person who had drugged her was male. Whatever the case, there was someone with the same fairy-related abilities as her. But what did they want with selkies?

For now, it seemed that Lydia had no choice but to stay put. That being the case, pretending to be Theresa might be her safest option. It would mean she could move freely, which would allow her to investigate the medium and what was happening with the selkies. The selkie at the hotel had mentioned a villa. In all likelihood, it was this one.

Lydia focused her mind. She would require motivation if she was to succeed. A fairy had asked for her help. If she wanted to become a full-fledged fairy doctor, she had to do this by herself. Only a *real* fairy doctor would be approached by one of the creatures for aid.

“I shall do it, Miss Susie. May I count on you to assist me and keep this a secret?”

“Certainly. Lady Collins has asked that I act as your caretaker, so I ought to be able to help without arousing suspicion from the medium.”

“Thank you.”

“Oh, Miss Carlton, I must warn you not to trust any of the other servants here. I have seen some of them exchanging whispers with the medium. Lady Collins has left the running of this villa completely in the hands of others, so there is no telling who might have sneaked their way in.”

The selkie had mentioned that some of her friends were being made to work here too. Lydia nodded thoughtfully. As long as she couldn’t tell selkies apart from humans—and the medium’s possible co-conspirators—she ought to move carefully.

Since Theresa’s spirit hadn’t kept any of her memories, Lydia’s lack of knowledge about the Collins family wasn’t a problem. In fact, it was rare for her to see Mrs. Collins without a smile.

“I have your favorite here, Theresa: custard pie! Be sure to eat it all up!”

Mrs. Collins spent much of her time sleeping or absentminded, likely an effect of the medication she was taking to help keep her mind stable. It wasn’t until their afternoon tea that Lydia saw her that day.

“Thank you, mother.”

Mrs. Collins's eyes welled up. "I never thought I would get the opportunity to have tea with you all grown up... It has been a constant feature in my dreams."

She took Lydia's hand as if to reassure herself that she wasn't dreaming now. "I never believed you were dead. I believed someone else must have been raising you with tender care, until the day fate would lead you back to your mother's side."

Lydia felt a prickle in her chest as the thought crossed her mind that she was lying to this woman.

"I wonder if that hair of yours comes from your grandmother. It was a light brown when you were young, but now it has taken on a redder shade. I don't recall that yellow in your green eyes either."

It was as though she had forgotten that her daughter was supposed to have returned from the dead. Strangely enough, Lydia wasn't finding their time together all that unpleasant. It was clear to her that Mrs. Collins's strong affection for her daughter was genuine. A part of her wondered whether her mother would have treated and spoken to her just like this.

With her prominent northern ancestry, Lydia's mother had possessed platinum blonde hair and fair skin. She had been utterly gorgeous, and everyone who had known her said that she and Lydia were nothing alike. The plump, friendly Mrs. Collins barely resembled the vague memories the fairy doctor had of her own mother. Still, there was something familiar there: a gentle tenderness. A feeling of safety in her presence.

"You've grown into such a beautiful young woman, Theresa."

When Mrs. Collins embraced her, Lydia found herself thinking it wouldn't be so bad to just let herself be coddled. She was no longer a child, but surely she had to have the same yearning for her mother as anyone else. If her own mother were still alive, would Lydia be embraced and called "beautiful" like this?

Perhaps her mother had been as desperately sad to leave her so young as Mrs. Collins had been to lose her daughter.

"You won't have to live without love anymore. I shall make you the happiest

girl there ever was.”

“Mother...” Lydia allowed her hair to be stroked like a child while thinking of what she had lost.





“Oh, look at me, shedding tears! Ah, yes, Theresa, I have a cameo brooch I would like you to wear. I was saving it for when you were a suitable age to start thinking about marriage. One moment.”

An heirloom passed down for generations. A symbol of the bond between mother and child that would remain even after the daughter married.

Lydia remembered the aquamarine pendant. When she had woken up, she hadn't been wearing it anymore. Her heart ached. Had she dropped it or had it been stolen? It felt like she had lost her mother all over again.

“Is that you, Theresa?”

Holding back her tears, Lydia looked up to see a young boy standing in the doorway. He looked to be fifteen or perhaps sixteen years old.

“Who are you?”

“Oscar, your cousin. Since my dear uncle is busy with his work in Manchester, I came on this trip with my dear aunt. I shan't have the opportunity to travel much once school starts in the autumn, after all.” His light-blond hair, cut neatly to chin length, swished with his movements. Sitting himself beside the table, he grinned like a mischievous child. “I never thought I would get the chance to meet you...although, I do not believe that one can call back spirits from the dead.”

Oscar was as tall as a grown man, but his face retained its boyishness. Though he seemed friendly, his manner of speaking was somewhat aloof.

“You do not believe that I am Theresa?”

“Do *you*?”

Lydia hesitated. “I cannot remember anything.”

“There exists the distinct possibility that you are putting on an act in order to claim my dear aunt and uncle's inheritance. You say you do not remember anything, and yet you are awfully familiar with the art of tea drinking.”

Lydia's heart jolted. Had she been acting *too* normally? She didn't like how Oscar seemed to be testing her. If he didn't believe that people could return from the dead, he probably didn't trust the medium either. Even so, she wasn't

confident she could share with him her suspicion that she had been kidnapped. The moment she confessed to not being Theresa, he would probably just label her a fraud. Too wary to say anything else, she stayed silent, and eventually Oscar seemed to give up.

He got to his feet. "Do you have a suitor, I wonder?"

"I'm sorry?"

"If so, you ought to realize that by becoming Theresa, you will have to marry someone else." With a smirk, he left the room.

Lydia suddenly remembered the article about the rich woman seeking a husband for her departed daughter. Had the woman in question been Mrs. Collins?

*Edgar...*

Supposing the newspaper had been telling the truth, Edgar was among the marriage candidates. Which meant he might come here. Would he help her? Or would he side with the medium, more interested in the potential to seduce a specter?

Lydia couldn't tell how much she trusted him. Even if his flirtatious words were insincere, she wanted to believe he wouldn't abandon her when she was in danger. The problem was his motivation: her skills as a fairy doctor were valuable to him. She wondered whether he would consider her worth saving in her own right.

Any hope she might have had for Edgar was dashed almost immediately. The Lord Ashenbert who came to the villa that evening was not the man himself. Lydia sat at Theresa's window and watched him alight from his carriage in front of the porch. Her disappointment at realizing she did not recognize him was severe.

*I should have known better than to trust the tabloids.*

Edgar's name must have been popular among the rich middle class, who had no dealings with him, hence the imposter.

Lydia threw herself onto the bed, hating herself for the time she'd wasted worrying about whether or not to ask for Edgar's help. As the sun sank to the west, the clouds drew in as if to conceal its pale light. As the gray enveloped the sky, sea, and villa itself, she was overcome with a sudden drowsiness.

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Located on the south coast of England, Hastings was known as a popular seaside destination. Although ocean swimming was originally a pursuit meant to be good for one's health, it had quickly caught on as a leisure activity for Britons, and now the town's white beaches would heave with tourists every summer.

The Collinses' villa was a few miles outside of the town and its seaside, and its surroundings were much quieter. A long and narrow road hung over the sea, beyond which the villa was built on what was almost its own little island. It was joined to the mainland by a single road, but that road sank below the water at high tide, cutting the building off from civilization.

At least, that was what Edgar had heard. Supposing the Prince's underling was scheming something within that closed-off space, there was no telling what sort of danger trespassing might entail. Nevertheless, Edgar was on his way with Raven in tow—Lydia was likely there, after all.

The Collinses had had the villa built not long after their daughter's birth. They hadn't been back since her passing. It had been in these very seas that their daughter had died at the tender age of five. The only trace they had found was a tiny shoe washed up on the shore. Knowing she might still be lying below the waves, the couple had been hesitant to sell the building.

That was the extent of the information uncovered by Scarlet Moon. Edgar took the time to organize it in his head as the carriage swayed on its nearly one-hour journey from Hastings station. When Nico had told him that Lydia was missing, he had mobilized every last servant under his employ. In their search, they had found a coachman who told them that Lydia had boarded his cab with a woman who had been crouched down on the roadside. At the hotel, Edgar had found out that the woman had been Mrs. Collins. Upon learning that they were already on their way to Hastings with the medium in tow, he experienced

a sense of defeat like he had been hoodwinked by an enemy. There were no two ways about it: Lydia had been kidnapped. But he wasn't about to accept defeat. A quiet determination welling in his chest, he had jumped aboard the earliest train to depart the following morning.

Edgar looked out of the carriage window. The blue ocean and sun rays reflecting off it were a much more vibrant sight than one would expect to find in Britain. Across the water lay France. People, goods, and conflicts had been crossing that channel since time immemorial. In fact, Hastings itself was famous as an ancient battlefield.

They could now catch a glimpse of the tall, tidal island as the carriage continued along the coastline. The long, narrow path toward it was settled between the gentle waves, doomed to sink below the water again at high tide. As the lonely landscape with its isolated brick building on the east side came into full view, the blue sky suddenly started to cloud over, threatening rain.

"Thank you for accepting my invitation, Lord Middleworth. It must have been quite the journey." Unlike at the séance, Mrs. Collins looked to be in remarkably high spirits. She smiled warmly at Edgar as she came to greet him.

"I came as soon as I could. I do hope that will not prove inconvenient?"

"Not at all. Another one of the gentlemen has already arrived, in fact."

"To think there was one more eager than myself! Who is it?"

"Lord Ashenbert."

"Oh, but of course. I hear he is quite the philanderer."

Raven stared at the floor as he followed close behind them, apparently trying to hide his smile.

"Those are just rumors," Mrs. Collins offered gently. Apparently, she had taken a liking to the fake earl. It made sense. If she wanted her daughter to marry into nobility, a well-known and prestigious name offered much better prospects than a poor man whose only asset was his title.

"There is still some time until supper. I could have you shown to your room, if



you'd like. Or..." Mrs. Collins trailed off, clearly hoping Edgar would show some consideration for the other guest.

"I would like to greet his lordship, if possible."

Mrs. Collins looked relieved. "I see. His lordship is in the reception room. Please follow me." She seemed very anxious to eliminate any risk of offending the imposter.

Naturally, this was of the least concern to Edgar. He just wanted to find out whether the man using his name was working for the Prince. So too did he want to uncover the Prince's motivations in all of this, and ascertain Lydia's situation. She was probably somewhere in this villa. He needed to find her and return her to safety. But how could he do it?

He turned the question over in his mind as he was taken to the reception room. The light outside was dimming, and the evening rain had set in. However, the room was brighter than that which had been used for the séance, and so Edgar was able to see the imposter for the first time.

"A pleasure to make your acquaintance. Ah, we were at the séance together, of course, but I did not have the opportunity to greet you properly, my lord." Edgar smiled, and the man did not hesitate to shake the hand offered to him. It seemed he was able to behave as nobility should. He must have spent a lot of time in their presence.

"Naturally. It is good manners *not* to speak to one's fellow participants at a séance."

"Incidentally, my lord, it strikes me that we are rivals for Miss Collins's affection. Do you truly intend to marry her?"

"First, I would very much like to lay eyes on the young lady herself. However, I think you will agree with me that our competition is of quite an advanced age compared to Miss Collins. That essentially means the choice comes down to you or me."

Edgar responded with an amicable smile. "I hope your lordship will spare me too thorough of a trouncing. But are you really prepared to turn your back on the many living women whose company you so enjoy?"

The fake Ashenbert responded with a lamenting smile. It looked rather theatrical. “Women are the same no matter where one looks. Even with the numbers I associate with, I have yet to be proven otherwise. That is how I found my curiosity piqued by this young lady’s spirit. I thought it might prove a novel experience.”

*How curious.*

According to the rumors, Edgar didn’t take any of his flirtations seriously. However, this man was voicing thoughts that had never once crossed his mind.

“I am surprised to hear your claim that they are all the same. I was under the impression that your attraction to women stemmed from their unique charms. Why flirt with them at all if you do not enjoy it?”

The imposter seemed at a loss as to how to answer, and Edgar wondered whether he really did have any connection to the Prince. If he had recognized Edgar and was trying to provoke him, he wasn’t doing a very good job of it. Either his incompetence was part of the Prince’s scheme, or he was a mere con artist after the Collinses’ inheritance.

“Pardon me, my lord.” Raven stepped quietly through the door.

*That didn’t take him long. Has he found something out already?*

Excusing himself to the fake earl, Edgar left the room. His servant’s expression, usually so hard to read, had just a hint of hardness to it. He braced himself for bad news.

“I have located Miss Carlton.”

“Is she all right?”

Raven paused. “I’m not sure.”

“What do you mean, you’re ‘not sure’?”

“It was difficult to tell. I would like to ask that you judge for yourself, my lord.”

The large room that led out onto a courtyard was being used as a gallery. It was lined with exotic artwork from the east, and the drizzle of rain sounded like a southern squall through the glass door. Seeing Raven with his dark skin standing beside a large-leafed houseplant gave Edgar the impression that he

had wandered into a mystical southeastern land.

Raven had his gaze fixed on a statue of a naked goddess, illuminated by the lamps. There was somebody behind it. She appeared to be trying to hide, but the hem of her dress gave her away.

“Apparently, the winner is whoever finds and captures her,” Raven whispered.

“She’s playing hide-and-seek?” As Edgar approached the girl, she turned around as if to flee.

“You won’t catch me that easily, Mr. Crow!” Giggling, she made off, only to crash straight into Raven. She looked up at him in surprise. “My, what are you doing over here?”

Then, she glanced back and saw Edgar. “You used one of your friends to trick me! That’s cheating!”

“He is not a crow, young lady, but a raven.”

“Oh, I see. And who might you be?”

When she turned around, the girl’s features fell under the illumination of the lamps. She had flowing caramel-colored hair, mysterious golden-green eyes, and a sprightly smile. It was Lydia, without a doubt. She didn’t seem hurt at all, but there was definitely something wrong.

“My name is Middleworth,” Edgar said.

“Ah! Mother told me you are a very important guest.”

“Might you be Mrs. Collins’s daughter?”

“Yes! My name is Theresa. It’s a pleasure to meet you!” The girl gave a clumsy curtsy, her smile suggesting she believed she had pulled it off perfectly.

Theresa: the spirit who had been summoned at the séance. Though he knew it was impolite, he couldn’t help but stare at her. For her part, she didn’t seem disconcerted by a man’s gaze at all. She stared straight back at him, approaching him curiously.

“I came back to life, my lord.” She knew she was supposed to be dead.

“It would appear so. You were but a spirit when we met previously.”

“We have already met? Forgive me; I cannot recall my time as a spirit, nor can I recall anything that happened prior to my death.”

“Has she been possessed?” Raven murmured.

Edgar nodded, for there was no other explanation. “What is it like to have returned to life, Miss Collins?”

“Oh, it’s wonderful! To think my family is so wealthy! I have so many dresses, so much jewelry...and mother tells me I am to marry a nobleman!”

“Dresses, jewelry, and noblemen. You are fond of all of these things?”

“Yes. I adore them.”

She was as simple as they came. Was this how Theresa had always been or was this what death did to a person?

Regardless, Edgar wondered whether there was a way to speak to Lydia. Before he had time to think things through, a voice called for Theresa.

“Oh, they’re looking for me. I have to go.”

Edgar stepped in front of her. “Already? I would very much like to speak with you a little longer.”

“Mother told me I was to meet the guests, and I haven’t done that yet. She will scold me.”

“Then let us play hide-and-seek for a spell longer.” He pulled her by the arm behind a relief, where they sat and huddled together.

Theresa took to the idea at once, giggling.

“Shh. Someone’s coming.”

It transpired that the approaching footsteps belonged to the freckled maid. She was calling frantically for Theresa, who was busy stifling her giggles. Raven went to tell the maid that the room was empty and led her from the gallery.

“You can be rather coercive, can’t you?” Theresa said.

“I would sweep you away from this place this very instant if coercion was all it

took.”

“Oh, I cannot leave just yet. There are other guests who have come to meet me. Mother has picked four potential suitors for me, and I am to select one as my future husband.”

It was the very reason Edgar had been invited in the first place. Did that mean that three other men would be attempting to woo Lydia?

*That won't do.*

Lydia was his fiancée. Even if she didn't consider herself such, it amused him to insist otherwise, and he was not willing to tolerate other men approaching her. Those golden-green eyes of hers ought to take in his image, and his alone. If any of the other three men dared to interfere, he would ensure they regretted it. It wasn't as though Lydia would be happy to learn that she had been spending time with unknown men while possessed either. Her soul *must* have been crying out for help.

Edgar pulled the girl's hand toward him. She looked up at him, bashful but flirtatious. He quite liked daring girls. She would no doubt make an assertive, passionate lover. However, the fact that Lydia would never have responded in such a manner made his heart ache. Where was the girl who would lose her temper, blush profusely, and eventually look like she wanted to cry? Where was the girl who, knowing the depths he could sink to, was wary of him, yet still worried herself to death over him? He missed the outrageously softhearted girl who had cared more for his safety than his reputation upon hearing that he had dueled over a widow.

“I have come to rescue you,” Edgar whispered.

The girl frowned suspiciously.

“Have no fear, my fairy. I *will* protect you.”

Her golden-green eyes seemed to widen for a split second, as though she had understood him completely. It might just as easily have been an illusion caused by the flash of lightning from outside illuminating her face. It didn't matter to Edgar; he kissed the hand in his.

By the following evening, all four of Theresa's potential suitors would have arrived. It was then, Mrs. Collins informed the two guests over supper, that she would introduce her daughter to each of them. Edgar didn't intend to spend the empty time idling away, especially since the host seemed to have taken a liking to the imposter.

After supper, Edgar retired to his room, where Raven reported his recent discoveries.

"Occupying the villa at present are Mrs. Collins, her nephew, Miss Collins—that is, Miss Carlton—the fake Lord Ashenbert, the medium, and the old woman who would seem to be her assistant. From Manchester, Mrs. Collins has brought with her only the young maid; the other servants were employed specifically for the mistress's stay, and so it is difficult to say who they might be affiliated with. Tomorrow, Sir Stanley and Sir Clark will arrive. They are both baronets."

"Supposing Ulysses is here, we can assume he is one of the men. Certainly, my name's usurper is suspicious, but we cannot rule out the possibility that the mastermind is one of the men arriving tomorrow, or indeed, one of the servants."

Edgar had already been drawn into enemy territory. The adversary was sure to proceed with his plan, whether or not he foresaw the earl's resistance.

"I wonder what he intends to do now," Raven said.

"The Prince controls his organization as a conductor does an orchestra. In order to bring things to a perfect finale, every instrument, every note, must be played flawlessly. That is why Ulysses will not deviate from the score. The question is what part I am expected to perform in this perfect composition."

"That isn't entirely clear to me."

"It is highly likely that any action I can think to take has already been accounted for."

"Meaning they foresaw that you might take part in the séance?"

"My intention had been to make a move sooner than they anticipated to unsettle them. As things stand now, I do not believe my actions had much of an

effect.”

“Were they always planning to have Miss Carlton play the role of Miss Collins?”

“A pertinent question indeed. Supposing it is a coincidence...”

So far, the enemy hadn’t done anything to suggest they were targeting Lydia. It had probably been a coincidence that she had come across Mrs. Collins that day. Ulysses may have required a young woman to revive Theresa’s soul, but there was no reason it had to be her. Edgar already had enough luring him to this villa in the form of the man who had taken his name and the medium who resembled Ermine. At any rate, supposing Lydia’s involvement caught Ulysses off guard, he would be forced to change his plan. That was where Edgar’s hope for victory lay.

“Lydia is the sole unpredictable element. She always has been: only with her assistance was I able to claim the Blue Knight Earl’s sword and my title.”

Lydia had a tendency to make events unfold in ways that even Edgar could not foresee. Her generosity, pride, and sense of duty as a fairy doctor pushed her to do things no ordinary person would think of.

“As ever, my fairy has brought me good fortune. Does it not seem, Raven, that calling her back will guarantee that things turn out for the better? Yes, that will be our first step.”

“If nothing else, I cannot foresee our enemies predicting that you would turn to exorcism, my lord.”

“Sarcasm, Raven?”

“My apologies, but I fail to see what part of my statement could be interpreted as sarcastic.”

His servant really did look apologetic, eliciting a chuckle from Edgar. Being able to laugh lifted some of the weight from his shoulders.

Perhaps it was foolish of him to pay less attention to the enemy’s plan, especially considering where he was. However, this had all started with the supernatural; the Prince’s pawns in this case used spiritual powers. That was



why he was pinning his hopes on Lydia, for she possessed knowledge and abilities that surpassed reality.

“By the way, do you know where Nico is? He asked me to open a window for him, but I haven’t been able to with all this rain.”

“I wasn’t about to wait around either. I’d be soaked otherwise.”

Edgar turned to see the gray cat on the cushion-rich sofa. “How did you manage to get in?”

“You’d be hard-pressed to find a house without at least one servant who’s fond of felines. All it takes is a bit of mewling and nuzzling to be let in. I *did* have to toss out the milk in the saucer I was given, however,” he remarked, pouring himself a glass of whiskey from who knows where. “I went to see Lydia, but I don’t think I’ll be getting very far with her. She kept chasing me around and trying to stroke me. I did try to tell her it was bad manners to treat a gentleman like a cat.”

Personally, Edgar didn’t see why Nico should expect anything else given he looked just like one.

“You needn’t worry about Lydia. Leave it with me.”

“What exactly do you intend to do?”

“For the moment, I shall merely see how she is faring.”

# The Ancient Battlefield and Its Players

Far across the ocean, a lamenting cry sounded among the squawking of the gulls.

*It must be the seals,* Lydia thought, although she wasn't sure the creatures were found on the southern coast. They might not have been seals, but selkies, their fae cousins. Her mother had often spoken of the selkies, so the thought of them filled her with nostalgia even though she had yet to see one.

Lydia's mother had hailed from one of the distant islands off the north coast of Scotland. In a foggy, mountainous land surrounded by drift ice and desolate seas, the selkies had been kindly neighbors to her. They had been considerate creatures and very much in tune with humankind. When they removed their sealskins, they became friendly maidens and amicable gentlemen. But Lydia's mother had reminded her that they belonged in the sea and were destined to put on their skins once more and return.

Humans feared the day when these kind creatures would leave. They would hide their pelts, hoping to keep them forever close. On the other hand, there were those who tried to take advantage of the selkies' submissive nature. While the fairies were liable to do whatever mankind told them, their hearts ached for their ocean home. That was why Lydia was so eager to do what she could for the captive selkies and hunt down the pelts as soon as possible. They had to be in this villa somewhere.

That morning, she slipped out of her room to begin her search. It seemed she was herself between dawn and dusk. She couldn't remember anything from the previous evening onward, and Susie had said Theresa had been possessing her then. The spirit's presence meant that, even if she escaped, she couldn't go home. Supposing the medium was involved in both that and the matter of the selkies, the best course of action was for Lydia to speak with her.

As she explored the villa, she came to a large garden. She followed the stone path and caught sight of an arbor entwined with wisteria and a person standing

underneath. Hearing a female voice, Lydia assumed it was Mrs. Collins, but as she drew closer, she froze. Then, she hid herself in the shadow of a tree.

*Ermine?!*

The beautiful woman was wearing a black dress. Although Lydia wasn't used to seeing her in anything other than men's attire, the woman was Ermine's spitting image. There was her short and neat dark-brown hair. There was her face with its angular lines and her mysteriously red lips. She was just as Lydia remembered.

She was supposed to have died in the merrows' waters. Had she survived somehow? If so, what was she doing here?

The old woman beside her called out to her, addressing her as Seraphita.

*Wasn't that the medium's name? Is Ermine the medium?*

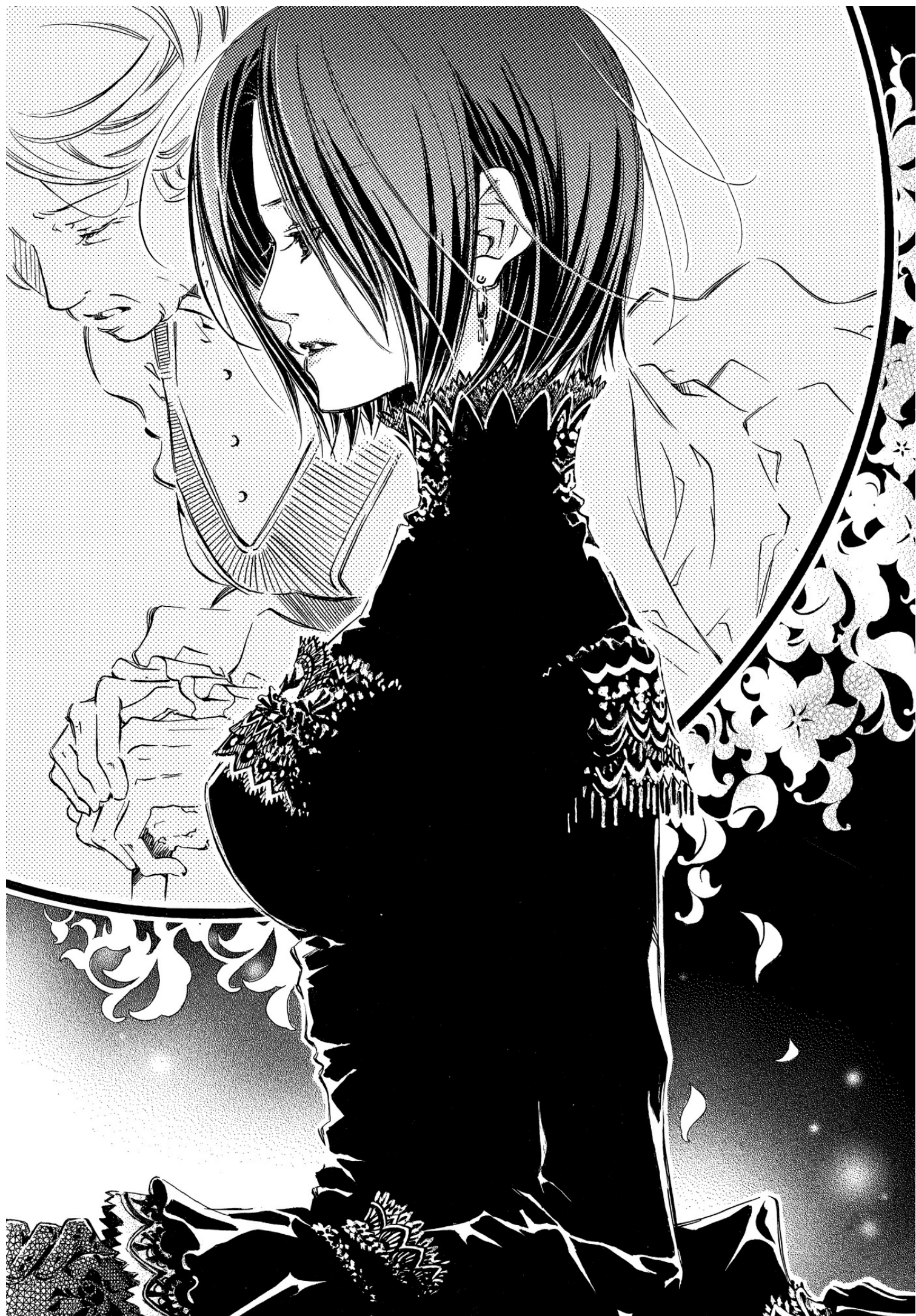
"Do you resent me, Seraphita?"

The medium looked up at the old woman forlornly.

"You wish for death, don't you? You mustn't think in such a way. You must only wish for happy things."

"Death will come for me no matter what I wish for, nanny."

"His dominion does not extend to the desires of our hearts."



Confused, Lydia was debating whether to call out or not when a hand took hold of her arm.

“I wouldn’t, if I were you. Come.”

She was led away so naturally that she didn’t think to resist. When she looked up to see who it was, she was even more surprised.

*Edgar? But the Lord Ashenbert who arrived yesterday wasn’t him...*

It felt even more now like she had been caught up in a ploy. He took her away from the arbor and along a secluded path lined with yellow gorse. Then, he turned to her. There was no mistaking that golden hair, those ash-mauve eyes, and that smile.

“I was waiting for a chance to see you under the light of the sun, Miss Collins. I understand Mrs. Collins was to formally introduce you tonight, but when I thought of our time together yesterday evening, I could not wait any longer.”

Was he trying to seduce *Theresa*?

“The sunlight becomes you, even in your second life. You are just as beautiful as you were last night.”

Lydia was seething. She had always suspected he was capable of delivering such lines to other women, but he had just proven it.

“You’re a fiend!”

When she brushed his hand away, he reacted quite calmly, as though used to it.

“And what defines me as a fiend, pray tell?”

Her anger only grew as it became apparent that he was confident he could convince her otherwise.

“To think that you really *would* flirt with a ghost! You are beyond immoral! And you think I would be happy to be branded your fiancée? I would much rather live in the world of fairies than marry *you*!”

She had wanted to take advantage of Kelpie’s absence to call off their engagement. She had almost forgotten, but now that Edgar was here, it seemed

like opportunity had come knocking.

“Listen, Edgar,” she continued, her volume rising. “Seeing as Kelpie isn’t here, I shall speak plainly. I wish to cancel our engagement posthaste!”

He was staring at her. “*Lydia?*”

Emboldened, she put her hands on her hips and looked up into his eyes. “It would seem that I am only possessed at night. Trying to seduce Miss Collins will prove a meaningless endeavor. When morning comes, I shall take every effort to pose as her and tell her mother just how awful a man you really are! Are we clear?”

Although Lydia was trying to pick a fight with him, Edgar’s face relaxed into a relieved smile. The raw emotion in his gaze disarmed her, and she found herself being swept into a gentle embrace.

“Thank God... I feared that we might never meet again.”

Edgar was a smooth talker, that was for sure. And yet, for some reason, Lydia felt like she was on the verge of tears. She had thought that no one would be able to track her down. Only now did she realize how disappointed she had been when the “Lord Ashenbert” who had arrived wasn’t Edgar.

Lydia looked up at the summer sun over his shoulder. Its brightness seemed to deliver a memory to her mind like a bolt of lightning. It was his voice, reassuring and gentle: “*Have no fear. I will protect you.*”

It seemed to Lydia that he had looked into her eyes, beyond Theresa’s consciousness, in an effort to reach her. Was that not also what he had been trying to do here?

*He might just be up to his old tricks...*

Then again, it was evident that he *had* flirted with Theresa last night. Just now, too, it seemed as though he had been seeking the medium and that his running into Lydia was coincidence. Pushing him away, she turned on her heel.

“Before you go, Lydia, I want you to explain something to me. You exhibited a great passion when I visited your chamber last night. Where has that passion gone all of a sudden?”

She froze; she hadn't been herself last night, but she couldn't ignore his insinuation.

"Wouldn't you like for me to give you a summary?"

"Make... Make it quick!" she stuttered, turning on him once more.

His smile was pregnant with meaning. "We are engaged, after all. Rest assured that I intend to take full responsibility."

"For *what*?" Her blood was rushing to her head so rapidly that she feared she would faint.

"I am teasing you, Lydia."

*I am never trusting another word that comes out of his mouth!*

"There was nothing I *could* do with that maid keeping an eye on us. We merely engaged in pleasant conversation."

"Do you mean Miss Susie?"

"She is a fine girl, highly considerate of her mistress. I could tell she was suffering much guilt over what has happened to you, despite knowing it was for the sake of Mrs. Collins. She was clearly intent on keeping you safe."

Forcing herself to calm down, Lydia nodded. "Miss Susie is my sole ally. She promised to assist me in returning home safely. However, she does not know what danger the medium might pose, so she advised me to act as Miss Collins for the time being. Oh yes, I just laid eyes on the medium for the first time. She looks exactly like Ermine."

"Yes, that caught me by surprise too. This was my first opportunity to see her in daylight. At this point, I can only think that she is Ermine herself." He sounded uncharacteristically tense. Ermine had been like family to Edgar, just as much as Raven was. There was no question that he wished for her survival despite her betrayal.

"So Ermine is alive..."

"It is too early to pass judgment. We need to be able to *verify* that it is really her. Regardless, the medium is currently under the control of a certain man, who in turn answers to the Prince. His name is Ulysses. It would appear that



bringing back Miss Collins and getting me involved is all part of his plan.”

It was immediately apparent to Lydia that this Ulysses was the man who had kidnapped her. If he was in charge of the medium, that meant he was potentially in charge of Ermine. So even if they *were* one and the same, Lydia could see why Edgar wasn’t exactly thrilled with the situation.

“I see,” she said.

It seemed that there was more behind the tabloids’ decision to write about him attending the séance and seeking out the medium than pure flippancy.

“Oh, but what about the *other* Lord Ashenbert who is here?” Lydia asked.

“He may have been invited in an attempt to provoke me, but I am not yet certain that he himself is Ulysses. Having come this far, however, it seems I no longer have any choice but to confront the Prince’s stooge. As for you, you need to get out of here and find a safe location where you may hide for a while.”

Things were worse than she had feared.

“I shall think of a way for you to escape. We can do something about Miss Collins later.”

It would indeed be safer to leave, regardless of whether or not a ghost dwelled within her, and she was confident that Edgar could make it happen. But she wasn’t the only one in danger.

“I must stay here. I have reason to believe there are selkies being held captive in this villa, more likely than not by Ulysses. I met one of them in London; she must have caught word that you had employed a fairy doctor. She led me to Mrs. Collins, and then to the hotel, to request my assistance. Unfortunately, she was subsequently killed... I believe the Prince’s underling had the medium place Miss Collins’s spirit inside me to prevent me from rescuing the selkies. Nonetheless, I wish to do so.”

Edgar frowned. He didn’t look entirely happy. “Reminding you of the danger will prove ineffectual, won’t it? You are a fairy doctor who takes pride in her work.” He paused to think. “If you are to stay, Lydia, it is imperative that we work closely together.”

Though nervous, she nodded.

“Therefore, we must act as lovers.”

She cocked her head. *Must we?*

Fortunately, Edgar was all too eager to explain his leap of logic. “Miss Collins seems to be enjoying her return to this world in a way that is highly innocent. She is looking forward to marrying one of the four guests chosen by her mother. Suppose one of these men were to brazenly enter your bedroom at night and make advances, all while your mind was possessed by another?”

“Most men are not like you. They tend to have manners.”

“You are too naive. Furthermore, Miss Collins appears to enjoy being flirted with and she seems indisposed to reject such behavior. Indeed, she never once looked uncomfortable in my presence. Not while I was holding her hand throughout, nor when I put my arm around her shoulder. I daresay I could have done more had the maid not been present.”

“‘More’ meaning what, exactly?!”

“You wouldn’t want to be touched that way by any other man, would you?”

Lydia had already started getting angry, but now she was beyond flustered. She shook her head aggressively, ignoring the small part of her that said perhaps she didn’t mind too much that Edgar had done those things.

“I shan’t let anyone lay a finger on you. I shall also ensure that Miss Collins doesn’t develop an interest in any of the other men. That means you must focus your attention on me from sunrise till sunset. Are we in agreement?”

He was so persuasive that it seemed like a matter of utmost importance, and she nodded. It was only afterward that she struggled to see where this plan of his fit in when it came to opposing the Prince’s underling. Her ardor for calling off their engagement had fled her mind completely once more.

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That evening proved different from its predecessor. Lydia was, once again, overtaken by a terrible drowsiness as the sun set, and she could feel Theresa taking over her body. This time, however, she utilized sheer determination to

keep herself awake. This did not change the fact that her body was possessed by another, so all she was able to do was to keep an anxious eye on the spirit's actions. When it came to sitting at the supper table with the potential suitors, she lamented that sleep would have been the easier and preferable option.

Theresa had chosen an eye-catching rose-red dress that Lydia didn't feel suited her at all. She didn't like perfume either, so her supper was spent in restless discomfort. Meanwhile, the spirit and Mrs. Collins seemed to be in very good moods indeed. Personally, Lydia couldn't see how anyone could be serious about marrying a girl who was once dead, but that was exactly the impression the men gave off. It was almost comical how eager they were to attract Theresa's attention. And yet, the sweeter their talk, the happier she and her mother seemed to be.

Nor could Lydia imagine that the other nobles were that keen on the false Lord Ashenbert. They needed this wealthy girl's vast dowry to rebuild their declining houses, but the earl wasn't struggling financially. She considered the blond man. He seemed quite lively, having had a drink, and she wasn't sure if his flirtatious behavior was genuine or an attempt to emulate his namesake. Either way, he came off as rather foolish to her.

Despite this, Mrs. Collins was granting him most of her smiles. Theresa, meanwhile, seemed more interested in Edgar, the supposed viscount. For his part, he wasn't looking at her at all. Much to Lydia's frustration, he had struck up a conversation with Oscar, who was sitting next to him. It was odd, considering he never paid men the slightest bit of attention. When Theresa tried to talk to him herself, his responses were invariably halfhearted. His tendency to lavish compliments on any female conversation partner had inexplicably vanished.

It would prove troublesome if Theresa were to become intimate with any of the other men. Edgar should know this—he promised not to let it happen, after all—but his behavior seemed to be irritating Lydia's host, who began making eyes at the others instead.

*Wonderful, she's just made an arrangement to go boating with this false earl. Does that mean I shall be forced to accompany him tomorrow? How will you make up for this, Edgar? Honestly, your actions and your words never align! I*

*was a fool to trust you!*

By the time supper was over, Lydia was utterly exhausted. Theresa still had plenty of energy. She was pacing her room in a rage.

“What on earth is Lord Middleworth thinking?! He seemed very much fond of me when he came into my bedroom last night, and yet tonight he completely ignores me? Susie, what do you think?”

“I am not sure. I am afraid I am unfamiliar with gentlemen and their emotions,” Susie murmured, waiting for Theresa to ask for help getting changed.

“Perhaps I ought to select Lord Ashenbert, as mother wants.”

*This cannot be happening!*

“If I may, miss, Lord Middleworth seems to me to be rather charming. If I were to describe it...it is as though he conducts himself just as a nobleman should, more so than the other gentlemen.”

“Are you perhaps interested in his lordship yourself, Susie?”

“Oh, of course not... It is just that Miss Seraphita has asked me much about him. A fair lady such as herself no doubt finds fascination in a gentleman as handsome as Lord Middleworth.”

There was more evidence that the medium truly was Ermine.

“Do you really think so?” Theresa stopped, a touch of panic coloring her tone. Perhaps Seraphita’s dubious profession had led Theresa to overlook the medium’s youth and femininity. Supposing Theresa was thinking of her now, she was likely realizing how attractive she was. “Susie, in which room is Lord Middleworth staying?”

“I’m sorry, miss?”

“I cannot abide a man who would ignore me and attempt to seduce another woman!”

*But Miss Susie has said no such thing!*

Theresa seemed to be implying that she would expel Edgar from the villa—

and what was Lydia to do then?

Oblivious to her concerns, Theresa made to storm out of the room. She froze as soon as she'd opened the door. Edgar had been standing right outside it.

"Where might you be going at this hour, Miss Collins?"

"Ah, Miss Collins was just coming to see you, my lo—" Susie was cut off when a pouting Theresa stamped on her foot.

"I daresay that's none of *your* business. Which is what, by the way?"

"I thought you might be so kind as to grant me some of your company this evening as you did last night," Edgar replied, sounding confident that she would acquiesce. He stepped into the doorway to block off her path.

"It was my understanding that you weren't interested in me anymore. You didn't even deign to look in my direction during supper!"

"I apologize if I gave you the wrong impression." He made a show of looking surprised, then lowered his gaze as though troubled by something. "You are correct. I could not find the courage to look at you. After observing Mrs. Collins's clear favoritism toward Lord Ashenbert and you enjoying your conversation with him, I was overcome with timidity."

*Edgar and timidity are like chalk and cheese!*

"It was my hope that you were only testing me, wanting to ascertain my sincerity. I came here trusting that you would be expecting me."

"A gentleman's sincerity is not something that can be learned by testing." Theresa looked away in a huff, but Lydia could feel how their shared heart pounded.

"You would send me back to my room? What if I were to seek out someone else to soothe this turbulent heart of mine?"

Theresa was quickly flustered. No doubt she had remembered the existence of Seraphita.

"Someone else' being who, exactly? Am I worth just as much as another to you?" She couldn't have realized that the moment she expressed her jealousy was the moment she was caught in Edgar's trap. Of course, Lydia hadn't picked

up on it either.

Taking a swift step into the room, Edgar closed the door behind him without turning around. Susie was left in the corridor, and now he and Theresa were alone. Leaning back against the door to prevent it being opened, he pulled her toward him.

Panicked at the forceful gesture, Lydia put all her efforts into moving. All she managed was the shifting of her left hand, which she used to try to prevent her body from being pressed directly against Edgar's. This did nothing to deter him as he completed the tight embrace. Lydia only grew more fretful as she found herself trapped and completely helpless to fight back.

When Edgar flirted, he gladly left himself open to being rejected; there was an escape. But when he became coercive, he was like a predator. He had no intention of letting her go anymore. Lydia wasn't sure what his victory conditions were for winning over a woman's heart, but she had the vague impression that he was inches away from fulfilling them.

"Let go of me, my lord," Theresa said, though she made no move to resist.

"You want me to let go? When you are the only one I have eyes for?"

His sweet whisper had her heart pounding. Lydia was struggling to work out whose emotions her body was responding to. She was still putting tension into her left hand in an effort to resist, but Theresa was essentially helpless at this point.

"Look at me." With one arm holding her to him, Edgar used his other hand to direct her face upward. The heat in his intense gaze was dizzying. Lydia was despairing at Theresa's choice of dress, one whose chest was far too open. "The way the mystical hue of your eyes enraptured me from the moment I caught sight of them couldn't have escaped your notice."

But the eyes he spoke of belonged to Lydia. Almost led to believe he was speaking to *her*, she felt her body try to release its tension. Everything Edgar was looking at in this moment, from her hair to her toes, was hers. Who exactly was he trying to seduce?

*Stop it, Lydia.* It probably didn't matter to Edgar *which* one of them he was

addressing.

That thought allowed her to maintain her strength, if only just. If he noticed the tension in her hand, he ignored it, running his fingers along her cheek and sending shivers up her spine. He seemed to be enjoying her responses as he traced the line from her jaw down to her neck. When he removed her bobbin lace choker, shame coursed through her as though she had been stripped completely naked, but Theresa did not move. His fingertips continued to travel over her shoulder, wandering the hollow of her collarbone.

*What is this...this lecher doing?! He cannot think he will get away with going any further!*

Lydia seemed to be the only one getting flustered, and to a great extent. The hand she was supposed to have control of was frozen in a tight fist, and she didn't even notice.

"How I long to make you mine."

*No...*

"Are you really satisfied with a girl like me?"

*You idiot, Edgar! What on earth are you trying to do to me?!*

Lydia's silent cries made no difference. Theresa was already completely caught in his entrancing gaze. There was no escaping his trap anymore.

*I suppose I shouldn't be surprised by what he's capable of anymore.*

By ignoring Theresa at supper, he had ensured that her resulting anger would put him at the forefront of her thoughts. Then, he had come to her bedroom and behaved in the completely opposite manner, stirred up her jealousy, and used it as an opening to attack. His strategy had worked flawlessly, and now she was certain to lose interest in everyone else.

"I want you." Edgar's lips grazed her earlobe so lightly that she might well have imagined it.

Stiff as a board, Lydia sent a silent apology to her father. As long as Theresa didn't resist, things would go exactly as Edgar willed them to. Lydia's heart was pounding so hard it felt like she would burst into tears. She wished she could



fall unconscious.

All of a sudden, Edgar loosened his grip. “You are so precious to me. That is why I mustn’t allow my passions to get the better of me.”

Relief washed over Lydia at once while Theresa stirred impatiently. However, she conceded.

“I understand. You are a gentleman, after all.”

Susie was finally able to push the door open a crack. She peered anxiously inside. “Miss?”

“It’s all right, Susie,” Theresa replied. She was still leaning against Edgar like she was in the midst of a fragile dream.

“Will you spend the morrow with me, Miss Collins?”

“I would like nothing more.”

“Thank you.”

At last, Theresa smiled up at him, her face flushed. She produced a silk handkerchief. “A symbol of our promise.”

“What charming embroidery.”

“I embroidered it myself. A plain white handkerchief is rather uninspiring, don’t you think?”

As Lydia recalled, she had stitched the tiny four-leaf clovers and ladybug just before supper. They were rather neat given how quickly she had embroidered them.

“You possess a true talent.”

Edgar’s praise stretched her lips wider. How innocent she was, believing everything he said and letting herself feel as though they were happy and in love. Lydia felt a slight pang of jealousy. Would *she* experience such happiness if only she were able to trust and love him from the bottom of her heart?

While Lydia was distracted by her thoughts, Theresa leaned forward and brought her cheek to Edgar’s chest. A warmth spread through Lydia; she was still overwhelmed from before, and embarrassment was not immediately

forthcoming.

Just then, there came a violent crash and a scream from beyond the door. The girls' shared body froze, and Edgar turned his head.

"What was that?" Theresa asked.

"I shall go and investigate."

As the earl stepped into the corridor, a man leaped out from the darkness. There was the movement of a second figure: Raven. The boy grabbed hold of the man in a matter of seconds and pinned him roughly to the floor.

"Ah! Un... Unhand me!"

Edgar approached the groaning man and looked down at him. He shook his head. "Ah, it is you, Lord Ashenbert. I had thought we had a ruffian on our hands."

Indeed, the good-looking man Raven was restraining was the false earl.

"Wait, Middleworth! I came searching for you!"

"What for?"

"I... I witnessed a specter!"

"A specter?"

"For God's sake, man, would you unhand me?"

"Let him go, Raven."

Raven followed his master's instructions.

"To think a gentleman seeking Miss Collins's hand in marriage would be disturbed by the sight of a ghost..." Edgar said.

"The circumstances are quite different! This ghost is *savage*!" The imposter leaned forward, apparently unconcerned by the state of his crooked tie.

"Savage? Does it perhaps possess the form of a beautiful woman?"

"It *murders* people!"

"So, it has transformed you into a specter too."

“It didn’t attack *me*, but Sir Stanley! His room is a bloody mess!”

“Bloody?!” Frightened, Theresa clung to Edgar.

*You do not need to throw yourself at him for every little thing!*

As though just noticing she was there, the fake earl frowned. But, apparently deciding this was too important not to speak of, he hurriedly recounted what he had witnessed.

“I heard a terrible racket coming from the next room, so I went to make a complaint. It was then that I found the room covered in blood.”

“I see.”

“A man has been murdered! How are you able to maintain your composure?!”

“Supposing what you claim is true, can you guarantee that *you* are not the culprit and that you would not lure me to the scene in order to make me your second victim?”

“I beg your pardon? And what would be my motivation?”

“Naturally, that you wish to secure Miss Collins for yourself. Nothing quite like eliminating the competition, is there?”

“I would never stoop to such evil!”

Edgar scrutinized the man with a prudent eye. “Why, then, did you deliberately seek me out?”

The fake earl hesitated. “I merely had the sense that you would be able to offer your assistance.” He scratched the back of his head, as though he himself thought his answer lacking. If this feigned ignorance was part of a scheme, it was difficult to judge whether to attribute it to cunning or witlessness.

“I saw a ghost in the baronet’s room,” he insisted. “That much is true! It had a white, indistinct form, and then it vanished. This house is most assuredly haunted!”

“A trick of the light. It happens in the darkness of night.”

“Would a *human* murderer dare leave the scene of the crime in such a state? I

think not!"

"That would depend on the sanity of the individual involved." After pausing for thought, Edgar continued. "I suppose I ought to come and see it for myself."

Theresa said she would accompany him, her morbid curiosity apparently piqued. Lydia would have preferred *not* to lay eyes on the grotesque scene, but she didn't get a say in the matter. As they set off, Raven naturally followed, and Susie seemed to have decided she should come too.

The villa was too isolated to be fitted with gas lamps, and the only illumination in the hallway before them came from the candle in Raven's hand. Being used to London, the place seemed awfully dark to Lydia. The sounds of the wind and the waves only added to the eerie atmosphere.

The long corridor eventually led to a door that had been left open, no doubt by the panicked imposter. Said imposter stopped before it.

"I shall go first." Raven slipped out in front of Edgar and entered the room. His master followed, and Theresa stood in the doorway, peering through.

Even by the low light of Raven's candlestick, the fallen tables and chairs were immediately obvious. So too was the slick blood that caked the tablecloths, curtains, walls, and windows.

Lydia felt sick. Theresa and Susie backed away from the door. Raven inspected the nooks and crannies, including the closet and under the bed, eventually concluding, "There is no body."

"What are your thoughts, Middleworth?" The fake earl finally appeared calm. Whether it was an act or not was still unclear.

"It is difficult for me to come to any conclusions. There is no proof that this blood belongs to the baronet. Besides, you and I are merely guests here. We ought to inform the mistress of the house."

"Mrs. Collins? Pardon my rudeness, but I do not see her being equipped to manage such a situation."

Edgar nodded. "There is one other belonging to the Collinses, no?"

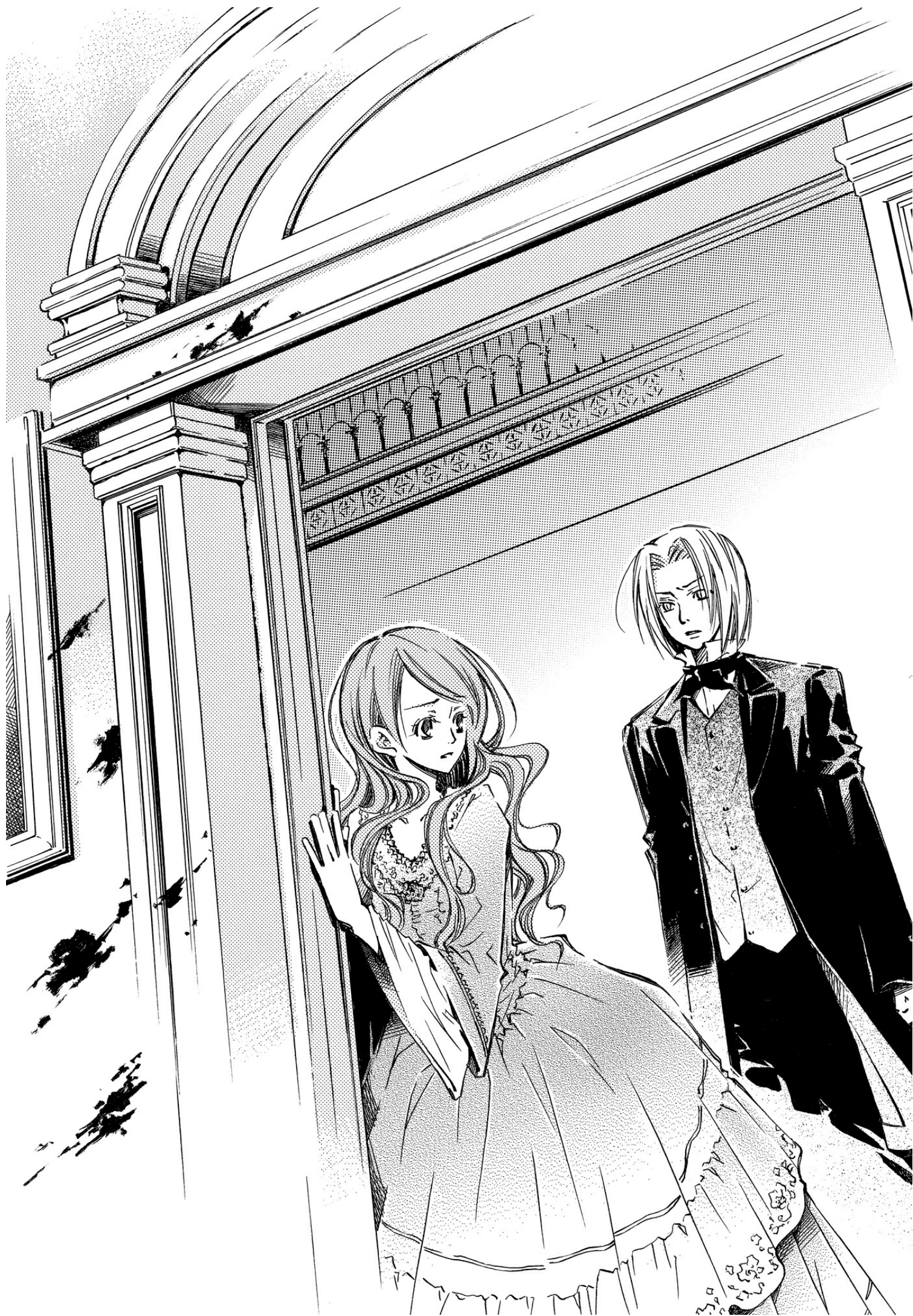
"Mrs. Collins's nephew? But he's still a child."

“No, I would say he is closer to a man than a child.” The earl exchanged a glance with Raven, who nodded and left the room in search of Oscar.

Anxiety gripped Lydia’s heart as she watched the imposter stalk through the center of the room and make his way over to Edgar. Raven was gone. And if this man *did* work for the Prince, there was no telling what he might use this opportunity for.

But all he did was peer fearfully over Edgar’s shoulder at the pools of blood. The real earl ignored him and looked outside the window. The black sea was reflecting the moonlight, which illuminated its unnaturally choppy waves. Although she thought the churning water strange as well, Lydia was quickly distracted by Raven’s return.

“My, how frightful.” Oscar hadn’t fully entered the room when he took several steps backward.



“I suggest you look for traces of any intruders,” Edgar instructed the boy. “And see if you can locate Sir Stanley, regardless of his state of mortality.”

“Yes, my lord, you are quite right.” But then, Oscar frowned. “However, how can I be sure of your trustworthiness? Where is the evidence to suggest that either of you, guests to our villa, are not the culprit?”

“If we are at the point of casting aspersions, then are you able to prove *your* innocence? And what about Mrs. Collins, or the medium whose visage is kept from us?”

Oscar let out a heavy sigh. “I have never thought the idea of bringing Theresa back and having her marry to be anything other than foolish. Naturally, the only gentlemen interested in such an offer would be enticed by the money and nothing else. I shall send a message to the local constabulary tomorrow. Anyone who does not wish to be involved should take his leave at the earliest opportunity. If you choose not to, then please remain vigilant and keep your doors and windows locked. I will not be held responsible for any further incidents.”

“You seem remarkably calm,” Edgar said.

Oscar glared at him. “As do you, my lord. May I remind you that I am here representing my uncle?”

“I am *sure* it was a specter,” the fake earl muttered. “We are not far from the site of the battle! Perhaps the dead soldiers seek revenge, even now!”

“Ah, yes, the Battle of Hastings, the first bloody battle of the Norman Conquest.”

“Though the battle raged centuries ago, we cannot discount the possibility of ghosts. Therefore, we might seek the medium’s advice.”

“She has long since retired for the night; she tends to be early to bed. If the culprit is indeed a spirit under her control, I suppose I ought to rescind my advice of locking your doors. It would make no difference in that case.”

As Oscar made to leave, Theresa began to shake violently. It came on very suddenly, considering she had been listening to the goings-on the entire time.



Lydia, too, was overcome with dread. A fear whose origin she could not pinpoint weighed down on her and she felt lightheaded enough to faint. Theresa crouched down.

“Miss? What is the matter?” Susie’s cry attracted the attention of Edgar, who came to put his arm around her shoulders.

“Are you all right, Miss Collins?”

“Yes... I just feel rather unwell...”

“This was no sight to inflict upon a lady. Come, I shall take you back to your room.”

Theresa clung to him as he helped her up.

*But of course she would...*

As she drew her left hand away from him again, his touch on her shoulder reminded her of their earlier hazardous encounter. Heat pulsed through her, making her even dizzy. She no longer knew how she would bear to face him tomorrow.

“Are you really willing to let another gentleman escort my cousin away like this?”

Oscar’s question to the false earl was the last thing Lydia heard as they left.

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Edgar had returned to his room after seeing Theresa to hers and was now staring intently at her handkerchief.

“A penny for your thoughts, my lord?” Raven approached him, having just finished his patrol of the villa.

“Unless I’m mistaken, one tends to stitch one’s own initials onto a handkerchief, yes?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“And yet, no matter how I look at it, this letter next to the clover resembles an ‘M’ more than it does a ‘T.’”

“Miss Collins does not recall anything of her former life. It may not be

intended as an initial at all.”

“Perhaps not. However, even if she does not *remember* her previous life, its traces should remain in her character, or her likes and dislikes. Or, indeed, in her desire to embroider on this handkerchief and the designs that she chose.”

Suppose the spirit possessing Lydia wasn’t Theresa after all? The girl had died at the age of five. A child that young wouldn’t normally choose to pick up a needle and thread in the first place, let alone be able to embroider with such skill. In that case, the spirit’s name likely began with “M.” Edgar racked his brains, but he failed to come up with a single candidate. At the same time, he had the sense that something highly important was hidden just beyond his reach.

He decided to let the matter rest for the time being and turned to Raven. “Has O’Neill’s letter arrived?”

“Yes, my lord.” Raven produced the letter from his inner pocket. He had been into town earlier in the day to pick it up from the post office.

It contained the findings of the investigation Edgar had tasked Scarlet Moon with. However, it seemed they had yet to find any leads regarding the identity of the fake earl. The two baronets were also using pseudonyms, but it wasn’t clear whether either of them was Ulysses. They could just as easily have been con artists after the Collinses’ fortune.

Regardless, there was something that Edgar found even more curious within the report. Judging from the behavior of the moneylender, it was likely that Ulysses had been on board the *Venus*, a ship that had arrived in London a month prior. The passenger list had included one Oscar Collins.

Mr. Collins’s younger brother—that was, Oscar’s father—had successfully expanded his business into the United States. The boy had returned in order to study at a British school come autumn.

“What say you, Raven? Coincidence?”

“It is possible that Master Collins and Ulysses met while on board the *Venus*, and that the former is now being used in the machinations of the latter.”

“I would wager that Ulysses boarded the ship to *target* Master Collins and

form a link to the family.”

“Do you mean to say that the Collinses were a part of the Prince’s plan from the beginning?”

“I believe so. For how elaborate it all is, their objective likely amounts to more than simply cornering me.” Edgar studied the letter’s postscript, which had been hastily scrawled in one corner. “They seem to have information regarding that too, although O’Neill wasn’t able to include the details. Would you go to town for me again tomorrow, Raven? You should be able to meet someone from Scarlet Moon.”

The servant nodded.

Sixteen-year-old Oscar Collins. Edgar wondered whether he really was just being used without knowledge of Ulysses’s objective. Although he had said that he didn’t trust the medium, that may have merely been what his manipulator dictated he should say. The earl would have liked to think that Oscar had no reason to participate in deceiving his own aunt, but as long as the possibility existed, they would need to remain cautious.

That being the case, who was Ulysses? They still didn’t have enough information to come up with an answer.

His mind racing, Edgar held the letter to the flame of his lamp and burned it.

# The Selkies and the Sea

Lydia had given up on trying to sleep and was instead waiting for dawn. Although Theresa was already unconscious, it seemed she wouldn't regain control of her own body until the sun came up. The low-hanging clouds appeared to cling to the gloom of night, but eventually Lydia felt Theresa leave her and she was able to get out of bed and dress quickly.

The vague thought crossed her mind that Edgar really *was* a philanderer through and through. It shouldn't have been news to her, but when she remembered how wily he had been in seducing Theresa the previous night, she became quite disheartened. Not to mention angry. Again, she realized that she simply could *not* marry him.

It had also become clear that Edgar used a much lighter touch when it came to her. Evidently, he was confident that he could make her his if only he were to get serious about it. He was toying with her, his flirtations only half-sincere, as he held fast to the belief that he could make their engagement official and progress to marriage at a time of his choosing.

*So let him cling to his misapprehensions!*

As Lydia raised her head, she heard the howl of the ocean wind intensifying. The villa itself was deathly silent by comparison. There was no clamoring from the servants at all, something she would have expected given last night's events.

"Perhaps the police are yet to arrive."

"It seems they are *unable* to arrive." A cat, walking on two legs, appeared from her dressing room.

"Nico! You came!" Lydia knelt down so that she could speak to him at eye level. It was a relief to see her old friend.

"I have been here for a while now. I was simply avoiding you, since that dead girl you lent your body to likes to chase me around."

“Things have taken a real turn for the worse.”

“We’ll manage.” Nico stroked her head with a small forepaw like he was soothing a young child. He had been a companion to her mother as well and was probably far older than she was. Perhaps he really did consider her to be closer to an infant than an adult.

Nico was fickle, selfish, and vanished at the first hint of a crisis. While Lydia may have regularly discredited him as unreliable, the truth was he was her closest friend and most trusted ally. Unlike a normal cat, he didn’t like to be touched, but she was nevertheless rather fond of his bushy, springy fur.

“You said the police couldn’t come?” she asked.

“The waters are too rough. The road will be accessible at low tide, but the waves are surging too high to guarantee safe passage. The messenger never left, as it happens. Going out in a boat in weather like this would be madness.”

Lydia went to the window and looked out over the water. The violent twisting waves were tossing white sea-foam high into the air. When she spotted something between the surges that appeared to be the dark head of an animal, she squinted.

“A seal? I wonder if it’s a selkie.”

“Sounds to me like the Prince’s stooge has rounded up some selkies and is putting them to work. The earl gave me a lot of information on that front. I wouldn’t be surprised if the selkies were responsible for the stormy seas. It’d be too convenient otherwise.”

“How so?”

“With the waves this rough, no one will be able to leave the villa. That means whoever is responsible for last night’s disturbance is confined here with us.”

Indeed, cutting off contact to the mainland would serve the perpetrator well. Ulysses might have had the selkies bring the waves for that very reason.

“What I cannot understand is how this Ulysses has gotten away with killing the selkie who spoke to me. Selkies have a powerful group mentality; they would surely seek revenge. And yet, if he is responsible for these waters, it

would seem that he is safe and sound.”

Nico folded his forelegs thoughtfully. “Perhaps this chap knows of a way to escape their bloodlust. One would have to have a deep understanding of fairies in order to manipulate them like this, after all.”

“Do you really think so?”

“For example, he may have done something for them in the past that earned him a favor. They say that when a selkie’s long life is over, it may gift its heart to a human who has earned its trust, yes? It’s a gift that symbolizes an eternal bond. The selkies wouldn’t lay a finger on a man possessing a heart from one of their own.”

Selkies were deeply fulfilled by their ties to mankind, and the closer those relationships, the happier they were. The affection they gained from one who held a selkie heart brought them a special kind of peace and prosperity, which was why the fairies worked so hard to protect the humans who lived by the sea. However, the gifting of a selkie’s heart was incredibly rare. Earning their favor to such an extent was no mean feat. Possessing a heart meant holding the fairies’ destiny in one’s hand, so a selkie would only part with it if it intended for its trust to be passed down the receiver’s line for generations.

“It is unthinkable that one who had earned a selkie’s heart should wish to manipulate them,” Lydia said.

“He might have come into possession of it without having earned it himself.”

“But how?”

A miscreant holding a selkie’s heart illegitimately was damaging to the creatures’ souls. The inconsolable fear it caused would eat away at them. Lydia was desperate to help, but she didn’t know who Ulysses was, or whether he even held the heart in the first place.

“Hearts aside, the skins are the most pressing matter. It would be too difficult to transport so many at once, so I am inclined to believe they are being hidden somewhere in the villa. You are capable of entering any room without arousing suspicion, aren’t you, Nico?”

“You want *me* to search for them?”

“That isn’t to say that I shan’t do my part. However, during the day I am forced to pretend to be Miss Collins, and I haven’t control over my body at night.”

Nico clicked his tongue. There came then a knock at the door, at which he quickly fell to all four paws. Shortly thereafter, Susie came in.

“Good morning, Miss Carlton.” After a brief curtsy, she spotted Nico. “Oh, a cat! I’m sorry, somebody must have let it in.”

“It’s quite all right. I am rather fond of cats, actually.”

Apparently worried he was in danger of being thrown out, Nico pushed his head into Lydia’s legs.

“Is that right? Anyway, I ought to let you know that something awful happened last night...”

“I am already aware. Although Miss Collins had possession of me, I was fully conscious.”

“Oh dear. So you were also there to bear witness that terrible scene.”

Lydia nodded, and Susie drew the sign of the cross over her chest.

“Please do not tell Lady Collins,” Susie asked. “Master Collins has asked the servants to hold their tongues.”

“You have my word.”

Mrs. Collins was in a fragile mental state. There was no telling what the news might do to her.

“There is something else. Lord Middleworth entrusted this to me. He asked that I give it to you as soon as you were awake.” Susie handed Lydia a letter.

It was a sickly sweet love letter addressed to his “darling beloved” that described their meeting as destiny and their love as irreplaceable. Taking it at face value, one would assume it was addressed to Theresa, and yet Edgar would have known that Lydia would be the one to read it. Only the last few lines seemed to hold any significance.

*“It is my wish that Mrs. Collins gives us her blessing as soon as possible. I shall*

*see her in her morning room after breakfast. I intend to request that our courtship be made official."*

It seemed that Edgar was eager to draw a line between who could and couldn't be trusted after last night's incident. Lydia would need to declare that he was her chosen suitor. And, once Mrs. Collins had accepted her decision, the other men would be forced to keep their distance. Edgar could then keep a watchful eye on her. This weather meant they were cooped up with a murderer; the earl probably wasn't happy to sit back and do nothing.

Even knowing the intentions behind Edgar's letter, Lydia found it so embarrassing to read that she couldn't bear the thought of anyone seeing it. Nico was already trying to peer at it, and she whisked it out of his sight. In her head, she was already berating the earl as a liar.

*Official courtship my foot! It is as though he thinks he can inspire lovesickness in anyone of his choosing!*

She was well aware of the nonsensical nature of her thoughts. Edgar was only seducing Theresa to ensure the safety of everyone involved. To what extent the ghost fell head over heels for him should hardly matter. Nevertheless, she seethed at the nerve he had in holding Theresa close one evening to writing her a passionate love letter the next morning.

"I didn't realize you and Lord Middleworth were acquainted," Susie said.

"Acquainted? Yes, I suppose so..." Lydia did her best to smile at the maid, but she could feel her muscles twitching.

"His lordship claimed you were very dear to him and asked me to do whatever I could for you. I thought him slightly coercive and frivolous at first, as he wasted no time in attempting to seduce Miss Collins. However, I see now that it was all out of concern for you. So desperate was he to rescue you that he would join the race for Miss Collins's hand."

Unfortunately, Susie was idealizing him too much. Edgar was definitely enjoying his pursuit of Theresa.

"Even after all that has happened, he has withheld blame from Lady Collins and now intends to confront the medium in order to return you home safely. I



see that he would brave any danger for his beloved. A valiant gentleman indeed!”

Again, she was speaking too highly of him. Her initial impression of Edgar, coercive and frivolous, had been the correct one. The only need he had of Lydia was her skill as a fairy doctor; he could not govern his territories without it.

Having said that, it was true that he would go to any lengths to protect those useful to him. It was one of the ways in which he provided them a comfortable working environment and built with them bonds of trust. He wanted to secure Lydia’s cooperation for the future. That was why he afforded her special treatment, even going so far as to make her his fiancée. It was more than a game to him, which was part of the reason she hadn’t been able to make him back down. He wanted them to be bound together for the rest of their days, even though there was no love between them. Marriage was the most effective means of making that happen.

Lydia struggled to understand his mindset. It seemed all too selfish and high-handed. He may have been under the impression that any girl would be over the moon to marry him, but she felt as though he was disregarding her feelings. She wanted a marriage based on genuine mutual love, just like that between her mother and father.

“Oh, to be loved by a man as wonderful as he!” Susie sighed without a hint of irony in her tone.

Edgar was far too good at inspiring admiration in girls. And now Lydia only felt all the more irritated.

Mrs. Collins, meanwhile, was in high spirits. It seemed the servants had followed Oscar’s instructions to the letter, and no one had let slip the events of last night. Her smile was bright and carefree as she took breakfast with Lydia.

“All four of our guests are most agreeable! Do you not think so, Theresa?”

“I do, mother.”

The thought of having to feign a deep affection for Edgar was hanging like a dark cloud over Lydia’s head. She had intended to break off their engagement.

Now it seemed the opposite was happening. Though she was highly annoyed with him, she continued to remind herself that this was in everyone's best interests.

"You seemed quite taken with Lord Ashenbert last night. You won't be able to go boating with him today, but how about walking to the shore with him later?"

*If I did go somewhere with the imposter, would Edgar become envious?*

Lydia balked at the sudden thought. She should have no reason to delight in his envy. None whatsoever. Besides, she was supposed to be focusing on protecting herself. This was no time to entertain such foolish notions.

"Mother. I wish for Lord Middleworth to become my suitor," she declared.

"Lord Middleworth? Well, I would agree that he is the most handsome of all, but would it not be better to spend some more time getting to know everybody?"

Lydia hurriedly shook her head. If she didn't forge ahead, she feared the memory of Edgar's outrageous behavior since last night would stay her hand. "It...seems as though it was love at first sight for both of us. We met after supper, and his lordship spoke of our meeting as though it were prearranged by destiny. I feel the same way. I shall never know another man like him."

As she spun those lies, she realized she was more or less parroting Edgar's letter. It awed her to think that he might have written it to inspire her at this moment.

"You are that taken with him?"

"He wishes to discuss our courtship with you. He said that he would be here after breakfast." Lydia studied Mrs. Collins's expression carefully, tensing when she sensed bewilderment.

*What if she objects?*

Even though her feelings for Edgar weren't genuine, the thought flustered her. It must have been because she had never had a discussion like this with her own parents and didn't know what to expect.

"His lordship will be arriving soon, then, I expect," Mrs. Collins said, glancing

at the clock on the dresser.

As if on cue, Susie entered the morning room to ask if she could show the viscount in. Presently, Edgar arrived, his outfit free of any ostentatious colors or patterns. His sincerity was clear in the way he presented himself, and he had not a single hair out of place. When Mrs. Collins offered him a seat, he quietly went to stand next to Lydia's chair.

"Forgive me, madame, but there is something I wish to say first. I would like to ask for your blessing. I wish to court your daughter and, eventually, to have her hand in marriage."

"Naturally, that is what I invited you here for. And I appreciate your request." Mrs. Collins hemmed and hawed. No doubt she was thinking of the fake earl, whom she much preferred.

Lydia felt herself growing nervous. Nevertheless, the woman continued.

"Forgive me for asking, especially at this late stage, but I must: are your feelings for my daughter sincere?"

It had been Mrs. Collins's idea to exchange a title for her daughter's dowry. More than that, however, she just wanted her daughter to be loved; she didn't want the marriage to be purely transactional. For once, her constantly drifting gaze was pinned squarely on Edgar.

"My estate is not wealthy by any stretch of the imagination. Certainly, that is why I decided to partake in the séance. Now, however, I would welcome Miss Collins as my bride without hesitation and regardless of any dowry."

It was a convincing act, but it was an act all the same. Lydia, too, had lied to Mrs. Collins's face about their mutual affection. Yet her heart beat out a nervous rhythm. Perhaps it was because the woman reminded her of her own mother, and she wondered what things would have been like were she still around. What would Lydia's mother think of Edgar? Would all mothers regard him with the same eyes that wanted nothing but for their daughters to be loved?

"May I take your word for it?"

"If you were to object, madame, I would simply sweep Miss Collins away."

Edgar's jovial tone elicited a smile from Mrs. Collins. She pulled Lydia into a gentle embrace. "I have not the words to express my delight, my darling."

A curious sensation came over Lydia, as though it was her *real* mother who had approved of Edgar and was now holding her. She didn't trust Edgar in the slightest, but it was like her mother was reassuring her that it was all right to do so. That it didn't matter how many lies he had told in the past or would tell in the future—she shouldn't doubt the sincerity of his proposal.

Was that truly what her mother would have said? There was no way of knowing.

Again, she seemed to hear her mother's encouragement in her mind: "*Wouldn't you like to try placing your trust in him?*"

Once Lydia and Edgar had left, Mrs. Collins sat back down in her chair, deeply satisfied.

"Isn't it wonderful, my lady?" Susie said.

"Oh, yes. It feels as though a weight has been lifted from my shoulders. Now that my daughter's happiness is secured, my mind is at ease." Smiling, she closed her eyes in thought.

It seemed to Susie that her mistress was finally free from the pain of losing her daughter. She couldn't be more relieved.

"Ah, but my work is not done, Susie. I have yet to find *you* a husband."

"By no means, my lady. It is my intention to dedicate my life to serving you."

"It is all right. You are like a daughter to me, and I am endlessly grateful that you have remained with me all these years. I had always meant to act in your parents' stead and find you a husband of whom you could be proud."

Mrs. Collins took Susie's hands in hers, and the maid had to hold back her tears. She adored her mistress. It was for that reason that she hadn't been able to put a stop to this business with Theresa despite how it horrified her.

But Theresa *hadn't* come back to life; not fully. She was merely borrowing someone else's body, which was why the viscount was now feigning this

courtship in order to protect its owner. Maybe Susie should have done more to convince Mrs. Collins not to hold the séance in the first place.

“What’s the matter, Susie? Please don’t cry.”

“Forgive me, my lady... Your kindness has overwhelmed me.”

It was no lie, but so too was Susie overwhelmed by her indecision, and she had to hurry from the room.

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The villa’s large front garden was connected to a grove that led to the shore. Edgar had invited Lydia for a walk, and the pair strolled leisurely down a path lined with cypress trees. The sky was thick with clouds, but there was no sign of rain just yet. The moist sea breeze would occasionally rustle the leaves around them. Combined with the roaring of the unusually high waves, it felt like a storm was on the way.

“How strange that a mother should be so happy to see her daughter married,” Lydia murmured, still under the influence of their earlier act.

“I do not think it strange at all.”

“My father endeavors not to think about the topic at all.”

“That’s a father for you. But I shall convince him, you’ll see. Is it not about time we disclosed our engagement to him?”

“It is *not*.”

No matter how many times she voiced her refusal, Edgar would smile as though she hadn’t said anything. “Once he understands that our affection is such that we simply cannot be apart, he will have no more reason to object.”

“I fear you are confusing lies with reality,” Lydia said, guilt weighing heavy on her chest. “We really have deceived Mrs. Collins, haven’t we? She truly believes that her daughter is set to be happily wed to you.”

“The spirit possessing you is not Miss Collins. Even if I were to marry it, Mrs. Collins would not see her wish fulfilled.”

“What did you just say?” She looked up at the earl walking beside her.

“The spirit embroidered an ‘M’ onto her handkerchief. Not only that, she died at the age of five. Would a five-year-old think to embroider on a whim? Lydia, are you good at sewing?”

“My grandmother taught me how to do it. I cannot say if I am *good* at it.”

She was trying to be humble, but Edgar seemed to take it to mean she was a poor embroiderer.

“I am not convinced that the spirit within you belongs to Miss Collins. It must be another girl, one who can sew well. A revived soul has no memory of its former life. An expert told me that, after death, one may choose to remain at whichever age one likes. In which case, does it really matter *who* the medium called back from the dead?” Stopping under a particularly tall cypress tree, Edgar turned to Lydia. He spoke clearly and with a gentle smile. “The only thing we can hope to do is put a halt to the Prince’s plan and restore everything to how it was. The dead must return to Hades, and you must return to me. There is nothing to fret over beyond that.”

Lydia took a step back, irritation sparking within her again as she recalled how Edgar had smiled at Theresa last night. “I do not belong to you.”

“You are my fiancée.”

“You need not bring that up at every opportunity.”

“I most assuredly do. Eventually, you might start to believe it.”

*Fiddlesticks!*

Why had she ever thought she might *try* to trust him?

Still in the throes of confusion, Lydia withdrew another step. “I do not wish for a loveless marriage.”

It was one of those phrases one might pick up in childhood without having a true understanding of what love entailed. That she had uttered it annoyed even herself, and no doubt Edgar would think she was being too idealistic.

“Is that so strange?” she pressed.

“On the contrary.”

"I *know* you stifled a laugh."

"The minds of others are not always as you imagine them to be, Lydia."

"Yet the fact remains that you would marry without love."

"Without *your* love, perhaps, for I am sure I would gain it quite easily."

The source of his confidence eluded her.

"You do not love me either. I witnessed you seducing Miss Collins last night. You really can wrap any girl around your little finger, can't you? All it takes is a scattering of lies and a bit of force."

Edgar stared at her for a moment, perplexed. "Do you mean to say you are conscious, even when Miss Collins awakens?"

"Not without considerable effort, but I managed it last night."

He put a hand to his forehead in thought, though she doubted he was truly troubled. "I did it for your sake, Lydia."

"I know. For the sake of my safety."

"Then I would ask you to still your temper."

"I am not especially angry." Looking away from him, she resumed walking.

"That is not the impression you give off."

"If I *am* angry, it is because you touched my hair, face, shoulders, and back, all without my consent!"

"I have done so countless times before. Why should last night—"

"Stop it! It wasn't *me* last night!"

"Then I should have done nothing to incur your anger."

Lydia had almost forgotten that he was perfectly capable of treating any woman as he would a lover. Her pace quickened as her temper flared even more brightly.

"No, admittedly, it did feel as though I was speaking to *you*. I could not bear to let you go. Not when you were looking straight at me and weren't trying to resist."

"You... You would have felt the back of my hand if I were in control." Lydia walked ahead of Edgar, keeping her face downcast so he wouldn't see the redness she could feel on it.

"I know. Although I would have liked to take things further, before you had the chance to strike me."

*What is he blathering about now?*

"It is a good thing that I restrained myself."

Lydia didn't respond.

"Or perhaps I oughtn't have. Why, if I had really loosened my restraint, you may have conceded that you would have no choice but to marry me by the end of it."

"It is clear to me that you have taken leave of your senses!"

"What a wasted opportunity to deepen our intimacy. I am sure that Miss Collins would not have resisted. You may have your own thoughts and feelings on the matter, but surely your *body* would have come to understand my sentiments at the end of such a wonderful evening together."

*My body?!*

Her insides raging, Lydia stopped stock-still.

"You have highly rigid preconceptions when it comes to what love is," he went on. "You *are* special to me. You just don't believe me, because my feelings conflict with those preconceptions."

"I am not in the mood for your jokes, Edgar! Any ideas you might be concocting are to be wiped from your mind *at once*." Even when she turned around to object, the arrogant smile remained on his face.

"Let us test out my theory."

"I'm sorry?"

"I can all but guarantee that you will see me more in the light of a lover by the end of it."

Lydia could feel the ocean wind blowing against her back. It whipped her



loose hair in front of her face, blinding her until she went to push it back with both hands. The next thing she knew, there was a hand on her cheek. Looking up, her eyes met Edgar's ash-mauve gaze. The touch of longing in his smile and the way he handled her so delicately made her think that she might really be special to him. Until she came to her senses.

He was looking at her in the exact same way he had Theresa last night. She knew she had to get away, but she couldn't move, and the thought that she might *want* this filled her with self-loathing.

*Are my morals really this loose?*

"Close your eyes," he commanded softly.

It was like a spell. She couldn't resist.

"I love you. I mean that."

She was on the verge of believing him, as though doing so might set something into motion. Even then, her heart chose to push back.

"No, you don't."

"If you do not believe in my words, then believe in my kiss."

"Why should I? You have never once tried to understand my feelings. Even now you dismissed them as preconceptions."

It was true. Edgar inevitably tried to mold any situation to the way he liked it. That was what made Lydia so reluctant to go along with him.

Slowly, she opened her eyes. A tinge of loneliness seemed to temper Edgar's gaze. Without a word, he let go of her. Not because Lydia willed it, but because there came the cracking of twigs from the grove.

"Who's there?" he demanded, his eyes boring into the shadows of the trees.

The figure turned at once and fled, but not before Lydia caught sight of a pale face: Ermine's. And she had been in her familiar men's wear.

"Go back inside, Lydia."

With that, Edgar raced off after the figure. Though she wore a black

gentleman's jacket, her frame was very clearly feminine.

She ran up the hill, pursued by Edgar, who had the sense he was being lured somewhere. Still, the medium who had thus far remained hidden had actively come to him. He needed to know if she was really Ermine or not.

She only stopped when she came to an incline that sloped into the sea. Then, she turned around. Her dark-brown eyes were almost black, and they held the hint of a challenge. The wind tousled her short hair of the same color. Her features were finally laid bare.

Edgar knew them well. There was a gravity to them that suited her male attire, and yet the beauty they held could only be described as feminine. Her clothing never could disguise her sex. Edgar approached her slowly.

"Lord Ashenbert." From her red lips flowed an achingly familiar voice. "It is good to see you after all this time."

"If you were alive, Ermine, why did you not return to me?"

"I serve Ulysses now. I cannot defy him."

"Did he perhaps save your life?"

Ermine's eyes flitted downward. "Miss Carlton has been with you all this time, hasn't she? You might find it absurd that I, of all people, should say this, but it is a relief to know she is safe and providing support to you."

"Losing you caused her a great deal of distress."

"I did a terrible thing. I wonder if she would forgive me for it."

"She forgave *me* for deceiving her."

The tiniest of smiles flashed across Ermine's lips. It was so like her. "I had the sense that something would change, ever since I learned that you did not harm Miss Carlton. She is honest, earnest, and kindhearted to a fault. If anyone is to save you, it may well be a girl like her."

The woman spoke things that only Ermine should know, yet Edgar still couldn't be confident that it was her, as much as he wanted it to be.

"You do not need to follow this 'Ulysses,' Ermine. Come back to me."

“Could you trust me? I betrayed you.”

“Yes, but your heart never did.”

The Prince had taken advantage of her feelings for Edgar to manipulate her.

“What is in my heart is irrelevant. I have been ordered to kill you.”

“Is that so?”

There was nothing in her expression or tone that suggested she had any intention of doing so. She was agile with sharp senses and no stranger to holding a weapon. If she wanted to kill Edgar, she most likely could. He stepped closer to her as she continued.

“The Prince no longer has any use for you. Your position has left you too well-known. That is why he instead wishes for you to suffer and die.” Ermine raised her hand. In it was a pistol.

Edgar reached out for her, and she flinched as he brought his hand to her ear. He used that moment to grab her arm and re-aim the pistol, which sent a bullet into the grass. She really wasn’t intent on killing him after all.

Tearing the weapon from her, he pushed her down onto the ground and reached for her shirt.

“Forgive me.”

Ermine tensed beneath him, but he didn’t give her a chance to get up, instead unfastening the buttons over her chest. There was no sign of the painful brand, the sign of a slave, that he knew should have marked her pale skin.

“Who are you?”

The woman held a knife to his throat.

“Why do you speak as though you know everything about Ermine?” he pressed.

Her brows furrowed mournfully as her fingers gripped the knife tightly. Pulling back, Edgar released her. Without hesitating, she jumped to her feet and rushed at him. This time, she meant it. She would kill him despite the grief it caused her. No doubt the secret he had uncovered was something that severely

tormented her. He had seen that she bore no mark, and she would bury him for it. It was a curious thing—to be identified as an imposter shouldn't have agitated anyone to this degree. Though Edgar wanted to fight back, even the way she handled her weapon reminded him strongly of Ermine. And he had vowed never to lose anyone again.

A shadow cut in between them. Raven showed no hesitation in pointing his knife at the woman, even though she looked just like his sister.

“Wait, Raven—”

The woman struck before Edgar could finish. If she really knew so much about Ermine and those around her, she should have known that fighting Raven one-on-one was suicide. A savage light was already flickering in the boy's eyes. The spirits were taking over. They would transform him into a demon whose sole concern was protecting its master.



Raven's unique fighting abilities served the singular goal of slaughtering his opponent. He easily dodged the woman's blade and plunged his own deep into her shoulder. She staggered back, desperate to distance herself from him. She made it to the edge of the steep slope, where her foot caught a rock and forced her to her knees. Her face twisting in pain, she tried to pull out the knife.

His expression unchanged, Raven stepped forward and reached for her. Despite his slender frame, he could snap her neck in an instant.

"Don't!" Edgar rushed over to help the woman up. "You don't have to kill her!"

The servant was already deaf to his master's orders. He held not the slightest hint of emotion as he carefully avoided Edgar and reached for his sister's doppelgänger. But then he froze.

"Please don't..." A pair of arms had wrapped themselves around Raven from behind to try and restrain him: Lydia's.

*No!*

It was hard enough for Edgar to put a stop to Raven. There was no way Lydia could do it. There had been times, several of them, when the boy had been in this state and had struggled to tell enemy from foe, save for his master.

Edgar darted in to pull Lydia away, but he was too late. Raven spared no strength in shaking her off, sending her flying toward the incline. She was on the brink of falling when Ermine's look-alike reached for her.

She wasn't strong enough; she and Lydia hurtled down the slope, "Ermine" holding the fairy doctor to her tightly, taking the brunt of the sharp rocks that jutted from the surface. Their momentum lasted to the middle of the incline, where the woman got unsteadily to her feet. She dashed down to the coast and disappeared into the grove as Edgar rushed over to Lydia, who was still on the ground.

Lydia had suffered a light concussion. She gradually became aware of the fact that Edgar was carrying her back to the estate, but embarrassment left her feigning unconsciousness a while longer. Only when she was lying in a bed and

it became clear that he wasn't leaving did she open her eyes. He peered at her anxiously.

"Lydia, are you all right? Do you recognize me?"

"Yes..."

"Stay still for the time being. You hit your head."

"I'm fine." She felt too restless lying down, so she slowly sat up.

Edgar offered a hand to help her but withdrew it surprisingly readily when she stiffened. She had suddenly remembered how he had tried to kiss her. But rather than wariness, it was the memory of her willingness to *be* kissed that had disturbed her. The thought of locking lips with such a flippant man should have outraged her.

What if it happened again? Lydia took a deep breath to try and still her pounding heart.

"I'm deeply sorry, Miss Carlton." Raven was loitering behind Edgar, his eyes glued to the floor. It was a remarkable display of sorrow from the servant who usually kept his feelings buried.

"It's all right," she replied. "I am at fault for coming too close."

"I have committed a fatal mistake."

"It is nothing so terrible."

"I am ready to face my punishment, whatever it may be."

It seemed that Lydia's words were doing little to assuage him. "Your responsibility lies in protecting Edgar. Whatever happens to me should be of no concern to you."

"You are to be my master's wife. Causing you harm is utterly unforgivable."

She frowned at the earl. "What exactly have you been telling Raven?"

"Precisely what he needed to know, seeing as he is my most trusted servant."

"You are taking our arrangement far too seriously!"

"Naturally. It is very important to me."

It seemed that Edgar would not let up on their engagement, even when it caused his servant such distress.

“You ought to tell Raven that there is no need for further concern.”

“It won’t make a difference. Would you, perhaps, strike him for me? That ought to put his mind at ease.”

“I couldn’t possibly do such a thing!”

“You seem to be on the verge of striking *me* on a regular basis.”

“That is only because you act so outrageously all the time!”

“Raven, perhaps you should do something outrageous. Then Lydia may be inclined to strike you,” Edgar said.

Lydia gawked at him.

“Outrageous, my lord?”

“Kiss her, for example.”

Lydia turned her tentative gaze toward Raven, scared to discover how seriously he might take his master’s nonsensical request. He was staring directly at her. Their eyes met. She braced herself but, after a period of fraught silence, he hung his head.

“I cannot do that, my lord. Please forgive me.”

“It’s all right. I trust you will now give up on this idea of needing to be punished.”

Raven sighed. “Yes, my lord.”

Lydia didn’t understand the logic, but she had to admit that Edgar did well to make his stubborn servant back down.

“Did you hurt yourself anywhere, Lydia?” the earl asked. “Are you in pain?”

As she was shaking her head, she realized there were shiny, sand-like particles caught in the ends of her hair. She wondered if she had picked them up when she fell, but they looked more like light-blue glass beads than dirt of any kind.

“There doesn’t seem to be a scratch on me. Ermine shielded me well, even



though she was harboring that injury.”

“That woman was not my sister. She tried to kill Lord Ashenbert,” Raven said decisively.

It was her love for Edgar that had led Ermine to betray him. It seemed the boy was saying that the same feelings would prevent her from killing him.

The earl took the seat next to the bed and fell into thought. “She claimed that she could not disobey Ulysses and that the Prince wants me to ‘suffer and die.’ I very much had the sense that this woman was not ordered to kill me, but to die herself.”

“Do you mean to say she attacked you in the hopes that *she* would be killed?”

Lydia thought back to how she had told the old woman under the arbor that she was destined to die.

“I am confident that she would have anticipated Raven’s arrival.”

There was no way Edgar would forgive himself if he had watched Ermine die all over again, regardless of if that woman was really her or not. And, just like before, it would all be the result of manipulation by his nemesis. He already carried the heartrending burden of being a lone survivor among so many companions. To want to put him through that again was endlessly cruel.

“No matter what reason that woman might have had for attacking you, she was not my sister. Any sympathies you might hold for her will only play into the enemy’s hands, my lord.”

“Quite so. This woman did not have the brand of a slave either.”

Lydia looked up, taken aback. She had thought that Edgar was *sure* the woman was Ermine, else he wouldn’t have been so desperate to stop Raven.

“Then why did you intervene, my lord? She should not have been allowed to survive.”

“A pertinent question indeed.” At first, Edgar’s response sounded quite detached, but then he frowned deeply. “I truly thought it could be her. She knew things only Ermine could know, and her expressions and verbal quirks... It was all her, save for the lack of a mark.”

“A mark like that cannot be done away with.”

“I do not have mine anymore.” Edgar’s brand had been taken away by the merrows. He turned to Lydia. “However, mine is a highly unusual case. I wonder if something similar might have happened to Ermine? Her survival would be more of a curiosity than the disappearance of that mark.”

Ermine had fallen into the merrows’ waters. Her body had never been found, but that wasn’t especially strange, given the complicated tides there.

As she thought, Lydia found her attention captured by the sparkling glass-like fragments. It was then that she realized there wasn’t a drop of blood on her, despite Ermine’s injury. Instead, her hair and clothing were dropping these tiny crystals. Could *that* be the woman’s blood? What if she wasn’t human? Selkies were the incarnation of those who perished at sea.

“I think Ermine might be a selkie.”

She was aware of how absurd it must have sounded. Edgar and Raven exchanged a glance.

“They say that people who die at sea become selkies. While that isn’t an inevitability, this Ulysses character seems well-versed in fae matters. I wonder whether he didn’t revive Ermine as a selkie.”

“Is that... Could *you* do such a thing?” Edgar asked.

“I do not hold any power over selkies. But if Ulysses does, and he is also a fairy doctor, it is quite possible that he had the selkies seek her remains and bring her in as one of their own.”

Edgar massaged his temples as though trying to process this information. “Do selkies retain the bodies they had as people? What about their memories?”

“There exist examples of both, such as a fisherman who died at sea and went back to his family, but because he was a selkie, he eventually returned to the ocean. It is said that those who have come to belong to the fairy world will lose their memories of this one. However, it seems that Ermine is not yet at that stage.”

“Meaning she became a selkie not too long ago,” Edgar muttered gravely.

“Supposing you are correct, Lydia, why must she and the others of her kind obey Ulysses?”

“Their skins have been hidden. Without their skins, selkies remain in human form, and they cannot return to the sea. Therefore, they become servants to whoever has concealed them. Their skins are like their souls, in a sense.”

“Does that mean if we find their pelts, Ermine will be freed from Ulysses’s manipulation?”

Lydia couldn’t answer immediately. If Edgar’s companion still held her human memories, it was likely she retained the influence the Prince had over her. Naturally, the others shared her concerns.

“All of this would mean my sister did indeed die,” said Raven. “Even if we were to free her from Ulysses’s dominion, she would still be the Prince’s tool.”

Edgar sighed deeply. “I fear you are correct. But, Raven, she is still your sister.”

Confused, the boy frowned at his master. While he may have recognized that Ermine was family, what he ought to *feel* about it appeared to elude him. That wasn’t to say that he didn’t love her. However, she had betrayed Edgar and was liable to put him in danger again. To Raven, this made her an enemy above all else.

Edgar, meanwhile, was more concerned with the truths in Ermine’s heart than her betrayal. Supposing she still remained in the Prince’s clutches, he wanted to be able to free her.

“She is not my sister,” Raven insisted.

“Because she is no longer human? Have you never longed to meet someone lost, even if you must settle for a dream? Or longed to converse with them once more, even if you must resign yourself to speaking to a ghost?”

Lydia couldn’t see Raven having experienced any such desires. His fighting abilities meant he had been raised as a murderous weapon; his human emotions had never been nurtured. Only after meeting Edgar had his heart finally cracked open. Though he had learned to think and be considerate of those around his master, to hold sentiments for or attachments to the dead

was likely still beyond him.

Speaking clearly, Edgar continued as though this was not the case. "I longed to see Ermine again. I cared not what form that might take or whether she would resent me."

It was the same motive Mrs. Collins had for calling her daughter back from the dead. It was the same way Lydia felt about her mother. It was an irrepressible wish, and one that she could not fault the woman for.

"Ermine saved me," she said. "She followed her own judgment and protected me, even though she wasn't ordered to. I believe she still considers you her dear companions."

Edgar fell silent. Raven did too, though his silence seemed riddled with anxious thought. As quiet took over the room, there came a subtle noise from the other side of the door. Everyone turned to look at it.

*Has somebody been eavesdropping?*

A chill ran up Lydia's spine, and she wrapped her arms around herself.

"Is something the matter, Lydia?"

"I feel..." It was difficult to breathe. A cold sweat was forming on her skin. She watched from the corner of her eye as Raven silently approached the door. Then she remembered the same sensation from last night.

Theresa was in agony. That was all she knew.

"Save...me..." It was all she could do to cling to herself.

Edgar took her hands in his. "It's all right. I'm here."

"Miss Collins...is recalling her death..."

Raven flung the door open. He didn't move once he had done so.

"Was someone there?" Edgar asked.

"No. However, it is possible that we were overheard."

Those were the last words Lydia heard before falling into darkness.

## Not Quite in Love

That evening, the tide had receded, and Raven had left for town. The seas remained stormy, the waves constantly lapping at the shore as if to sweep away any passersby. Taking the narrow path was even more dangerous in the dark night, but the boy had insisted on fetching Scarlet Moon's valuable information.

"I shall be back tomorrow morning. Please remain vigilant until then, my lord."

"The enemy wants me to suffer slowly. It is a little early for them to pull out all the stops."

Despite what Edgar had said as he saw his servant off, there was plenty to be cautious of that night. More than anything else was the possibility that their adversaries may realize that Theresa only possessed Lydia after dark.

"She's still unconscious! What's going on?" Nico complained, joining Edgar on his hind paws.

"Miss Collins is currently in possession of Lydia's body. It could be her terror that is keeping her asleep, but she may well awake soon."

"Terror?"

"It would appear that memories of her death have been fraying Lydia's nerves."

Nico folded his front legs. "And you can't do anything about that? Do you have any idea what it might do to her?"

It was indeed a horrifying thought. However, Edgar reasoned, Theresa's sudden recollections of death may well have been caused by last night's incident. No, not the incident itself, but what came afterward. What had she seen? What had she felt?

Supposing Ulysses had murdered whoever was possessing Lydia specifically to pass her off as Theresa, something about the incident must have reminded her

of her murderer.

“There is a chance, Nico, that Miss Collins’s killer is responsible for all of this. If she can recall the moment of her death, we might just be able to gain the advantage.” Edgar stood up and made to leave the room.

Nico scrambled in front of him. “You would make her *remember*? But what if Lydia is awake inside there?”

If she was, she might be forced to go through the same horrific pain.

“If I don’t do anything, Lydia will remain in harm’s way, and I cannot guarantee that I shall be able to protect her.”

Edgar picked the fairy cat up and put him to one side. Nico screeched.

“Unhand me at once! You’re not concerned about Lydia in the slightest, are you?! Sometimes simply saving someone’s life isn’t enough!”

In Edgar’s mind, he *was* concerned about her. And yet Nico was parroting Lydia’s sentiment that he hadn’t even tried to “understand her feelings.” Were they right to make such accusations? Surely there was nothing more important than keeping her alive? After all, if he failed to protect her, there would be no feelings left to understand in the first place.

His mind made up, Edgar headed for Theresa’s bedroom.

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She was in pain. She couldn’t breathe. The more she struggled in the darkness, the more filthy water filled her mouth and nostrils. She wanted to cry for help, but she couldn’t find her voice. The only thing she achieved was exhaling the little air that had been left in her lungs. In exchange, she swallowed yet more of the water that was dragging her body down. It felt like she was fit to burst for the liquid that was filling her up. It was then that Lydia bolted awake.

“Miss Collins, are you all right?” Susie rushed into the room to stroke her back as she coughed.

“Save me...” It was not Lydia who uttered those words, but Theresa. She hadn’t fully shaken free of the nightmare.

The night had drawn in, and the spirit was awake. Though Lydia was conscious, she had no control over herself.

“You must have had a bad dream. It’s all right; you are awake now. His lordship was frightfully worried about you; you’ve been sleeping since the afternoon when you began to feel unwell.”

Theresa finally looked up, which was when she spotted Edgar for the first time.

“I was indeed highly concerned, Miss Collins.”

“My lord...” She reached out for him, her heart brimming with joy.

*I am in my nightclothes!* Lydia protested fretfully as Edgar gently wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close.

“Something must be the matter with me,” Theresa said. “I am so horribly discomposed. I begin to tremble and I cannot even say why. Stay with me. Please.”

*Come, now.*

“I shan’t leave your side.”

*Please do!*

“I am well aware of how inappropriate it is for me to remain in your chambers throughout the night. However, my concern is such that your maid acquiesced to my ludicrous request. And then there is the matter of last night’s incident, which has yet to be solved.”

Susie took half a step back and nodded. She had total faith in Edgar, believing him to be both Lydia’s lover and a perfect gentleman. What the fairy doctor wouldn’t give to be able to set her straight!

“I shall take my leave now then, miss. Please do call if you require anything of me.”

*You mustn’t leave us alone!*

But Lydia could only watch in horror as Susie dipped her head and disappeared into her own quarters. Her room was immediately next to this one,

separated only by a door. This did not deter Theresa, who leaned into Edgar as he sat on the edge of her bed. If need be, Lydia had been prepared to punch him with the hand she barely had control over, but the ghost had wrapped her arm around his back, rendering it useless.

Then she remembered what Edgar had said that afternoon. Surely he wouldn't do anything that meant she no longer had any choice *but* to marry him?

"What did you dream about?" he asked. It was, much to her relief, a far cry from what Lydia had expected him to say.

"I was sinking in an expanse of water."

"Why do you think you dreamt of that?"

"Most likely because I died by drowning."

The very memory of it had Lydia's chest feeling tight all over again.

"Do you remember anything else?"

Theresa raised her head and frowned at him. "Why do you ask?"

"I long to know everything about you, lest I take for granted the miracle that is our encounter."

Theresa seemed to accept this answer. Lydia just felt uneasy. For whatever reason, Edgar was probing into the spirit's death. He had mentioned that she wasn't really Theresa. Which begged the question: why would someone want to pass off someone else's soul as Mrs. Collins's daughter? Had it been impossible to call back the girl herself, pushing the perpetrator to settle for someone who had died more recently?

"Anything else..." Theresa murmured. "Ah, yes. Someone was watching me drown..."

Did that mean this girl had been murdered for the sole purpose of deceiving Mrs. Collins?

A shiver ran up Lydia's spine, and she broke out in a cold sweat. Still, Theresa continued.



"I think it was a man. There was...a light behind one of his ears. Like a small gemstone, perhaps."

"You do not have to force yourself to remember, Miss Collins."

"It's all right. I feel fine."

"You do not *look* fine."

*Lydia* didn't feel fine. She wanted Theresa to stop.

"I suppose my body is in pain, but I am not suffering for it."

*What is that supposed to mean, I wonder?*

"I still feel somewhat detached from my body, perhaps because my revival was fairly recent. Even when it is under severe distress, I seem to be shielded from the worst of it."

*Am I the only one suffering?*

This was *Lydia's* body. It made sense that she would bear the brunt of its pain, even if that pain was caused by Theresa's memories.

"In that case, could I trouble you to push yourself to remember a little more?"

*Edgar, no!* It was becoming unbearable. Not only that, but *Lydia* doubted he would stop even if he knew what she was going through. He was determined to draw out any useful information he could from Theresa.

The spirit recalled the mud-laden water. *Lydia* could feel the bitter liquid flowing down her throat and into her lungs. She began to cough.

"Take your time."

*Lydia* didn't think she could take any more agony.

"I was...on a bridge, looking out over a river. Then, I was suddenly pushed from behind." Theresa paused. "As I fell, he said, 'For His Royal Highness'...I think."

*Lydia* clenched her hand. *This isn't fair...* She hadn't noticed that her hand was resting on Edgar's arm. As she struggled to endure her distress, her fingernails dug into him. A small furrow appeared on his brow, which Theresa seemed to miss. Though her body was trembling, she spoke clearly and calmly.

“He was laughing. I was so afraid...”

All of a sudden, Edgar put his hand on Lydia’s. “That is enough for the time being, Miss Collins.”

“I’m happy to go on.” She cocked his head at him.

*No...more...*

“No, it’s all right.”

“I wish for you to know everything about me too.”

“Not now. You may feel all right, but it would seem that your recollection is taking its toll on your body.”

Theresa stopped trying to remember then, and Lydia was finally released from the pain. She felt exhausted as she fought for breath. Edgar tightened his grip on her left hand and guided it to his cheek.

“Forgive me,” he said. His words were meant for her. He seemed to have realized that hand was linked to Lydia’s consciousness, and he did look genuinely apologetic, but she was too tired to take his words sincerely. After all, he was a man who thought a single “sorry” could make up for severe manipulation. She wanted him to stop touching her, but she was still wrapped helplessly in his arms.

Theresa leaned into Edgar, completely at ease. “You are endlessly kind, my lord. I feel as though I have never known such kindness from anybody.”

“I am sure that isn’t the case.”

“No, I am almost certain of it. People think me foolish. They would approach me in droves, and yet not one of them ever thought I was worth taking seriously. It was clear as day, and yet I enjoyed the illusion of popularity...”

“These are your memories?” Edgar asked.

“I wonder... They must come from before my death. My lord, your kindness is such that I would be satisfied were your love merely an act to secure the dowry. I ask only that you remain kind so that my love for you will continue to burn. I shan’t pry into the depths of your heart.”

Despite the muddled state of Lydia's mind, her heart gave a start at those words. Did Theresa have a vague awareness of Edgar's lies? Had she realized that he wasn't intending to marry her?

The ghost was her complete opposite. Theresa was honest with herself about how she felt. Lydia was less concerned with her own feelings and more concerned with keeping Edgar at arm's length because she knew *his* weren't genuine. She had to wonder whether she would be capable of reciprocating his feelings if they were real. Then she wondered whether she could be confident that she would *never* fall in love with him, so long as they remained a lie.

She didn't know, and yet she continuously placed all of the responsibility on him.

"What makes you think this is an act?" he asked.

"You have made no attempt to kiss me."

"I would advise you not to trust any man who *would* kiss you so readily."

*For example, you. This afternoon.*

"Yes. You're right."

"But you do not trust me either."

"I want you to kiss me, then. Not frivolously, but as a sign of your love."

*No...*

As Edgar gazed at her, Theresa found the strength to wrap her arms around his neck.

*Please don't...*

She didn't want Edgar to kiss her. She didn't want Edgar to kiss Theresa right in front of her either. It was hard to tell which frightened her more. She just knew that she didn't like either option.

Edgar's hands came to rest on her cheeks, his fingers reaching her ears. "My fairy."

He was addressing Lydia. She always found that nickname embarrassingly saccharine and hoped that he would drop it someday. But then she realized he

was calling to her without alerting Theresa. Her heart began to thump, curiously energetic despite her exhaustion.

“I am sure that you would find it difficult to trust me even if I were to pour my love into this kiss,” he said.

Theresa didn’t respond. Though she couldn’t have realized that he wasn’t speaking to her, his words might have made her feel rejected.

Lydia was relieved, but also a touch surprised. She had thought that whether she trusted him or not was irrelevant to Edgar; that he wanted her by his side regardless. That was why he ignored her feelings by burying them under practicalities like kisses and engagements. And yet he had just called out to her before proceeding to turn down Theresa’s advances. It was as though he was declaring that he wasn’t going to kiss her unless Lydia had full control of her body. As if that would be enough to earn her trust. But he was a man who manipulated people without shame.

“I am exhausted,” Theresa said. “I can hold myself up no longer.”

“Why don’t you lie down?”

“Yes, thank you...” She let her arms fall.

Edgar made to lay her down before suddenly righting her and holding her close. “Might I embrace you for a spell longer?”

He must have felt Lydia’s left hand tightly gripping his sleeve. She wasn’t sure why she couldn’t bring herself to let go or where she had even found the strength.

“Forgive me,” Edgar whispered again.

Their words and feelings always seemed to miss each other. Lydia felt like she was constantly running away, yet when one small corner of her heart urged her to consider how she felt, she inevitably rejected it. But now that all of her movements and emotions were concentrated into one hand, she found the objections of her mind overridden. It struck her that this hand would be capable of reaching his heart.

Her sudden desire to know how he really felt was frightfully sincere. Her hand

searched his arm, which was holding her with just a little less confidence than usual. It struggled to find even a hint of deception.

By the time morning came around, Edgar had failed to catch even a wink of sleep. Though he had let himself sink into the sofa and closed his eyes to the dark, his mind had been focused on Lydia's breathing. He had been worried that she would be plagued by nightmares, but to his relief, she slept soundly.

It was undeniable that the man with the gemstone behind his ear was Ulysses. Only the Prince's closest attendants were ridiculous enough to refer to him as "His Royal Highness." Edgar had managed to obtain a vital clue, but Lydia had suffered in the process. This saddened him more than he had expected.

As light began to seep into the room, he rolled up his shirt sleeve slightly. There was a light red mark where Lydia had been clutching him. He hadn't expected such strength from her. It spoke to how much distress he had forced her through. Though he had known she would suffer for it, he had still tried to pry Theresa's memories from her. He could declare his fondness for Lydia all he liked, but when this was what he did to her, it was no wonder she didn't trust him. What sort of man would put his beloved through such agony? It felt like he was slowly starting to understand what she meant when she accused him of disregarding her feelings.

If there was one thing he never wanted to do, it was lie to her. Her value as his fairy doctor aside, he found her genuinely endearing. He wanted to keep her close and out of the reach of other men. If that wasn't love, what was?

The problem was that he felt that way about a lot of women. He was well aware of the fact that he fell in love fairly easily. That being said, his proposal to Lydia had been no flight of fancy. Yes, it had been impulsive, but he *did* like her, and such an arrangement would benefit them both.

As Edgar pondered, his eyes closed, he heard the rustling of cloth as Lydia got out of bed. He felt her draw near like a girl approaching a sleeping wolf. It was this wariness, he suddenly realized, that made him want to tease her. While this only made her all the more wary, he craved her attention, despite its source.

Lydia likely hadn't realized that her hair was tickling his neck as she peered

down to see if he was asleep or not. She was too distracted by the red mark on his arm.

“Oh dear!” she murmured, stooping down.

It had been Edgar’s fault, but of course Lydia—being who she was—would feel guilty about it. His heart ached unbearably as she gently touched the spot. How he wanted her to be his. Preferably as soon as possible. It wouldn’t be that difficult merely to steal a kiss.

He had refrained from kissing Theresa last night because he’d wagered that Lydia’s heart would be unable to accept it. But now, the spirit was out of the picture. Lydia herself was within reach and completely unsuspecting. Nevertheless, he found he was slightly conflicted. Maybe he didn’t treat her with enough care. That held true for yesterday evening, and when he realized that forcing a kiss on her would do nothing to eliminate the distance between them, he felt uncharacteristically timid. If he so much as hinted his wakefulness to her, she would jump up and flee at once. She was right there and yet she felt so far away.

Who was he to her? An enigmatic villain? Her employer? Or did she feel something akin to friendship for him? She had said that she could not abide a loveless marriage.

*Love...*

He had always felt that he held some degree of love for her. But this was the first time he was truly scrutinizing his emotions as he returned his focus to the mark on his arm.

“Miss Carlton? Are you up?” Susie called.

Lydia jumped back from Edgar. “Yes. What is it, Miss Susie?”

Slightly annoyed, he shifted his head and pretended that the maid had just woken him.

“Forgive me for disturbing you this early, my lord,” she said once she was inside.

“It’s all right. Is something the matter?”

“Lord Ashenbert is looking for you. He seemed most upset...”

Upon realizing that Edgar wasn't in his room, the fake earl had apparently been shouting the house down in his search. Lydia was just as perturbed by this news as she suspected her employer was. Susie was the only one who knew they had spent the night in the same room, and the maid had hustled the imposter into the reception room and promised to summon the “viscount.”

The memory of Edgar's behavior on the night of the incident had Lydia's stomach sinking in anticipation of what this meant. She decided to go with him; it was probably safer to stick together.

The pair quickly made themselves presentable and headed for the reception room. When the fake earl laid eyes on Edgar, he rushed forward, practically throwing his arms around the other man.

“Middleworth! Thank God you're safe! Oh, and Miss Collins! You too, of course!” He seemed genuinely perturbed, but he might have simply been a skilled actor.

“Why wouldn't we be?” Edgar asked.

“You have to save me! Please!”

“First, I need you to calm down and explain what you need saving *from*.”

“It was Sir Clark this time! His room is in the exact same state, and the man himself is nowhere to be seen!”

Edgar pushed Lydia's chair in for her. “You were the first on the scene again?” His tone was grim.

“My room is close by. I heard a commotion...”

“Was your room not next to Sir Stanley's?”

“I changed rooms. I didn't wish to sleep near the site of such a frightful incident.”

“It would seem that your neighbors are frequently targeted.”

“I... I cannot deny that, but nor could I tell you why! Regardless, you or I could

be next. Would you stay with me? You have that servant, don't you? The one who knows how to fight!"

It was obvious from the look on Edgar's face that the prospect of being attached to this man displeased him greatly. However, the fact was that Ulysses had made his next move. It was as though he were gradually creeping toward the earl, who remained trapped in this villa. On top of that, there remained the possibility that the imposter himself was Ulysses. Edgar hadn't forgotten this. He approached the other man abruptly.

"Forgive me." He grabbed the imposter's head, moved it left and right as though checking for something, then let go.

Amidst the shock, Lydia remembered Theresa speaking about a man present at her death. A man with a "gemstone" or something similar behind his ear.

Edgar looked at the perplexed man. "Did the possibility not cross your mind that I might be the perpetrator?"

"Perpetrator? This is the work of a specter!"

"In that case, I suggest you keep a Bible close to your chest. I cannot protect you." Edgar turned away, but the fake earl frantically darted around in front of him and clasped his hands together like he was praying.

"Please, Middleworth, do not leave my fate to chance! I never expected all this to happen when I was asked to come to this villa!"

"You were 'asked'?"

"Yes! The medium, Miss Seraphita, requested that I take Miss Collins as my fiancée to soothe her mother's heart. No doubt she feared that a ghost—even a rich one—would fail to attract many suitors. She promised me a reward should I win Miss Collins's heart; the spirit cannot remain in this realm for more than a week in any—" He quickly cut himself off and looked at Lydia.

She pretended she hadn't been listening and sat with a dazed expression.

"I see," Edgar said. "That being the case, what is your real name?"

"Palmer. I have been having some...financial troubles since my benefactress went abroad."



“Benefactress is one way of putting it.”

“I am confident in my looks and I know how to treat a lady. As a source of income, I find it to be most agreeable.”

“I wonder if the earl whose identity you stole would also find your work agreeable?” Edgar muttered.

Personally, Lydia couldn’t think of anyone better suited to the role. She sighed, the tension leaving her. That she wouldn’t be possessed for more than a week also relieved her, though she did worry about Theresa. Not only had the girl been murdered by Ulysses, but her soul had been manipulated. She had been called back to this world to be falsely engaged, only to be sent back to the realm of the dead in a matter of days. Lydia herself had to bear some of the blame for deceiving her, especially when the fairy doctor was so eager for her to be gone and take her feelings for Edgar with her.

“It must be the medium!” Palmer exclaimed suddenly. “She must be controlling the spirit responsible! Let us capture and question her, Middleworth.”

“If you are referring to Miss Seraphita, she is no longer here.” Oscar was standing in the doorway. “I had some questions for her myself and was searching for her, but it seems she has not been seen since yesterday.”

*Most likely since Raven stabbed her...*

“Do you mean to say she fled the villa?” Edgar asked.

“How could she, with the waves as high as they are?” asked Palmer.

“It would not be impossible as long as one is willing to brave the danger,” Oscar pointed out.

A selkie would have no trouble at all. The question was *why* Ermine had fled. If she really was bound to Ulysses’s orders, then he must have told her to do it.

“What about the older woman who was with her?” Edgar inquired.

“Gone.”

“Miss Seraphita aside, I cannot see a woman of her age risking such a dangerous journey.” Palmer frowned.

“She may be hiding somewhere,” Oscar said. “Else she and Miss Seraphita suffered the same fate as Sir Clark.”

Edgar took a step toward the dresser while the boy was speaking. He knocked a framed picture from it with his elbow, most likely on purpose.

“Oh, my apologies.” He made no attempt to pick it up, which, while not unexpected of a nobleman, came off as highly arrogant.

Oscar stooped down to retrieve it. It must have embarrassed him to do so, but he didn’t show it. Lydia watched as Edgar peered carefully at the boy from above. Only then did she realize he was checking the back of Oscar’s ear. His pale blond hair fell down over his cheeks, exposing his ears. She couldn’t see a lot from where she was sitting, but Edgar stepped away from Oscar casually and walked over to her.

“At any rate, we know not who or where this perpetrator is, nor do we have the means to leave the villa. If I may be frank, Master Collins, I find myself reluctant to trust *anyone*.” Edgar’s hand on her shoulder seemed to warn Lydia to be cautious. She took it as a sign to mean that he had seen a gemstone behind Oscar’s ear.

Could this boy really be Ulysses, the servant the Prince had sent over to Britain? She found it difficult to believe; she had imagined a grown man.

“I suppose it is every man for himself,” said Oscar.

“So it would seem. I shall protect Miss Collins.” Edgar helped Lydia to her feet.

“I’m afraid I cannot let you do that.” Oscar moved to block the door. “Theresa is my cousin.”

*Does he suspect something?*

“And my fiancée. Mrs. Collins has given us her blessing.”

“She is not yet your wife. I cannot let her go with you.”

Lydia began to panic. She could think of little worse than being alone with the Prince’s henchman. “His lordship is the only man I trust!”

“Please be reasonable, Miss Carlton.” Oscar grinned.

In one fell swoop, he admitted both that he knew she wasn't Theresa and that he knew Edgar thought he was Ulysses.

The earl immediately made to push Lydia behind him, but Oscar's pistol was already pressed into the back of her head.

"If I might ask you to relinquish any weapons..."

Edgar had been reaching into his jacket. Now, he hesitated. "And if I were to say that I *do* mind?"

*Edgar?! Didn't common sense dictate that one should obey the captor's demands?*

"I would kill her."

*A most predictable response!*

"You are welcome to try. It will take less than a second for you to join her in death."

Lydia didn't like the way he was handling the situation one bit. She was too worked up to realize that things would only get worse if Edgar disarmed himself, that Ulysses might kill her right in front of him, all to make him suffer. She heard the subtle click of a trigger behind her ear, and her breath caught in her throat. This man had already killed Theresa. He probably thought nothing of killing Lydia on top of that, and she dearly wished Edgar would stop tempting him.

For a while, the men stared each other down, each frozen in his stance. It was when Lydia began to struggle to draw breath that Ulysses let out a sudden lighthearted chuckle.

"You're rather shrewd, aren't you, Ted?"

He seemed to use the nickname quite deliberately. Edgar looked repulsed, and Lydia surmised that it must have been the Prince's name for him.

"I am your target," the earl said. "Where is the sense in wasting your time with others?"

"Yes, get *angrier*. It only makes this all the more satisfying. The final chapter has only just begun. So, if you don't mind, I will be borrowing Miss Carlton for a

while, for I long to watch you struggle in vain.” Ulysses pulled on her arm.

When stark fear overtook her, the memories of Theresa’s death came flooding back. She started to shake and flew into a panic.

“Don’t touch me! You... You scoundrel!”

Ulysses only reacted by holding her tighter and keeping the pistol pointed at her. Seeing Edgar watching in silence just irritated her further. *He* knew that anything he did would push Ulysses to shoot her, starting with her arms and legs to keep her alive. She didn’t. She continued to brand him a murderer at the top of her lungs.

“You are not blameless either, Edgar! You care nothing about what happens to me, isn’t that right? Why would you *encourage* him to shoot me?!”

“I care, Lydia. I *will* save you. Just please don’t do anything reckless.”



Ulysses put a hand over her mouth, preventing her from insulting Edgar further. She could believe the earl was telling her to just let herself get kidnapped. If she hadn't trusted him before, she certainly didn't trust him now.

"I would advise against making any rash promises. Still, I suppose if you are that fond of her, the least I can do is kill you together. You would be very welcome to attempt a rescue." Ulysses grinned as he dragged Lydia from the room. With the pistol still pressed against her, she had no choice but to follow him.

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Around the same time, Raven was hurrying back to the villa, having finished his errands. He and his horse had made it to the shore while the tide was low, but the waves were just as violent as yesterday despite the waters being calmer closer to town. They pressed in on the narrow path to the tidal island, swelling up and pulling back as though in combat with the land. Still, the light of dawn should make for an easier passage than the previous night. Though it would make Raven vulnerable to enemy eyes, it was more urgent that he return to his master.

The boy had a package from Scarlet Moon tied to his person. Making sure it was still there, he urged his horse onto the path that separated the waters and toward the high ground at its end. They were about halfway to the lonely villa when he spotted shadows between the waves. For a fleeting moment, he could have sworn they were human heads, but it quickly became apparent that they were not men. They were seals.

Looking around, Raven realized they had surrounded him.

*No, not seals... Fairies?*

He hadn't known about selkies before Lydia had shared her knowledge of them, but the way the spirits inside him tensed told him these creatures were beyond human. Supposing they were fairies of the sea, they wouldn't be able to follow him onto land.

Raven kicked the stirrups to hurry his horse on. The selkies dove under the surface as one, creating a massive wave that started to close in on him. There

was no escaping it; it swallowed him up and dragged him down to the water's depths. Even as he tried to push himself back to the surface, the fairies coiled around him, sinking their teeth into him to pull him down farther. He yanked out his dagger and swung it. It made contact with something, spreading red blood through the water. Alarmed, the selkies instinctively pulled back.

It took only a split second for the red to be sucked away by the gray of the ocean. The selkies swam at Raven again, tightening the circle around him. There were too many, and moving underwater was no mean feat. His lungs would not hold out much longer either.

Just then, he thought he heard a command to stop; that he wasn't their target. Something came up behind him to support his arms and lead him up to the surface. The violent waves fizzled out, and the waters released him without resistance. He gasped for air, but not without gripping the wrists of his savior's withdrawing hands.

"Ermine."

"Let us get to the shore quickly. It shan't be long before the waters turn rough again," she said, making no effort to escape his grip.

They took shelter on the slope, in a hollow that partly shielded them from the wind and the waves. Ermine—or perhaps the selkie that looked just like her—sat upon the sand and explained that they were currently in one of the villa's blind spots.

Raven threw off his water-sodden jacket. "You said I wasn't their target?"

Ermine lifted her exhausted gaze to him questioningly.

"When you stopped the selkies from attacking me."

"Oh, yes. The man who has captured their companions in this villa and is treating them with such cruelty has them agitated."

"Ulysses."

"That's right. But they have no way to reach him. They attacked you, thinking you were working with him."

"So the selkies in the waters are not at Ulysses's beck and call?"

“No, but those serving in the villa—the ones who have taken human form—are. The selkies in the ocean *are* being manipulated, however. Ulysses enraged them so that they would turn the waters violent.” Ermine was leaning against a rock. Raven’s knife was still embedded in her shoulder. The bleeding hadn’t stopped; even now, the red liquid continued to drip down her arm. Partway down it became translucent, before turning into glassy dust that sifted onto the sand.

It was undeniable that Ermine was no longer human. Therefore, she wasn’t Raven’s sister. She was an enemy like any other. The blood that ran through her veins held no connection to him anymore.

“As you can see, I am no longer the ‘person’ I once was,” Ermine said, noticing his intent gaze.

“Miss Carlton suggested you might be a selkie.”

“A fairy doctor would certainly know.”

“Did you save me because Ulysses wants me alive?”

After a moment of hesitation, Ermine shook her head. “He told me to remain hidden because of my injury. That is my only instruction at present. However, I doubt it shall be the last. No doubt he intends to make full use of me in his pursuit of Lord Ashenbert.”

Edgar was not easily moved by sentiment, but he would face any danger if it meant protecting those he felt responsible for. Ermine was one of those people. He had trusted her to the extent that he blamed himself for being unable to prevent her betrayal. Knowing this, the enemy had identified Ermine as Edgar’s weak point.

Feeling a twinge of irritation, Raven went to stand beside her. “You are supposed to be dead. For what reason did you return? Why was it enough to shed your humanity?”

“I never wished to regain my life. At least, I never felt that I did, but perhaps my heart feels differently deep inside. I believe it longs to serve his lordship once more, if only that were possible.”

“His lordship is engaged to be married.”



“You misunderstand me, Raven. I simply wish to serve him. That is what I have wanted from the very beginning.”

“You leaked our movements to the Prince in order to keep his lordship to yourself.”

Ermine had known that if Edgar became an earl and solidified his place in Britain’s aristocracy, her feelings would have even less chance of requital. She wanted to remain as close as she could, as somebody who had fought beside him.

“Yes, I did. I lost sight of my original desire. What I felt for Lord Ashenbert went beyond loyalty, and those were the feelings the Prince took advantage of.” Blood continued to seep from the wound on her shoulder. Raven wondered whether hemorrhage could be fatal to fairies. Whether fairies were mortal in the first place. Why hadn’t Ermine removed the knife? “Raven. I want you to kill me. I do not see that there is another way. You must kill me properly, so that I have no way of returning a second time. I cannot bear to remain a tool for his lordship’s suffering.”

“You are already dead. What difference would killing you make?”

“I have heard that I may die as a human being does, so long as I am in this form. Selkies are closer to living beings than they are spirits.”

Killing her was for the best, Raven reasoned. It would end her suffering and was likely necessary to protect Edgar. If she could perish in the same way as a person, then he could do it without causing her any pain. He reached for her pale, defenseless neck.

“Forgive me.”

“You are her only brother.”

Raven turned to see they had been interrupted by the small, elderly woman.

“You ought to see how she fretted over you, despite no longer being human.”

“Are you a selkie too?”

“I am. My sealskin was taken a long time ago, and I have been under Ulysses’s command ever since. I may soon forget what it was like to take on my other

form, but I am selkie nevertheless.” Her tone made it sound like she was describing someone else’s life. It was clear that she did not follow Ulysses of her own free will.

Raven recalled that Lydia had said selkies were forced to obey whoever obtained their skins. They were enslaved, essentially. As he and Edgar had both been in the same position, he listened to the lady speak without hostility.

“Your sister’s body drifted through the oceans. Ulysses instructed me to give her new life as a selkie. She is still a babe in her second life, and I am like her mother.”

“And that is why you do not want me to kill her?” Raven said.

“If you would take a moment to consider things from her perspective, you might find that there was someone she wished to protect more than herself, or even her master: you.”

At first, Raven struggled to understand. For his part, there was nobody more important to him than Edgar. Next came the things precious and indispensable to his master. Raven had always worked to the utmost to protect those whom Edgar also tried to protect. As far as he was concerned, Ermine was just another name on that list.

He was not unique among their companions. They obeyed Edgar because of their trust. There were those who liked Raven and those who did not, but they cooperated because they were a team with their master at the helm. How could this woman claim that he was more important to Ermine than Edgar was?

“That is enough, nanny,” Ermine said.

“You are brother and sister.”

*What does that mean, beyond the fact that we happen to share a mother?*

Edgar had asserted the same as the old woman, emphasizing that Ermine was his sister. A question struck him then. When *had* Ermine first established contact with the Prince, and why? He had learned of her weakness and manipulated her so she would leak information to him. That couldn’t have happened without her meeting him in person.

Raven considered their escape. Had she left Edgar's side at any point? Yes. Just once. It had happened when Raven was captured by the enemy. Edgar had been engaged in a conflict with another group, and his servant knew enough to understand that he was to find his own way out. His master believed he could do it, and Raven knew he wasn't the only one Edgar had to worry about.

However, it had proved to be more difficult than anticipated. That was when Ermine had come to save him. Only later had he learned that she had acted of her own volition, but the rescue had gone so smoothly that he'd thought nothing of it.

Now, however, he wondered what had pushed her to act without Edgar's permission. She would have known that their leader wouldn't hesitate to order a rescue of Raven if he felt it was required, and that he wouldn't run the risk of leaving it too late. And yet she had chosen to prioritize her brother over Edgar's orders. What if the Prince had brainwashed her then?

Raven had never experienced such confusion. He was trying to think logically, but his emotions couldn't keep up.

*My sister...*

Edgar had probably come to the same conclusion. That was why he had reminded Raven that Ermine was his sister when the boy had blamed her for her betrayal. She had gone out to rescue him because he was her brother, more than just another companion. And she had been willing to risk betraying their master to do so.

"Raven...the selkies are crying out. Something might have happened. You must return to his lordship, quick—"

Raven grabbed Ermine's arm. Keeping it as taut as possible, he slid the knife from her shoulder in one go. She cried out in pain and fell limp as the boy lifted her onto his back and looked at the old woman.

"How does one heal a selkie's wound?"

"You are the owner of the knife and you have removed it. There is nothing left to worry about."

*That is why Ermine couldn't pull it out herself...*

“Ermine. I shall take you to his lordship. He can decide what to do with you.”

Raven made sure they weren't seen as they slipped back into the villa, after which he made straight for Edgar. Ermine had stopped bleeding shortly after he pulled the knife out, but her strength had yet to return. He was prepared for it to take a while.

Though he rushed to Edgar's room, he arrived to find it empty. He lay Ermine down on the sofa, then turned to seek his master. That was when the door opened to reveal just the man he had been looking for.

“Raven! Thank God you're all right!” Edgar broke into a relieved smile.

The earl was the first person to have ever treated him like a human being. Even the most dangerous of missions seemed utterly insignificant compared to what Edgar had chosen to live with. His master was the sole voice the violent, bloodthirsty spirits inside him would listen to. Raven wanted only what Edgar did, and that had always been enough for him.

Now, however, the boy had formed a wish of his own. He approached his master's arms, spread out in a display of deep affection, and knelt before them.

“My lord. I ask that you pardon my sister. She may still be under the Prince's control and may cause you harm. If so, I am prepared to take full responsibility. I shall keep my eye trained on her. I am prepared to kill her should it be necessary. But I ask that you save her. Please.”

In this way, Edgar was alerted to Ermine's presence on the sofa. He approached her, at which she exerted herself to try and sit up. As she hung her head, he took her tightly into his arms. “Welcome back, Ermine.” He then turned to Raven and put both arms around his shoulders. “Welcome back.”

Raven recalled when Edgar had embraced them similarly upon their joint return. At the same time, the strained look on his master's face suggested that he could not rejoice fully in their reunion.

“Did something happen, my lord?”

“Yes. Lydia has been kidnapped by Ulysses.”

# The Mystical Fort

Ulysses had been posing as Oscar. Naturally, this meant that the real Oscar Collins was dead. Ulysses had likely targeted the boy, who had come to visit his uncle and enroll in school, on his passage from America. He had usurped Oscar's possessions and life before even stepping onto British soil. Most likely, the fake persona he had used to board the ship had been passed off as dead. It wasn't unusual for deaths to occur on these weeks-long voyages or for passengers to go missing after falling overboard.

After that, it wouldn't have been difficult for Ulysses to infiltrate the Collinses' estate; Mr. and Mrs. Collins had never met their nephew. As for why the Prince was targeting them in the first place, there was supposedly a hint within the package from Scarlet Moon. It contained a sheet of copper that fit in the palm of the hand. As a piece of art, its motif of ships and angels was gorgeous in its own right, but the important details were in its hidden pattern. It was an ensemble of overlapping spirals that were vaguely reminiscent of dark magic symbols.

"I'm told this is part of a ward against evil spirits." Raven glanced at Edgar, who nodded, before continuing. "This sheet copper is a recent reproduction. The age of the original is unknown, but it was apparently produced at the behest of the Blue Knight Earl."

The Blue Knight Earl, also known as the Earl of Ibrazel: the man whose title was now held by Edgar. The last man recorded to have held the position lived three hundred years ago and had a lover in the form of a painter. It was she who had created the link between the earl and society of artists, Scarlet Moon, who knew more about the earldom's history than Edgar did. That was why he had asked them to search for a connection between the Blue Knight Earl, who despised the Prince, and the Collinses.

"Was there somebody he needed to protect from evil?" Edgar asked.

"It goes beyond protecting individuals. According to the sheet's owner, it

comes from a structure that was built generations ago. The owner's ancestor was involved in the construction and left this diagram in this copper."

"Where is the original structure?"

"Take a look, my lord." Raven pointed at the sail of one of the ships traversing the choppy waters. There was a coat of arms on it.

"Two lions... The arms of William the Conqueror."

William I was the Norman king who had landed at Hastings. The battle he won earned him the Crown of England, and his lineage continued to rule to this day.

"So the original structure stands in Hastings?" Edgar surmised.

"Scarlet Moon believes so."

Meaning the Prince was targeting Hastings, where the Collinses just so happened to have their villa, rather than the family itself.

"But for what purpose would the Blue Knight Earl want to build something to ward off evil here, where William landed?"

"Precisely because of what William achieved; this land is pivotal to protecting England. Scarlet Moon is of the opinion that the Blue Knight Earl built the ward to defend against sinister invaders."

Edgar had only recently learned that the Prince had eradicated anyone carrying the Blue Knight Earl's blood. Presumably, he feared the appearance of a descendant who possessed mysterious powers and strong bonds with fairykind. No doubt that same fear had led him to send his underling to Hastings.

"Sinister invaders...being what, exactly?"

Raven frowned. "That much is unclear. However, Hastings sits on a near-straight line between London and Paris. He may have wished to defend against any influence from France, or rather thought that this was the most effective place to protect London and Britain as a whole from foreign invaders. The ward may have been a fortress of sorts."

"In other words, he sought to prevent the appearance of a second conqueror by building a charm to repel the French army?"

It was difficult for Edgar to immediately wrap his head around it. Having said that, England had a long history of war with France, and so perhaps such wards were a part of their strategy. Although sorcery was forbidden by the church, there were those within the royalty and nobility who secretly researched and kept the practice alive. The Blue Knight Earldom was associated with mysterious powers, so it was quite possible that one of the earls had contributed to the dark arts for the sake of the Crown.

“What are the Prince’s intentions with the Blue Knight Earl’s protective spell, then?”

“That is also unclear. Scarlet Moon has given me no information beyond what I have shared with you.”

“He seeks to destroy it.” Ermine finally spoke. Until then, she had been lying stock-still on the sofa. “Ulysses said it would be destroyed.”

“In preparation for the Prince to lead France’s army in an invasion, no doubt.”

Ermine let out an exasperated sigh.

“All jesting aside, I can well see the Prince setting his sights on London,” Edgar said. “Especially since he has already found success within America’s underbelly. If he wishes to make it here, he will first have to cross the Channel. Perhaps he fancies himself a second William the Conqueror.”

Raven nodded in agreement.

“In order to prevent Ulysses’s scheme, we must protect the Blue Knight Earl’s ward. I just wonder how they intend to destroy it. It would possibly involve ‘undoing’ the spell.”

“Do you know of anything similar to this sheet in the area, my lord?” Raven asked.

Edgar pointed out of the window to a hill that protruded out over the shore. “There are a number of rocks sticking out of the ground over there, varieties of which cannot be found on the beach itself. I noticed them when Lydia nearly fell—I worried she would hit her head—and they struck me as rather peculiar.”

“Then that hill is likely man-made,” Raven mused.

“I believe so. Most likely, beneath the surface it is a collection of rocks taken from elsewhere.”

As he thought of Lydia, Edgar’s concern for her heightened once more. She was suffering because of him. While he didn’t like the idea of involving her in his quarrel with the Prince, he otherwise saw her as a valuable ally. His enemy despised the Blue Knight Earl’s powers, so he could foresee Lydia’s ability to communicate with fairies being an indispensable weapon.

Edgar’s companions, including Raven and Ermine, had been prepared for danger and suffering in fighting for their shared goal. While did what he could to protect them, he also expected them to face a certain level of risk. That was why he had thought so little of putting Lydia through the same.

However, she was his employee, and one he had chosen for the unique abilities she happened to have. Her role in his becoming an earl had been incidental. That he had forced her into an engagement in order to keep her close to him was cowardly, and if he intended to keep up the arrangement, he couldn’t see her as an asset but rather as a girl he would do anything to protect.

A betrothal. It was something more than a contract keeping two people together. The sudden realization left Edgar utterly exasperated with himself.

Mrs. Collins wanted her daughter’s fiancé to be someone who would care for Theresa as she did—if not even more deeply. Marrying her daughter off meant parting with the girl she had raised so diligently and entrusting another with her future. A great resolve was required of her parents, and so the responsibility of her groom was great. Marrying a woman meant taking on what was formerly provided by her mother and father.

Edgar needed to protect all of Lydia: her cheerfulness, her overly generous heart, even her temper. He was supposed to be keeping her away from danger at all costs, and yet the terror she was going through now was his fault. Though he called himself her fiancé, he had failed to live up to the role. It was no wonder she didn’t trust him, and he could only imagine the deep despair she was feeling at this very moment.

“I allowed Lydia to be kidnapped before my very eyes. What kind of a man am I?”



He had *not* been acting like a man whose lover had been taken hostage. That much was certain. His plan had been perfect. And yet Lydia didn't trust him an inch, which was why he must have appeared completely heartless to her.

Edgar sighed as he stared out of the window. "Do you think she will despise me for this?"

"Yes, my lord."

Raven was only answering truthfully; it was not his intention to depress his master further. Strangely, his words had the effect of rousing Edgar into action.

"We ought to do something to ensure Ulysses does not escape."

"Would it not be more prudent to think of a plan to safely rescue Miss Carlton first?"

"When it comes to women, Raven, preemption is key."

Ermine was the one who replied. "I am relieved to see you have not changed, my lord." Though she didn't yet have the strength to stand, her slightly amused tone cheered Edgar somewhat.

"Here's hoping our remaining suitor can hold on to his life. That ought to make things easier."

Just then, there was a quiet knock at the door, followed by a wobbly voice. "Middleworth..."

Raven opened the door carefully, allowing Palmer to tumble in.

"Perfect timing," Edgar said. "What have you got for us?"

The former imposter cleared his throat. "I begged Master Collins to spare my life, just as you said. Told him I would do anything he asked of me. He gave me the task of guarding Miss Collins. She is in the underground warehouse, and he has the key."

Ulysses had put Palmer to work. From that, Edgar surmised that the Prince's underling didn't have any human allies present to share the burden of his task and had therefore relied solely on the selkies. Lydia was a fairy doctor, and the seallike fae had secretly approached her for help. Ulysses would want to keep the two separate, leaving Palmer as his only choice of guard. Had that not been

the case, Edgar's impersonator would likely have been killed on the spot.

Edgar had intentionally put Palmer's life at risk in order to gather information. No doubt Lydia would have considered it unacceptably cruel but, he reasoned, this was war.

"Splendid. Take me there."

Palmer faltered. "Say, do you really intend to protect me? Master Collins will surely kill me if he realizes what I'm up to."

Edgar took a step toward the other man and smiled as kindly as he could. "It was your turn to die next regardless of the actions you took. It would appear that Master Collins intended to save me for last. Besides, from his point of view, there would be no advantage to putting his full trust in you."

"Indeed," Palmer muttered. "That is why I chose to follow your instructions."

Edgar nodded. "The only way your life can be spared is if you devote it to my victory. Naturally, I shall endeavor to ensure you can return home safely."

The other man seemed to relax ever so slightly.

"Not that I can guarantee anything. Come, Raven." Edgar gave Palmer a gentle push on the shoulder.

Despair shadowing his features once more, the imposter began to lead the way.

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"Things are extraordinarily quiet, wouldn't you agree, Susie?" Mrs. Collins was sitting on her bed and gazing out of the window. The seas were as stormy as ever. The wind was a constant howl. But she considered this quiet. Perhaps she had sensed that something was happening, given that those in the villa had taken to exchanging hushed whispers.

"Yes, my lady." Susie placed some calming medicine on the bedside table and put a gown over her mistress's shoulders. "You are looking particularly well this morning."

"I feel unusually refreshed."

“Might that be because Miss Collins has found her future husband at last?”

“Yes, it must be.” Mrs. Collins opened up her hand and smiled at the cameo brooch within it. It was supposed to be in Theresa’s possession, a gift from her mother to see her off into married life. The girl had been wearing it on her breast during the first evening’s supper.

Susie frowned. Mrs. Collins must have taken it from her daughter’s room.

“If only she still lived, she could hope to be loved so tenderly. She could be happy...”

The maid’s eyes widened. “My lady, does this mean you knew?”

“Knew what?”

“That Miss Collins is...not Miss Collins?”

“Theresa is not Theresa?”

“Um...”

Even as she hesitated, Susie had the sense that her mistress knew the truth. Mrs. Collins was stroking the light-pink brooch gently, as though it were Theresa’s cheek. The maid leaned over and put her hand on the older woman’s.

“I know well how much love you hold for your daughter, my lady. It is only natural that you would struggle to accept the loss of one so important to you. But Miss Carlton has her own family, her own lover. People who care for her.”

“Miss...Carlton?” Though Mrs. Collins cocked her head in confusion, Susie continued.

“She has done much for your sake, my lady—more than enough. Is it not about time you let her go? Before it is too late?”

Her eyes swimming with anxiety, Mrs. Collins placed her palm gently on Susie’s cheek. “Forgive me, Susie. I have caused you so much concern, haven’t I?”

“Think nothing of it, my lady.”

“I wonder whether you might bring me some hot milk?”

“At once, my lady.”

Susie only left the room briefly, but when she came back with the milk, Mrs. Collins was nowhere to be seen.

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Frustrated, Lydia pounded on the door with all her might. It made no difference no matter how much she hit and kicked. Her fingers were stinging before she knew it, the skin grazed. She slumped to the floor, exhausted and close to tears.

There was only one small candle in the underground room. It wouldn't be long until it burned out completely and she was left in total darkness.

"That *fool*! Didn't he realize I could have been shot?!"

Her hands hurt. The darkness was frightening. And it was all Edgar's fault. If she had paused to think about it rationally, it was more Ulysses's fault than the earl's, but she was far from rational at the moment.

She recalled what Ulysses had said when he'd thrown her in here. *"Don't think this is the first time that scoundrel's been confronted with a situation like this."*

No doubt Edgar had suffered kidnapped companions before during his days fleeing the Prince.

*"But that doesn't guarantee he's coming to rescue you."*

Companions of whom he had lost a great number.

*"If he believes it to be beyond him, he won't hesitate to give up on you. He's a shrewd man. Else no one would have followed him."*

Would he abandon her? No matter how Edgar flirted with her, Lydia had never believed he had any romantic intentions. Rather, he valued her solely for her abilities as a fairy doctor. He might try to rescue her out of genuine concern, but that didn't mean that he felt for her in any particular way.

The despair took over then. If Edgar abandoned her, Ulysses would doubtless kill her; she had no value to him, after all.

There came a sound from behind her, and Lydia stiffened. She had thought she was alone here. This place was used as storage, and there were piles of all

sorts of things, but the back corners of the room were too dark to make out.

Another thump and a feeble cry. It sounded like a meow. Hardly daring to hope, Lydia approached the sound and found a tinned box of sweets that was moving. She took off the lid to find a ball of bushy gray fur.

“Nico!” She pulled him out at once.

“Lydia? I think it’s too late for me...”

“Nico, what happened?! Talk to me!” Holding the limp cat in her arms, she stroked his back frantically. He froze; he hated being touched.



“I’m so hungry.”

Lydia paused.

“I haven’t had a bite to eat since I was captured.”

At once irritated beyond belief, she let him down onto the floor. He staggered into a sitting position, held his tail up, and began to smooth it down bitterly.

“My tail has lost all its luster!” he lamented.

“You’re a fairy. You can go five minutes without eating.”

“Not if I want to maintain my gorgeous fur. Incidentally, Lydia, what are you doing here?”

“I have also been captured!” she couldn’t help but raise her voice, frustrated as it made her. The next second, however, her anxiety and anger seemed to vanish into thin air. Realistically, she knew that Nico’s presence didn’t guarantee her rescue, no matter how unconcerned he was.

“You have? I suppose that means you haven’t any food.” His spirit shattered, the fairy cat drooped his head once more.

“Did you manage to find the selkies’ skins by any chance, Nico?”

“I came across a suspicious room, made so that no fairies could enter it, which of course means the selkies can’t get in there either. That boy was loitering around. He found me, and that is how I came to be here.”

“That boy? You mean—”

“That’s right, Lydia! Mrs. Collins’s nephew is the mastermind behind this entire plot! Oscar! He realized I was a fairy and locked me up in that box!” Nico waved a triumphant paw in the air.

“Yes, I know.”

“Oh.” His spirit further shattered, the fairy cat drooped his head once more.

“Still, it is highly likely that the sealskins are inside the room you found.”

*That’s right... I am a fairy doctor.*

She may have taken on Theresa’s ghost and stumbled into this mess, but her

primary objective in staying in this villa was to rescue the selkies. There was no time to waste being depressed and angry with Edgar.

“What good will it do, worrying about whether he has given up on me or not? At the very least, *I* cannot afford to give up!” Lydia got to her feet. “We are escaping, Nico.”

“How? I’m too hungry to move.”

*That might well prove a problem.* She folded her arms and looked around them.

“Are you there, fairy doctor?” someone called from the other side of the door.

“Who is that?”

“Please take cover by the wall.”

There came the sound of rushing water, and it was getting louder. Before Lydia could so much as open her mouth, a great force battered the door and knocked it down. A huge wave came pouring in, making her cower against the side of the room in shock.

When the noise died down and she was able to raise her head, she saw that the piles of boxes had been crushed haphazardly against the wall behind her. The damaged door, too, was stuck there, but there was no water to be seen and Lydia was bone dry.

“By all means, come in,” Nico muttered, poking his head out from behind her. For someone who was so hungry he couldn’t move, he had certainly been swift in relocating.

“Forgive me. It was the only way to get through the door.” Their visitor was the old lady who had been with Ermine.

“You are a selkie?” Lydia asked.

“Yes. Although I begged your assistance, I can only apologize that I was able to do no more.”

“It’s all right. But I thought Ulysses had hidden your skins. How can you disobey him?”



“I have come here without his knowledge. He was the one who had me place that departed soul within you—and those orders I had no choice but to follow. The best I could do was to make sure you would regain your consciousness during the day.”

In doing so, she had taken the risk that Ulysses might kill her as an example to others. She and the other selkies had staked their lives on the hope they had placed in Lydia to set them free.

“When he sees the room in this state, he’ll immediately know it was the work of a selkie,” Lydia warned her.

“I know, but it was the only approach I had time for. Once he has dealt with you and the Blue Knight Earl, Ulysses plans to kill all of us. This is our last chance.” The elderly woman held her hand out. In her palm sat the lost aquamarine from Lydia’s mother. “I took it from you to ensure that Ulysses would not steal it.”

Lydia wondered if the villain was fond of such jewels.

“He wears a gemstone behind his ear,” the woman continued.

The statement seemed to come from nowhere. Lydia hadn’t seen it directly, so she didn’t know what sort of stone it was, but she nodded nonetheless.

“Be very careful. It is the heart of a selkie.”

Lydia gasped. A selkie’s heart was a symbol of its trust and loyalty. She and Nico had already surmised that Ulysses likely possessed one, given that he abused the selkies without fear of reprisal. However, she hadn’t realized that it was the gemstone he wore on his ear. He must have used it to lower the selkies’ guard before capturing them. Having gathered them in one place, he took their skins and put them to work, but the heart ensured that they could not unleash their rage on him.

“What is Ulysses’s aim in killing you after making you work for him?” Lydia asked.

“We do not know either. Now come, we must leave this place before we are discovered.”

Lydia nodded and turned to Nico. “Where is the room you mentioned?”

“Did you not hear me when I said I couldn’t move?”

“I saw you move just now!”

“I urgently require food.”

“Oh, never mind.”

“This way, fairy doctor.”

At least the selkie was offering to be helpful.

Leaving her useless companion behind, Lydia stepped out of the room. She could sense a number of other selkie servants watching anxiously from the shadows. They sent the old woman a wordless signal, presumably telling her that Ulysses wasn’t around and that it was safe to proceed. She hurried up the stairs, and the other selkies joined her in leading Lydia, who realized that they must have helped to knock down the door.

The fairy doctor touched the aquamarine that she was wearing around her neck again. *Will I really be able to protect them all by myself?*

She was dealing with a man so cruel that he would mispurpose a selkie heart. Not only that, he likely had more knowledge and experience as a fairy doctor than she did. Still, she could not walk away.

“Here it is.”

The elderly woman stopped in front of an unremarkable door on the second floor. Lydia put her hand to the knob, something the selkies wouldn’t have been able to do. To her surprise, it was unlocked. She gently pushed it open, but there didn’t seem to be anyone inside.

She entered alone. The room seemed like the last place anyone would think to hide sealskins. It clearly belonged to a child, what with its light-pink wallpaper, frilly curtains and cloth, rocking horse, soft dolls, and picture books.

“What is this place?” Lydia opened the closet. It was filled with child-sized dresses. She had expected to find a pile of at least ten skins waiting for her, but now she struggled to imagine where they could even be hidden.

Now that she thought about it, the skins *did* belong to fairies. The selkie's heart took on the form of a gemstone, so perhaps the skins also appeared as something different.

"Theresa? What's the matter?"

Lydia spun around. Mrs. Collins was standing in the doorway, a vase full of arranged flowers in her hand.

"Mrs... I mean, mother..."

The woman flung open the window, apparently oblivious to her mistake. "You must have fond memories of this room. You used to spend your summers here as a child. Do you remember?" Mrs. Collins didn't seem to expect a response. She held up one of the dolls. "It always terrified me to come in here. I worried that, if I saw this room empty, I would be forced to accept that you were really gone."

It sounded like the space had been sealed off ever since Theresa had been swept away by the waves. In all likelihood, Mrs. Collins had been in here before Lydia arrived and left it unlocked to fetch the vase of flowers. It must have been the first time she'd come here in over ten years. Since it had been locked all that time, it was very likely that Ulysses saw it as a prime hiding spot for the skins.

*Where could they be?*

"Oh dear, this place is full of dust! I suppose it would be, after twelve years."

*Dust?*

Suddenly, Lydia's eyes fell on a small box on the shelf. Its enamel ornamentation shone, and it stood out precisely because it *wasn't* dusty. She opened the intricate case to find it filled with several glass beads, each the size of a walnut.

She picked one up. It was damp and slightly elastic. Warmth radiated from its pale, ocean-blue surface, as though it were alive.

*Have I found them?*

"That case..."

Lydia jumped and whipped around to face Mrs. Collins. She wondered whether the woman would object if she tried to take it from the room. "It's very pretty."

"Isn't it? You were so small at the time, but you wanted it more than any toy. You take it with you wherever you go, even to this villa..." Still smiling, Mrs. Collins averted her gaze. "You may have it, if you like."

"I'm sorry?"

"You are at the perfect age to appreciate it." The woman stroked the coral decorations with a doughy finger. "It is a curious thing. I was sure I would wish for nothing but death the moment I stepped in here. Instead, I feel as though a weight has lifted from me. In all these years since I lost her, I have been walking in darkness. Now, I sense the tiniest ray of light."

It was as though Mrs. Collins knew everything, even that the recalled spirit was not actually Theresa.

"Excuse me, but—"

"I had ordered a finer case, one which you could use in preparation for your marriage. But I see that you will always prefer this one."

With that, the woman had slipped back into her dreamworld. Though the case contained the selkie skins, it was also a precious memento of Mrs. Collins's daughter. Lydia held it protectively in her arms.

"Are you in there, my lady?" Susie stepped into the room. Upon seeing her mistress, she looked instantly relieved. "Oh, thank goodness. You were with Miss Collins."

Lydia exchanged a smile with the maid. "You are right, mother, this room is dusty. Let us go to the garden."

Just then, there was a frightened shout at the door. "Fairy doctor! Ulysses is coming!"

The door closed and was audibly locked from the outside.

"Let us out!" Lydia started banging on it at once, but there was no reply. She couldn't hear the selkies either.

“What is happening, Miss Collins?” Susie took a step toward Lydia.

Mrs. Collins looked anxious but didn’t yet seem to realize the danger they were in. Whatever might happen to them in here, there was no way it would improve her mental state.

“Miss Susie,” Lydia began, searching for the right words. “This is the work of the man responsible for the murders. It is his intention to kill everyone here.”

“You know who the murderer is?”

“It’s Master Collins...although, he probably isn’t the *real* Master Collins.”

Susie gasped. “Yes... He only returned home last month, and no one in the family had ever met him before!”

Suddenly, Lydia could smell burning. Smoke was seeping in from under the wooden door. Pressing her ear to it, she could hear the crackling of wood and feel heat against her cheek.

“Fire!” She rushed to the window, only to find that something had been thrown through it: a bottle that had shattered on the frame and sprayed liquid everywhere. The flames spread in the blink of an eye.

She cowered instinctively. The flame-engulfed curtains above her began to fall strangely slowly toward her.

*We have to get away from here.*

Her foot caught on a birdcage. It swayed and then came crashing down on her head. Her vision blurred.

“Susie!” Mrs. Collins screamed.

Lydia forced her eyes open, doing all she could to stay conscious. Susie had collapsed, and Mrs. Collins had rushed over to her, put out the flames on her skirt, and pulled her over to the wall that the flames had yet to reach.

“You mustn’t die, Susie! I *will* save you!” The woman overturned the vase above her own gown, dousing it in water. Throwing the material over Susie’s head, she tried to get them both to their feet. It was the image of a mother doing everything in her power to protect her daughter.

Mrs. Collins seemed to have forgotten all about Lydia and, by extension, Theresa. Her biological daughter was already dead. Susie was the precious child who had remained by her side.

*Thank goodness.* Lydia was genuinely relieved. With this, perhaps Mrs. Collins could finally let go of Theresa. She must have realized now that, although they weren't blood-related, she and Susie shared the same affection for each other as mother and daughter.

At the same time, Lydia felt a lonely pang. *Ah...I ought to be saving myself.*

No one would be coming for her. Only now did she realize she had been gripping her aquamarine pendant.

*I understand, mother. I am a fairy doctor. It is my job to assist others in need. And even if I find myself alone, I must gather the strength to trust in myself.*

At last, she was able to push herself to her feet. She had managed to avoid the fiery curtains, but now the window was surrounded by flames, blocking it off as an escape route. Not just that, but the impact of her fall had sent the decorated case flying from her grip. It lay open on the floor, its contents scattered. She picked it up hastily and gathered the transparent beads.

"I'm missing some..." Lydia swept her gaze across the floor, spotting a single bead, and then another, beyond the flames.

*No!*

If the skins burned up, their owners would perish. Maybe that was Ulysses's intention in starting this fire: to destroy the building as well as the people and skins within it.

Lydia made to pass through the fire, but before she could move, a sudden gust from the window sent the flames surging. Forced to close her eyes, the next thing she felt was a pair of arms wrapping around her, as if to protect her from the heat. And then she was being dragged away. There came the crash of something fallen, and she collapsed into the gloom.

"Lydia! Thank God I made it in time!"

It was too dark to see anything clearly.

“Edgar?”

“Can you stand? It shan’t be long before the flames reach us here. Come, we must hurry outside.”

He pulled on her arm, and they started walking. When her eyes finally adjusted, she realized they were in the servants’ quarters, heading through a passageway. There must have been a third route out of Theresa’s room besides the window and door.

“What about Miss Susie and Mrs. Collins?”

“I entrusted Raven with their safety.”

“And the selkie skins?” Lydia had the case in her arms and a skin in her hand, but there had still been several left on the floor of the room. She halted and turned to go back, but Edgar stopped her.

“You will have to leave them.”

“No! I cannot bear the thought of doing so!”

“Please. This is reckless.”

“But... Oh, Ermine’s skin might be among those left behind. Selkies die if their skins are burned!”

Edgar paused ever so briefly to consider her words. “That is a shame.”

Lydia recalled Ulysses’s warning: that the earl was perfectly capable of giving up on his companions.

“A shame? Is that all? Well, I suppose you *are* used to letting people die.”

Of course it was idealistic of her to suggest they still had a chance of saving anyone; Edgar would have known from experience just how hopeless their situation was. Lydia had always tried to be sympathetic toward the agonizing choices he had been forced into and the pain of losing his companions as a result. Still, she couldn’t stop herself from twisting the knife. She had felt abandoned by him, and the isolation she had endured as those flames danced around her fueled her obstinance.

“Why not forget about me too? You are under no obligation to rescue me. I

do not belong to you, and I wish to act in accordance with my principles!”

Edgar pulled her in. She knew she ought to have controlled her temper. But when he spoke, his voice took on a gentle tone. “I shall go.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Get outside.” He turned on his heel and hurried back through the narrow corridor.

*Edgar?*

Struggling to process what had just happened, Lydia was rooted to the spot for a moment. Then, she started to chase after him.

After only a few steps, the smoke came pouring in, choking her. The fire had progressed into the hallway. She could already catch glimpses of the flames at its far end. The area was suddenly illuminated as they intensified.

“Edgar... No... What now?” She would have slumped to the floor if not for the grip on her arm.

“I told you to go outside.”

The slight anger in his voice quickly urged her into obedience.





The pair escaped out into the back garden. Lydia turned around to see the large building dotted with flames. It seemed Ulysses had started several fires throughout the interior.

They moved upwind to escape the smoke and dancing embers of the building. Only when they reached the stone steps that led to the coast were they finally free of the smoke's stench.

Exhausted, Lydia slumped down onto the ground. Still standing, Edgar studied her from above.

"I was only able to find one." He opened his palm, revealing a single sealskin.

Lydia took it from him. After checking how many were actually in the case, she hung her head.

"How many are missing?"

"Around half."

"I suppose you wouldn't appreciate it if I said that saving half is better than none?"

If saying that was all he had done, then no, she certainly wouldn't appreciate it. But Edgar had gone back into those flames. That was more than she could say for herself.

"Why did you come for me?" she asked.

"I said I would, didn't I?"

"I refused to get my hopes up. I never believe anything you say. So why would you risk yourself by jumping into the flames?"

"I would do anything for you, whether you believe that or not."

"What an easy thing to say."

Edgar had known that there was still a slim chance of saving those skins, else he wouldn't have bothered going back for them. Lydia certainly wouldn't have been capable of succeeding at that point, but he had wagered that he just might manage it.

"You did not see those flames as any great threat. Otherwise, you *would* have

given up.”

Still, how much courage must it have taken for him to be able to judge the situation so rationally? It might have been easy for him to claim it was for her sake, but the action itself couldn't have been easy after all. Lydia was surprised to find her inner thoughts shifting. It frustrated her that she couldn't simply thank him.

“You may be angry at me if you wish,” she said.

“Why should I be angry?”

“I just said something abhorrent to you.”

Edgar's long sigh left her on tenterhooks. His smile held a touch of sadness.

“Every time I think we have gotten closer, you seem to withdraw again. Every time. Now and then, you worry so earnestly about me, only for me to push you away and prevent your heart from opening up completely, whether that is because I act insensitively or because I put you through something distressing. I see now that it is my fault that, no matter what I may say, you continue to distrust me.”

He continued, his tone uncharacteristically sincere.

“The sentiment that Miss Collins shared with me yesterday has been similarly expressed by other women I have pursued. They are content that I treat them as my lover only when we are together, as though under the impression that I do not seek a serious commitment. No doubt it is my behavior that gives them this impression, though thus far, I failed to see the problem as long as we were enjoying ourselves. You are the first to ever reject me outright for the insincerity you perceive within me. That is why I believe that, if *you* were to fall in love with me, I might be able to change.”

Though Lydia sensed him sitting down next to her, she didn't raise her head.

“How you and I define sincerity may well differ. However, if it is sincerity that you require from me, then I think I might be able to offer it.”

“I disagree. We are too different.”

“Perhaps. That does little to dissuade me.”

*Why?*

“You are wasting your time. In fact, I am not worth anybody’s time.”

Edgar cocked his head, confused.

“I couldn’t be the daughter that Mrs. Collins wanted. She knew that neither I nor the spirit possessing me were Miss Collins. She knew, then, that her daughter was never coming back. I, too, understand that my own mother will never return. I may call myself a fairy doctor, but I was never able to learn the things I should have from her. Though I do what I can alone, ultimately, it amounts to very little.”

If Edgar hadn’t come to rescue her, she would have yielded to the fire along with every last selkie skin. She had done her best to keep a positive mindset, but in truth, the despair had almost overwhelmed her. Mrs. Collins had chosen to save *Susie*, leaving Lydia to fend for herself. She had her pride as a fairy doctor, but that was it. Her knowledge and experience were lacking, and she didn’t have a motherly figure she could depend on. She was useless and pathetic, so she had fully expected Edgar to abandon her.

Only, he hadn’t.

She was beyond grateful for that, but she couldn’t see how she could live up to the expectations he had of her.

“I am not worth your time,” she repeated. “I am too cowardly and dependent on others. I act fearless when in truth there is nothing *but* fear inside me. It doesn’t matter how dearly I wish to save the selkies; I am utterly powerless in the face of Ulysses. Every thought I have in my head is devoted to fleeing this place as fast as possible!”

It was only then that she realized something. She had been taken here against her will and forced to wield the spirit of one departed. The only reason she could muster up the determination to remain here and save the selkies was because Edgar had come. With him by her side, she could believe that thwarting the enemy wasn’t just a pipe dream. He brought out a courage in her that she couldn’t muster by herself. It was because she hadn’t recognized how much she depended on him that the thought of his abandonment caused her so much despair.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Sorry?"

"I shan't let you be overwhelmed by fear anymore. I am with you."

"My... My fear wasn't the result of your absence..." In fact, it was, but she suddenly felt too embarrassed to admit it.

"Meeting you opened my path to freedom. It would bring me no greater joy than if you were to promise to stay with me. And should you do so, I hope you will rely on me. Although I cannot help you in matters related to fairies, I *can* support you. I sincerely want to become a man that you are able to depend upon." Edgar's voice was determined as he looked out over the sea.

Lydia stole a glance at him. His silky golden bangs hung close to his eyes, and when she studied his handsome face, she noticed that the tips of his hair were singed. Before she knew it, she was sweeping those burnt ends away with her fingers.

He turned in her direction. His ash-mauve gaze was hard to define as a single color. It was just like the sentiments Lydia held for him: she didn't know if he was good or evil, loving or uncaring, honest or deceitful. He was now gripping her hand. His breathtaking face was drawing nearer, its pull on her strengthening.

"Wait!" she stuttered, instinctively pushing his head away with her free hand.

He hummed thoughtfully, then grumbled, "I was absolutely certain that you were willing this time."

Just when she thought he was finally taking things seriously, he ruined the mood. She supposed she shouldn't have expected anything different from him.

"Doesn't your brain have space for anything else?" she asked.

"Not a lot of it."

Beyond the grove, the villa was burning ever more intensely. Despite that, Lydia found she was not as downcast as before. It was lightheartedness, not a lack of sincerity, that Edgar had employed, and perhaps that was a virtue. She felt less burdened, and she certainly wasn't scared anymore.

"I am far from dependable myself," she began. *And yet you would marry me?*

She didn't yet have the courage to ask her question.

"Hm?" Edgar prompted.

"Never mind..." She must have been tired. Her mind felt heavy, even though the evening had only just begun. "I'm falling asleep. I think Miss Collins will awake soon."

She leaned on Edgar's shoulder, simply because she wanted to. Perhaps it was because she had seen how fast Theresa was to cling to him that she felt there was no harm in it. Or perhaps Theresa was already taking over. That would be a convenient excuse.

But, she suddenly realized, no matter how close she got to Edgar, she felt completely at ease. Her heart was pounding. Still, she knew how much affection and tenderness he was capable of when presented with a girl. She had seen how he embraced Theresa, and though it vaguely irritated her, she recognized that it had been for her own safety. That, and she knew that Edgar had seen *her* and not Theresa. Allowing herself a small moment of conceit, she entertained the possibility that each embrace had been for her sake.

Edgar's back was slightly broader than her father's. He was slender too, but he made up for it in height, where he again surpassed Professor Carlton.

"Miss Collins?" Edgar asked as the girl shifted against him.

"I can hear the sea... Are we outside?" Theresa's voice was still thick with sleep. Unlike Lydia, she was happy to lean her full weight on Edgar.

The fairy doctor feared that the sudden lack of hesitation might have given her away as the action's originator. The spirit was quick to place her hands on his knee.

Flustered, Lydia gently lifted her left hand. Edgar chuckled quietly before laying his own hand on top to stop it. His hands were far more delicate than her father's.

"What are we doing here? Why is my dress so filthy?" asked Theresa.

"The villa is on fire."

“Heavens!” The girl’s eyes widened as she turned to see the building in flames.

A dark look etched onto his face, Edgar gazed at the sky. “The wind has changed direction. Let us move from here.”

# A Dream in Aquamarine

The entire villa was engulfed in blinding flames. In their bid to escape the embers and ash, Edgar and Lydia—or rather, Theresa—were forced toward a hill on the tiny island. Presently, the earl was carrying the decorated case for her. As drained as Lydia felt, she had just about managed to hold on to her consciousness.

The seas were raging even more intensely than before. As far as Lydia could make out, the number of selkies in the waters was increasing. Ulysses had infuriated the fairies, and yet they could do nothing to harm him as long as he possessed the heart. It was unlikely that burning the villa was part of his original plan. The thought that he might have something else up his sleeve sent anxiety bubbling up within Lydia. She used the hand she had control over to seek out her aquamarine pendant. Fear overwhelmed her to an unbearable degree. Ulysses was misusing his knowledge as a fairy doctor. She was almost certain that she would therefore have to be the one to face him, not Edgar. But that didn't mean she was alone. Or at least she wanted to believe as much.

"I am so afraid, my lord. How could this have happened?" Theresa was clinging to Edgar's arm as they walked.

"It's all right. I'm here."

"My memory fails me far too often. I cannot help but wonder why." It seemed she was scared of more than just the flames. She was beginning to sense how unnatural her being there was. "*I am* alive. I cannot be sent back to the world of the dead, can I?"

It was the same concern Lydia had been grappling with. Theresa could not possess a body for more than a week, and that would be a difficult pill for the spirit to swallow. She may not have been the real Theresa, but she had inherited the girl's life and fallen in love with Edgar. How would she react if she knew she would lose everything again?

"Who is Lydia?"



The fairy doctor's left hand stiffened. How did Theresa know about her?

"I beg your pardon?" Edgar's confusion came off very naturally. It was like he was used to one woman questioning him about another.

*And he wonders why I cannot take his flirtations serious—*

"It is the name you called me while I slept yesterday."

*What?*

"You must have been dreaming."

"I wonder. You appeared greatly distressed. You begged my forgiveness, then held on to my left hand for a long, long while. I felt as though I ought to keep my silence."

If that was true, Lydia must have been unconscious at the time. She couldn't remember a thing.

Theresa stopped in her tracks and looked down at herself. "From time to time, I am suddenly overcome by a peculiar sensation. I wonder whether this is really me. The distance to my toes doesn't seem right, and I cannot remember my hands and fingernails being so clean." She reclaimed a strand of her rust-colored hair from the wind's grip and frowned at it. "My hair feels as though it is the wrong color. When I look in the mirror, I find it hard to believe that the reflection there is mine. I endeavored to ignore these thoughts, but my doubts only grew when I heard you speak the name 'Lydia.'"

Edgar didn't say anything. He just stared at her with a troubled expression.

"This girl is not me. Am I correct? My body was lost when I died. The reason you treat me with such tenderness is because you care for this body's owner."

*What now, Edgar?*

Lydia could only sit fretfully and watch things unfold.

"I thought I wouldn't mind it if you only *pretended* we were lovers. But, even in our most intimate moments, the words and embraces you share with me are not truly mine."

"Miss Collins—"

“Tell me the truth.”

Edgar averted his gaze in defeat. “Lydia is my fiancée. She was kidnapped in London. When I came here to bring her back, I found her possessed by your spirit.”

Theresa faltered before letting out a mournful sigh. “Why did you not tell me so from the outset? You ought to have told me before I fell so deeply in love with you!”

“He lied to you, Theresa. He wanted to ensure that you would not flee or become desperate and bring harm to that body.”

Edgar turned to see who had interrupted them. A young man stepped out from a sparse collection of trees. His hair was a light blond, and his ruthless smile was at odds with the boyish vulnerability he exuded.

“Ulysses...”

“He is eagerly awaiting the moment that your soul returns to Heaven.”

Theresa took a slow, shaky step back from Edgar. “Of course... To you, my lord, I am no more than a strange spirit.”

“Come to me, Theresa. I can make you human. I can make that body yours.”

“Balderdash. Were that possible, you would have made it so from the very start. You killed this woman, Ulysses, and made her out to be Miss Collins’s ghost, all so that you could deceive Mrs. Collins and commandeer this villa.”

“And why should any of that matter to her now? You would cherish a second chance at life, wouldn’t you, Theresa? You are still young, and there are so many wonderful things you could yet experience. You need only do as I say, and I can ensure that you remain in this world. Or would you rather disappear, when there is currently not a soul who would mourn you?”

“He is trying to trick you,” Edgar urged her, but Theresa was already staggering over to Ulysses.

“I can live?” she asked.

“That is the man who killed you in the first place!”

“You wish her dead too, my lord,” Ulysses said. “You are just as guilty as I.”

*Don't go, Miss Collins! Ulysses will not keep his promise! It is his way to kill anyone who has served his purpose!* Lydia's desperate pleas fell on deaf ears.

“Take this.” Ulysses tossed a knife at Theresa's feet. “I need you to retrieve the case from that man and bring it to me.”

Though she picked up the knife, the spirit hesitated. She must have wondered what Ulysses wanted with such a worn case. But Lydia could *not* abide it being stolen. Not when it contained something so precious. The selkies had placed their lives in her hands, and she had to protect them at all costs. But with only her left hand under her control, there was little she could do.

*I'm begging you, Edgar...do not give her the case!*

“I am afraid I cannot let you have this,” said the earl.

“Theresa. Press that knife into your arm.”

*What?!*

“You will feel little pain. Should that body become unusable, I shall prepare you another.”

*He can't mean to do this!*

Theresa seemed just as confused. But perhaps out of a curiosity to see if it would hurt or not, she proceeded to put the knife to her arm.

“No!” Edgar cried, making her stop in her tracks.

Ulysses grinned jovially. “I thought you would have endured a little longer than that.” He addressed Theresa next. “Approach him, slowly. Ah, but do not get too close. Put the knife to your neck, and do not fret: even if your hand should slip, you will not die. One cannot die twice.”

As troubled as she looked, Theresa obeyed every command like a puppet. She couldn't work out what the best course of action was. As much as she loved Edgar, she now carried the pain of his betrayal. Then there was her envy of Lydia. She wanted to live, but she didn't know whether she could trust the man who had killed her in the first place.

Edgar watched her as she stayed frozen to the spot. He could tell how her heart was wavering. No doubt he was trying to come up with a way to pull her from Ulysses's deceptive grip. He couldn't simply say he cared about her; it would be a bald-faced lie.

"If you would be so kind as to place the box on the ground and withdraw, my lord," the boy said, "unless you are in the mood for a little bloodshed?"

*I, for one, am not,* Lydia thought. However, she was prepared to go through some pain if she needed to.

Edgar had expected her to endure some level of suffering when he let Ulysses take her. She would be greatly disappointed with him if, after all that, he gave up the case without a fight now.

He put the box at his feet. It seemed he wasn't prepared for her to go through even an ounce of pain. If Theresa was to be believed, he had begged Lydia's forgiveness while she slept. Suppose that was how he *really* felt...

*Perhaps he cares for me more than I thought.*

Not that it helped her now.

Edgar did not step back from the case. "Miss Morris," he said suddenly.

Theresa gazed at him, confused.

"You are not Miss Collins. You are Miss Maggie Morris. Are you prepared to let things end here, without knowing who you are or the truth of what befell you?"

"Maggie..." she murmured.

"That's right. You were a seamstress." Edgar pulled a handkerchief from his breast pocket and unfolded it. "A highly skilled one, I might add. Here, you have an 'M' accompanied by a four-leaf clover and ladybird, symbols of luck. You must have embroidered them onto your handkerchief as a way to soothe yourself. As I said, they demonstrate a high level of skill."

*Miss Morris!* Lydia suddenly remembered. The woman whose body had been found in the Thames the morning after her meeting with a "Lord Ashenbert." The inspector had said that she was a seamstress. *What a tragic tale...*

“You too had someone who you held dear, Miss Morris. I trust you remember who taught you to embroider like this?”

As Edgar spoke, tears started to rush from Maggie’s astonished eyes. She didn’t seem to be aware of them.

“My mother... She taught me to embroider these...good luck charms...”

“I am certain that your family and friends have been praying for your soul to find peace and happiness. Would you forget about them and sever those bonds by taking on the life of another? Is that what you truly want?” Edgar took a step toward her. “The people who love you won’t forget you as long as they live. They will carry their grief with them always, but if *you* remember them, they will be able to go on living, knowing that you are watching over them.”

“Pay no heed to his words, Theresa. If you continue to live as Mrs. Collins’s daughter, your every wish will be granted. You will not want for money, and you will be able to marry a nobleman.” Though Ulysses had raised his voice, Maggie was not answering to the name “Theresa” anymore.

“I am deeply sorry that I ever hurt you, Miss Morris. However, I too have someone I hold dear. Someone I wish to protect in body and soul. Please, return Lydia to me.”

Maggie’s tears were throwing Lydia into confusion. She felt as though they were her own.

*Edgar...you sound strangely sincere.*

“I remember...” The knife dropped from Maggie’s limp grip. “I always longed for wealth. If only I could marry a rich man, I thought, my life would be forever happy. That was why I pretended to come from a distinguished family.”

She looked up at Edgar, smiling through her tears. “Becoming Miss Collins was like a dream come true. Everyone spoiled me. I knew it didn’t make sense, but I desperately wanted to ignore the uncertainty. I am glad, my lord, that you made it clear that this body is not mine, and that you do not love me. Through that, I was able to remember that there are things that I, too, held dear, regardless of my lack of wealth.”

“What utter rubbish! You despised your family and the environment in which

you lived! Why else would you have been so elated to meet with me when I claimed to be an earl?" Ulysses cried.

*He is wrong. Families may quarrel, and sons and daughters may rebel, but I doubt you would find anyone on this Earth who truly hates their family.*

"I wish to go home. My mother may complain constantly, my father may be slothful, and my brothers may be saucy, but they are my family and they are irreplaceable. I wonder if I might fly to them?"

"You most assuredly might," Edgar replied.

Maggie wrapped her arms around him and squeezed.

*Excuse me?*

"I hope that your fiancée will not stumble."

"I shall hold her to make sure she does not."

"Hold her more tightly than that. She intends to push you away when I am gone."

*How does she know that?* Had she noticed that her left hand often tried to keep Edgar away as best it could? Presently, however, Maggie had both arms around him. Lydia's chest was tight as her heart battered around inside it, and she felt she might collapse.

"Thank you for discovering who I truly am."

A feathery wind seemed to pass through Lydia's body. Then, every ounce of tension left her. Edgar's arms ensured that she didn't fall. Though she had the willpower to push him away, she lacked the strength.

"Welcome back, Lydia. I shan't let go of you ever again."

*I should have known.*

She had been so impressed by how skillfully he had convinced Maggie to go that she had forgotten about his penchant for lighthearted quips.

"Edgar, this is no time for..." She trailed off as she caught sight of Ulysses. He clicked his tongue and was now pulling out a pistol.

"Useless. Every last one of them."

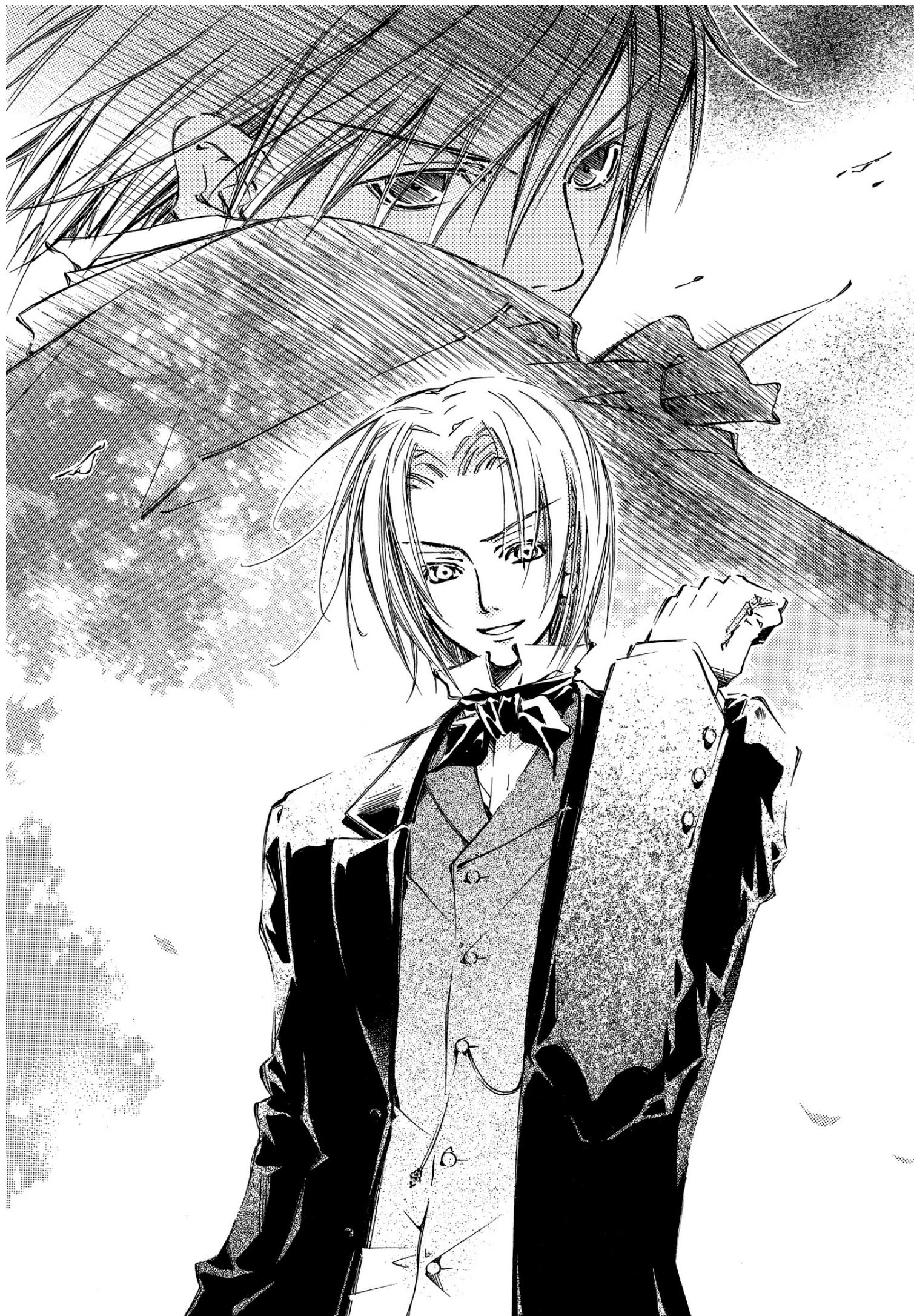
“It’s all right,” Edgar murmured, not letting go of her.

There was a rustling in the bushes. Raven leaped out to attack Ulysses just as the blond whipped around. The pistol was kicked from his grip as the expressionless servant swung a knife at him. It seemed certain that the knife would plunge into his throat, until the next second, when he swiveled around a tree. Lydia cringed as the blade sank into the bark. She could only imagine what would have happened had it connected with flesh.

It seemed that Ulysses knew this was no ordinary opponent. He pulled back even farther as Raven readied his knife again.

“I was hoping I wouldn’t have to run into you,” Ulysses said. “In fact, I had been endeavoring to avoid it.”

He raised a hand, and two men emerged from the darkness of the trees.





“Go,” he commanded them simply, then pulled a blue bead from his pocket and began to fiddle with it very deliberately. It was a sealskin. The box hadn’t contained all of them. It pointed to a truth about the two men.

“Raven! They are selkies!” As Lydia cried out, a large swirl of water came rushing toward her and Edgar. Terrified, she squeezed her eyes shut and heard the crashing of the waves around her as her feet were lifted from the ground.

Edgar was torn away from her. The water clogged her airways. It was as her consciousness was fading that she suddenly felt the waves pull away, and she was thrown onto a solid surface.

“Ouch...”

Though she opened her eyes, she was in pitch darkness. She had only been caught up in the waves for a short moment. Where could they have taken her? The ground beneath her felt cold and flat, like stone, and there seemed to be a pillar of some kind next to her. She was likely in a building of some description.

“Lydia? Can you hear me?” Edgar was calling to her from somewhere.

Lydia began to crawl, fumbling around her surroundings. When she tried for the direction from which she had heard him, she came up against a wall.

“Where are you, Edgar?”

“I cannot see well enough to tell. Are you hurt?” His voice echoed all around her. She couldn’t work out its origin.

“No. How do you suppose we ended up here?”

“It must have been the fault of those selkies.”

“Does that mean Ulysses has us trapped?”

“I don’t feel as though that is the case. The selkies do not *want* to answer to him; perhaps those waves were meant to bring you here without him noticing. The trees around us were also washed away, but the water seems to have protected us both.”

A secret rebellion against the one who held their skins hostage... Lydia was reminded of the old woman, who, while doing as Ulysses asked, had allowed

Lydia to have control of herself during the daylight hours.

“How curious that, despite all of that, there is not a drop of water on me,” Edgar remarked.

“It wasn’t real water. It was something created by the selkies’ magic.”

The fairies were still placing their hopes of rescue on Lydia.

“If we *both* move, I fear we shall never find one another. Would you stay still for me?” asked Edgar.

“I can do that, but...”

“I promise I shall find you. Keep speaking. I shall use your voice to lead me to you.”

“All right.” Lydia peered into the darkness now that her eyes had adjusted, but she still couldn’t make anything out. “Why do you suppose the selkies wanted to bring me to this place, Edgar? What could be so significant about it?”

“I wonder whether we aren’t below that hill. I believe this area acts as a ward and was formed long ago by the Blue Knight Earl.”

“A ward?”

“A fortress of sorts, imbued with magic, built to protect London from overseas invaders. It would seem that Ulysses has come to destroy it on the Prince’s orders.”

“Really? How?”

Judging from the reverberation of their voices, the area was rather spacious. Given that the slightest movement brought Lydia in contact with a stone wall or pillar, it probably had a labyrinthian structure. All the more reason a single person would struggle to destroy it.

“I have been wondering the same thing,” Edgar said.

A thought occurred to Lydia then. When Maggie and the earl had been walking along the shore, the waters had grown more violent than ever. The fairy doctor had also spotted a great number of selkies gathering between the waves. The skins she had failed to rescue should have burned in the fire.

Considering the strong bonds the seallike creatures had with each other, it must have been their anger and grief that had brought them together like that. Ulysses had started the fire in an attempt to kill all the selkies who served him. What if he had done so in order to draw in a large group of their enraged brethren?

“Edgar! He will use the selkies!”

“Elaborate.”

“Selkies have been known to group up and seek revenge when their brethren have been severely wronged. Several of them have gathered all around to ensure Ulysses pays for what he has done. Were they all to charge at once, this entire island will be torn apart and washed away by the sea.”

Edgar fell silent for a moment to consider her words. “Why, then, have they not attacked *yet*?”

“Likely because Ulysses is controlling them. The gemstone he wears on his ear is a selkie’s heart. For a human to receive one is supposed to be a symbol of friendship and trust, but Ulysses is misusing it.”

“And that is why they do not attack him and must obey his every command?”

“Possessing the heart does not make the selkies subservient to you, unlike the skin. As far as I know, however, it *does* command the utmost respect from them.”

It was clear how skilled Ulysses was from the way he dangled the heart over the enraged selkies, keeping them at arm’s length. What was Lydia to do against such an adversary? She felt dreadfully inadequate. The more pressing the situation, the more her inexperience held her back. Nevertheless, *she* was the fairy doctor here, and she was the only one who could get them out of this situation. She had to do something or every human on this island would die. Edgar, Raven, Mrs. Collins, Susie... They would all be washed out to sea.

The pressure was making Lydia nauseous. She lost her balance and staggered, and her foot struck something. When she reached out to pick it up, she recognized it as the decorated case. She could feel the enamel adornments and the sensation of the coral, smooth like boiled sweets.

“Thank heavens it came with us.”

But she couldn't let the relief distract from the situation. She needed to get these skins to the surviving selkies, else they wouldn't be able to regain their seal forms and return to the ocean.

It was then that she came upon a further concern. If the two selkies from before had sent Lydia here as a plea for help, it could only mean one thing.

“Edgar,” she began, “if Ulysses intends to destroy this place, might he not be here at this very moment?”

The only response came from the reverberations of her own voice. She grew flustered; all the explanations she could come up with for Edgar's silence were among the worst-case scenarios. Perhaps he had been captured by Ulysses, or perhaps he had stumbled into a pitfall. Or perhaps the person she had been speaking to hadn't been him at all.

“Edgar?” she called anxiously. “Edgar, where are you?”

With the case under one arm, she began to walk along the wall, until the nearby crunch of pebbles halted her in her tracks. She held her breath as she felt someone move in front of her.

“There you are, Lydia.”

“Edgar? Is that really you?”

“Would you like me to give our password?”

*We don't have a password.*

“I love you, my fairy.”

*It's him.*

Though his jesting irritated her, the relief of knowing he was there almost brought tears to her eyes.

“Whatever is the matter?” he asked. “I didn't frighten you, did I?”

“Why didn't you respond when I called?”

“I was concentrating on following the sound of your voice. I knew I was close, but my response could very easily have drowned it out.”

Still, Lydia wanted to burst out crying. His words weren't enough. She wanted to know that he was *really* there by her side. Suppressing the urge to touch him, she took a step backward, after which exhaustion pulled her to the ground.

"Lydia?"

"Please don't come near me for a moment."

"How long is a moment?"

"I do not feel at ease..." Lydia's mind was in such a jumble that she wasn't sure what she was saying.

"All right."

"I am not in a sound state of mind. Miss Morris has left me, and yet I was on the cusp of doing something rather shameful."

"Oh, I see. Well, I wouldn't mind it if you *were* to embrace me."

"I would."

Edgar paused. "You could at least have seen fit to soften the blow a bit."

Lydia was irritated with herself for sulking like this. The fairer sex was supposed to be charming, and she was being anything but. A girl like Maggie, who let herself be fawned over when she was feeling vulnerable, probably endeared herself to everyone. Perhaps it was the case that physical touch bore and cultivated feelings of love. Was it any wonder, then, that Edgar harbored no such sentiments toward her, given that she rejected him time and time again? She made no effort to love him, while expecting him to develop earnest feelings for her. It was far from equitable, and it was an arrangement that ensured they could never become lovers. Having said that, it wasn't as though Lydia could transform into a girl like Maggie overnight.

"I would mind because such a course of action would not befit me."

She felt his hand on her shoulder. It traced the length of her arm before reaching her hand and holding it.

"I shouldn't think what befits you or not should come into it."

"Nevertheless, it does. Please let go of me."

“I am simply holding your hand. Surely that much is acceptable?”

Now that she considered it, it wasn't as unpleasant as she had feared. Her fingers were wrapped in Edgar's palm, and that was the extent of it.

Lydia fell silent. There was a period of quiet, during which they stayed like that, before Edgar suddenly spoke.

“In fact, I find this to be most agreeable. I cannot see an inch in front of my face, and yet I feel your presence so keenly.”

For all the energy Lydia had put into protesting, she had allowed him to slip through her defenses quite readily. While a part of her felt he had taken advantage of her inability to refuse him completely, for the most part, she was simply bewildered.

Edgar was good at finding the chinks that would let him past anyone's armor. She had recognized as much when she had watched him seduce Maggie, but when he did it to her, she had no idea how to respond.

“Do you not feel as though your other senses have become more sensitive due to your lack of sight?”

Lydia hesitated. “I cannot say.”

“I can see in my mind's eye the expression you are wearing presently. It comes to me through your voice, your breathing, and the tension in your fingertips.”

He was invisible to her now, but his presence alone seemed to allow Lydia to sense his proximity to her. They were closer than she would have liked. Under normal circumstances, she might well have tried to distance herself from him. But, using the darkness as a convenient excuse, she didn't. She didn't feel threatened by him, likely because he was touching her fingertips and nothing else. That was what she told herself, at least, but she knew she wasn't being entirely honest. The warmth of his soft palm seemed to thaw her fingers, which had been frozen with anxiety. When both she and they relaxed, his own firm but delicate fingers worked their way into the gaps between them. Now that he was holding her hand properly, she again felt like she was on the verge of tears.

“Did I not say not to come near me?” Lydia knew she could not have sounded

convincing when she made no attempt to shake him off.

“There is nothing shameful about finding comfort in one’s fiancé.”

“You are not my fiancé.”

“You would find it very easy to believe that I were, if only you would permit me to kiss you.”

“I suppose there are many women out there who believe themselves engaged to you, then.”

“You do not *dislike* me, do you? If you find comfort in my hand, then you need only to accept that you might find comfort from me in other ways too.”

“It is precisely those sentiments that make me worry I am of loose morals,” Lydia stuttered, while knowing she ought to have kept the thought to herself.

“Should I take that to mean you *want* to kiss me?”

“No! I wasn’t speaking in earnest!”

“Personally, I would *prefer* your morals to be a little looser.”

She didn’t know how to respond anymore. Maybe there was no need to be so defensive. The girls from her hometown often exchanged episodes about their lovers with one another, and they were around the same age as her. Lydia would overhear them from time to time, but she never made such judgments about *their* morals. In fact, she covertly wished that she could join them.

However, *their* lovers were all men whom they were able to love sincerely. No doubt Lydia’s response would have been very different if the same lovers hadn’t taken their relationships seriously. Perhaps that was why she felt her situation was immoral in some way. Her and Edgar’s hearts were far from beating as one.

“I’m sorry. Setting aside the question of whether a kiss would be agreeable or not, I would certainly regret it.” She hesitated. “I am sure of it.”

“You would *regret* it?” Puzzled, Edgar fell silent for a moment before murmuring, “I suppose that puts me in a fix.”

From what Lydia could tell, there was resignation with a spot of confusion behind his words. She felt him get slowly to his feet. He tugged on the hand he

was still holding.

“Shall we go?”

“Where?”

“I observed a faint light some distance away from my original position. We ought to discern the details of our current predicament.”

The pair fumbled toward the light. It wasn't long before they recognized it as an illuminated space with shadows flickering inside it. Evidently, it was occupied. After creeping closer, Edgar and Lydia concealed themselves behind a large stone pillar and peered into it. They seemed to be looking at catacombs encircled by countless candles. In its center were the selkies whose skins Ulysses had taken. The elderly woman who had rescued Lydia was lying on the floor and looked to have been beaten. The fairy doctor immediately rushed toward her, not noticing that Edgar tried to stop her in case Ulysses was nearby.

“What on earth happened to you?” she cried. “Oh, this is all my fault. Ulysses discovered that you let me escape, didn't he?”

“Fairy doctor... Thank goodness you are safe.”

“We must get you out of here. All of you.” Lydia looked around. The selkies were surrounded by a circle of rope on the floor. There was mistletoe woven into it, creating a barrier that kept all fairies from escaping. Ulysses must have rounded up all the selkies that had survived the fire. The pair he had commanded earlier had wanted to show this to Lydia.

“Give me a moment and I shall take apart this barrier.” She tried to loosen the knot, but it was tied so tightly that it proved difficult.

“Would cutting through it be an option?”

“Yes, but I haven't any scissors with me—”

Edgar cut through the rope with a knife before she had even finished her sentence.

“Oh... Thank you.”

“You are most welcome.”



Lydia worried that the selkies might now think her scatterbrained. Brushing the thought aside, she turned back to the ones who were tentatively stepping past the rope.

“I have your skins here. Please find and take your own.”

As she opened the case, the creatures stirred excitedly. They approached it without squabbling, each taking out a single light-blue pearl before stepping back for the others. The elderly woman was supported by her companions as she wrapped her fingers tenderly around the bead in her palm. Only when the box was empty did Lydia realize something.

“Ermine isn’t here.” There weren’t any skins left either. Surely the fire hadn’t claimed her...

“Ulysses holds her skin,” said the elderly woman.

“She must be alive, then. Thank goodness.” Relieved, Lydia looked at Edgar, but his expression was conflicted. Yes, Ermine was alive, but Ulysses still had full control of her.

The earl repositioned himself behind Lydia’s back. “Try not to turn around.”

His sudden words confused her so much that she did exactly the opposite and her gaze fell on something bloody tied to a pillar. Edgar caught her before she could collapse from horror and redirected her line of sight. But the image was burned into her mind.

“What... What *is* that?”

“If I had to guess, I would say Sir Stanley and Sir Clark.”

“Are they dead?”

“I daresay it goes far beyond that.”

A third, cold voice resounded through the room. “I wouldn’t waste time thinking about it. Everyone on this island will be joining them soon.”

Lydia’s eyes darted around until she spotted Ulysses slowly descending the stone steps at its far end.

“They were my sacrifices. It wouldn’t do to keep this place too pure.” He had

with him Ermine and the pair of male selkies from earlier, and held a pistol to the back of the former. “I don’t recall instructing anyone to escort the earl and his fairy doctor here.” Ulysses glared at the male selkies in turn before looking at Edgar. “I would have been happy to set this woman on you again, my lord, if only she wasn’t injured.”

Ermine looked like she was struggling to stay on her feet.

“Why not relinquish her to me, then?” Edgar suggested. “You and I can fight instead.”

“Would that I could. Unfortunately, I must prioritize my duties over personal whims.” His tone laced with meaning, he pulled Ermine closer to him. “She is of no use to me anymore. I suppose all I can do now is kill her in front of you.” The boy stopped in the middle of the stairs and forced the pistol into Ermine’s grip. “You are not so injured that you cannot shoot yourself, yes?”

The young selkie obeyed silently, making to point the end of the gun at herself.

“What a disgusting show of cowardice!” Lydia shouted, though she knew it was unlikely to deter Ulysses.

All of a sudden, Ermine changed the direction of her body. Her movements lacked their usual agility, but she managed to get one arm around Ulysses and press the gun into his neck.

“You shouldn’t be able to disobey me!” he cried.

Lydia was just as shocked.

“I *will* shoot myself, just as you asked. The bullet will simply travel through your neck before it reaches my skull.” As she spoke, Ermine brought her face close to Ulysses’s throat, as though preparing to kiss it. Her finger curled around the gun’s trigger.

“Stop her, Raven!”

A shadow swooped down from above. A piercing gunshot bounced off the underground walls. Ermine collapsed back so that she was sitting on the stairs. But Ulysses was still standing, having blocked Raven’s knife with his saber. If the

blond was unhurt, then the bullet must have missed Ermine too.

There was no time for Lydia to bask in her relief. The selkies, forced to protect their master, leaped at Raven's back. While the servant was occupied, Ulysses made to run away.

Edgar rushed over to the steps. "Take the stone behind his ear!"

Raven kicked the selkies away, turned to Ulysses, and tossed the knife at him. The weapon severed the boy's ear from his head. The gemstone caught the light as it fell. It was a light, ocean-blue color.

*An aquamarine?*

Lydia touched her pendant. A gemstone that had been passed down from mother to daughter for generations. Apparently, there had been many fairy doctors in her mother's lineage.

*Suppose this pendant is...*

She realized only a second too late that she ought to have scooped up Ulysses's stone. It had fallen to the bottom of the stairs. If only it hadn't come with an ear attached, she might not have hesitated. By the time she reached it, Ulysses had already dashed down the stairs and retrieved it. She braced herself as they came into close contact, but the boy merely smirked and grabbed her arm.

"Lydia!"

Though she heard Edgar chasing after them, Ulysses was already dragging her away into the shadows.

It was clear that Ulysses knew where he was going as he led her through the pitch-black labyrinth. They climbed some stairs and emerged on top of the hill. The sky was thick with clouds, and the constant pounding of the waves filled the air. The selkies' intensified rage was pushing the sea spray all the way up here, creating a light drizzle. At the peak of the hill was a burning collection of firewood.

"Come. Allow me to show you the sea." Ulysses led Lydia by the arm past the

bonfire. He did not seem perturbed by his missing ear or the blood that trickled down his cheek. “You call yourself a fairy doctor, don’t you? Then you ought to understand that it’s too late.”

“I call myself a fairy doctor because I am one.” She glared at him.

“This entire island will be swallowed up by the sea the moment I will it.” He chuckled. “I have to say, I am most looking forward to it.”

“Is this what the Prince ordered you to do? Does the title of fairy doctor mean nothing to you? In fact, you are not a fairy doctor to begin with, for you are no friend to the fae. That is how one gains the ability to understand them and their powers. What you are doing is unforgivable, and I am not prepared to allow you to proceed!”

“You have quite a temper, don’t you? Unfortunately, you lack the means to stop me. You may be able to see fairies, but that will do precious little to help you.” Ulysses pulled three translucent beads from his pocket. “With these, it will all come to a close. In your last moments, I pray you will have the sense to regret getting involved with that rogue.”

He made to toss the sealskins into the fire before he was grabbed from behind. It was Edgar. The earl snatched at the skins, and they fell from Ulysses’s grip. One of them tumbled into the flames.

Edgar struck the younger man, knocking him to the ground, and began to kick at the burning wood to put out the fire. Lydia could do nothing but stare in shock as he pulled the skin from the red-hot ashes.

Ulysses stood up and wiped the blood from his cut lip. “You normally have more sense than that. Saving one little fairy is entirely meaningless at this point!”

“I am the Earl of Ibrazel. It is a given that I will follow my fairy doctor’s lead in protecting these fae.”

“Very amusing. The Blue Knight Earl no longer exists on these shores. Nor do any competent fairy doctors. The girl may refer to herself as such, but there is nothing she can do to stay these creatures.” Ulysses held his aquamarine up to the waters. “Come, my selkies.”

Lydia spun around to face the sea. The herd of selkies had begun their advance. The waters swelled and the first waves were starting to come in. She had to do something.

*My mother is with me, she told herself, as is Edgar. And he trusts in my abilities as a fairy doctor.*

Ulysses's quip about competence may have held true. However, if Lydia's aquamarine was also a selkie's heart, she was on equal footing with him.

*But what if it is nothing more than a gemstone?* As much as it pained her to admit it, she would be out of options in that case. Nevertheless, she gathered her courage and held her pendant out toward the sea.

"Heed my call, selkies! I am the Blue Knight Earl's fairy doctor! Please do not destroy his lordship's fort! I am prepared to shoulder the burden of your grief. I swear it upon this heart."

"A heart? Where in heaven's name did you get that from?" Ulysses muttered.

The waves did not calm but came dashing up the hill. The foamy waters reared up in front of them.

"Lydia!" Edgar had grabbed onto a tree and was now reaching out for her. She made to take it, only for Ulysses to catch her hair from behind.

The waves descended on her. They sucked her in and carried her away. As she struggled for breath, she saw Ulysses's hand reach for her pendant.

*I would rather die than let you take it!* Lydia tried to fight back.



*I cannot hold out any longer...* It was just as that final thought crossed her mind that something crashed into Ulysses. *A selkie?*

And then she realized that she *could* breathe. She had slipped into the fairy world.

It was another world that crossed paths with the sea of the mortal realm. The seals swam slowly around Lydia as she drifted, keeping Ulysses at bay. These were the selkies whose skins she had protected. The air bubbles woven in their pelts gave them the same pale-blue hue as the light-filled water.

“You would defy me, selkies?” Ulysses protested.

“We have no reason to obey you any longer.” It was the largest selkie who spoke, and it was immediately clear that it was the old woman. Though petite in her human form, her imposing manner under the water spoke to the years she had lived as a fairy.

“I possess a selkie’s heart. I can bring suffering to you all for generations to come if I so wish.”

“This girl also holds a heart, and there is a new Blue Knight Earl. They are our friends and will surely share the burden of our pain.” She swam with ease. The injuries that had afflicted her human body were nowhere to be seen.

“He is not the real Blue Knight Earl,” Ulysses scoffed.

“Yes, he is,” Lydia shot back at once. “The merrows accepted him as such.”

One of the selkies surrounding her at a distance spoke then. “I had thought we could no longer hope to trust anyone ever again. The Blue Knight Earl, the fairy doctors... I thought they had all gone.”

“That wench does not possess the same powers as the fairy doctors of old. Heart or no heart, she will be unable to save you. If you wish to perform a tragicomedy for me, trust in her, by all means.” He continued to speak dismissively, as though unaware that he himself barely looked old enough to be considered a man. “Defy me and you will have lost all hope!”

The selkies exchanged anxious looks. Still, none of them moved.

“She is the fairy doctor of the new Blue Knight Earl,” said one.

“Can we *trust* the new earl?” asked another.

Though she shared some of their concerns, Lydia interjected. “If you should find even a glimmer of hope within yourselves, I ask that you do not destroy his lordship’s ward. We may no longer possess the powers of old, but both he and I are on your side. That much I can promise you.”

“Fairy doctor, selkies cannot live without human friendship. You have worked hard for the sake of our brethren, and we shall place our hopes in you.” The waves stilled.

Ulysses clicked his tongue. “Foolish fairies. You will live to regret this.” With that, he vanished.

*Does he possess the ability to come and go to the fairy world as he pleases?*

To think the selkies had chosen the inexperienced Lydia as their friend, knowing full well how dangerous an enemy like Ulysses might be.

“Fairy doctor, the earl’s fort has already been defiled. Its powers may have long since decayed,” one of the selkies said.

“You ought to go. The cat is here,” another one added.

The selkies swam away from her, leaving bubbles in their wake. Looking up, she saw Nico plodding toward her. Even underwater, it seemed he insisted on walking on his back legs. While relieved that he had come for her, she was irritated by the lack of urgency in his pace.

“Nico! I cannot believe you would leave me to fend for myself!”

“My apologies. But I have come for you now.”

The paths of the fairy world were complicated, and it wasn’t unusual for humans who wandered there to become hopelessly lost. Lydia would have liked to have sent Nico away and left by herself, but she knew that would be impossible.

She settled on “Fine.”

“Don’t be in a sour mood. I was utterly starving. I thought I would die.”

“You were not the only one close to death!”



“Yes, but... Very well. When we get back, you may stroke my belly,” Nico offered, fiddling bashfully with his necktie.

How was that supposed to make up for anything? Still, in the fairy’s eyes, it was probably quite the recompense. Lydia seemed to recall that, when she was little, she had liked nothing more than to nuzzle up against Nico’s fluffy tummy. He would grudgingly let her do it whenever she cried for her lost mother.

But she was a child no longer. Or was she? The puzzle amused her for some reason. By herself, she could achieve nothing, but the fairies and people around her gave her the strength to push further.

Lydia let Nico lead her by the hand as they ascended. It was then that the elder selkie returned to them. The fairy held in her fin a bead the same color as the waters.

“Is that Ermine’s skin?” Lydia asked as she took it.

“She is likely too young to recognize herself as a selkie just yet. One day, however, she may begin to long for it and to return to the ocean. Please keep this safe for her until then.”

Lydia nodded gravely. Relieved, the elder left them once more. Far below in the ocean depths, the selkies swam in a group. For a split second, the fairy doctor swore she had caught a glimpse of the decorated case. One of the smaller creatures was playing with it as they went.

*Miss Collins?*

Selkies were thought to lose their human memories over time. But what if their most precious feelings persisted? They would likely be the sentiments whose roots were embedded deep within the creatures’ souls.

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The white beaches of Hastings experienced a few days’ worth of summer tourists, after which their numbers dwindled again. British summers went by in the blink of an eye. Though the sunlight remained strong during the day, the slightly earlier evenings brought with them a decidedly autumnal orange.

Lydia walked the coast alone, gazing out over the sea. The events that had

occurred at the Collinses' villa had ended with the fire and three people registered missing. Ulysses had vanished, though it was likely that he still lived. The selkies' waves had destroyed a portion of the hill, rendering the structure beneath it inaccessible. Neither they nor Lydia nor Edgar knew whether the Blue Knight Earl's ward retained its power, and it was unclear whether it was even still standing. Edgar seemed to think it was enough that Ulysses's plan had been foiled.

Mrs. Collins and Susie had returned to Manchester. Though the woman still seemed to inhabit a dreamland of sorts, she appeared to have recognized Lydia as a kindly girl who had temporarily lived as her daughter. She had stopped speaking about Theresa and acted as a mother to Susie. It looked like she was on the right path to return to reality, even if she was unlikely to walk it quickly.

In the end, the island remained standing, protecting its inhabitants. Lydia was well aware that it couldn't have been accomplished with her abilities alone. It was the support and help from those around her that had granted her the opportunity to succeed. Just recognizing that was enough for her to feel a little more suited to her title.

"There you are, Lydia."

Seeing Edgar approach with that smile of his had her instinctively tensing up. His good moods were dangerous. The same could be said for his bad moods, of course, but it was his smile that she needed to be particularly wary of. It often made her lower her guard before she'd realized it.

"You should have told me you were going for a walk," he said.

"I was under the impression you were busy," she replied flatly. On her way out of the hotel, she had spotted him flirting with a rich woman from who-knows-where.

Edgar's smile didn't falter. "I would drop everything for you even in my busiest moments."

*I'm sure you would.* Exasperated, she quickened her pace.

"There is no reason to be aloof, surely? Are you aware of how I worried for you during those three days you were missing? I wandered the beach day and

night in search of you.”

Raven had said much the same thing, so Edgar wasn’t lying, at least. Although it felt as though Lydia had barely spent any time at all in the fairy world, she had been gone for three days according to Earth’s clock.

“You needn’t have. I am sure Nico would have told you that he was going to escort me back.”

“Even then, I could not find peace until I saw you with my own eyes.”

Feeling a stab of guilt, Lydia slowed down. As he came up next to her, Edgar slid the parasol from her hand. A man and a woman walking together while he held her parasol over them was a classic picture of two lovers. Lydia was a split second too late in realizing this, and she knew Edgar would refuse to hand it back to her, so she said nothing.

“Do you still have Ermine’s skin?” she asked.

“Yes. Once she holds it, she may well lose her memories of her human life and become a full selkie. Is that right?”

Lydia had decided to pass the skin on to him, as he knew Ermine better than anyone.

“I wonder what the best thing for her would be,” the fairy doctor answered.

“We have plenty of time to consider it.” Edgar smiled. “Anyway, a deserted beach is certainly romantic, wouldn’t you agree? Shall we link arms?”

“No, thank you. You may have more luck with the woman you were speaking to earlier.”

“She was my cousin.”

“As if I would believe that!”

“All right, but I kissed her like I would a cousin. It was a casual, familial kiss.”

“You *kissed* her?”

Edgar looked nonplussed. “Is that not what you are angry about?”

“You are incorrigible!” Again, Lydia quickened her pace.

Edgar paused to look at the sky and consider the grave he had dug for himself. Apparently deciding the situation was salvageable, he set off after her again.

“It is because you keep pushing me away, Lydia. If I cannot kiss you, who can I kiss?”

“Nobody! As far as I am aware, kissing is not vital to one’s survival!”

“It is to mine.”

Strangely enough, she could believe that. “Then kiss whomever you like,” she said. She knew she shouldn’t care, but she couldn’t help but feel irritated.

“I find myself bereft of my former confidence,” Edgar said glumly. “Having failed to capture your heart, I am at an impasse.”

*I mustn’t fall for his loneliness act*, Lydia reminded herself, though she still glanced back at him.

“I merely wanted to ensure my abilities had not dulled.”

“What abilities?” she asked cautiously.

“My kissing abilities. I want to be able to kiss you properly when the time comes.”

“When *what* time comes?”

“The time when you’ll allow me to.”

*Why did I even ask?*

“Come, Lydia, do not walk so quickly. You will miss the calming sound of the waves and the gentle breeze on your skin.”

“I would rather enjoy walking *by myself*.” She jerked her head away huffily.

“Why, if it isn’t Mr. Palmer,” Edgar said.

Lydia had seen him too, coming toward them. The former imposter raised a friendly hand in Edgar’s direction.

“How do you do, *Lord Ashenbert*?” the earl replied in a scathing tone.

“Come now, that’s rather unkind, isn’t it? How was I to know it was *your* identity I stole?” Palmer straightened up and took on a more serious note. “The

newspaper got back to me, my lord, and it seems they will pay a pretty penny. I shall look for decent work upon my return to London.”

“I am glad to hear it.”

Palmer smiled at Lydia. “Not Miss Collins, but Miss Carlton. You will be seeing his lordship’s name in scandalous articles no longer. Once it becomes known that he has finally settled down, certain scoundrels will be less inclined to borrow his name and pick up women.”

She wasn’t sure she liked the sound of that. “Would you be so kind as to explain, Edgar?”

“Your detailed explanation was most uncalled for, Mr. Palmer.”

“Oh, I do apologize. In any case, I ought to be getting on.” With that, he hurried away.

“What did he mean by ‘settled down’?” Lydia asked once Palmer was gone.

“The fellow was short on money. I granted him permission to tell the newspapers about us.”

*Mr. Palmer sold a story to the tabloids?*

“You told him about me?”

“I relayed to him the romantic tale of the Earl of Ibrazel and his fairy doctor. Poetic, wouldn’t you agree? You expressed that you wouldn’t be worth an article to these journalists, but I would wager you are about to be proven wrong.”

Edgar straightened up, his voice taking on a more assertive tone. “Professor Carlton will be returning from Paris next week, yes? Londoners tire of gossip rather quickly, so by then all rumors of me will have been forgotten. As far as your housekeeper is concerned, you are on a work excursion, so why not stay here for a while? After all, wouldn’t it be tiresome to return to London with all this gossip swirling around?”

Lydia’s anger had exceeded its limitations, and all she could do was let her shoulders droop. She had still been meaning to call off their engagement, and yet Edgar was ensuring she had as little excuse to do so as possible. However,

she found she was not quite as inclined to push him away as she had been before. Marriage still felt like something of a fantasy to her, and she couldn't imagine Edgar as her future groom either. But he possessed qualities that she didn't, qualities he was more than happy to share with her. She was starting to feel like she wanted to become a tiny bit more acquainted with him—the *real* him. Still, perhaps this new sentiment was just a result of one of his schemes.

"I adore the ocean," she said, not answering his questions directly. "It reminds me of my mother." She walked up to the water's edge. The sepia crests danced around her shadow in an almost lonely fashion.

"When you said you would regret it, Lydia..."

She heard Edgar murmur something behind her, but his words were unclear. "Pardon? Did you say something?"

He smiled softly at her. "That was when my confidence suddenly faltered. I was unable to promise that you *wouldn't* regret it...that I wouldn't allow you to. I wonder what it would take to earn your trust. I can see that it will take more than words or kisses." The sound of the waves wove through his words. His gaze, however, was filled with such desperate longing that Lydia felt her heart pound, despite herself.

"What is it you have there?" she asked.

Twirling the thin, floral lace parasol in his hand, Edgar approached Lydia and offered her a light-pink seashell.

"Why, that's lovely. When did you pick it up?"

He passed it to her and then took her hand. His movements were as awkward, as though he were touching her for the first time. "To think I cannot bring myself to do more than this."

"What are you talking about?"

"Oh, nothing." Edgar led her along by the hand.

Lydia allowed him to, a little nervous. She couldn't deny anymore that it was rather comforting to walk with him like this. She didn't mind holding his hand, though the thought still made her feel slightly guilty. Should she really be doing

this while her father was away?

*Forgive me, father, but I feel that this would make mother smile.*

The evening sun caught her cheek and transferred its light to the aquamarine around her neck, making it sparkle a pale orange.

# Bonus Translation Notes

Hello, everyone, and welcome to the bonus content for *Earl and Fairy* volume 4! This time around, we have some notes and insight on the translation to share with you. If you have any questions about the translation that you'd like answered in-depth, feel free to share them in the thread on the J-Novel Club forums, and we might cover them in future bonus content. For now, we hope you enjoy some of the tidbits we've picked out over the process of adapting this volume!

This section contains (potentially huge!) spoilers for volume 4 (and volumes past), so please read it after reading the novel itself!

## Names

As a general note, *Earl and Fairy* so far has been very good about using names that actually exist. Often when translating light novels, I find that Japanese authors may choose to make up names for fantasy settings, and the transliteration of those names is left up to the translation team. In *Earl and Fairy*, the names are based on real names that were common at the time, and this comes through in the surnames especially. Firman, Purcell, Carlton are all valid surnames, which saves the translation team a lot of grief! Having said that, Ashenbert does seem to be an exception...

An interesting example from this volume is Seraphita, the name that Ermine uses in her guise as a spirit medium. It comes from the title of a French novel about an androgynous being, which suits Ermine well as a woman who dresses in masculine clothing. While not posing any significant translation challenges, this was an interesting tidbit that isn't explicit in the text itself. It makes you wonder about the inspiration behind other names too. It doesn't look like we've seen the last of Ulysses, so how might his name become significant?

The usage of surnames over first names in Victorian culture has been discussed in the bonus content before. However, now that we're a few volumes



in, there are some more specific challenges we can talk about here! Someone that *may* cause us a few challenges in the future is Paul. He has two surnames: Firman, the name he goes by currently, and O'Neill, his real name. Near the end of volume 3, Edgar says this line: "You haven't changed a bit, O'Neill." In the Japanese version of this line, he uses his first name, Paul. But, since Victorian gentlemen wouldn't have used first names, we had to pick: Firman or O'Neill? In this instance, O'Neill made more sense, as Edgar had just confirmed that Paul *was* the friend he remembered from childhood—the friend he knew as Paul O'Neill.

In fact, Edgar addresses him as Paul for the majority of the Japanese text. (Even to Lydia, he is Paul-*san*). In the localization, this became "Mr. Firman" pre-reveal. Going forward, then, should Edgar address him as Firman or O'Neill? Even close friends in Victorian times would rather refer to each other with surnames, only dropping the honorific, so switching to Paul wouldn't be in line with the rest of the translation.

In Paul's brief appearance in volume 4, the Japanese didn't mention his surname at all, in prose or dialogue. We made a point to mention it in the English text, because surnames are used much more widely in the translation. It is likely that the choice of which surname to use will depend on how significant the O'Neill name becomes in future volumes. If Paul is still using "Firman" for the majority of his dealings, then that is likely what we will stick to. Another option is that Edgar may refer to him as O'Neill in private, and Firman in front of characters (such as Lydia) who are unfamiliar with the O'Neill name. We'll have to see!

Incidentally, we were lucky that Maggie's surname was made clear from the get-go. It would have been highly improper for Edgar and the inspector to be referring to her as "Maggie," but if we didn't have a surname, we might not have had a choice...

## **Kawaii**

If you are familiar with Japanese works or language, you have likely come across "kawaii," meaning cute, before. Kawaii is a significant concept in Japanese culture, and tends to be used to describe things much more often

than we use “cute” in English.

In romance stories, the male love interest may compliment the girl he is interested in by calling her, or her behaviors, cute. *Earl and Fairy* is no exception, and while he doesn’t do it all too often, Edgar has certainly been known to throw a kawaii or two in Lydia’s direction. However, “cute” as an adjective didn’t widely take on its present-day meaning until after the 1900s, and even then, it was a definition that originated in America. Because of this, we had to do something different with the translation of kawaii, a word that rarely causes pause for thought. Our go-to translations tend to be “endearing” and “sweet.”

### **Fairy Names**

An interesting point of note in *Earl and Fairy* is the fairy names themselves. Often, the names of each type of fairy have been translated into Japanese characters (kanji), but paired with furigana (i.e. text above Japanese characters that tells the reader how to pronounce them) that consists of a transliteration of their English name. For example, brownies are written as 小妖精, which literally means “small fairy.” The furigana, however, is written as: ブラウニー (*burauni-*), the Japanese transliteration of “brownie.” In fantasy light novels, it is common for spells, for example, to have a name in kanji, while having furigana to show it is pronounced differently. These pronunciations often use English or English-inspired words (or other languages) to give the spells a “cool” twist. This leaves the translator in the position of considering both the furigana and the kanji to create the resulting spell name in English. This isn’t the case in *Earl and Fairy*, because the English fairy names are firmly established in folklore, having been translated *into* Japanese once before, but it is interesting that Japanese readers have two versions of a fairy’s name to refer to. The kanji names may also act as a little reminder of some of the fairy’s traits, something we lose out on in English!

Other examples include: 水棲馬 (water-dwelling horse) for kelpie, 家付き妖精 (household fairy) for hobgoblin, 小鬼妖精 (imp fairy) for the bogey-beast, and アザラシ妖精 (seal fairy) for the selkies.

## **British Setting**

As a slight aside, the translator on the team is British—and this makes it a much easier ride to translate the series and its settings. For example, when translating a series set in Japan, a lot of time is spent double-checking the correct romanizations for certain towns and cities, or reading up on them to see if there's any background information that might be pertinent to the translation. *Earl and Fairy* is much easier in this regard, because when Edgar mentions “Hastings” (for example), a lot of the background knowledge already exists through lived experience, education, *etc.* Of course, one of the joys of translating Japanese literature is building up a knowledge of Japan's geography, history, and culture bit by bit, but it's not bad to translate something more familiar once in a while. Since the dialogue is translated in a British manner too, there are far fewer notes from the editor along the lines of “What does this mean? I think it's a Britishism,” which is always a plus.

Incidentally, anyone who grew up in the noughties in Britain knows that the Battle of Hastings happened in 1066, not because of our education system, but because of a certain insurance company with “Hastings” in its name. Its advert used a catchy jingle that included its phone number, which ends in “1066.”

## **Some General Tidbits!**

Translation as a whole is a tricky process, and Japanese has several “quirks” (from an English-speaking perspective, at least) that make it hard to translate literally at times. When it comes to literature, special attention is also required to make sure the translation reads smoothly and enjoyably. One such quirk is the use of direct quoting, or speech, in the middle of a sentence. Japanese will often put a “quote” in a sentence (i.e. the literal words a character is thinking or saying), where it would be awkward to render it into English. For example: *Sonna musakurushii pikunikku, **arienai janai to** kangaenagara, Lydia wa...* (lit: While thinking that such an uncouth picnic was “out of the question,” Lydia...). This is only a minor example, but it can often become much more awkward to render in English if the thought or quote in question is longer. The translation instead became: “Lydia could hardly believe he would partake in anything so unrefined...” where the thought is instead rendered into a feeling to make it

flow better.

Similar things happen when it comes to sentence length. For example, the amount of information contained in a Japanese sentence might be more compact than its English equivalent—meaning the English version could end up as a long, unwieldy sentence. In these cases, one Japanese sentence may end up as two—or two may end up as one—when translated. Sometimes, Japanese likes to repeat information that has been stated very recently, which would not be jarring to a Japanese reader, but may be so in English. For this reason, information might be moved to different sentences, reworded to be more or less vague, or sometimes cut all together. It all serves to make the English translation more enjoyable!

As an example, consider the following: *“Reibaishi wa, kuroi doresu ni kuroi bēru. Kao wo ootte iru no de, youshi mo nenrei mo wakaranai.”* As literally as possible: “The medium wore a black dress and a black veil. Because she covered her face, one could not tell her appearance or age.”

The translation became: “[Next, the medium entered,] her face covered by a black veil that made her age and visage impossible to decipher. She wore a dress in the same shade.”

As you can see, the action of her entering has been pulled from the previous Japanese sentence (that hasn’t been included above). Her wearing a veil and her face being covered have been merged into the same point to avoid redundancy, and the information about her dress has been shifted to the next sentence, as it is less significant than the fact that Edgar cannot see her face. Additionally, the repetition of “black” has been avoided, as it is more stylistically jarring in English than in Japanese.

And this is just one of any number of examples. While it would be fun to pick apart the entire translation like this (we promise!), that’s all the space we’ve got for now. We’ve only scratched the surface of what we can say about the *Earl and Fairy* translation, so hopefully you’ll be seeing more of these notes in later volumes!



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Earl and Fairy: Volume 4

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