

Summer 1891: London

The hour was getting late. Though there was no change in his cool, elegant appearance, the man at the center of the crowd could feel the tension rising in his chest. He'd tried to get out of attending tonight, of all nights, but social and professional necessity had forced him to the pre-theater party held here at the Langham Hotel; it was, after all, in celebration of his latest accomplishments. Even so, he'd had to risk insulting his host and hostess by declining to attend the theatrical performance itself, claiming a prior obligation. They'd been disappointed but understood a man of his unusual profession kept strange hours.

So here he was, having clad his muscular body in his finest evening clothes despite the crawling sensation prickling his skin, wearing a polite smile despite the ache radiating throughout his bones, and maintaining the reputation for which he was famed throughout London—a man in complete control of himself—despite the heavy knowledge that this was a complete and utter lie.

No one noticed that his dark gaze flicked back and forth from the opulently dressed guests to the slant of sunset sky visible through the parted window curtains. No one thought it strange that he checked his pocket watch now and again; he was known for both his observational skills and his impatience. But when he could no longer postpone his departure and started toward the door, the Duke—his host—clasped his arm and begged a word in private.

At such a time, he could never tolerate such contact. Even the light pressure of the Duke's fingers made him want to snarl in outrage. "Forgive me, Your Grace," the man said, barely remembering his manners with a tiny bow of his head, "but I must not delay."

"Just a moment, Blakely, if you please?" The Duke would not let him go, and though the man tried to weave through the crowd while they spoke, the old nobleman seemed determined to speak his piece. The conversation was inconsequential, which was fortunate since his listener could pay little attention. He felt feverish and the bright light from multiple chandeliers had begun to hurt his eyes. Sweat trickled beneath his dark brown hair. Time was his enemy now, and so was the Duke, though the elderly Duke didn't realize it.

“Forgive me,” the man whispered again, interrupting the Duke and wresting himself from the other man’s grasp. With no further word, he ducked through the milling bodies, now keenly smelling the Macassar oil on the men’s hair, the ladies’ powder and perfume, and above all the scent of their skin that made him dizzy with longing.

He pushed his way out the door and ignored the hotel’s footman trying to protect him with an umbrella. The rain was a blessing. It cooled his head. With one glance at the crowded street, he saw that his own carriage was blocked by dozens of others and knew he’d have to make his way by foot. Speed was his natural gift and he gladly used it, letting loose his powerful calf muscles that were even now stretching and burning with desire to run, though instinct made him yearn for grassy fields and forests instead of the rain-slicked cobblestones beneath his feet.

Fleeing past Regent Street, he sucked air into his lungs and groaned with every exhale. Already he sounded less human. He ripped the gloves from his fingers and flung them to the street, needing his skin exposed, the freedom to clench and unclench his hands. The rain lessened and clouds parted to reveal the stars and the cursed moon, its fullness mocking him with its siren call. He looked steadfastly ahead of him. Not that ignoring the white-gold face mattered. He could be in his cellar, windows blocked by the thickest curtains, without even a sliver of moonlight visible, and it would make no difference. When the moon was rising, when it was at its highest, he always knew.

Desperation threatened to make him cry out as the pains started. Thankfully he was only a block away from his house—he owned the whole building, a necessity for privacy—but still he moved faster despite the searing in his bones that made even breathing difficult exercise. At last he stumbled up the stairs and through the door. He shut and bolted it behind him, though the safety of the lock wasn’t enough. He was approaching the most dangerous time: the Cusp, as he’d grown to call it. Too much a creature yet still too much a man, with all the craft, intelligence and cruelty unique to humanity. Someone in this state was far more dangerous than any mere animal.

Yanking at his stiff collar, which chafed him along with every stitch of clothing that already felt like an abomination, he tore off his coat as he reached the sideboard and the dark bottle he used only three nights a month. He poured the liquid down his throat and nearly choked. Usually its sickly sweetness wasn’t a problem if taken earlier in the evening, but by this stage his flavor preference was for savory, not sweet. It was a bad sign that he could barely get

the liquid down, and panic rose anew. He dropped the bottle on the silver salver and managed to find his way to the dark cellar he knew so well. The door slammed and locked behind him as he fell to his knees. Painfully he crawled to the corner, hoping against hope that he'd been in time.

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The light rain had subsided by the time Nettie began her evening stroll. Her heels clacked along the cobblestone path, the echo resounding throughout the alley. The humid night air clung to her skin and the young woman had already removed the shawl she'd draped over her shoulders before ducking out into the night.

Even when exhausted from standing all day in the hat shop where she worked, she never missed her stroll—especially on a night like this. Moonlight flooded the London streets, peeking through the strange filter of the fog and turning what had been gray and ugly into a silvery blue. It would be easy to get lost in such a shrouded maze of tiny little streets, but she knew the area well, even after living here only a month.

Nettie's family thought it wasn't safe, a girl alone, far from home. She felt independent and alive. Her sisters were all in service in others' homes, hands rough from scrubbing, faces old before their time. Not her. She had a proper job in a lovely milliner's, handling nothing heavier than fine lace and velvet, sometimes even modeling the beautiful creations for the gentlemen buying gifts for their wives or mistresses.

She smiled now, her gait quickening to nearly a skip, as she thought of the man she'd met this morning. Handsome as anything, he was; he'd spent nearly an hour begging her to try on hat after hat, admiring each one—but not as much as he'd admired her pretty, heart-shaped face. “You're the most fetching thing in here,” he'd murmured, boldly chucking her under the chin with one pearl-colored gloved hand. “Shame I can't get you wrapped up in one of those fine packages.”

Such cheek! Of course, she was used to men's flirtations. Blessed with beauty and not shy about showing it off, she aimed to marry well and perhaps have a bit of fun beforehand. And why not? These were modern times, nearly the end of the century, and a young woman like herself didn't have to end up stuck as a drudge with a dozen children.

The stranger from the shop had promised to see her again, and for some reason she believed him. Maybe he'd return and invite her to take tea with him in one of those grand hotels on Park Lane. She'd go even if he weren't rich, with his dashing appearance and those dark eyes of his, staring at her as if trying to memorize her for a sketch.

Nettie's dream-like state was rudely shattered by someone calling to her.

"'ere, miss!"

Scowling, she turned to find the wiry, shabbily-dressed figure of a young boy—a familiar sight on Gresse Street, he was known only as Mouse and famous for selling anything he could get his slick little hands on. During the day it was newspapers; at night he'd sell various items he'd claim to have 'found'—stolen, most likely.

"It's awful late," he yelled. "Whatcha doin' out?"

"Keeping to myself," she said with a lift of her chin, continuing forward. "Mind you do the same."

The boy paid no heed. He examined her through dark, shining eyes. "Shouldn't be on your own, not 'round 'ere. You barmy or somethin'?"

"Watch your mouth. What I do is none of your affair."

"Just tryin' to—"

"Besides, I've been walkin' here nearly every night for weeks now and you never said a thing before. What's different tonight?"

He stared at her as if she were an escapee from Bedlam. "Don't you know? Ain't you 'eard of the Gresse Street Beast?"

Nettie burst into laughter. "Pull the other one!"

Ignoring her mockery, Mouse sidled closer. She instinctively clutched her reticule more tightly. There wasn't much in it, only a few pennies and a letter from home, but the black beaded bag was a gift from her mum. Mouse might be trying to snatch it from her while telling her his latest absurd story.

"They say 'e comes out when the moon's out, bright like this," Mouse said, his voice soft and full of awe. "No one's seen 'im, but I know two people that say they saw—"

"Oh, be off with you. You're not foolin' me! A beast, I'm sure."

She turned onto Gresse Street, which would lead her over to the charming houses of Percy Street. As she walked, she heard Mouse call out a final, "Be careful, miss!"

The young woman ignored him as she strolled on her way. The night seemed darker here, the buildings looming tall above her. It was oddly quiet too, even for this late hour. Usually one could hear the clip-clop of carriage horses audible all the way from busy Tottenham Court Road. But the humidity seemed to weigh everything down, including the normal sounds of the London night. All she heard were her own footsteps, as well as the skittering of dry leaves across the pavement behind her.

Nettie suddenly slowed down. Dry leaves? At this time of year? Strange. At least, it had sounded exactly like autumn leaves dancing in whirlwinds. Now that she was listening more closely, the noise seemed to have disappeared. Her heart pounded and she thought of Mouse's words earlier. "Stupid boy," she muttered. "Heard too many stories from those penny dreadfuls." She clenched her teeth and pressed on.

Three paces later, she heard a voice. A guttural word. Or maybe a growl.

She whirled around, but no one was there. She was halfway down the alley and it seemed empty. Only a child or dog would be able to hide, crouching in the stairwells leading down to the houses' lowest floors.

Turning back and clucking her tongue at her fancies, she took another step. It was all she had time for. Hands slammed on her back, shoving her brutally to the damp street. Too shocked to cry out, she tried to get up but the body on top of her was too heavy. She could hear her attacker's deep, ragged breathing, and she felt hot, moist breath on her neck. Scrabbling her hands on the ground, she turned to look at her attacker. Instead she saw the flash of something white, something sharp, and then it sank into her flesh and the world exploded in pain and blood as her face, her pretty heart-shaped face, was torn to pieces.

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The first signs of dawn streaked through the windows of the beautifully appointed townhouse as the owner awoke. He found himself lying on the floor, his arms covered in scrapes and bruises. He felt as if he had been on a week-long drinking binge.

The experience was one to which he'd grown almost accustomed over the past five years. There was no sign of the silk, pearl-buttoned shirt, the white waistcoat or trousers he'd worn at the party last night. His flesh was bare and chilled despite the warmth of the July morning.

None of this was unusual. He wasn't surprised to be lying naked, scarred and alone. What shocked him, once his blurry eyes acclimated to their normal vision, was where he was lying. This wasn't the cheerless dirt floor of the cellar room that was his confinement three nights out of every month. Beneath him was his parlor's multicolored oriental carpet, itchy but a softer bed than the cellar floor. And he was surrounded by shards of glass from the now-broken window that looked out onto the alley.

Filled with dread, the man staggered to his feet and lurched toward the looking-glass. Surprisingly, it hadn't been smashed to pieces like the nearby window.

He stared at himself, at the scratches on his throat, at the usually neatly combed wavy hair that was disheveled and matted with sweat and grime. Worst of all, when he swallowed, lingering in his dry mouth was the coppery taste of blood.

"Dear God," the man croaked, his tormented reflection silently echoing the words. "What have I done?"