



A Victorian Demon's Guide to London, Love, and Being a Hero (Time for Monsters)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: When Jack is summoned into the mortal world by a spell that goes wrong, he figures he'll see why all the demons down below rave about London. Despite his horns, pointed ears, and a few more noticeable "attributes," he slides seamlessly through a human city teeming with filth, corruption, and vice.

London is all any demon could want, especially with such a plentiful food supply. Tasty little morsels practically throw themselves into Jack's arms, only to realize too late that they've made a mistake—until Polly lands in his lap and changes everything.

Polly has always worked hard in Mr. Bunson's Home for Unwanted Urchins. When he allows her to remain even after she's grown, Polly assumes her cheerful spirit and hard work have earned his favor. But when he presses her for favors of an entirely different sort, Polly flees. Hopeless and helpless, a dark stranger comes to her aid, removing the threat in a most... unusual manner. Not only does he save her life—he offers her a new one.

Jack's not sure what happened. One minute, he was dining on a plump specimen and picking up a charming young lady for dessert, and the next—Polly was sweeping his attic flat, scrubbing his floors, and off to the market to do his shopping. Full enough to watch and wait, Jack finds that Polly feeds something else—his curiosity. While the rest of London watches in (warranted) terror for sightings of the so-called "Spring-Heeled Jack," Polly is busy touting him as a hero. Shockingly, Jack thinks she may even be falling in love with him.

Love? That's something neither Polly nor Jack have ever experienced first-hand. Is it really as simple as being unable to imagine your life without the other person? Can it really change your entire life? Polly seems to think so, and Jack? Well, he doesn't know what to think. Good thing he has Polly—his guide to London, love, and being a hero.

Monsters have always existed. They walk amongst us or live in the shadows. Hungering. Craving. Looking for love. Are you ready to meet these swoon-worthy specters and creatures of the night? It's

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London, 1880

“There ‘e is! A son of old ‘imself!”

“Look at ‘is ‘orns!”

“Look at ‘is ‘oooves!”

Well.

A fine thing, isn’t it? You’re going about your business, hunting the little human meat sacks that fall into your midst, and then boom, zap, you’re suddenly in theirs, naked as a spawn and subjected to the most grating vocal qualities. What’s worse—they don’t seem to realize what they’ve got. Not at all.

“‘Ere! Beelzebub or Lucifer, or whatever your name is. We summoned you up, and now you serve us!”

I look at the three men in this dark, dank little room. It smells horrible.

I think it’s them.

I hope they taste better than they smell...

“Do you think ‘e understands us?”

“You! Oi! Ol’ . Do you understand?”

“I’m willing to try,” I say, crossing my arms in front of my chest. I feel underdressed, and I hate it. In my realm, no one wears clothes, although we know of them. There’s also very little opportunity to see others in my realm, so I don’t suppose modesty would matter much, even if my kind did want to bother with garments.

“We drew up the sigils, and now you’re ours to command. You’re going to make us rich, and then we’ll let you go, all right, demon?”

The one man is very tall and well-dressed compared to his companions. He talks with a sneer and a laugh, pointing at me like I’m some slave sent to do his bidding. He points to some paint on the floor.

A doorway to my realm—but I’m no demon. I’m a Flameheel, a monstrous hybrid that lives between Hell and Earth. I believe we used to be gatekeepers, but since humanity has gotten so awful, we’re out of a job. Souls shoot straight down all the time, and we don’t have to try to sift them. I doubt we could these days. Like I said—there aren’t many of us where I come from. Living humans do wander in on rare occasions—and they’re our favorite meal.

They’re are only meal.

I smile at the man. I don’t like him, and I have the amusing idea that he thinks this dab of paint is going to keep me in place.

“Oh, yes? Rich how?”

“You’re gonna rob a bank with us. Rip the door right off the vault! You demons are strong, aren’t you? And evil?”

“Evil... What is evil, in your definition?”

“Larry... Why do you think he speaks so well? I thought you said they would only grunt and howl like animals?” The second little man has wide eyes and cowers back.

Oh, dear. This one’s actually clever. He’s figured out something is wrong.

Arrogant Larry hasn’t. “Demons know all the languages of the earth! It’s in the Bible, Will!”

I’m pretty sure he’s right about the languages—not so sure it’s in the Holy Writ, but that’s neither here nor there. I’m not bound by either code. No laws of Heaven or Hell exist in the Middling. We are law unto ourselves, and the only law is to survive.

“Evil is evil. Like sinning. Breaking laws. Stealing, killing, all that.” The third man, scruffy and smelling the worst of the three, steps forward.

The fool of the lot, it seems. I try not to smile, but my claws itch, and I feel a familiar burning in my hooves as my muscles tense to spring.

Let him come right to the edge. The others will think he got too close, and then—oh, their faces when I step out and grab them...

“I suppose I’m evil. I could be persuaded to kill and rob.”

“Persuaded? ‘Ark who’s talking! Aren’t you a proper little lord of the manor, persuaded ,” Larry scoffs.

Will whimpers and shakes his head. “You don’t know who this is, Larry! Maybe you did get some lord! A prince. Don’t it say there are princes of demons?”

“Cobblers, Will. You’re a coward. All right, Old , you do what I say, and we’ll let you out of the circle, and we won’t send you back to the pit for a fortnight. I bet

you'd love to raise a little Hell in London, eh?"

It's my turn to sneer. "Those who wish for Hell are fools and have never seen it."

"This one has some lip on 'im." Short and scruffy wipes his nose and scowls at me. "Give me that poker, Larry."

"You're twice the idiot Will is! What are you going to do with a ruddy poker?"

I smile broadly now. "What indeed?"

"He needs to be shown we're the masters!"

The tubby one steps over to me with his face going red and his eyes narrowing. Will, who I have decided I will only eat if I'm still hungry after the other two, flees. Clever boy.

"Master of me? Oh, I don't think so." I haul the first course in and bite into his throat, spitting out the skin.

I shudder. Unwashed. Rather rotten and oily in flavor. But the meat underneath is good, and I'm starving.

Larry, after some initial screaming and losing his tall black hat and long black cloak, is braver than I gave him credit for. He starts yelling incantations, but nothing happens. I imagine he only knows how to open doors to the Middling in one direction, poor overconfident fool.

"You—you're going to regret that!" he spits in a quivering voice as I hollow out his companion, pulling meat from bones and discarding the skin.

“Am I? I would agree if I had eaten the outer layer, but once you’re peeled, you’re quite palatable.”

“Foul beast!”

“Well, yes. You wanted a foul beast, didn’t you? To rob some bank?” I ask between bites.

Larry is rifling through the little book in his hand.

I stop mid-bite, stepping from the circle they’ve painted to pluck the book from his hand.

His high-pitched scream is melodious. It’s a mix of shock that I’m out of my “prison” and terror that he’s next, with some fear-induced blubbering tossed in. “Is this place—London, full of humans like you?” I ask with a gory smile.

“Yes! Yes, you can have your fill!” Larry’s eyes shine with a second of hope before I dig my hands into his chest and break him down the middle. It’s a very efficient way to get to the good bits.

There’s a second where he’s alive and looking at me in horror. He thought he could lure me away by offering me others? I don’t know why, but I think I’m going to get a particular satisfaction from eating him. “Thank you. I just wanted to know since I’ll be here for a while.”

He tastes much better—and he was thoughtful enough to leave me his hat and cloak.

Tomorrow, I shall eat someone with an excellent set of boots to hide my hooves and impeccable taste in clothing.

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, 1881

“Eat your porridge.”

“It’s rat brains.”

Polly put bowls in front of the poorly scrubbed children in their ragged clothes. “Now, now, Jas. You know I always save rat brains for pudding—and only if you eat your porridge!” she teased with a wink. “Henry, you bring me that jacket tonight, and I’ll see if I can mend it. Anna, you collect up those bowls.”

“Yes, Polly.”

“Yes, Polly.”

Bunson’s Home for Unwanted Urchins was always loud and chaotic. Polly moved through the place with a quiet, cheerful will, unperturbed by quarreling children and clattering dishes.

“Polly.”

The oily voice startled her, cutting through the din in the kitchen in a way nothing else could. “Ah, yes, Mr. Bunson?”

“Look at this list. 40 yards of muslin, 50 of cotton, tincture of iodine... This runs into money, you know. I keep these little sprats fed and housed—at a loss, mind you.”

“Yes, Mr. Bunson.” Polly didn’t argue with the owner of the glorified workhouse. At twenty, she knew she was there far past the time when most were turned out and that Mr. Bunson only kept her on because she was such a good worker who didn’t give him any lip. Even if the children needed new clothing and the sheets had been patched, turned to the middle, and patched again, she wouldn’t ask again. She’d seen little ones as young as six put out in the street for less.

“Well, I suppose I could find the money for it this time. But you’ll not be sitting and sewing during the day when there are mouths to feed and floors to scrub. You’ll have to do it in your own time, after the little ones are in bed.

“Of course, sir.”

“I’ll... I’ll have it brought to the storeroom tonight, but I’ll expect you to be there to carry it up to your room if you expect to sew it.”

“Yes, sir.” Polly nodded, eyes carefully blank, smile wide and pleasant. If she wanted to say that the children could help her sew—since they were busy sewing feed sacks for the Bunson Brothers to sell to the granary, or to point out that they had twenty strong, young boys who could easily carry things to the attic instead of her, she didn’t.

She had long ago made rules for herself. Be quiet. Be good. Don’t argue. Smile. Mr. Bunson and his brother, the younger, thinner Mr. Bunson, always liked her cheer and hard work. They kept her on, even though they’d had a dozen other matrons to oversee the children since she’d been there. She couldn’t remember anyone ever staying as long as her. In , when you had no family and no money, food and a warm-ish bed were worth any price.

“You’re a jewel, Polly.”

Polly jumped as Mr. Bunson brushed past her and left the kitchen. He'd never complimented her before.

She'd heard him give compliments to others.

Ada. Martha. Mary. Carrie. Kitty. Even Gertie, who was as sour-faced as month-old milk.

But they all left very soon after he began to praise them.

His silence or his irritable shouts were far more comforting.

"Thank you?" she whispered to herself long after he was gone.

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“You always keep yourself clean and neat, . Clean and neat and smelling fresh like flowers and buttermilk.”

“Thank you.” I hoist up one of the heavy rolls of fabric and try to give a little curtsy. I think Mr. Bunson likes it when people treat him like he’s very important, and since we’d be out on the streets without his kindness, I suppose he’s most important to the children and me.

“Ooh!” A sharp little squeak jumps out of my lungs as the heavy roll crashes across my waist, Mr. Bunson on one side of it and me pinned to the wall on the other. “Mr. Bunson!”

“You’re sixteen, ?”

“Twenty!” I blink.

“I’ve been waiting too long. My brother said he wanted you, so fair and pretty, but he’s out playing Lord Muck in the country, and I’m tired of the second-best cuts.”

“I’ll go to the butcher’s, sir!” I squirm and push, but Mr. Bunson is far heavier and taller than I am.

“That’s why I thought you were so young, . Most girls your age would already have had a husband by now—or at least a few good going overs.”

“I’ve never met—” I stop. I don’t know anyone to marry, and I know I don’t want to do what Bunson seems intent on doing, his hand pawing at my dress. “Stop that!”

“Shut up, or I’ll put you out now. Tonight.”

Another rough grab at my waist.

I heave the fabric back with my hips and catch him off balance. He topples—and I run.

I slam into the storeroom door that really ought to have been repaired. It splinters, even under my slight weight. Bunson roars behind me, threatening that he’ll take the cost of a new door out of me before the night is through.

I don’t speak, don’t answer his threats, just run, skidding out the side door into the filthy alley, sending rats and cats shrieking ahead of me.

But what’s the point of running? He’ll catch me, and then what? If I run from him, I’ll never be allowed back. I’ll be put out on the street. I can scarcely write my own name. He’ll not give me a reference. Probably say horrible things about the work I’ve done for years and years without pay, and everyone will believe him, not me! What kind of situation can I find where they won’t treat me just like Bunson does?

The stories I’ve heard whispered about Ada, Kitty, Gertie, and the rest are enough to send tears streaming down my cheeks. One way or the other, girls like us end up under some man, losing something that ought to be ours to keep or give away on our terms.

“Please help, please...” My cries are faint, panicked half-pants as I keep running.

“Oof!”

My worn black shoes slide on the slick, broken cobbles.

When I look up, my voice freezes. I can't decide whether to scream or beg for help.

The face above me is cruel and cold, almost aristocratic, like the faces of the rich men who come into the home to hire the boys for their factories and country estates.

“Oooh. Just what I was looking for,” a low voice purrs. In the shadows, his pale face stands out, especially his dark eyes. They lock onto me—hypnotic, I think that’s the word educated people would use. But they don’t just stare. They burn. I don’t like them. They’re... They’re hard eyes. Mean.

He pushes me out of his lap, but his fingers fasten around my arm and won’t let go.

“Please, sir, I’m sorry, sir. I’m—I’ve got to go, my employer is... He wants... Let go!” I twist and tug, but it's nothing to him. He doesn’t even flex his fingers. I might as well have my arm in one of the cow crushes at the Smithfield yards.

“Oh, I’d far rather take you home with me and put you to a much better use.” The cruel eyes seem to relax a little into something amused.

“‘Ere! You let go of that! That’s not a common doxie, that’s my girl. Bought and paid for!”

I let out a wet, muffled cry at the lies, at the insult. I know dozens of girls who’ve been “bought and paid for,” but I worked all this time with no wages and never a word against him to avoid that life—and he’s saying that’s all I am! “It’s not true, sir. I’m a good girl, and I’ve never let him touch me. He’s not bought me. I work hard and get nothing but room and board.”

“And that’s too good for you, disobedient sow! Give ‘er ‘ere.” Bunson’s voice turns into a furious growl.

The man lets go of my arm, and for a second, I'm afraid he is going to force me into Mr. Bunson's arms. Men stick together.

"She doesn't seem to want to go to you," the man says coolly. He has a long black stick in one hand, a fancy cane, and he swings it now, swishing his cloak around him to stand in front of me.

In front of me.

My heart flutters for a second. Hope. This stranger is pushing me behind him now, putting himself between Bunson and me.

He turns back to look over his shoulder, and his voice is a low snarl, the kind I wouldn't dare argue with. "Don't. Move. I'm taking you with me tonight. I can put you to far better use than this fat, slobbering cur can."

He is some sort of rich gentleman! I'll work for him rather than Bunson if he'll have someone like me, someone with no proper training for a gentleman's house, only for work in kitchens and sewing and minding children.

I squeeze my eyes shut and nod as his hand connects with my shoulder. I bite my lip so I don't scream as he jams me behind a stack of broken lumber and orange boxes.

Bunson roars. "Who the hell do you think you are? You f—"

There is a lot of cursing and shouting. Then, Mr. Bunson is the one crying for help.

I don't move.

The stranger must be giving him ever such a thrashing, but no one rushes to the alley to help. No one came for me. No one came for him. In this part of London, people

don't investigate cries in the night.

Mr. Bunson's shouts stop all at once. Horrible, wet noises that make my stomach lurch fill the alley, so I put my hands over my ears and keep my eyes shut tight.

"Come along then."

I gasp when a gloved hand lands on my elbow, pulling me away from the alley.

"Come with me. It's the least you can do. I'll treat you far better than he would have. There won't be any pain, I promise."

"Are you... a foreign gentleman, sir?" I dare to look behind him and see Mr. Bunson lying still on the ground. His shirt front glistens in the bit of moonlight that sifts its way to the street below.

Blood?

I don't really care. The gentleman was offering me work, although how he went about finding a maid was certainly odd.

"I'm not from around here, no."

"Sir, I..." I swallow as I catch sight of red streaks across his pale face. The police will come in the morning. I might be blamed. No, I will be blamed. Some of the children would have heard the commotion. Mr. Bunson—the other Mr. Bunson—will come, and they'll tell about me screaming and running. They'll say there was a fight outside—and I fought back. That I... I look down the alley one last time.

The figure doesn't move. At all.

Someone will think I killed him.

“Is he dead?” I whisper.

“Most certainly.” The foreign gentleman smiles as if killing a man is nothing to him.

Maybe in his country, they protect innocent women. Maybe in his country, they won’t put a rope around your neck for fighting back.

I swallow my fear. I can’t go back inside. I may have to hide. I need a place to work, or I’ll starve.

“I do need a new position, sir. I’m very handy, and I aim to please.”

“Aren’t you lovely? Charming! Well, I’d like you to start tonight.” The hand on my arm tightens like an iron band.

Perhaps he’s just very strong.

“Tonight?” I blink and try to think what the clock chimed last. Nine or ten.

“Oh, I promise I won’t keep you up for long. You’ll be able to rest soon.” His voice is soothing.

And I’m so very tired suddenly. And desperate.

“I can begin straightaway tonight. My things—I’d rather leave without them, sir. I haven’t very much to begin with.”

“You won’t need much. I’ll provide everything for the tasks at hand.”

“Where do you live, sir?”

“Not far at all.” With a sudden jerk, I felt him lifting me, pulling me up in his arms like I’d carried dozens of ill children to bed.

“Sir, no! Please, I can walk.” I struggle to get down while clutching his shoulder for balance, a mixed-up thing that he’ll surely laugh at.

“You’re very tired. Just had a horrible escape.”

I frown. I escaped something horrible. But the escape wasn’t horrible. Was it? Did I misunderstand him, or is it because he’s speaking wrong, the way some foreigners do? Sometimes I feel so ignorant around others, and I haven’t had much schooling.

“It’ll be faster this way,” he whispers with a laugh, and then we’re running—no, leaping, going up stairs and over rooftops like they are nothing.

My scream dies in my throat, and I bite my lip. If I scream, he might drop me.

I’ve seen chimney sweeps running from rooftop to rooftop, scaling walls like monkeys, pulling each other up by the ends of brushes. Maybe this man had been a chimney sweep once? Or maybe one of them fancy foreign tumblers?

Almost as soon as I finish that thought—we stop. My new employer puts me down in a small, dim flat, and I realize—we came in through the window.

Not my place to question.

“I’ll make up the fire, sir.” There. That’s something I can do. Making a fire must be the same the world over, mustn’t it? And I can do it tonight, showing I’m worth employing. I shiver. March has been damp and cold, and tonight feels bleak.

I freeze for a moment, picturing the other two places I could be tonight—under Bunson or shivering as I walk alone in the dark, hoping to find a safe place for the night with no money and nothing in the world but what I'm wearing.

I wonder, just a little, if this man is an angel, and maybe that's why he seems to fly.

“How shall I address you, sir?”

“Uh— Mr. Spring—ton. Springton. Mr. Jack Springton.”

“Thank you, sir. I'm .”

“. Pretty.”

“Thank you, sir.”

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I'm full, for now. I sit and stare at the figure in the black dress with a ragged white apron and scuffed black shoes. Her bright golden hair is the only spot of color aside from her blue eyes and pink face.

By human or Flameheel standards—pretty.

I can see why Bunson (most filling) would want to claim her. But surely all the screaming and sobbing and running nasal cavities would spoil the beauty of her body?

Humans are very stupid at times. In the past year of hiding among them, I have met a few clever ones. Sometimes, I let the smart ones go. I can easily afford to, after all. The great majority are stupid and horrible to one another, and I dine well.

Anyway, her beauty won't matter to me in a few minutes. I'll let her lay the fire. It would be nice to be warm, not that I have a strong preference, but it will help her. She's shivering. I prefer my meals warm when I can arrange it.

Not that it will matter to her. I'll be nice and quick with the kill. Bunson deserved the butchering he received, squealing like a slaughtered pig as I tore off the best bits of his organs.

Yes, Bunson and his ilk earn my instant hatred.

But Polly... Somehow, she's instantly interesting. I don't know why. She doesn't seem particularly clever—but she is very resilient.

Look at her. Nearly the victim of that odious little man, carried across several miles of London by rooftop, and she is resolutely laying the fire.

What a good girl.

Stop. She's not a pet.

“Goodness, sir, I see why you were down our way late at night. Left you in a lurch, did your last girl?”

I blink and stir where I've been rooted, watching.

Polly is hanging a mass of clothes from the floor over the firescreen to air.

Some of them aren't mine. They're the “wrappings” my dinners came in over the past few weeks.

“My last girl—yes. She was gone without a trace.” I kick a dress behind me. It belonged to a common whore. Not pretty, but exuding sexuality and tasting like the hot, greasy batter that humans used to make their favorite things—fish and chips. She was very forward, petting me most indecently. I was rather relieved when she was dead and I could eat in peace.

I'll burn the dress when she's not looking—which means I'll have to send her from the room.

Wait, I'll just kill her, and then it won't matter!

But I'm full.

It's a waste. I won't even get to enjoy her if I do that now. No. I think... I think she'll

be for dinner tomorrow night.

“Blimey, sir. These clothes are in a state. And the floor isn’t swept.” Polly winces and shakes her head. “I’ll start now, sir. May as well, now that the fire’s lit.”

“No! No, you... Your services are not needed here so urgently. Let me... Let me show you to your room.”

Yes, that’s a nice, soft death for her. I’ll take her. Lay her down... Maybe she’d like to be comforted, I could do that—and then after she’s asleep, a soft pressure on her neck, and she’ll be done. Won’t even know it happened.

Polly looks up at me, lit by the glow of the fire, like the fake human-like angels in pretty books, a cherub with blonde wisps flying into a little halo around her sweet face. “My own room?” Her eyes are wide. “Even when Mr. Bunson said I could sleep in the attic, I had to share with all the older girls!”

“I have no other staff at the present.”

“So you’ll want someone to see to the cleaning and the meals?” Polly nods, a serious look on her face.

She’s going to taste like wine and honey. She has to.

For a minute, I envy the vampires I’ve met in London. They live on blood alone. They don’t have to kill to feed, even though most do. I wish I could eat this one slowly, a little at a time.

I sniff the air, and for the first time ever—food smells good. Not even the cleanest humans have smelled like Polly does.

Ooooh. How could this work? Maybe just a nip here and there while I feed on others to keep full? She could be like a cordial, a little fine wine to end the meal. Could I do that?

Polly walks past me, and I almost lick her cheek to see if the usually loathsome skin will taste good, too. She stops and clucks her tongue as she stares at my unused kitchen. “I can see you haven’t had supper here, sir. Did you dine out? Shall I make something from the larder?”

“You really are eager to work. Very keen.”

Polly nodded again, earnest blue eyes piercing mine. “I am a good worker, sir. I worked as hard as two girls for Bunson. He had no right to... He had no right to want other services from me. I wasn’t any kept woman. I’m not much for reading and sums, but Mr. Bunson never asked me to do any of that. The children don’t bother with book learning at Bunson’s. Only trades for the boys and sewing, cleaning, and cooking for the girls. When they get old enough, they usually get put out to factories, and I expect most of the girls marry soon after.” Polly stood, twisting her hands, now in the door of a tiny room by the kitchen. “I don’t have any other references than Mr. Bunson.”

“He is hardly in a position to give them,” I smirk.

Polly looks down. “I should feel bad that he's dead. Makes me an awful Christian, doesn’t it?”

“Oh, no. I wouldn’t say that. I believe Deuteronomy says that you shall put evil from you. Mr. Bunson was evil. He’s been put. I... I will go and see the police tomorrow and ensure all is explained. You don’t need to worry.” Why should you, if you die tomorrow?

“Oh, really, sir? Truly?” Polly steps forward, a timid tottering step, and then another. She suddenly reaches out and puts both of her hands around one of mine, eyes overflowing. “Thank you. I don’t know why you... I don’t know why God was so kind as to put an angel in my midst tonight.”

“I am far from an angel. I know my scriptures without any pretense of piety. In case you were in any doubt, I am not a good man. I feel no remorse for my actions.”

“I should say you couldn’t help it, sir. He was a horribly strong man, Mr. Bunson, for all that he was short and stout. I’ve seen him pick up two big lads and toss ‘em out when he wanted them gone.”

This woman! She is...

Well, she’s something. I scratch my head and see if her eyes follow my hand. In the dim light and with her innocent mortal eyes, Polly hasn’t noticed the small curling horns hiding among my black waves and white streaks. Her mind has probably found some way to erase the fact that we flew home. “I had a choice. I chose to kill him. I will, however, explain my reasoning to the police. He was attacking a young woman. I was protecting her.”

I was protecting my meal. I should stop this charade. I could grab her now, she’s so close...

But tomorrow.

“This is your room. I’m sorry it isn’t much, but it has a bed and linens. Sleep. Work in the morning.” I shut the door firmly in her face and hurry back to the sitting room.

I toss any clothes that are too obviously bloodstained or too big or small or feminine to be mine into the fire before sinking into the chair and waiting for sleep.

She'll be such a delicious breakfast.

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“A righteous woman should have no fear. I didn’t lay a hand on Mr. Bunson. I tried to stop him from laying a hand on me.” My voice is a soft, firm whisper as I tug my skirts into place. “I can walk freely into the market nearest Mr. Springton’s lodgings and get eggs, bacon, potatoes, cabbage, flour, salt... Everything.”

There is nothing in his larder but pots and pans. I found an old dress in the room where I slept—a dress far too fine for a servant to wear, but I will risk wearing it to the market and back. Just as soon as I gather my nerve to go.

Because even if the righteous shouldn’t walk in fear... I’m terrified that Mr. Bunson (the other Mr. Bunson) will find me and... I don’t know what. Something horrible that leaves me dead or wishing I was.

I wonder if Mr. Springton has an account at the market like Mr. Bunson does? If he doesn’t, I need money, and I don’t have any. And if I don’t have any money, I can’t make him a nice breakfast to show that I can cook.

If I find money lying about and take it, I’ll have to leave a note to explain that I’ve only gone to the market—and my writing is so poor, I’m not sure Mr. Springton would understand it. What if he thinks I’m a common thief after he saved me?

My thoughts are all in a whirling muddle—and the faces of Jasper and Anna and Henry start weaving in. Who will look after them? What if it’s one of the little ones who sees the body in the alley? Their poor little eyes! Their poor, sweet, young hearts shouldn’t see such things or know such things. They’ve already had to live through so many hardships if they’ve landed at Bunson’s!

And damn this dress! I break off buttoning it with a sob. It must have been left by some rich woman with servants because no woman's arms bend all the way up and around to reach the three buttons in the very middle.

“! You—you're awake.”

I whirl. Mr. Springton is in my doorway, a furtive, stealthy look about him—and it's not hard to guess why. He's having second thoughts about hiring some possible strumpet off the street in the dark—and now he finds me looking as if I'm about to steal one of his guests' dresses.

“Oh, Mr. Springton! I wanted you to sleep longer, sir, and I am going to the market to fetch things because the larder is empty, completely empty, sir, but I don't know if you've an account or if I should write a note if I found money left for the household shopping, sir, and then—this dress. It was in this room, and I... Mr. Bunson has a younger brother who is often in the countryside, sir, but if he should know—a-and if he should see me out today—”

Mr. Springton cocks his head, dark curly hair falling over arched eyebrows. His lips form an amused little quirk that makes me very aware that he's in my room and the back of my dress is undone.

“I can't reach the buttons in the middle,” I whimper.

“I can.” He strides to me.

Mr. Bunson had an oily voice. Mr. Springton has an oily step, but I don't mind it. It glides. He moves like dragging your fingers through water.

Push, pull, push, pull, push, pull, and tug. I'm done.

“It looks better on you than it ever did on her,” he says with satisfaction, standing back and admiring me like I’m some painting. “It’s the crack of dawn, .”

“Marketing is best done early, sir! Fresher goods, less spoiled bits.”

“Hm. All right. What will you buy?”

“Oh, anything you tell me to, sir.”

“I’m... I’m not one to fuss over the menu. Tell me, what do you think I’d like to eat?”

For some reason, the way he speaks and the tone of his voice as he says those words make my stomach go hot and shaky. He looks at me with that same burning gaze I first saw last night, and everything in me prickles. Fear and something else race through me. “Is it some foreign dish, sir? I don’t know any, but I will learn them for you, sir. I’ll learn anything you like.”

“Anything I like?”

I know there could be a trap in those words, but I think I’ve lived in a trap most of my life. I swallow and nod. “Anything you like to eat, sir, I’ll learn to make it for you.”

“.” He reaches his hand out—and then snatches it back and fumbles in his pocket. “Here. I’ll learn to eat what you make, and you learn to cook what I ask. It’s a deal.”

He shoves coins into my hand, more than Mr. Bunson would give me for a week for twenty or thirty children for just one man. “That’s too much!”

“Buy plenty.”

Buy plenty...

I wonder if I can slip a few turnips and apples to someone to take to Bunson's for me?

But first— "Do you have soap?"

"That I do have. In great quantity."

"Since you're up, I'll start the laundry to soak, sir, and then I'll do the marketing, and you'll still have a nice early breakfast of eggs, bacon, toast, tomatoes, mushrooms, and kippers. Is that all right, sir?"

Mr. Springton looks at me in silence for a moment, then sighs. "Well, it is certainly not what I had planned to eat for breakfast, but oddly enough, I'm looking forward to it."

I BUY MORE FOOD THAN I can carry, and a boy delivers what I can't, riding behind me on a bicycle with a basket strapped to the back.

"What have you bought?"

Mr. Springton must not care for sleep. Perhaps he's one of those gentlemen who does not need to work. He pounces on the shopping bundles with curiosity, an oversized cat sniffing the meat wrapped in paper, picking it up and turning it over in his hands.

"Sir, I'll see to everything, please. Oh. You need more ice for the icebox. This is ever so posh, Mr. Springton. I've seen them, but not in the children's home." I look at the little box in the kitchen, one that stands as high as my waist and has Harrods stamped in gold in the dark brown wood. Inside, metal shelves wait, one thick top compartment for a block of ice to go on top and for cool air to drift down and keep the rest cold.

“Ice? Yes. Of course. I’m sorry, the last housekeeper or maid must have failed to request that deliveries continue after their—departure.”

I think Mr. Springton is lonely—and probably hungry. No rich gentleman comes in to watch his maid put away the shopping. Ooh. I suppose I’m the housekeeper! Me, a housekeeper at only twenty! “Am I the housekeeper, sir? Or the maid? Or cook?”

He looks at me, holding the beef kidneys I’ve got to soak and peel if I’m to make steak and kidney pie for his tea. Or supper. I suppose he’ll have supper. People in the upper classes do, that’s what Kitty used to say, and Kitty said she’d grown up in a posh house until her mother ran off with the husband of the house and the angry wife sent her to Bunson’s, even though she was twelve and could easily have kept on as a maid.

“You’re the housekeeper, I suppose,” he muses in that slow, elegant voice. I don’t like it. There’s something dangerous about it, but...

Well, I suppose angels are dangerous, too, and Jesus most surely was, what with Him being able to send a whole herd of swine over the cliff into the sea.

And part of me likes it in a way that’s very wrong.

I must always remember that he’s my employer and a rich man, and he would never have any honorable intentions towards someone like me unless those intentions related to having his shirts washed and his supper made.

“Do you have tea or supper, sir?” I gasp out.

“What’s the difference?” Sleek eyebrows slide high on his noble forehead.

Not a wrinkle on that forehead, and yet he has white hair mixed in among the black. I

wonder how old he is?

“? Is there a difference between those two meals?”

“Don’t you have them where you’re from, sir? Begging your pardon. I mean— Ah. How long have you lived in London, sir, if I might ask?”

“I’ve lived in London for a year. My home was very informal about meals. Catch as catch can, I believe I’ve heard the English say.”

“Tea is earlier and heavier, sir, but the food is often simpler. People like me have tea. People like you have supper,” I explain.

“Oh. Well. We can’t have that. There’s only the two of us here. It would be a shame to make two meals. Let’s have supper together, .”

I swallow.

His smile shows that he’s teasing me. Playing with me. He knows it’s wrong, and yet he means it.

I think.

“I will eat at the same time as you, sir,” I say, turning with a curtsy.

“No. You will dine with me. Sitting at the table with me. I am lonely, and I would like you to join me for my meals.”

That iron grip is back on my arm, and I’m forced to face him. His eyes are cold and hungry, and I know I should be afraid.

Why aren't I more afraid?

"Yes."

He drops my hand and pokes the kidneys again. "Tell me all of these foods, . Please."

My lower lip wobbles as I list them off. I don't wish I was back in Bunson's clutches, but I wish... I wish I understood Mr. Springton better.

I name things as I sit them on the small wooden workspace in the flat's long, narrow kitchen. "Kidneys. Steak. Bacon. Eggs. Bread. Flour—I can make my own bread, sir, and I will from now on, but we needed it for breakfast. Milk, potatoes, tomatoes, mushrooms, carrots, onions, spring onion, lettuce, liver, apples, butter, cheese, lard, salt, pepper, sage, rosemary, parsley, thyme." I stop. I've never used the last few items, but I don't want him to know that. They smell good. I can tell what things go with what else by smell.

"I want the steak, the kidneys, and the liver. They smell the best."

I smile a little to myself.

"What is it?"

"I cook by scent, too, sir. There is something heavenly about a good bit of steak and kidney pie. I had it. Once. I know how to make it. I used to make it for Mr. Bunson and Mr. Bunson all the time."

Mr. Springton looks perplexed for just a moment. "There are two Mr. Bunsons. That's rather confusing."

"Eric Bunson and Robert Bunson, sir, but I daren't call them that."

“Which one did I remove?” he asks, polishing his nails against his thumb.

In the dark, they almost look like claws, like a dog's claws, short, sharp, and black.

Need to open the shutters in here.

“Robert. The older one.”

“Then I’ve done his brother a kindness. He’ll get the other’s holdings, isn’t that the way it works?”

“Often, sir.”

“Sir. No one ever calls me sir in that rather sweet, respectful way that you have, .”

I gasp when his hand catches my chin and squeezes my cheeks, pushing my lips out a little. For a second, I think he’s going to kiss me. Force me. Like Bunson.

“Why is your mouth so pretty? No other hu—woman that I’ve met has such a pleasing mouth.”

I whimper a little, and he lets me go. “Mr. Springton, I won’t tell the police, sir. But if you want me for bedding, I’m not... I’m not.” I can’t explain the rest. I’m not going to let myself be bullied into being his housekeeper with my body as some sort of pudding, even if he saved my life and gave me a job.

But there’s the tiniest bit of my brain that jumps with excitement when he grabs me. Smiles at me. Looks at me like I’m the only good thing he’s ever seen. He talks to me in a way that matches, not like Mr. Bunson, who would talk down to everyone, even his own brother.

“I see. Well. What if I only did things you liked, ? Would that be acceptable?” His smile stretches.

I rub my cheek once and drop my hand. “Yes, sir, that’s acceptable.”

What did I just agree to?

“Would you like to have supper with me? I promise I can be quite convivial.” A laugh that rings in the empty flat. The whole house is silent. It occurs to me that I haven’t heard or seen a speck of movement in this place, and I wonder if he owns all of it, not just this flat.

“I don’t know what that word means, sir.”

“It means I could be a fine friend if I’m so inclined.”

“I don’t think we could be friends, sir.”

“Ah, well. Probably not. But a dinner companion is not a friend, necessarily. It’s more of someone to keep you from being bored while you dine. You have no servants to talk to, and I have no guests, save you. You are my guest, you are my housekeeper. I invite you to sit at my table and talk to me of London. Will you accept? Would you like that?”

Would I like to sit with a fine, handsome gentleman and simply talk to him—and look at him? Maybe learn more big words and learn about far-off places where they don’t have tea and supper or steak and kidney pie? Where the men save the women and tell them their mouths are pretty, but that they will only do what pleases her?

Yes. “I would like that, sir, thank you.”

And again, I find myself wondering—what have I agreed to?

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What have I agreed to?

Firstly, I went into Polly's room this morning—no. Not her room. The second bedroom of the flat, which happened to be vacant. I was expecting to find the poor, exhausted thing asleep. I planned a soft, quick kill and then a lingering devouring.

And instead, I buttoned up her dress, gave her all the silver in my pockets, and am now being tortured, smelling kidneys and bits of flesh cooking.

One doesn't cook one's meat in the Middling. I'd never considered such a foolish practice until the heavenly scent tickled my nostrils. It's enough to dispose of the body and clothes without attracting attention in this world, never mind trying to put it on a spit or mince it into a pan. Ugh. Such a waste of time.

Although, whatever is happening in the kitchen makes me want to consider it.

I turn on my heel, pacing in the other room, the room that I'm pretending is mine, as if I ever bother to keep to a human's ways when I'm alone.

She shopped for me, cleaned for me, and cooked for me. I've gotten more than enough use out of her. This should be the end. Instead? I invited her to eat with me. I've never eaten human food. I wonder if eating the animal's flesh while looking at her will be almost as good as eating humans themselves?

"I have to go out for a few hours. I'll return for supper," I suddenly shout.

I cannot endure this torture another second.

IF YOU WERE HUNGRY , why not kill her? She's there. Convenient. The rest of the flats have been "emptied," and the assets of the owners are lining your pockets. No one would hear.

I pause as I drift from gable to gable over houses in the murky March afternoon.

There would be other things I wouldn't hear. Her voice. The little intake of breath when I speak to her. I wouldn't see the way her eyes change when she looks at me. Oh, humans wouldn't notice, but I do.

In a year, I've met plenty of people. I keep our acquaintances brief.

I've discovered that most mortals are oblivious to the supernatural, which is excellent for those of us who walk among them and wish to remain unknown. Of course, there are always a few humans who see us for what we are. Over the past year, a few observant types have spotted me. In a city of this size, it was bound to happen, and stories of a devilish flying monster with blue flames coming out of his heels have landed in the obscure sections of the newspapers.

When a shaft of sun lights the leaden sky, I land in the dark shadows of a grotty little alley in Whitechapel and emerge with a tug on my high silk hat, a much finer replacement of the original I once took from the unfortunate Larry who summoned me to this world.

I hurry along, merging into the mass of humans selling, buying, shouting, sweating, and clamoring. I walk fast, head down, eyes up, always moving.

Always hungry.

It is to a hunter's advantage to go unobserved while observing everyone else. Humans look like food in costume to me. Fat ones, thin ones, lean ones, poor ones, and down

here in this part of London—very few rich ones. Sometimes, I prefer to gamble and take a piece of prey that will surely be missed, but most often, I stick to the dregs with their foul-tasting skin and their plentiful innards.

That is why I was lurking near Polly's corner of the world last night. I wouldn't take a child for there's no meat on them, but there are plenty of prostitutes and beggars that no one misses. If you catch them early enough on their descent into their living hells, they still have the flesh that makes the catch worthwhile.

Polly is the only catch I've ever interacted with for more than a few hours and... It's puzzling. I find myself stopping to watch a flaxen-haired woman scrub a stone step and wonder what she'd taste like. Would all blondes as pretty and strangely innocent, yet as fearless as Polly taste the same?

You could simply eat Polly, you fool.

But then I couldn't watch her and see what she does next.

I suppose it makes sense that after a year of being able to gorge myself and eat several times a week instead of several times a year, I would start to grow bored and look for other amusements. Yes, that's it. Polly is an amusement. Something to watch, like the humans who watch other humans dancing about on a stage or singing on the street corners.

I turn down a grimy alley close to where I hunted last night. Morbid satisfaction makes me check on Bunson's remains, and I'm relieved they're gone. Little throngs of people gather and gibber, but I pay them no heed. I'm looking for something specific. I want to find a meal that looks like Polly so that I can rid myself of the desire to eat her and keep my plaything alive a little longer.

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Dora Nettles had earned her nickname for her generous gift of venereal disease, shared with every gentleman caller. Hers was the kind that made you itch and sting like you'd rubbed your sausage and potatoes in nettles.

Most men who had become afflicted after visiting her kept quiet as they could about their suffering or only unburdened themselves to sympathetic folk—other men who had suffered a similar fate between her legs or the legs of one of her compatriots.

Mac Finn (that was no more his name than Dora's surname was Nettles) was a one-eyed Scotch-Irish laborer who had gotten drunk and fallen into the Thames at Cheapside and lived in ever since. He was famous for his drunkenness after payday and his temper at all times. No one dared to tease the red-haired giant even though, at the moment, he was walking around as bow-legged as a turkey's wishbone.

“Did you pay a visit to Dora Nettles?” one of the braver folks at the Eel and Feathers asked.

He growled, tried to sit on a wooden stool, and quickly rose back up with a heated curse. “She ought to be killed like one of them slaving dogs with rabies. She ought to be hung up by her heels! Giving honest paying customers such agony.” Finn shrieked when someone collided with him and sent him down on his arse. When he rose up, he took the drink of the man nearest him and drained it. No one dared object.

“Even whiskey don't help,” he whimpered.

“It's because she's so pretty with her flaxen hair and her big blue eyes, looking like an innocent little virgin. For tuppence extra, she'll pretend she is one!” one of her former

customers rubbed his groin at the painful memory of his last visit.

Raucous laughter filled the air of the Eel and Feathers, but this only seemed to inflame the furious Finn more.

“Someone ought to do for her. Someone ought to take her off the streets.”

“Or you could just settle for something a bit homelier next time.” A plump brunette with a stump of an arm snuggled next to Finn with a winsome smile.

He gave her a rough shove, pushing his way through the laughing crowd. “Don't be daft. Then you'll have it, too, and pass it on to some other poor bloke. It's your fault, you know, being in this disgusting trade.”

“It wasn't so disgusting last payday when you went to visit Dora,” the brunette strumpet said, which set the bar to laughing again.

Finn stormed out.

DORA WAS RARELY SURPRISED by the requests of her clients, and she always insisted on getting at least half of the money first in case one of them asked for something truly queer.

The gentleman in front of her was well-dressed and bored-looking, two things her clients never were. To a man, they all looked eager or, at the very least, interested in what she had to offer.

“How did you find me, sir? Men don't usually come to see me in the middle of the afternoon. I charge extra if a man wakes me to do the deed.”

“I'm not most men, and after you've seen me, you might find yourself amenable to a

change of schedule,” the stranger said with a bow. He studied her carefully, almost as if he were appraising her clothes.

That struck Dora as odd, as men usually couldn't wait for her to lift her skirts. This gentleman seemed to regard her apparel with a critical eye, finally placing a gloved hand under his chin and remarking, “That's a very pretty lilac color.”

“Thank you. All right. You woke me up. Shall we get on with this?” Dora asked, irritated for some unfathomable reason.

A flash of something dark and malicious flew across the gent's face, but it was gone when he spoke with a slow, smirking smile. “As you wish.”

The gentleman took off his hat and gloves, revealing very dirty fingernails, which were almost completely black. Dora suppressed a shudder. Oh well. It was far from the only dirty thing that she'd encountered, and she would pay him back in kind with something far more loathsome.

As he unhooked his billowing black cloak, swinging it over his shoulders where it seemed to fly high in an unseen breeze, the door banged open. Dora jumped as Mac Finn appeared in the doorway, his shoulders hunched together and legs thrust apart. He looked comical, a child's string puppet that had been pulled too hard.

“I've saved you the trouble, mister. She'll give you the clap.” Finn pushed up his sleeves, revealing arms the size of Christmas hams. “I'm determined to stop her dirty tricks.”

“Finn, you should leave,” Dora hissed. Fear gripped her heart as Finn pushed past her new client with a murderous gleam in his single eye.

“Why should I do that?” he grunted. “I won't be able to go back to my missus until

I've seen a doctor now, and you're not worth the cost of a doctor on top of what I paid for the shameful quick shag you gave me.”

“Pardon me, sir. Is it your intention to kill this lady?” The bored voice of her new client broke into the conversation.

Dora and Finn turned to look at him, and Finn demanded, “What business is it of yours if I do? Are you a constable?”

“No, no. Far from it. I was only curious. Go on about your business. I'll wait,” The gentleman flicked some imaginary dust from one of his horrible black nails.

“You'll not wait, you'll leave. I don't want anyone here except Dora and me.”

Dora pawed at the air in front of her as if she could force Finn back. “Finn, I'm sorry. I never meant no harm. I didn't have it to begin with. It was some other bloke that gave it to me,” she protested, realizing that the dapper Johnny would surely leave and let Finn beat her until she was disfigured or dead. Her pretty blonde hair and unlined face were the only reason she was still able to have a home of her own—such as it was, one of the worst boxes of bricks in all of , an eight-foot square in Hangman’s Yard.

With a sudden flash of blue light, the gentleman stood between her and Finn. With a strike of his arm, Finn’s dusty white shirt split down the middle, revealing a broad chest covered in reddish hair. The grubby peach flesh spilled with a gush of blood and glistening, writhing organs. Dora shrieked and started to run past the body that fell heavily to the floor and the man casually licking his fingers.

“You're some sort of devil, some monster,” she shrieked.

“Well, I suppose you've noticed it now. Better late than never,” the gentleman

monster said, and his claws struck again.

JACK QUICKLY ATE THE flesh of the giant, muscular specimen, even though he felt quite ill and full halfway through. He reflected that Bunson had been quite a meal, perhaps a meal and a half. In the Middling, he would have lived a year on a prime catch like that. Now? He was soft and spoiled and would have eaten within a few days—maybe even a week. No, it was Dora that he had come to dine upon, and yet again, he found himself too full to enjoy a pretty meal.

“Well, bother it,” he muttered to himself, a phrase that he had recently picked up from humans in a coffee house. This was no use at all. He had killed Dora because she knew what he was and what he had done to the man she called Finn.

He knelt next to the female figure on the floor, lying on her side in a sprawl, her throat sliced. She looked rather like a sleeping Polly, and he found that put him into an annoyed mood instead of a hungry one.

“Waste not want not.” That was another phrase he’d learned. Jack worked his way across the girl’s torso, clucking his tongue at the red strains soaking into the lilac fabric. He should have taken her dress off first.

Why should that matter?

I think Polly would look nice in this color. This one did, and they’re very similar in height and coloring.

He left his second course unfinished and washed his hands and face in the cracked white basin by the unmade bed. He threw back a folded sheet strung on a piece of rope and revealed several pieces of women's clothing and a pair of worn black boots. He hesitated for a moment, staring at them, then took two of the dresses over his arm and walked from the squat brick home in one of 's darkest and dankest yards. As he

left, Jack stabbed his heel down on the ground and sent a jet of flame across the dead woman's skirt and the remains of Finn. The place blazed up as he drifted higher, traveling unnoticed as a dark shadow in blacker smoke.

As he flew home. Jack considered the strange turn of events. He had intended to find a woman who looked like Polly and feed off of her to curb his appetite for the pretty blonde now under his roof. And he had. But he hadn't really enjoyed it. He was full, almost too full, and he was suddenly worried that he wouldn't be able to eat the meal Polly was cooking for him. How would he ask her to dine with him if he couldn't bear to eat?

That is why you're the master, and she is the servant. You can ask her to sit with you, and she'll obey.

Polly seemed so eager to please—while still seeming afraid of him. Something rippled down his spine, another sort of hunger.

Eager to please. Pretty. Afraid.

His appetite surged back, but for the first time since landing in this feeding ground, it wasn't for mere food.

That's settled. I will eat as much or as little as I please, and she won't say a word.

Perhaps she'll feel badly that I just pick at her hard work—but the hurt may be soothed with these little trinkets, he thought, smoothing a hand over the pale blue dress in his arms.

Yes, I think she'll be pleased with these.

“What do I care if she's pleased or not?” he asked himself in an aggrieved voice. “It

doesn't matter.”

But it did.

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“Will you wash these?”

I jump when Mr. Springton tosses two dresses at me. One is blue, and one is brown, but both are a better cut and finer cloth than I could ever afford or have ever owned.

“Yes, sir!”

I’ve marveled round this flat for a few hours while Mr. Springton’s been out. It’s not so small as I thought, with two bedrooms, a little square dining room with a hatch through to the kitchen as well as a door, a sitting room, a kitchen, and even a proper privy built inside with a bath long enough for a man to lie down in! There is a plumbed sink in the kitchen and the bath, and a cupboard with a cistern, and next to the airing cupboard (a grand, wide one), there’s a tiny room without a window that must be for the cook or maid. Mr. Springton is very rich, indeed.

When I look out of the windows, the streets around here are cleaner, and more people travel in cabs than on foot. It didn’t feel like we traveled far, yet I feel as if I’m in another world while still in London.

“Wash them thoroughly ,” Mr. Springton instructs as he leaves the kitchen.

“Yes, sir! When will your wife be arriving?”

Mr. Springton stops and turns.

I hate when he looks right at me. Something in me shrinks. Something else in me swells. Everything pounds. I squeeze my fingers tight into the dresses to stop my

hands from shaking.

“I have no wife. Those are for you. You left without your belongings, and therefore, they must be replaced.” He nods once, and he’s gone faster than blinking.

I uncurl my hands, but everything is still pounding. Blood in my cheeks. My chest.

I work for him. Rich people treat their servants better than Mr. Bunson treated his... slaves. I struggle to think of other words, but the calm, silent cheer of yesterday was shattered last night, and now I let myself think of things I could never bear to dwell on before.

New things, too.

Like the fact that Mr. Springton is both the most generous and most brutal person I’ve ever met. “Thank you, sir!” I call, scrambling back to work, cursing myself for my rudeness.

He doesn’t answer.

I WASHED CLOTHES IN boiling water on the stove, but it wouldn’t surprise me if rich people used the big long baths in the privy as washtubs. I expect that, in time, I’ll get used to the way a proper servant should do things. I’ll meet the other maids in the area in the market or the shops, and we’ll get to be friendly.

My heart stings suddenly, wondering how all the little ones are getting on without me, how the older ones are doing running things without either Mr. Bunson about.

I wish I could help them somehow without fear of the police. I wonder how Mr. Springton fared with the police when he went out, but I imagine it’s not my place to ask.

It's not your place to sit at the table with him, either, but he wants you to do that.

That thought brings back the pounding in my temples, and I clutch the wet clothes I'm carrying down to the small strip of back garden. What will we talk about? Is steak and kidney pie enough, and suet pudding for afters? That's as fine a dish as I know how to make. What if he sacks me?

It's almost dark. What earthly use is it to hang these to dry in the damp night air? Go and dry them in front of the fire, you cloth-eared cabbage.

I trudge back up the stairs—three flights and not a sound in this fine house. It must have at least six flats, and all but one stands empty.

That doesn't seem right.

“Ah!” I round the corner and jump at my own shadow.

I shake my head and fairly run up the final flight of stairs.

I'm far safer than I ever was at Bunson's. When I was first there, I faced cruel girls and black-hearted matrons and overseers. Then I grew, and he and his brother apparently couldn't wait to take what's mine, and there have been big lads and bullies there my whole life.

I'm far safer here.

But Mr. Springton unsettles me.

“THAT SMELLS DIVINE .”

Mr. Springton smiles at me across the rectangular table with its white cloth. I aired

the linens today and spread it on fresh just a few minutes ago. The rooms have gas lamps, the kind built into the wall where you turn the little metal key on the bottom and hear the gas hissing into the little glass cup before the match catches. You'd think rich folks would never get tired of having enough heat, enough hot water, enough light—but they must, for Mr. Springton came in with a tarnished candle holder with four candles in it and placed it in the center of the table.

“I hope you like it, sir.” I serve the pie to him, the whole pie, with a knife and fork so he can slice it. I don't know if I'm supposed to do that or if the master of the house should do that and serve his guests. But I'm the servant and the guest. I bite my lip and walk back to the door that swings on soft hinges and leads to the kitchen.

“Where are you going?” His voice is soft, but it pins my feet as if someone pushed nails through the toes of my shoes.

“I... To the kitchen? Sir.” Please just let me go to the kitchen and wash the dishes. I know how to do that.

Mr. Springton rises. In the dimly lit room, I can see how pale his skin is, even his hands without his gloves. They move like white birds, flying too close to me, sliding through my arm, and leading me back to the table. “I will not force you to do things; that was our agreement. But would you like to dine with me and tell me about London? You said you would.”

Blimey, I did say that this morning. “I went to the Crystal Palace in Hyde Park once!” I blurt. “Mr. Eric Bunson took twelve of us with some rich charity lady who wore black and a veil and patted our heads every few seconds. She gave the home a lot of money and never came back to see how it was used. That's what I think. Because we had that one trip and one nice meal where there was fresh milk and bread, and that was it for the lady in black. Didn't see Mr. Bunson for months after that. Mr. Eric Bunson.”

“Ah. The Crystal Palace. I went one night. They were having a wonderful performance. So much singing and laughter. I met the man who I—I purchased this flat from at that performance. A stunningly well-dressed fellow with a very irritating wife.” Mr. Springton smiles, and his teeth snap shut over the words.

“Oh. I see. You bought up the other flats, too?” Am I allowed to ask that? Is that impertinent?

“In a manner of speaking, I took temporary ownership of all of them, yes. I like my privacy and have no wish to share the building at this time.”

He likes his privacy, but I’m in the room just up the hall from his. “I could stay elsewhere in the building, sir.”

“You are not an irritation. You are useful. Would you like to remain here, with me? You are not a prisoner. You can run if you like—the way you were running when you fell into my lap.” Amusement glitters in his eyes, and he smiles. He slices into the pie without looking at it. His eyes never leave mine.

My mouth is dry as flour, and I shake my head as he pushes a plate with a wedge of pie across the table to me.

“You don’t want to stay?” One dark brow arches, rising to his glossy curls.

Never seen a man who has such beautiful hair, clean and shining, not full of grease to make it look slick and limp.

I shake my head again.

“You do want to stay?”

I freeze, my fingers latched to my knees, rumpling my dark skirt. I have nowhere else to go. One day in safety reminds me what it's like to be hungry, cold, dirty, and afraid of what will happen the second Bunson decides you're done. At least if I work here for a bit, I believe Mr. Springton will give me a reference. I can say I kept house in a fine part of London, which will be sure to impress someone who needs a maid.

I nod at last, neck cracking in the silent room as I dip my chin in acceptance.

"So flustered, pretty," he murmurs, and his fork slips into the thick golden crust and slides out with a chunk of kidney dripping in gravy. His lips close over it, and I...

I must have a fever. I feel those lips wrapping around me, pulling me in, swallowing me whole—and he simply smiles.

"This is very good. Pleasant and warming. It's... It's not a recipe we have where I'm from."

"I see, sir. Where are you from?" Will you be returning?

"A little place farther south. Very uninhabited. A bit tyrannical for my tastes. London suits me. I wouldn't mind Paris. New York. Florence, perhaps. Anywhere with bustling streets and dark corners," he laughs, sitting back farther in his chair, one calf flung up on the very corner of the table as he sucks the tines of his fork.

God help us.

That's bad manners. Not how you sit at supper. Not how you sit before a lady. I suppose I'm not a lady, and this is his way of reminding me. Making me feel small.

And yet... There's a niggling little feeling that says this is a very dangerous man, but I'm safe. Like walking past the caged beasts in the zoo.

“Your boots are in need of a good clean. I’ll polish them after supper, sir.”

“You won’t. No one touches my boots. Thank you.” The leg drops, and Mr. Springton sits up stiffly in his chair, putting his fork across his plate. He catches me staring.

“Pudding, sir?” I can barely whisper.

He stands. Stalks around the table and by my chair. His arm brushes mine.

An accident.

Then his hand closes over mine, his fingers playing with mine. Narrowed eyes squint as he examines every digit with perfect control. Ownership.

I can’t breathe over the scream rising in my throat. I’m not in any pain, I’m just... I don’t know what’s going to happen next, and the feeling of going mad is consuming me.

“You barely ate.”

Barely ate? I haven’t even lifted my fork. “I... I never ate with someone like you before,” I croak. “A fine gentleman.”

“Oh?” Mr. Springton kneels next to me, elbow on one knee while the other rests on the floor. “And what are you, ?”

“Me? Nothing, sir. No one.”

There’s a flash of fury in his eyes that I can’t place. I thought that was the right answer.

“You’re a lady, . A finer lady than I am a gentleman.”

“What? No, sir, I’ve no parents, no money, no—”

“None of that actually matters. Humans are all the same. Strip off the fancy dresses, empty their silly purses and pockets, and they’re just... Meat. Meat and blood and bones.” He taps his forehead. “This is the bit that sets them apart. Words and thoughts and deeds. You are incredibly amusing, .”

“Thank you, sir,” I wish he’d stop kneeling. Stop staring at me. I’ve gone all pink and flustered, and I can feel sweat starting to slide down the back of my neck. I wonder if I stink to his fine nostrils. I wouldn’t to the folks down Bunson’s way, but here... I swallow again.

“You don’t talk much, , but I rather wish you did,” he purrs, one finger running up my forearm.

“Not my place to talk, sir.”

“Oh, but it is. It’s part of your duties. Cook, clean, shop, sweep, lay the fires, and join me at the table and in talking. A companion. I’ve heard of people having companions.”

“Men can’t have women companions, sir. Unless he’s very, very old and she’s his nurse. You’re strong and young. Healthy. I could only be a companion to a woman, and a very dull, stupid sort of woman at that, for I don’t know much about the world and art. I couldn’t talk on the finer things.”

“Hmm.” Springton rises, hands thrust behind his back and clasped there, down low where his trousers meet his waistcoat. “It would break the rules, would it?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And running off from Mr. Bunson? Did that break a rule?”

I don’t want to think about last night. “I don’t know if running off breaks a rule of law, but Mr. Bunson would say anyone doing anything he didn’t like was bad behavior, sir,” I confess.

“Killing Mr. Bunson probably broke a rule, too. Murder. I’m sure I wasn’t supposed to do that,” Mr. Springton says, cheery as a lark, now fussing at the mantelpiece, touching a silver pint pot on the mantle.

“What’d the police say, sir?” I blurt.

“They’ll contact me later if needed,” he waves a careless hand and grabs the poker by the fireplace.

What does that mean? What did he say? I struggle to ask what I want and fall silent.

“You’re still not eating,” Mr. Springton turns and frowns at me, poker swinging idly in his hand now.

“Nor are you.” I bite my tongue against my cheek. Shouldn’t have said that. Sounds saucy.

“I had a busy day and a large... tea. You’d call it tea.”

“Well... Why’d you stop out for tea if I was making you supper?” I demand, forgetting my place. “All this food, wasted.”

“And that concerns you?”

“It bloody well does! Some days, I fed the children at Mr. Bunson’s nothing but boiled water and potato peelings and called it soup,” I hiss.

“Bunson was a rather round individual. Surely there must have been food.”

“For him. Not for us.” Words I’d never say to Mr. Bunson bubble out of my mouth. “He was a greedy man, selfish and mean. I don’t even know who will think to go and buy food for the little ‘uns now. Once you’re old enough to work a job, you get out and don’t come back. Well, some have, but only to take another one away. Kitty did that. She got a good position as a kitchen maid in a big house with lots of servants, and they wanted a scullery maid, so she came back and took Hannah. I don’t suppose any of that matters. I’ll clear, sir.”

“Sit.”

I stop pushing myself up from my seat and slowly sink back down. The shadows dance around behind him from the fire, and the warm air carries the scent of cooking. I could be cozy and fat here, even if Mr. Springton is a peculiar, foreign gentleman. I have to stop running my mouth so bloody much before he decides a companion and housekeeper isn’t the ticket.

“Where do you buy enough meat to feed all of these little ones?”

“Oh. I suppose... Meat? Meat enough for everyone?” My eyebrows pop high on my head, and my mouth forms an “o” of amazement. “The butcher’s, sir. Or maybe fresh from the Smithfield Stockyard.”

He paces, and the fire throws flickering shapes. In one moment, he almost looks like some painted devil, with his pretty black and white curls formed into horns by the shadows. “How much am I paying you?”

The noise I make isn't ladylike at all. It sounds like there's a fishbone stuck in my throat. "Room and board, sir. Plus clothing."

"No money of your own?"

The sweat that trickled down my neck is streaming now. The back of my dress feels wet, and I realize I won't be able to get the damn thing off without help.

He saves me from speaking. "You'll never get away, out on your own, without money."

That's true, but life at Bunson's doesn't teach a girl to think much ahead. You think about living until tomorrow. "I had no references, sir. When you move to one of them other big cities, you'll give me a reference saying I was a hard worker, clean, sober, respectable, and a good cook." Please, God. "And the next job, I shall have wages."

"Or..." he suddenly sits, dragging his chair close to mine with a screech of wood. "You could take your wages and buy things for those urchins at the home. You needn't go back. I'll see that they're delivered. I... I have quite a bit of business down that way."

"But—But it must cost pounds and pounds to buy meat for all of them. I'm not worth that. Why would you do that, sir? If you please, sir."

Mr. Springton sits back and looks genuinely puzzled for a bit. He stares at me for a long time without speaking.

I feel like there's not a dry inch on my body. I wish he'd send me back to the kitchen and leave me alone.

Except that part of me wants to cry and cling to him in gratitude for even thinking of

feeding the children left behind, for rescuing me from Bunson and whatever he had planned for me.

“It might be cheaper than paying you wages,” he finally says.

I nod eagerly. Yes, it might, and that’s a good explanation that a poor girl can understand. It always comes down to money.

“And if I ease your mind, you’ll be content here. You might even decide to travel with me when I leave this city,” he says. “Would you like to see Paris, ? Or America?”

“Oh, America, I think, sir, if I had a choice. I don’t speak French, but I’ve heard they speak English pretty well in America.”

“Hmm. My appetite is back. You see? You make an excellent companion.”

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I could eat for hours watching her. There's something about the way her head dips. Her hands flutter. Pretty, nervous little prey.

I want to see the flesh she keeps covered. The scent of her... She doesn't smell like the others. I normally can't wait to get to the meat underneath the stinking, dirty skin of the humans I ingest. Her skin is smooth in places and rough in others, but it's delightful to touch.

It's late in the evening, nearly midnight, when I finally see her leave the kitchen. I doze in front of the fire in the sitting room, hands supporting my chin as I watch her enter, see me, and jump in place. "You look overheated, Polly. That dress is too heavy for such work."

"Yes, sir. My other dress is thinner, and it'll be clean and dry tomorrow," she gasps, a hand under her breasts.

With a sick realization, I know why Bunson wanted her. Oh, I realized before, of course, that he wanted her for carnal pleasures. It's just a jolt to realize I feel the same way now. Her breasts are bountiful, and her beauty is the flawless, unassuming kind. She doesn't know she's so lovely. She simply knows Bunson was bad and would go after anything he wanted.

I'm far worse than Bunson, but she doesn't know that. Yet.

"We will buy you a new dress or two. Something light. Aprons. Shoes. Hats. Underthings." I don't flinch as I say the words that the prim and proper humans are loathe to say. Polly turns pink.

It's all I can do not to bite her cheek.

"You don't have to, sir," she gasps as if she hasn't enough air to speak. "You gave me two fine dresses today, plus this one."

"You said part of your wages is in clothing. I'll not have you fainting in those heavy dresses." I rise abruptly as Polly seems to sag, her pink cheeks suddenly pallid as she stands in front of the fire. "You've been sweating in that all day, cooking, washing, cleaning."

"I'm fine," she says faintly. I know she isn't, for she's forgotten to say "sir" at the end of every sentence, a habit that's gratifying but getting on my nerves.

"Are you?" I slide my arm around her waist. She stiffens and then pitches forward. "I think you've lied to me, Pretty Polly."

"No, sir."

"I think you need to get out of that dress and into a bath."

"I—"

"If you argue with me, I'll sack you." I smile. Yes, I hold all the power over her. It should be very satisfying, and instead, it's dawning on me that she has an equal amount of sway over me. She's all I can think about. If something were to happen to her...

My claws fly down her back, splitting the dress until it falls off her shoulders and pools down to reveal those splendid breasts I was imagining. There was some little white shirtlet—also split—under the heavy black garment she wore, but nothing substantial, no heavy corsets or layers upon layers like some I've encountered.

Polly whimpers and squeaks. “Please!”

“Into the bathtub. Do I run this hot or cold?” I push her along ahead of me, her elbows in my chest as she crosses her arms to keep the split dress from revealing the rest of her.

“I don’t know. We’ve never... I never... We used a washtub every now and then, but usually just a towel and water.”

“We didn’t have these where I’m from, either,” I grunt, keeping hold of her with one hand and cranking open the tap with the other. “But they’re quite useful.” Blood washes away so easily when you can simply submerge yourself in water. “Don’t you faint on me, or I’ll have to scrub you down myself,” I warn in a stern voice.

Nothing I’d like more.

“The dress is torn,” she says in a dazed voice. “My underthings... I don’t have a night dress, sir.”

“We’ll add it to the list. I’ll fetch you something for tonight.”

I leave Polly in the bathroom and slide from my flat. The halls of the building are dark and silent. The flats stand empty. I’ve long since eaten their inhabitants, but I’ve left enough of their belongings about to make it look as though they might return.

Very hard to return when their bones are the ashes in the bottom of my fireplace.

This part of London—just south and west of the refined urbanity of Pimlico, seems to be full of well-bred humans who mind their own business. Of course, it helps that supernatural beings seem to be invisible to them, and our activities likewise. I move from flat to flat, trying to recall which once held female occupants. On the first floor,

I think. Yes. White cotton. Voluminous. She was a fleshy woman with gray hair and a bitter stringiness to her.

Glimpses of Polly's pale skin, almost as white as mine, glow in my mind. White and pink, blonde and blue. A pretty thing wrapped in sweet scents. She's a confection after a year of fatty meals, lean meals, unappetizing, bitter, stinking—but always filling meals.

"She's a cordial to sip on," I whisper, heels igniting and sending me soaring up the stairs the second I leave the flat on the ground floor.

The blue flames that come from my hooves scorched through the heels of my boots, but I don't mind. My feet aren't delicate, soft things that can't stand mud, snow, and rain. Of course, if Polly ever got her hands on these boots, she'd be shocked to see the heels are slit through, to find the thick, cloven hoofprints worn into the bottom.

I won't make you do things you don't like.

For the first time, I think about whether she'd like what I can do to her. What I want to do to her. Not eating her. Not that way.

If her hands slide through my hair and grasp horn, will she scream? Of course. What about when she finds my well-muscled thighs end in thick shanks and hard black hooves?

Or that my genitalia, which I've heard called everything from sausage and potatoes to wedding tackle, is considerably more bull-like in size than human...

"Hm." A human's dislike never stopped me before. Why should she be any different?

I TEMPT FATE. MY VERY existence in the human world tempts fate, so I continue

my plan, unhindered.

The bathroom is silent when I arrive back in the flat. Has she run off? Has she drowned?

Fingers press against the door, and it opens without a squeak.

Polly glistens, back and shoulders to me, submerged to the waist. Her head is bowed. Is she crying?

I would hate that. Purely for selfish reasons, I don't want her to cry. The sound is displeasing and ruins my appetite if I don't stop it quickly.

She's silent. Breathing deep and even.

Oh, poor thing. Poor little morsel. She's fallen asleep in the warm water, exhausted.

Good.

I risk moving inside, silent, stalking my prey as I would in the Middling, a vast, open land where prey can run, even if they can't hide. It's best to sneak up on them as there's no cover.

Here, there's no cover. One tilt of her head will let her see me.

I want that. I want her to see me. Feel me. Beg me to taste her. Bite her. Devour her.

My hand inches toward her bare shoulder. I could yank her from this tub and under me in seconds.

Instead... I drop the nightgown over the doorknob and slip back out of the room.

“Polly. I’ve slid a night dress through the door. Dry off and get in bed.”

I hear a splash and gasp. “Th-thank you, Mr. Springton!” her voice calls back, startled.

But sweet. So delectably sweet.

How long can I live like this without tasting her?

NOT LONG. A DAY PASSES . Polly is in a frenzy of cleaning and scrubbing and hauling home a giant chunk of ice, which shows me that under her frail appearance, she is surprisingly strong.

I leave to let her work in her shabby, thin dress, promising her that tomorrow we will go shopping and that today I will take care of the rest of her “wages”— meat for her little urchins.

I find the stockyards Polly speaks of, but there are humans everywhere. Walking, dead-eyed humans who have blood caked into the creases of their skin. For the first time ever, my appetite dulls while looking at strong, healthy prey.

Very strong, dedicated prey. I’m afraid they’ll work all night, but at last, most of them leave. In the distance, a church clock chimes nine. I’m late for supper. Polly will fret. My pace quickens at the thought of her frown, and that makes me frown, too. I need to get the meat and leave.

Sneaking through the giant building that looks so beautiful from the outside, with high arches and vaulting ceilings, I hide in the din and hustle of dirty men, barking dogs, bleating sheep, and squealing pigs. The market covers acres of ground in the heart of London. I head to the cattle. I take half a cow from a giant metal hook. Literally, it’s half of a beast, perhaps four hundredweight of meat, gristle, and bone, a

giant carcass split and quartered, swaying in the constant jarring of bodies and the rumble of trains that lead straight to this building. The streets around the market run red with blood.

If only I'd found this place sooner. Perhaps I'd never have left, I think with a crooked grin, dragging the meat behind me.

I stop before I reach an exit. There are live beasts here, too. I know the humans kill and eat them—but I never had until yesterday. Beings like me prey upon humans, for that's all that enters our realm. Nothing else has a sentient soul fit to find its way to Heaven, Hell, or in between.

With a moment's hesitation, I sling the carcass onto a vacant hook and slip into the mass of giant black, shaggy bodies that are penned in, waiting for their date with a blade. I sink my claws into the coarse black hide of a steer and tear, the creature's lowing surprisingly loud right next to my face. I bite and slash, sinking my teeth straight into warm, twitching muscles.

Oddly enough... its flavor is far more pleasant than humans. And the skin isn't so unpalatable, which surprises me, as well.

I leave the beast bleeding. Tomorrow, it'll die either way. A few chunks from its neck and shoulder won't matter. Some workman in the stockyard will imagine one of the dogs savaged it, perhaps.

To me, the only thing that matters is that I leave the meat in front of Bunson's and then vanish, my appetite still sharp.

As I turn towards home, the pain blooms in my middle.

Very sharp indeed.

Just one taste of her. That's all I need—for now.

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Do I go to bed and leave supper on the table? Do I wait until he comes home?

I should wait until he comes home.

I pace in the kitchen, which smells of bacon, onions, and leeks. Tonight's dinner is liver and bacon in onion and leek gravy. Of course, if I add the liver to it now, it will be tough as an old boot by the time Mr. Springton gets back—whenever that is.

“No, I'll wait until he comes in, and then it would only be a few minutes for the liver to cook through and the rest to heat up. Again. And if he's angry that it's not ready the second he sets foot in the door, I'll give him a glass of wine. Or brandy? Do gentlemen take brandy before a meal? Does bacon go tough?” I run my fingers through my hair and catch the strays, sliding them back into the bun at the top of my head. March is cool, but the flat is warm and toasty without being unbearably hot like it was last night. My dress is lighter, that's what it is.

Last night.

I stand stock still, remembering how he grabbed me around the waist—how he ripped me out of the heavy, fine dress that buttoned all the way up to under my chin, with sleeves all the way down to my wrists.

I swallow and feel my breasts tighten like they do in the cold—only I'm not chilled this time. It feels hot in my middle and tight all over, like pins sticking in me when I breathe.

You were about to faint. He didn't know he'd rip your dress and underthings right in

half. He'll take you shopping tomorrow.

I press a hand over my bosom, wishing for the hundredth time that I was flat-chested like Gertie. My breasts are big enough that my dress sits differently without the snug little cotton undershirt. Kitty said I ought to have something better, something like the brassieres that are in the back of the women's magazines, all the way from Paris. Or a corset.

Too thin to need a corset, and don't need men looking at your shape—such as it is.

I push the lust I've seen on the lads' faces out of my mind. Wipe away the leers of Mr. Bunson and his brother.

Mr. Springton doesn't leer. He smiles. He smiles as if he owns the world and finds it all a bit funny.

Mr. Bunson leered like he owned me .

When I think about Mr. Springton kneeling next to me, everything is tight and prickly again.

“Four hundredweight of beef dropped off at Bunson's. A very surprised-looking pair of little boys opened the door, and such a hullo and a cry broke out. There. That's your wages for the month, .”

I whirl when Mr. Springton enters the flat, talking away as if he's been behind me for hours. My spine shivers inside of me and I wonder if he truly has, if he's been hiding somewhere, watching me.

“Oh! Thank you, sir!” I gasp. “Four hundredweight! That's more than enough!”

He tosses his coat and hat on the settee behind him, and the dark smile he wears stretches. “Good. Let them fatten up. If there’s one thing I despise, it’s a bony adult,” he mutters. “Supper?”

“Yes, sir! Brandy, sir?”

“Only if you have a glass, too.” He slides down the small, narrow hall.

I freeze in the midst of hanging his hat and cloak. “I don’t drink, sir.”

“Have you ever tried? It’s rather nice.”

“No, sir, I...” I need to stop staring at the red streaks on the wooden floor. Blood. Bloody footprints.

Well, of course. Smithfield’s yard runs thick with blood; it’s common knowledge. Not many a fine gentleman would go down to purchase food for orphans. Bless him.

I run to stop soaking the liver in milk, strain it, and toss it in the pan with the bits of bacon, leek, and onion. “I’ll be there in a minute, sir! I’m just going to scrub up these footprints.”

“And then dress for supper?”

“I... Dress for supper?”

He strides out of the bathroom, curls wet down and combed sleek to his head, a shadow of dark stubble standing out on his pale skin. “Put on the dress I brought you. The blue one. Tomorrow, we’ll buy more—if you like. Would you like, ?” he asks, stepping up close to me.

Lord. He's handsome.

I've never thought a man was handsome, not once. In my head, that gave a lad power over me.

Mr. Springton already has so much power over me, and I don't even mind.

My voice comes out a mere breath when his arm brushes my waist as he circles me. "I don't know if they'll fit without altering them, sir."

"Shall I help you into one again, ? Or out of one?" There's a hungry twinkle in his eye, and his smile spreads and stretches, a handsome smile in a handsome face.

Lord, I'm lost.

"I can manage, sir, as long as I'm quick."

brANDY. A FINE DRESS that is far too low for a woman of good character to wear. A plate of food heaped high, and more where that came from. Snowy white linens and candles again—in what Mr. Springton calls a candelabra. "Have I fallen into some fairy story?" I blurt as the first sip of dark amber fluid fires through me, burning my throat and nose.

Mr. Springton sips, swirls his glass, and stares at me over the rim. "What story would it be, ?"

"The handsome knight saves the girl from the evil old witch, I expect, and takes her back to marry the prince and live in his castle."

"Hmm. No. Not that one. We have different stories in my land."

“Do you? Will you tell me one?” I ask shyly. Does that seem presumptuous? “It’s just that after I came to Bunson’s, I never got much chance to look at books, and most of the reading I learned I haven’t had no use for and—”

His hand raises, and I stop at once.

“In my land, there are no knights. No princes. No good fairies. There are only monsters. We eat the princes and princesses. We eat the witches and the evildoers.”

“This doesn’t sound like a very happy story,” I mutter, quick to drink again.

“Then hear this one. Deep in the woods, where all the beasts dwell, the most daring of the beasts was out hunting. His claws were sharp. His appetite was sharp. He stalked his prey, a pretty little morsel walking alone in the dark.”

Mr. Springton pushes his plate away. Leans forward. Black claws on the tablecloth.

What? No. It was a trick of the light. Of the brandy. He has no claws. Humans don’t.

A small, stiff voice in my mind warns me that he’s acted differently than every other human I’ve ever met.

My breath freezes, and I feel so cold that not even the fire or the brandy helps.

“The girl was running. From another sort of beast—a weak, fat, slobbering sort of beast. There was a battle. Well, you really can’t call it much of one since the weaker beast growled a few times and then was eaten all up.”

“Mr. Bunson wasn’t eaten,” I blurt.

Mr. Springton stops, jaw tightening as his lips thin. Then his smile returns, small and

pointed, a knife tip in my heart. “Very good, . You saw through my story. What else do you see through?” he asks in a silky whisper. It wraps around my throat and pulls tight, stopping me from speaking.

“You don’t need to be afraid. The rest of the story has a nice ending.”

“Does it?” I squeak, shaking my head to try to clear it. He’s not an actual beast. It’s... What is it called when you say one thing to mean another, but they both have the same meaning? I don’t know, but I’m sure educated people like Mr. Springton would know.

“The beast who killed the other beast took a liking to the pretty girl. She was brave and kind. Willing to help and work hard. She took care of others and herself. For the first time in his life, the beast wasn’t hungry for food. Just a taste of her. Sometimes... sometimes he thinks the girl might be hungry for new experiences—even the dark kind he would give her.”

There’s silence. Mr. Springton’s out of his seat, standing behind it, nostrils flared, a figure like a statue, all proud and frozen in stone.

“Would you like that, ?” he finally asks, voice something between a snarl and a whisper.

I’m confused. I don’t know if we’re in the story or talking about real life. Do I answer as the girl in the story or myself? Or are we one and the same? Is Mr. Springton the beast who eats other beasts or a strange rich man who buys his housekeeper dresses and makes her feel safe and afraid at the same time?

Or are they one and the same?

“Would you like that, ?” he repeats, voice a little softer, smoother.

I nod, and the room tips and swirls at the edges. “I’ve liked everything so far,” I say, a hand to my forehead.

“Then I think you’ll enjoy this, too.”

Mr. Springton is beside me. The familiar iron grip of his hands skips my arms and lands on my bare shoulders this time, but I don’t protest. Just gasp.

How can he be the man in front of me and the beast in the story? He has a man’s face... but I feel his claws bite into my skin as his mouth lands on mine.

I’ve never been kissed. Not once. Kissing leads to babies and being forced into the street, that much I know.

But when Mr. Springton pulls me tighter to his chest, an urgent grunt of his lips against mine, I don’t even try to pull back.

He said he would only do things I like, and oh... “Mr. Springton—”

“Jack. They called me Jack. You must call me Jack, ,” he whispers, kisses moving down my neck.

It must be the brandy working because the world tips and spins, and I land with my back against the tabletop, my hair inches from the flickering flames of the candelabra.

Flat on my back, served up for the beast to eat.

What nonsense.

I drag my eyes from the dripping wax above me, and my eyes struggle to see anything but the black dots the candles’ flames have left in my vision.

Mr. Springton stands in front of me, between my legs, pinning my skirt to my knees as he breathes in fast, uneven spurts. His hand reaches up and tugs at his tie and collar, ripping them open.

“What’s happening?” I ask, spine tight. I should sit up. Run. Scream.

I know what’s happening. I’m letting it happen. I don’t feel helpless or hopeless like when Mr. Bunson was chasing me. I wanted to run from him, to flee, to find help, to be rescued.

Well, now I’m rescued, safer than I’ve ever been, as more danger than I’ve ever been in seems to stare me in the face.

I simply wait.

Mr. Springton smiles and pulls a chair behind him. “I’m going to have supper now.”

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Her little whimpers and winces whet my appetite like nothing else. As I collapse into the chair, claws digging into her soft white thighs, I want to bite. I want to rip the tiny bit of padding from her lean legs and devour her.

But there's a sweeter, darker scent that calls me to burrow deeper, folding back the skirt of her dress until it's bundled over her waist, revealing a threadbare bit of cotton between her legs.

"Mr. Springton—"

"Jack. I want that to be the name you call when I dine on you," I hiss, dragging the tips of my sharp claws down the unmarked white of her legs, making pretty pink trails. A fraction deeper, and blood would well to the surface. I pause, ready to pierce.

No. I won't do that to her. Not yet. I want her to enjoy this. To enjoy me as I'm about to enjoy her, so that she'll let me do it again and again and again. A swipe with a single finger reveals coarse brown-blond curls and plump pale lips that press together, unopened. A perfect crease, like the folds of flower petals.

My hand traces over her stomach, and I feel her shivering. "No one has tasted you?"

Polly shakes her head. "What will happen after you do this?" she whispers.

"What do you think will happen?" I ask. I could tell her. I will sate myself in your flavors, dine on your cooking, and still hunt at night, taking particular pleasure in killing and devouring those who remind me of Bunson.

For the first time, my appetite withers at the thought of human flesh, but the thought of the kill, of removing other beasts who prey upon the Pollys of this world... That makes me lick my teeth, such human-looking teeth with deceptively sharp points waiting to rip and tear.

Polly is mine. Belongs to me. My grip is tight, bruising as I seethe, thinking of others touching my prey.

I'd forgotten I asked Polly a question, so lost am I in my thoughts—until I can feel the vibrations of her skin through my palm as she speaks.

“You’ll tell me to go. But you’ll give me a reference?” her voice trembles.

A sound I loved—and now suddenly hate. That’s not my Polly. Not the one who tried to free herself, who ran and fought that bullying bastard, Bunson. There must be a reason she lets me touch her now. She didn’t the first night.

My touch gentles. Smooths. Her skin is a luxury under my hand, so fine and soft here between her legs. “Tomorrow, we shall spoil you with all the frocks and fripperies in Christendom. You will cook and clean. I will... have business to attend to in the city in the evening. If I please you as you please me, then tomorrow night, you will ask me to do this again. To do this, and more.”

Her fists tighten in the fabric of her skirt. She nods, saying nothing.

Frozen little lamb, hoping the wolf isn’t going to snap her tender neck.

I sit down hard, looping my hands around her thighs and yanking her forward. The candelabra tips and only my Flameheel reflexes save Polly from being burned. I snag the offending fixture and blow the candles out in one puff before placing the candelabra on the floor. The only light comes from the low fire in the hearth now, but

I can see perfectly. Perhaps it's just as well that Polly can't.

"What are you doing?" she yelps when I pull her bottom all the way to the edge of the table and bite down softly on her thigh.

"Something you'll like."

HIS FINGERS ARE PARTING my cunny, and fear flies through me, chased by pleasure. I close my eyes and wait, unsure why I'm not pushing him off.

You've seen what he did to Bunson. You've felt how strong he is. It'd be useless.

Only... "Stop!" I shout, voice thin and quivering.

He stops, hands falling from me instantly.

I lie there, breathing hard, blushing. I could move. I could kick him squarely in the face.

"Stop? Did I hurt you?" he asks. His hand comes back, soft and featherlight under my navel and above my curls. Fear mixes with heat and a new kind of tension, one that makes me squirm.

"No."

"Are you afraid of me?"

"Yes."

"You're smarter than most."

His head bows, and he murmurs the words into my thigh. I feel his lips moving, tongue sliding. Kissing me. Licking me.

“I... I’m not smart. I never had much schooling,” I whisper.

“As if all the knowledge one needs is contained in books. Books can be more trouble than they’re worth. I should know,” he laughs, a dark, wicked sound.

His lips don’t stop, nor do his fingers. They pull and knead the space above my quim while his lips and teeth take turns, first right thigh, then left, then a slow drag across the middle.

I jump when his lips hit something between my legs, a spot that seldom aches, but when it does, I bite my lip, close my eyes, and try to push the hungry thoughts away.

Some girls at Bunson’s have gotten in the family way, and some of the boys at Bunson’s put them there. I heard their squealing and gasping in the storeroom, the giggling and cursing. Slickness filled my knickers when I thought about someone making me moan and gasp like that—and then potatoes needed peeling, and fish needed cleaning, and all thoughts of forbidden pleasure vanished.

Tonight, there is no one here to distract me. Save me. Stop me. Mr. Springton’s lips press against my quim with a satisfied sigh, and then...

The world jumps under my hips. Lightning shoots straight up through me, toes to head. His kisses aren’t just kisses. His mouth opens and sucks, his tongue lashes hungrily, lapping at me like a thirsty animal.

It’s disgusting. It’s dirty.

It’s divine.

A moan escapes me, and I clutch the fabric at my waist as he has his way with me.

SWEET LITTLE FLOWER , so full of delicious hidden nectar. She pours so easily once I begin to split her apart with my tongue, forcing her virgin holes wide open so that I can delve in deep and pull more moans from her.

Between soft curls, she's pink and mauve, a masterpiece, a confection fit for royal tables.

How sensible you are, Jack, I congratulate myself, to have spared her life so you can eat this meal again and again. "More," I groan when her thighs slap against my ears, trembling as she tries to stay still.

Silly thing, she needn't stay still and quiet. "More! Wider," I command, claws poking against her cunt lips. I run my thumbs down them to feel her shiver before moving to suck on the hard bead of flesh that makes her nectar flow and soak my fingers.

My cock is hard and aching, desperate to plunge into her. My teeth take hold of her bead as I suck, the urge to bite for blood almost overcoming me. In desperation, I drop one hand to my lap, to my trousers, tugging open the flies with a wrench. My suction on her bead slows as I groan in satisfaction when I grip my cock, tugging the long, thick member to relieve the ache Polly creates in me.

"Mr. Springton—"

"Jack!" I snarl.

"Jack. Jaa-aack." She breathes out my name and I can't help but rise and tower over her. She doesn't tense, brave girl, and my lips find her throat. "Oh, Jack," she murmurs, a hesitant, sighing noise as she rests her jaw against the crown of my head as I lathe my tongue across her throat, wishing I could swallow her sounds.

Standing like this, bent over her with her hips at the edge of the table, I can feel her hot, wet flesh against my cock. I want to plunge in, to make her sloppy with my spendings, and then feast on her again.

But I won't. I sit back down to force myself to wait. She will ask me to bed her. Breed her. I don't know if Flameheels can spawn with humans, but I know that I suddenly want to feel her virgin walls grip me as I empty inside of her, cock pressed to her womb.

"You do such things to me," I groan, shaking my head. "You have no idea what urges you give me."

"No, I don't."

Silence again while I resume my licking and lapping, determined to make her peak but not quite sure how. "How do you pleasure yourself?" I demand harshly, my hand impatiently stroking my cock.

"I never have. It leads to babies and being used by every man who knows you like it," Polly explains in a reluctant voice.

"I'm the only man who need know, and your secret is safe with me, Polly. And my secrets are safe with you, aren't they?"

HIS SECRETS. HE KILLED a man. I let him. I said nothing, nor will I.

Jack stands again, kissing my throat, pushing my hand under his until my fingers are down over my matted curls. He's made me so wet with his tongue and my own juices. My cheeks are on fire to think that his mouth has been there, and the color floods the rest of me as he pushes my fingers down deeper.

“So wet for me. You must like it, Polly. Say you do?” he asks, his face inches from mine, tight with worry.

Funny. I thought when a man had you flat under him, you were powerless. At the moment, I think I could crush him with a shake of my head. Only it would be a lie to say no.

“Did it feel good? Did it feel wonderful?” he persists, his fingers tangling with mine, over me one second, under the next, rubbing through my wetness and finding my pearl. I fight for a moment, hand still against his pushing, but then give in, rubbing myself with him.

“It’s wonderful,” I admit, and God, it is. His fingers are even better than his mouth, bringing a burning ache to the surface.

“I want to make you peak. Pour your juices on me, sweet Polly. Do you know how good you taste?”

“Sir, don’t say—”

“The truth? Oh, poor thing. You’re stuck in my truth now, whether you see it or not. I am your beast, and you are my burden. I cannot seem to let go of you or put you down. I love that. I want to be with you, to feel you near me. To taste you and fill you.” His fingers slide into me easily, but I cry out in shock.

“No!” I whimper, shaking my head. “Please, not yet.”

“No, no. Not yet. I want to help. Does this help?”

My muscles lock around him, then slowly soften as he thrusts inside of me with just the tip of one finger, the fleshy pad of his fingertip circling inside of me while his

thumb worries my pearl back and forth.

“Rub yourself for me, Polly.”

I was never foolish enough to believe that when a man finally bedded me, it would be for love. I wasn't hopeful enough to think it would bring pleasure, either. I close my eyes and know I'm not in love, but Jack's words echo in my ears. “I cannot seem to let go of you or put you down. I love that.”

He loves being with me.

And I...

He is a beast... But perhaps he is my beast, and I am safe in his claws.

With our slippery fingers wedged together and darkness and heat swirling around me like the brandy in my stomach, I feel something break free inside. Something that feels so good that I curse aloud and don't even care that I shout, “Jack!” loud enough that the people in the next house must hear it. Everything pulses and trembles, like a frantic heartbeat is in between my thighs.

“Ah, Polly,” Jack sighs in blissful contentment—and slips away from me, back into his seat. He buries his head between my legs as my mind slowly clears.

Eyes wide in the dark, I struggle to find my breath again, the only sounds in the room are my shallow pants and Jack's slurping chuckles.

“You are a most unusual person,” I whisper, a heavy, satisfied feeling washing over me. I could sleep. I could sleep right now, like this, debauched and defiled on the dining table.

“I’m not a person, Polly. A beast. Don’t forget it,” he whispers with one last, long lick that makes me twitch all over.

He moves about while I try to force my limbs to obey. There are dishes to wash. The tablecloth will have to be washed—probably ought to be burned after this. I must cover up. I must—

I do nothing as Jack swings me up into his arms easily, carrying me like I would cradle a sick child. “The dishes. The linens,” I protest weakly.

“They can wait. You must sleep.”

Whatever he did to me, my body enjoyed it. My brain is still hazy. Without a murmur, I let him strip off my dress and leave me in my bed, wrapped in sheets and a duvet. “Pretty Polly,” he whispers, planting a kiss on my forehead.

My eyes open in time to catch his startled expression.

He looks quite sweet when he’s shocked by his own actions. “Handsome beast,” I dare. In the morning, I won’t be so bold, I’m sure.

Jack chuckles and strides away, shutting the door behind him.

He’s a good beast...

Then sleep wins.

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Eric Bunson was a tall, lanky man whose greedy habits had finally started to put flesh on an otherwise stick-like frame. Some would even say he was handsome, unlike his toad-like brother.

“Kate, my little lamb. The police haven’t told Uncle Eric what happened to Uncle Robert,” Eric Bunson wheedled, catching hold of one of his brother’s unfortunate urchins.

“‘E got killed, sir,” Kate said, far too happily.

“Yes, I’ve heard about that. But all that I heard was that he was found in the street. What happened before?” Eric asked, trapping the little girl by holding the strings of her stained apron.

That was not all that he’d heard. He’d heard that his brother had been gutted like a fish and mauled by wild dogs. He’d been told that he could bury the head and the bones... but there would be no need for a good black suit to bury him in. Hanging about the depths of Whitechapel the last few days had subjected him to the ravings of drunkards, whores, and madmen, who claimed that some trull and her giant of a clap-infested client had met a similar, yet milder fate the next day. Fools began to whisper about some menace with blue flames about his body, some demon who could leap over buildings.

Poppycock.

“Someone killed ‘im,” Kate repeated, struggling in Eric Bunson’s grasp.

“Yes, I know. Someone who hated him very much.” Eric wound the strings around his wrist, and Kate stood still with a wince. “That’s better. Listen to Uncle Eric. Someone who hated Uncle Robert very much hurt him.”

“E don’t let us call ‘im uncle. Mr. Bunson, it was.”

Eric closed his eyes and resisted the urge to strike the child. Ever since he had taken up residence in his brother’s rooms a day ago, there seemed to be some sort of quiet mutiny brewing among his brother’s charges. That wouldn’t do. Without the children’s labor, their burlap sacking business would be a dead duck. He’d expected to find the dirty, snivelling little nits panicking and quarreling amongst themselves over the last of the provisions in the larder or the last of the coal in the cellar.

But they weren’t. They were full and strangely happy. Some of the older boys had taken charge.

Fear keeps a man needed. Hatred makes a man a target.

Eric let the child go with a shove.

Someone had to have killed Robert in that ghastly way out of pure hatred and rage.

That meant someone Robert had tormented to the snapping point. Someone here, or someone who had just left after years of being pinned under Robert’s cruel thumb. While Eric was sure he had the cushier job, being away from the little curs, he liked to make out that Robert had the easier task—staying in one place, bossing a bunch of children about, and satisfying his lusts with the girls he was about to kick from the nest. Now, he was sure it was so. Robert’s job had some perks, indeed, but it had plenty of risks.

As Kate ran off, Eric watched three of the big lads carrying out mattresses stuffed

with rotted hay, tossing them into the street.

“Roof wants fixin’,” one lad called, chin raised defiantly.

“Leaked all over these,” the next one chimed in, crossing his arms.

“Ought to get new beds all around. We do good work ‘ere. Don’t get paid for it.” The third stepped forward, and Eric was alarmed to see that the youth was almost as tall as him.

“Well... the money’ll be tied up, won’t it?” Eric said smoothly, not backing down. To back down would be to admit a loss of power. “Inquest and all. Murder does that. Ties up the pounds and pence. But you seem to be faring all right. Is that beef stew I smell?”

“One of the rich toffs Bunson used to parade around dropped off ‘alf a ruddy cow,” the broad-chested youth said.

“How kind. And Polly’s in the kitchen?” That would be some consolation. With Robert out of the way, he could finally have the wide-eyed blonde. So patient, so willing, so unspoilt. The perfect enjoyment.

Unless Robert had her first. Eric’s fists curled, and he shoved past the startled trio. “She didn’t leave, did she?”

“Polly?”

“Polly?”

“Who’s Polly?”

Eric stilled at the triad of vague responses. “You know Polly. Every lad here knows Polly. Every one of you dreams of slipping it to her!”

“Polly’s looked after most of us since we were little.”

“Don’t mean you wouldn’t give her one,” Eric chuckled. “Have you hidden her somewhere? Or did she finally grow a brain in that empty head of hers?”

Stony silence warned Eric that he should try a milder line of questioning. He squinted at the three boys in front of him, probably all fifteen or sixteen. Ready to strike out on their own. Old enough to make alliances. Old enough to lie.

“Gents, let’s not start my visit off with cross words. Polly’s not in the kitchen, is that it?” he asked, his voice light. “Has she left? I wouldn’t begrudge her leaving. After all, she must be seventeen. Eighteen...”

“Twenty. Twenty in the autumn, she was.”

“Well! Then it was high time she went! I suppose Polly has been the best matron we’ve ever had, and we didn’t have to keep her with wages. She just had that pure, gentle spirit.” Eric put his tall silk hat with its stained and soiled fabric to his heart with a heavy sigh. “I wonder if she’s heard of Robert’s passing?”

“I don’t know. She might.” The one who seemed to be the youngest of the three looked between his companions.

“Well, when did she go?” Eric asked, his face pleasant while his mind churned.

Polly’s been here forever. Robert’s personal little pet, his dolly that he let grow nice and plump and more beautiful each year. Ripe for the plucking.

Oh, I bet he plucked her, all right. Had his way with her. Probably beat her until she couldn't fight back or pushed her down the stairs and got his leg over.

Filthy swine.

"I think it's been three days. Maybe four?"

"Today would be four."

"No, no, she was 'ere yesterday."

"No, she wasn't!"

Eric made a grumbling sound, nodded, and walked off. Robert had his particular pets—but Polly was supposed to have been his. Still... he had consolations. One of them was a rather pretty fifteen-year-old with raven hair, green eyes, and a badly twisted leg that left her lame and "useless" to most. Robert had tried to push her off on some charity matron many times, but Eric always insisted that they wait. After all, in just a few more years, he could risk coaxing her to some hidden corner of the place and taking his pleasure.

"Liza, my sweet sparrow, how are you?" Eric sat down beside the girl in her ragged clothes as she sewed sacking together.

"Much the same, Mr. Bunson."

"Uncle Eric, dear child! I suspect you are downhearted over the loss of Mr. Bunson and Polly?"

Liza's head jerked up. "Polly? Who told you about Polly?"

“I don’t know their names, I’m afraid. The boys. Three big lads.”

Liza snorted. “They would notice she was missing,” she said bitterly, savagely plunging the needle into the cloth. “I could be dead a week before they’d think to look for me. But Polly, with her perfect legs and perfect skin... They told you about her running screaming into the night, did they?”

“I’m sure they’ll pay more attention to you since she’s gone,” Eric soothed, not answering the question. “How could any man resist? Why, if I were ten years young, Liza, I’d carry you off in my carriage, and we’d sail the world. I’d never take Polly with me. She wouldn’t appreciate the wonders I could show her.” He ran a finger under the girl’s freckled chin. “Sometimes being able to caper about like a painted pony just means you’re weak in the head,” he tapped his brow. “Not like you. I know if there’s anything I need to know, my sweet, clever Liza will have the answers. I do wish I knew what prompted Robert to run out into the alley that night. I don’t suppose—”

Before he could finish laying the trap, Liza had sprung it, her head bobbing as she leaned near him, an eager expression on her face. “Polly. It was Polly. Everyone knows she’s Mr. Bunson’s favorite. Reckon he was bedding her, I do. Otherwise, why keep her on with her being well older than the rest of us?” Liza hissed, a smug look of satisfaction on her face. “Of course, some of these dolts couldn’t see it, but I could. Looked at her like she was made of gold.”

Eric nodded, making a sympathetic cluck. “Why, of course he did. He was very foolish, my brother. He overlooked so many things right under his nose,” he concluded with a leering look at the girl, who flushed and puffed up with her own importance. “How did Polly get mixed up in Robert’s death?”

“Oh, he was chasing her! He chased her right outside, shouting at her, and she was running from him—as if she had anything left to run off with! Maybe she did. Maybe

she had something of his.”

Eric doubted that. Polly wasn’t a thief. Lust or not, Robert wouldn’t keep someone around who would cut into the profits with theft. “So, she ran, and he chased?”

“And neither ever came back in. He’s dead, and she’s gone. D’you reckon she did it?” Liza asked, her eyes like glowing coals, burning with excitement.

“I think she might have.” With help, of course. Eric didn’t think Polly was strong enough to have killed his brother in such a brutal fashion—but she might have struck the first blow. She might have had help.

She might have been a victim of that madman with the dark lantern and a bit of phosphorus on his shoes to make him glow, the one the papers were calling Spring-Heeled Jack.

But if she was alive, he would find her and make her answer his questions.

And then, he’d make her pay.

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“Why are you dithering behind me like that?” I snap as I pull Polly out of my shadow for the third time in the space of five minutes.

Polly had been studiously pretending he hadn’t ravished her until she came all over his hand and mouth. Her only admission that it had happened was her particularly savage beating of the rugs and scrubbing of the floors and the bright red blush on her cheeks that spread down past the neckline of her dress.

Until now.

“All these fine people are looking at me, sir, and they don’t think I should be near you. Nor do I. I’m the housekeeper,” Polly answers with as much dignity as she can muster, chin held high, eyes dipping away from mine.

“How can they tell that?” I demand. I can tell things about humans by looking at them. Sniffing them.

None of them smell as appetizing as they used to.

Except for Polly. She smells... even better than last night.

“Well—you’ve got on a fancy cloak and your high silk hat, and you look every inch a well-bred gentleman—except for those boots, sir.”

“Hang the boots. You look respectable. Cleaner than most of these little sausages on legs,” I mutter.

“My dress is threadbare ‘round the elbows, and my shoes are almost worn through. My dress is too tight and too short,” Polly whispers, agony on her face as I hook my arm through hers. “Mr. Springton! Stop it,” she hisses, twisting away. Her eyes scan the streets of Pimlico. “You can’t touch a lady in public unless she’s your wife. That’s how it is in England. Mr. Bunson once had a vicar in to speak to us all about good and proper conduct. Ever such a long sermon it was. Called it Victorian Morality and Christian Duty.”

“I have nothing against Christian Duty. I wouldn’t be here without it,” I smile. It’s true. Without Heaven, there’s no Hell, and no Middling, either. “Victorian? After the fat queen?”

“Hush! Good glory, Mr. Springton.”

“.”

The red flush had faded, but it’s back with a vengeance. “You mustn’t call a man by his Christian name if he’s your employer or even an acquaintance. Not in public.”

“Hm. When can I touch you like I want? Can I call you Polly?”

“I’m your servant. You can call me whatever you like.” She sidesteps me—damn her. “As for touching—no. Only an engaged couple or a husband and wife go about arm and arm. There would be no touching, no kissing, nothing like that unless they’re people of low character.” She swallows hard. “You must think I’m awfully low now. After last night.”

I snort and give her the coldest glare I possess. “After last night, I think better of you than anyone in London—or this world, for that matter. You’re mine, Polly. Don’t you remember?” My gaze turns heated the longer I stare at her, pinning her into a dark strip of alley between two shining white buildings.

“Yes, I know, I—”

“But I’m just as much yours.” I stick my elbow out, telling myself I don’t care if she takes it.

But I do. I know she doesn’t know what she’s taking hold of, but I don’t care. She can be mine. I can make her mine...

Polly unleashes a deep rush of air from her lungs, sighs, and slides her wrist hesitantly through the crook of my arm. “Sir, people will say things about me—and about you, too. This isn’t Whitechapel. This is a nice part of the city. I don’t belong anywhere but the market dressed like this.”

“We are going to buy you dresses. Dozens.”

“Dozens! Two would do!”

“Ten,” I say, and when she starts to protest, I yank her off her feet and half drag her along.

And I feel bad that she stops speaking after that. “I’m a horrible beast,” I remind her. “I don’t want you to argue with me.”

“No, sir.” Her voice is sad and meek.

It’s very irritating. Worse than irritating. Unbearable. “God damn it!” I burst out.

People shudder and shy away, suddenly walking faster lest my foul tongue infect their ears. Polly winces.

Another tug, and this time I leave the pavement by an inch or two, skimming the

ground in my fury. “I’m a horrible beast. I shouldn’t care if I hurt you, but I care about that. Very much. I don’t want you to argue with me when I’m trying to—to—do something.”

“To be kind to me?” she suggests in a soft voice.

Bloody hell. My nose loves her scent, my tongue craves her flavor, my hands cannot get enough of the feel of her—and now she has enslaved me with her sweet, soft tones.

I can only growl.

But her hand stays in my arm, even after I scowl at her, flashing my teeth like I would on the hunt.

“SHE MUST HAVE FIVE new dresses, all the things that go over them and under them. Shoes. Hats. Parasols. Umbrellas.” Each word drops as a command. The plump little ladies who own the dress shop in the High Street nod and scurry, ignoring Polly’s little yelps of protest.

“You scared them. They’re running,” she whispers as they fairly fly.

“Good. They know I’ll bite them if they don’t listen.”

Well, no, they do not know that, but I know that—and I made sure Polly knows it too. She doesn’t laugh and assume I’m speaking in riddles. She may not know exactly what I did to Bunson, but she knows enough.

“You can’t hurt innocent people, Mr. Springton.”

“No humans are innocent.”

“Well... some try. There are plenty of bad folks in London if you want to bite someone,” she says, lips pursing.

It’s horrific how badly I want to kiss her. I’m positive a Flameheel has never wanted to kiss their prey, and Polly is my prey... I still want her delicious flesh—just in a different way. Even last night, I didn’t want to kiss her just to kiss her. Now I do. I want to kiss every inch. I want to put myself in every opening she possesses, part of owning her. My cock aches at the thought of slipping deep inside of her, feeling her body gripping mine. Invading that sweet pink cunt, and then the tighter, darker pucker behind it. I want to slide my shaft past her pale pink lips and watch her eyes widen as I thrust into her mouth. Her throat.

It’s utterly unfair that she should wield so much power without doing anything remarkable.

“Did you bite Mr. Bunson?” she asks softly, so low I doubt human ears could hear her.

“Many times. Until he stopped breathing,” I say.

She’s still beside me for a long time. The plump little women with graying hair come back with modest black dresses covered in lace, dresses in bright pinks and lavish purples, boxes and boxes of white undergarments, and confusing-looking waistcoats that have no armholes and far too many buttons.

Polly is still silent.

“I won’t lie to you. You won’t like me if I lie to you or hurt you. And I want you to like me,” I admit the galling truth and poke at the stiff brocaded effrontery on the counter. “What is this?”

“A corset, sir.”

“Do you want it? It looks awful.”

“It helps a girl stay slim.”

“I want you to be as slim or plump as you choose. The plumper you are, the more there is to squeeze,” I hint, hoping she won’t want the evil thing.

“If sir would wait outside, madam can begin dressing.” One of the women is back, looking at me with fear. The other stands behind her, looking at Polly with disdain. Disgust. Looking down on others helps humans retain their courage, it seems. “Unless perhaps madam would feel more comfortable at another shop more suited to someone of her standing.”

That one will be dinner. Later.

“Madam prefers this shop, and she will change at her leisure,” I say with flint in my tone. I pull Polly aside. She looks miserable. “What now?”

“They’re going to see that I don’t have any knickers left,” she breathes, voice shaky.

“Oh. Well, that’s simple.” I reach over to the counter and grab a fistful of dainty white and cream-colored fabric from the flat white boxes. “Here.”

“Really!” The disgusted one marches forward as if to seize the fabric from my hand.

“I never saw the like!” The frightened one puts her hands to her cheeks.

“Well, you’ve seen the like now,” I snarl. “And mind how you speak to this young lady, or it may be the last you’ll ever see.” My walking stick flashes through the air,

and I land it on the pile of clothing with enough force that you can hear the wood underneath receive the blow.

It might be my imagination, but I believe Polly is smiling. Just a touch.

She likes being protected. Defended. I saw it the first night I met her with her pitiful and harried gratitude.

I like this little sly smile better, the one that vanishes. I want it to stay longer. Maybe if I eat both of the old pigeons clucking and gasping at me...

“You go. I’ll hurry,” Polly urges, tugging on my sleeve.

It’s my turn to grab her arm, holding her by the wrist and pulling her close. I bend my head and whisper in her ear. “How does a man make a woman his wife in this country?”

For a moment, she stammers nonsense, and I shake her to jar back to proper words. “They get married by a vicar in a church,” she hisses. “Or some get married in the registrar’s office.”

“What church? Where? What office?”

“I don’t know, sir, wherever the bride’s parish is, I reckon!”

“Why do you sound like that? Your voice is... high.” And worried. My first instinct is to wrap my hand around her throat or slash it open. That’s usually how I make that sound stop.

Damnation, it’s going to be hard to keep Polly alive.

“I don’t know. Why are you asking?”

Why am I asking? “Would you like to be married? Would you like it better than being a housekeeper?”

Her mouth bobs open and shut. “Well... yes! Girls like me don’t get married until we’re very old, sir. We can’t afford it. We have to work in service, and once you’re a wife, you’re sacked. Unless you marry another of the staff.”

“I have no other staff. You’d have to marry me.”

Polly looks at me for a few seconds, her eyes filling up and her face changing colors. I’ve no idea what to do with a human who cries except kill it to end its pain faster—if it hasn’t annoyed me first, in which case, the suffering comes to a natural conclusion when it expires. “You can say no. I don’t make you do things you don’t like,” I remind, stunned to hear my own voice getting huffy.

Why shouldn’t she want to marry me? She says other women in her position don’t wed! She didn’t want to end up face down in an alley while Bunson accosted her. I’ll keep her safe—safer than any other man in the world could keep her! Fed, clothed, housed, and I’ll buy her things... I’ll give her pleasure each and every night. Or day. Both. Night would make it easier to hide the hooves, I suppose...

“It’s not a matter of liking, sir. I imagine I would like it well enough. But why would you want to?” Polly leans close.

“Ahem!”

I silence the pointed cough from one shopkeeper by flinging a handful of banknotes and coins at her. “Wrap everything up! We’ll manage without alterations.”

“Madam hasn’t chosen her hats,” the braver (and ruder) of the two argues as the other flitters about, collecting money while muttering about my manners. “Madam would look decidedly common without proper haberdashery, sir. Even worse than she does now.”

Oh, yes. She’s most definitely supper.

“Madam will choose in a moment!” Polly whirls and spits back with a single stamp of her dainty foot.

Oh.

Oh , saints and demons. I like when she does that.

“Because I want you to be mine, Polly. I don’t want to let you go. I want to touch you and not have you say it’s wrong. I want you to walk next to me on the street and not worry that someone will say you shouldn’t. I don’t like that humans have these silly rules about class and dress,” I groan at the end. “You all taste about the same, honestly.”

“There’s more to just being able to move about London without raising eyebrows, sir. There’s... well, there are some people who marry for love.”

“And you’re one of them?”

She laughs, a sad, bitter laugh, with her blue eyes still so bright. “No. That would never be me.”

“It would never be me, either.” Flameheels don’t wed. We breed—rarely. Females are fucked, spawned with, and infant Flameheels are left beside a few fresh kills so they don’t starve.

We're always alone or killing.

And they say Hell is much worse, but when I look into Polly's eyes and think that I might never have seen them... I'm not so sure.

"A fellow usually gives a girl a ring."

Is that a yes? Her face is blank. Still. Her skin stays one solid pale peach color, and her eyes aren't weepy. I suppose it must be a yes, then. "Then pick your hats. And don't let the old trouts push you about. You are to be Mrs. Springton. That name commands respect where I come from."

Because I could drain the blood and eat the flesh of everyone in this city. They should be afraid.

"Yes, sir."

I bend and catch her chin. Kiss her mouth once, hard, just to feel it, the sweet, plump lips that push back against mine in a reflex as her gasp of surprise parts us. "Engaged couples may do that," I quote her laws back to her, and then I spring out of the door, heels igniting before it swings shut.

Now. Where in London does one buy a ring and find a vicar?

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:31 am

“It’s beautiful. It’s far too fine.”

“You must not say that anymore. The wife of Jack Springton wouldn’t say that.”

The circle of gold on my finger is the most valuable thing I’ve ever owned. The top is set with a round white stone that sparkles even in the dark. A diamond—a real diamond, set in gold. It’s more than I’m worth. I know that’s why Mr. Springton gave it to me. Last night made it clear. He wants to use me like Mr. Bunson did—only no, not like he did. He wants the same things, but in a different way. I flush when I think of what Mr. Springton did to me last night, of how he made me feel.

I want it again.

I’ve heard many women say that marriage is the same as working as a maid or cook in service, except now you have to serve your husband’s needs, too. You belong to him in every room of the house, kitchen and bedroom. But, fair trade it is, since he’ll pay for the roof over your head and the clothes on your back.

“Will we need a maid now? And a cook?” Mr. Springton asks, building up the fire.

I hurry to help him, thinking of an answer. I could be an awfully grand lady in a fine house with servants of my own—except that I wouldn’t know how to manage them. Most would probably know more about running a house than I would, and then how would I come off as lady of the house without looking like some imbecile? They’d talk down to me and it would be clear they should be in charge. Mr. Springton would see how little I know of such matters and think me foolish. More foolish.

For some reason, I can't bear that thought. "No, no. I'll still keep house and cook. I wouldn't like servants about."

"Good. Nor would I."

"But... you had servants. Before me."

"They left quickly. I'm not an easy man to work for."

I can't help but laugh at that, taking sticks from his hand. "You are the easiest of all men to work for! You are generous to a fault with the money, and generous to those in need. You barely make a peep at home. You eat what I cook, although I know it's not the fancy things you're used to."

“.”

I stiffen. My name comes out of his lips like a purr, but when I turn to him, he is unsmiling.

"Yes?"

"What about... What about other things I give to you? Like last night..."

I drop the second stick I hold, and a shower of sparks shoots up. "I... I'm sorry, sir. I shouldn't have let that happen. I'm not a girl of low character."

"I can tell that. You are entirely pure—deliciously so."

"You oughtn't to do what you did. It's not clean."

"It's scrupulously clean. You had just bathed. You can bathe every day and every

night, three times a day, I don't care," he hisses, stepping behind me. His hands are on my waist, and his head rests on mine. "I want you to like what I give you, . I want... I want you to love it."

Love. The word rings like a mockery in my ears. I agreed to be his wife because it was a better position than being his housekeeper, but I'm not so foolish to think that he intends to love me. "You can bed me when you like, and I won't mind," I say. "You don't have to lie about love."

His hands drop as if the flames licked him. "I wasn't."

"I'm sorry, sir, I misspoke."

"Call me Jack, for God's sake. I cannot bear to hear sir all the time," he paces away from me, worn and stained boots squeaking on the floorboards. His hands clasp behind his back one second and tear through his glossy curls the next. He is the cleanest of men, the cleanest I've ever met, constantly washing, constantly careful of his appearance. Clean, generous, protective... A smile sneaks across my face when I recall how he put those sniffing, haughty dressmakers in their place.

A woman with far better prospects than someone like me would be lucky to have a man like Jack Springton just for his wealth and looks alone.

I cannot imagine, in spite of what he says, that I am the wife he truly wants. I've been told that I'm pretty and that the color of my hair makes me stand out to some men. Many a man weds a woman so he can bed them, but regrets it later.

"You do not think I can love?"

Did I speak out loud? "I'm sure you can!"

“Well, I’m not. But I would... I would consent to learn if it would please you. It would please me to try.” The words drag out of him, low and agonized.

It is my turn to squeak the boards, hurrying to stand in front of him. “Many men take a wife just so they have their physical urges met. Or maybe you’d like a child. I don’t doubt you can love, sir, it’s just I see no reason to pretend that you’re in love with a girl when you simply want to fuck her. Oh!” I cover my mouth with my hand as the foul word slips out. It’s not like I am a stranger to the crudest words in the English language, being raised in a workhouse and passing every drunkard and doxie going to the market for Mr. Bunson when he was too busy to go himself. Still, I know never to say such things.

“I’m sorry,” I gasp. “I know I’m not a lady, but I try hard, sir, not to—”

“Call. Me. Jack .” Mr. Springton suddenly seizes me and pushes me against the wall, pinning my wrists to the sides of my waist. “Please. Please call me Jack. And you are a lady. I’ve seen it. Tasted it. There is no more beautiful lady in all of London and likely in all of humanity.”

His compliments make me dizzy.

“And I do want to fuck you. In every hole, in every room—but only if you want me to. If I am willing to learn how to behave in London, do you think you might... Do you think it is possible that we might learn to have something like love? As I say, I’m not sure if I can—”

His grip softens, and it is my turn to suddenly grasp one of his hands, my fingers so much smaller than his. “I am sure you could. Most men can.”

“I’m not most men. I’m not even—I’m not a man. I’m a beast.”

“Why? Because you took the life of a horrible man trying to force a girl against her will? A man who would beat her black and blue? A man who would toss a little boy or girl of six into the streets if they were particularly strong-willed?”

“Murderer is much shorter. Or monster. I believe that’s what I’m called here,” he says with a small, grim smile.

“I don’t mind that you killed a worse monster,” I whisper. “Beasts slay beasts. But so do knights. Heroes.”

Something flashes in Jack’s eyes. His hard face softens. “Heroes?”

“Well... the man who slays the dragon isn’t a hero to the dragon’s mother, now is he? But to the villagers who were getting eaten he certainly is!”

“Ohh, .” Jack lets out a long, shivering breath, the sound of laughter under it. His eyes sparkle as he pulls me into a twirl. The skirt on my new black dress spins around me, held full by petticoats underneath. “You have a clever mind. A unique, brilliant mind.” He strokes a hand down my cheek, and I think for the hundredth time that he has claws.

Such nonsense. As nonsensical as him believing I’m brilliant. Or a lady. This might be one of those things that he doesn’t understand. “Sir. Jack? In England, a lady is someone who has been raised properly, with parents and an education in the finer things, like music and French. Or even sewing and managing a house. I’m a woman, but not a lady.”

“I like you as you are. And I know humans. Some of the ones covered in jewels and silks with their carriages and estates are nothing more than guttersnipes in disguise. I meant to say that you are a woman—but you are a lady to me.” Jack gives me a low bow.

Sometimes he speaks as if he's above all other people, some divine creature separated from the rest of us somehow.

I once thought he was an angel... but I don't think an angel would do what he did last night—or what he's doing now.

“Do men and women celebrate being allowed to touch one another?” He reaches for my hand and fondles the circle of gold, wriggling it back and forth.

My stomach clenches and leaps. Warm wetness starts to flow almost instantly—but in all honesty, it's been like a stew left over the fire all day, simmering off and on. “I imagine they do,” I whisper.

“May I touch you?” His voice is ragged as his hand drops mine and his arms wait to circle me and pull me close.

Part of me cries out no, but the part that has been raised with rules and hidden hopes is stronger. “Yes, please.”

It's instant and all-consuming, the fire that burns through me as soon as Jack wraps me in his arms. His nose buries in my hair, then my neck, grunts and growls that sound affectionate coming from his lips.

I feel wanted. Not like Bunson wanted. To use and toss away.

To keep. Even to love?

“I'm hungry,” he hisses, biting down hard on the shoulder of my dress.

“It's tea time. Do you want tea, instead of supper?” I whisper, eyes closed and head thrown back.

“Yes!” he snarls, hoisting me in his arms and striding down the narrow hall until we reach my room.

He tosses me on the bed and kneels beside it.

“Jack, no...” I protest faintly when his hands clamber under my skirts almost at once.

“Why? Do you want a bath first?” he asks, fingers still scrabbling, connecting with my new underthings.

“Maybe. Only it seems... I’ve not heard of men wanting to lick women there. I’ve heard of men wanting to— Well, they want women to do something similar.”

“Later, if you want. I don’t care what other men want. Other men are selfish. They don’t get a cockstand from bringing their women pleasure, but I do. Do you understand? I want to bury my face in your quim and drink your juices.”

“But—”

“Ah! Wait.” Jack holds up a warning hand. “You said something earlier about meeting a husband’s needs. Be a good little wife and let me eat you up, my dear.”

“I’m not your wife yet,” I squeak as he suddenly lifts my skirts, petticoats and all, and flings them up. They half cover my face, and I bat them down to find Jack licking his lips over me.

“Then let me show you what I shall want once you are. Every day, I will want this little pink honeypot to dine from.”

His hand yanks at my new knickers, grabbing them hard around the leg hole.

“Stop. You’ll rip them and that’s just wasteful. We just bought them! And I don’t want to go back to that shop anytime soon.” I wince.

“Tonight, I have business in town. I’ll bring you back as many knickers and petticoats as I can carry,” he laughs, hands working together now, leaving me bare by inches.

“That’s still wasteful! I don’t need so many clothes. You could take them to Bunson’s home and give them to the poor little things there. Liza is clever with a needle. She could make three dresses out of one,” I pant, still battling my skirts.

“Hang the clothes.”

“Says a rich man who was never so cold his fingers cracked and bled,” I snap, sitting up. “Says a rich man who never had to tuck four children into one bed with one blanket and pray none of them would die of cold in the night! I’m not a lady, Jack, I’m a workhouse orphan, and I’ll always be one, even if you dress me up ever so fine and put a ring on my finger!”

I’m sure he’ll be angry. The mood is ruined, and I’ve seen first-hand how a thwarted man rages. I swallow and wait for the explosion.

It doesn’t come. “Couldn’t Bunson afford blankets? Or wood and coal?” he murmurs with a frown. “I’m sure he could. He was a portly fiend. People who can afford to run to fat while children freeze are selfish and deserve to die.”

“True.” I know it might be a sinful attitude to take, but I don’t care.

Jack eases next to me on the bed. “I’ll be more careful of your clothes, . Where I come from... Where I come from clothing isn’t any indication of status or wealth.”

“I’d like to see a place like that,” I laugh.

“No, you wouldn’t. It’s a horrible place for humans.” His lips clamp shut.

There it is again.

“You are human, Jack.”

“No, love. I look human. Somewhat.”

My heart flutters when the word love slips out and he doesn’t even realize it. “You mustn’t say such unkind things about yourself. You have a generous heart. A good, kind heart.”

You would have thought I slapped him across the face. He rocks back, eyes wide. “Have I?”

“Oh, yes! Oh, yes, you do, and it’s... It’s one of the things that makes me want...” It’s my turn to seal my lips, face aflame. Is it wrong to say that I want his fingers in me again, that I want him to suck on the parts of me that throb?

“You want what I give you?” he asks, voice a sudden rasp as he slides down to the floor again.

I nod. “But help me off with my dress first,” I whisper. “And make sure the drapes are closed.”

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:31 am

She wants me. It's a rush. It's fire in my loins. It makes me gnash my teeth, wanting to rip into her, but instead, I look at her naked body as she shivers on the bed. It's not cold. She's shy. She thinks the darkness hides all but her outline, but not to my eyes. I can see everything, every swell from breast to hip, the indents along her spine and ribs, the way her nipples stiffen and her nether lips glisten.

"Are you going to undress?" she asks.

"Do you mean am I going to bed you properly this time?"

A croaked, "Yes."

"Would you like to be married first?"

"Yes!"

"Then obviously, we'll wait. I have no need to rush, now that you're mine. You are mine, aren't you? I can do this every day?" I sink to my knees and part hers, licking my lips.

"Yes. No! No, of course there will be a few days each month when you can't. Soon, in fact."

"What?" I dig my claws into her thighs, and she squeals.

My cock almost bursts my flies at the sound. I have to yank myself free and pump with one hand as she wriggles under my grip.

“When a woman is in her monthly courses. You can’t... You can’t.”

“Why can’t I?” I believe she’s talking about when women bleed.

“There’s blood, .”

“I love your blood.”

And that silences her. I’ve told her again and again what I am, but humans can’t see. Can’t believe.

Maybe shouldn’t play at human tonight. Maybe should be a Flameheel and eat her the way he wants to.

Well, almost the way he wants to.

I take advantage of her stunned silence to push her legs wide apart, claws forceful, digging in until she cries out in pain, then attacking her soft, swollen cunt with my mouth. This time I bite before I suck. I pull her softest inner lips, stretching them while I finger her slit, spreading her juice from her pearl to her pucker and licking them both.

Her noises unhinge me. They run the gamut from whimpering squeaks to low, deep moans. When she closes her legs on my hungry cheeks, I snarl and nip her, rebuking her. “This is mine!” I warn, rising.

I lean over her and squeeze her breasts, sucking hard on her tight nipples as my long, thick cock rubs against her snatch, her wetness soaking me. “This is mine,” I repeat between sucks. “My cock is aching to be inside of you this second. Can you feel how hard and hungry he is for you?” I growl, thrusting against her. I put my hand down to part her lips, nudging myself against her entrance.

We don't fit well.

Hm. That poses a problem.

Polly's hand comes between us, and I think she's going to push me away, remind me of my promise to wait. I wasn't going to break it, and I shouldn't have made her think I was.

But to my surprise, her little fingers curl around my shaft and she bucks against me. "It's yours," she agrees with a sigh. "Get on the bed."

Do I risk it? Humans are oblivious, true, but isn't my bride bound to notice that my smooth humanesque thighs lead to thick, hairy, bull-like hocks and then black narrow hooves?

"You had a taste. Don't you want to be touched in return?" she whispers, hand falling away.

I drag it back quickly. "I do. Of course I do. But I'm not done with you yet. I only had a taste. A taste isn't enough for someone starved for you."

I climb up beside her, cock out, trousers up, and huddle her naked body to my half-clothed one, kissing and sucking on every inch I can reach until she turns to face me—and our lips meet again.

They fuse. Mouths open.

Tongues slide into one hot coil as her hand works around me and my fingers dance between her thighs. Some of her moans turn off too quickly as my fingers start to thrust into her exquisite softness. Is it my claws? I have them curled away from her walls. "Polly?"

“It’s fine, sir. It’s fine, ,” she quickly corrects.

“Why does it hurt? Am I scratching you?”

“No! Never had anything in so deep, that’s all. All the girls say it hurts at first.”

“Hurts at first?” I don’t like that. It’s not supposed to hurt her when I give her pleasure, and yet I know I’ve been too rough, too careless. As oddly restful as it is to clutch her close and kiss her, I slip down her body and ply my tongue again.

“. Oh, God. Oh. Ohhh. Oh, yes!”

My fingers concentrate on the outside while my softer tongue darts inside of her, wriggling and lapping. Flameheels have very long tongues when we want to extend them fully, and I push mine deep inside, until I feel a fine net of resistance. I taste blood, and my saliva fills my mouth, almost like venom pooling before a bite.

But I’m no serpent, and I don’t bite—this time. I wriggle and lap as she plants her hands in my hair—and then around my horns. She uses them as leverage, rocking her swollen bead against my upper lip, lost in herself.

I’m not complaining. I arch one hip up so that one of my hands can race up and down my aching cock in time to her frantic thrusts.

I let my mind go, just as Polly lets her body go.

Her blood on my tongue.

Juice in my mouth. Her hands locked around my horns as she rides my face, oh, God. Oh, divinity!

A creature like me doesn't deserve this. "Ahhh," I gasp as my cum rushes out over my hand without warning, firing freely.

", , Ja—ack!" Polly wails the last word as her walls clutch and flutter around my tongue. "Ohh. Ohh, God, it happened again. It's so good," she half-sobs, curling up into a ball with her knees on her chest, hugging herself.

"It is. It's so good." I leave her with one long lick and slide up against her, cradling her, pulling her tight to me. I want to inhale that freshly pleased scent that seems to seep from every pore.

"It always seemed so wicked," she moans, arm flinging over my neck as she shakes. I can feel the pulses that still jump through her.

"I think it is wicked," I muse. "To share this with someone and then leave them. That would be wicked indeed." Breeding is nothing like this with Flameheels. It's over in seconds, quick and violent, with almost no words exchanged. This feels... "It's like a secret of the soul. And these parts we hide, letting someone have total control over them—ohh, it brings the most intense pleasure, and the greatest fear at once." I think of her, knowing that to Polly, coupling would never have been something good or equal with Bunson, and probably not with most other men. I'm no saint, nothing good... But I make her feel good, and I take good care of her.

I like it.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:31 am

Eric Bunson flung open the door.

A startled man with oddly pale skin looked back at him, surprised eyes hiding behind dark curls streaked with white and a stack of boxes. A cool, imperious voice announced, “A gift for the children.”

Eric found himself flat on his back under a sudden onslaught of boxes, then bolts of fabric—fine fabric, too, damask, silk, satin, cotton... “Who are you?”

“A person who wants those items to be used for the children. You will not sell them. You will not profit from them. You will see that the children are warm and well-clothed.”

The man turned, and Eric scrambled to his feet, pushing boxes across the dirty floor. The stranger was vanishing fast, far faster than a man could walk—but then again, he had just managed to carry far more than one man could.

There must be someone with him. Someone slender and slight that I missed.

“Who the hell are you to tell me how to run my business?” Eric Bunson shouted into the night, venturing into the fog-covered street to shake his fist and scan the area for the mystery man. “Agh!” a strangled gulp burst from his lips when he turned back to the building and the man was there, facing him. His hat was pulled low and his cloak was turned up high. All he could see was a streak of white and black curls, piercing eyes, and very red lips.

“I am here to tell you that this isn’t a business. It’s a home for children. You are to

safeguard them until they become adults. Adults are fair prey. Children aren't."

"You're touched in the head. Get away from here, you nutter." Eric swung one lean but strong arm up—and wished he hadn't. A crushing grip caught his wrist, and the bones grated in the stranger's grip.

"I am wiser than you. Do what I said with the fabric, or I shall know about it."

With one twist that left Eric on his knees and screaming in agony, the stranger was gone—and a blue light, faint but unmistakable, was left in his wake.

"What's all the fuss?"

Eric jerked his head towards a voice behind him. Three boys—the same three who had demanded he fix the roof—were behind him, their arms crossed. "Get back to bed."

"Not until we know what's goin' on." One bent and picked up a long white box and opened it. "Look at this! Fancy gowns and all!"

"M'Lady's. Grosvenor Road. Pimlico," another said, reading the stamping on the box. "That's bleedin' posh!"

"Give me that!" Eric snatched the box from his hand, only to get a clout on the nose for his trouble.

"Get off! Get one of the other dozen boxes, you weasel."

Eric Bunson fell back and tried to recover his dignity by picking up one of the smaller boxes. Indeed, it was from Pimlico, in the Grosvenor Road.

The man with blue lights. This spring-heeled bloke. He was here the night my brother died. And he's here again.

Eric kept his head low as if studying the box's address. Around him, the three boys who had made themselves de facto leaders were gathering up the rest and carrying it away. He wouldn't get those back without a fight, and he could have fetched a pretty penny for them, too, especially from the bolts of fabric.

An unsettling realization occurred to him.

I wouldn't win that fight. Not now. The little wankers have gotten bold. They think... They think Polly killed Robert and got away with it. Her and some fancy man are out there, blood on their hands, living the high life, now. Dropping off gifts like that ruddy half a cow. Now this.

His blood chilled. Fear of punishment, or worse being put out on the streets, that's what kept Bunson's Home for Unwanted Urchins operating. More progressive homes run with more discipline but better care were flourishing, but these little sprats didn't know that, and Whitechapel remained a blister on 's backside, full of poverty and filth. You lived here and you died here, unless you worked bloody hard to escape. Usually, the only way out was by climbing from the pit, pulling yourself up by the knives you plunged into others' backs.

I'll lose this place. Lose control of the children. The money we make off of them.

No. Not for some murdering whore with a pretty face, I won't. She'll pay. I'll make her pay.

Eric's cowardice didn't allow him to admit that he wasn't thinking of making the stranger with the bone-shattering grip pay. No. Just Polly. Polly, because she was weak and would be easy to punish, batter, and worse.

Ought to leave her body here for the kiddies to find, teach them the fear of God and Eric Bunson again!

Or not. Police might poke around.

Oh, it wasn't as if children hadn't died in their care before. Cold, illness, accidents, injuries... Those were easy enough to explain away. It hadn't happened in a long time—not since Polly took over as their unofficial matron. It wouldn't happen now, either, if her secret accomplice kept leaving gifts that kept the children warm and full—and fearless.

Tomorrow, he would leave and go to Pimlico and look for the man with the strange blue lights about him. If he found him, he'd find Polly.

“Where'd this come from?” One of the boys was asking as he hoisted a teetering stack of boxes.

“Ten to one it's Poll. Good old Poll.”

“Where'd she get the money from?”

“Are you jestin'? With a face like 'ers? She wouldn't need to go on the game, she'd go straight to being some rich bloke's bit of stuff on the side.”

A rich bloke? Eric stood still on the ground floor of the drafty building, listening to the voices as they disappeared into the dark stairwell that led to the dormitories.

A rich man, yes, one who could afford to buy such quantities of meat and cloth as if it were nothing.

Rich men were powerful men. Hadn't he and Robert scraped every penny they could,

even out of the mouths of starving babes, in pursuit of that power?

Powerful enough to kill and get away with it. Then come back like it's nothing, as bold as brass, the toffee-nosed bastard. Eric clenched his fists. Well, the man probably only got involved for the sake of Polly. Hurt the girl, hurt him.

That would have to be the end of it, for rich men had their own laws and protections.

And besides... I don't think I dare leave the home for too long just now.

Eric watched the three boys spring up the stairs in high spirits, despite the fact that they'd have to be up in just a few hours.

Larking about as if they own the place. There's mutiny afoot if I'm not careful. Best to remove their little friend and stick close to the nest.

"Sleep well, boys. Busy day tomorrow," Eric Bunson said, and slunk back to his room.

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I wake up to strong fingers pinching my nipples, pulling them and rolling them, sending long, curving waves of bliss down to my quim. “Jack,” I moan, trying to understand what’s happening. The warm rush in my belly. The hot waves of pleasure that slide slowly through me mixed with sharper twinges that set my spine arching...

“Good morning, pet. Had a good sleep?” Jack’s voice comes from between my thighs.

“I did. I—I never heard you leave. What about your work?” I half sit up, eyes flaring open.

Jack growls and hooks his arms over my thighs, his hands clasping over my middle. “Stay.”

Well.

I don’t suppose I mind.

But I can’t be a kept woman of leisure. It’ll never work. I’ll go mad. “I need to empty the tray in the icebox, or the melting will overflow the pan in the bottom and go all down the floor.”

“Mmm.” Jack laps at my folds.

That’s not an answer. I keep speaking, toes beginning to tingle as his tongue dances in sinful swirls. In a second, his fingers gently ease in. Once they’re inside, gentleness vanishes. “Ohhh. Oh, God.”

“I’d prefer the credit,” he says, voice muffled.

“Jack!” My bottom clenches as he thrusts steadily. “Oh, God. Oh, stop.”

“Are you in pain?”

“Not in the slightest.”

“Then why should I stop?” he asks, voice genuinely puzzled.

“Breakfast to see to! What about the laundry? These windows need a good scrubbing, and the drapes are full of dust.”

“I could take them down—and then everyone in the street could watch me bend you over the bed tonight, . Would you like the world to watch while I claim my bride?”

“Bride?” I half roll, but Jack rolls with me, chest coming up rest along my spine for a minute while his fingers fuck me and my thighs part, offering him all of me. I can’t help it. The feeling is too good, too strong.

“I gave you the engagement ring. Today, I marry you.”

“People usually wait a few months!” I gasp. I can feel his cock against the curve of my spine, but then it’s gone, and he’s gone sliding down behind me and bending my knees up, turning me onto my hands and knees.

“I could wait, I suppose.”

I gasp and clutch the sheets when his fingers push apart inside of me, swirling in a circle to stretch me. His mouth moves from my bead to the crack of my arse, and his tongue teases between them. “Jack!”

“Don’t you like that?”

I can’t tell if I like it. Everything is too much. But none of it hurts. I suppose I’m so soaked that I—

With a horrified gasp, I realize why I feel such warmth, why I’m so randy, as the lads would say. Though I always ignored it, there would be a day or two each month when any pressure between my legs when I sat would be a torment.

Those days when my courses began.

“I’m bleeding!”

“It’s delightful. You’re much hotter inside, and you’re not complaining of pain. I want my cock to fill you easily without any trouble. I like your pleasure, , and I’ve come to loathe your pain.”

“But—”

“Rock back against me. Rock your hips against my hand.”

He guides me, one hand inside of me, one parting my cheeks, pulling me so that I obey.

“Warm, wet, and red. Slick and soft. Fuck my fingers, , until you peak.”

My protest dies as his mouth descends again, creating a squirming sensation I can’t chase away, and one that I’m not sure I wish to.

What’s done is done, I realize, cheeks as red as his hand must be. If I stop now...

“If you stop now, you’ll be miserable and I’ll be angry. I was doing so well, and then you woke and spoiled it all,” he protests.

It’s as if he reads my mind.

“Do you worry about the mess? We’ll wash it. The blood? I’ve had pints of it. Gallons. Blood is wine where I come from, and yours is the finest vintage.”

I let out a soft grunt as my hips end their battle of wills and I begin to move back against his curved fingers in earnest, eyes closed, puffs of air blowing my hair from my face on each thrust.

“Do you think I’ll care about some ancient rite of deflowering the virgin? I’m doing that, one way or another. I’d like to take every hole you own, , and make them mine. Will you let your husband into this tight little pocket tonight?” Jack demands, pushing hard against my upper wall.

I sit back suddenly, chasing a feeling that is just beyond his reach. Jack purrs his approval. “Ride my hand. Harder. Harder. Squeeze and push down, !”

I don’t know how he knows what to do. I suppose he’s been with many women—and I’m lucky he wants me.

Beyond lucky. No man I’ve ever heard of has devoted himself to his wife’s pleasure—even before she’s his wife.

The wail that bursts from me shocks us both. I cover my mouth with my hand, and Jack crows in delight. I collapse forward and he follows—slurping the blood and juice from my quim like he’s parched.

“Do you still want to marry such a monster?” he asks.

“Yes,” I breathe out.

“Will you marry me today?”

“What about your work?”

“I did it last night. We shall have to find another dress shop.”

I sit up now, eyes wide. Jack leans back, cock out, sucking his fingers as he idly strokes himself with his free hand. “Why?” I demand in a quivering voice. “Did you go back and bother those women? Did they send for the police?”

“I imagine the one will. The other isn’t in a position to.” Jack’s face is cold, and he waits for me to scream or cry or something as the pieces fall into place. He is a killer, this man.

“She didn’t do anything to you!” I say, reaching for the bedclothes. I want to be covered, even though we can only see shadows of each other in the dim morning light.

“She did something to you. She looked at you as if you were less than her when you are obviously so much more. She rushed you. She made my claws and teeth itch, . I let the other alone. She was only a bit impatient. A bit rude. I’ve killed for less.”

“Well, in London, you can’t kill for that! You kill the men who beat children and rape women!” I hiss.

Jack blinks. “You... You would marry me still? If I were to kill humans like that?”

“I am as guilty as you. I know of Bunson’s death, and I... I think he deserved it. The courts might have found him guilty if he had forced me. They might not have. I have

seen the courts do nothing for the little ones who died in his care. I think it is justice of a sort that he met his end as he did.” I shrug, crossing my arms across my bare breasts, suddenly cold.

His head cocks. “Justice means little to me—but something to you?”

I shrug, arms crossed. “I couldn’t hope to have it before. Now...” With him as a protector, so many things are possible.

“If I brought justice to other men in other cities, would you be the wife of such a monster?”

“Would I be the wife of such a hero ?” I correct. “Yes. But Jack, you mustn’t lash out at little slights. It’s not always done because people are evil. Sometimes they’re simply distracted. You must not harm people just for rudeness or bad manners. All but a handful of people would die!”

“ You would live. I would be content with that. The evilness or goodness of humans isn’t something I consider.” He smirks, licking his lips, the tip of his talented tongue tracing red lines, chasing away the last tinges of me. “Cleverness. Bravery. Industry. I suppose I admire those things. A little . But whether I care for humans or not is of no consequence. Beasts like me devour humans like you.”

My eyes narrow. I squint at the man who claims to be a monster. Biting, tearing, clawing, killing... Yes, I suppose devour might be one word for it.

I swallow and stay still in the sheets. There is something not quite human about him. I’ve known it from the second I met him. But... Only demons and angels exist, and they don’t walk among us.

Do they?

“I’ve scared you. Two days ago, I would have liked that.” He rises and walks to the corner of the room, parting the drapes, long and mustard-colored. Dust puffs in the sunlight as he parts them. “I don’t like it any longer. And I saw Eric Bunson last night. I gave him yards of cloth and boxes and boxes of clothes. I scared him—and I liked it. He tried to bluster and bully at me. I wanted to tear his head right from his shoulders, but I didn’t. He would have bled all over the floor and on the fabric.” Jack clucks his tongue and stands in the sunlight.

I study him much harder than I have before. Blood leaves red traces on his chin and lips, despite the work of his tongue. My blood. His chest is bare and gleams white in the morning light, hairless, like marble, and his trousers hang low around his hips. His manhood...

It’s huge. Huge enough to swing like a pound of sausage in one long link. I don’t think men are built like that. Bulls are built like that, or so I’ve heard it said.

My gaze hurries away, down to his ankles—still encased in those boots. “Do you never take them off?”

“What?”

“Your boots.”

“No, love. Then you would see my devil’s hooves,” he says with a lazy drawl, stretching in the sun.

I roll my eyes at that. “Enough of devil this and monster that. You are living among men, whatever you claim to be. You wish to marry me, as a man might do.”

“Only to be with you. Keep you.”

“That’s what humans do, too, Jack. Marry to keep the one they love near, or the wolf from the door, or the money in the family. There are a thousand reasons to wed, and all of them tie back to love of something, I’m sure.” I rise, keeping a sheet wrapped around me, ignoring the stain on it. It’ll wash—I hope. “And many a girl fears the man she weds, that he will ill use her or mistreat her. I don’t fear that with you. Yes. I will marry you. But you must make me a vow, as I will make you vows in front of the registrar.”

“Vows?” Jack turns, leaning against the wall, one eyebrow arched.

I swallow. It is sinful how rapidly he is enslaving my heart with his handsome face. “You will not harm innocent people. If you swear to that, then I will be yours. Forever.”

His eyebrows drop, lowering along with his lips as they form a frown. “Where I come from, there are no cattle. No birds. No fish or fowl or game.”

I blink. “There aren’t places like that in this world. Are there?” I dimly recall one missionary we heard speaking of the vast sands of Africa.

“Not many. In this world. Hm. Well. I’m sure that I could come across three or four evil men a year,” he murmurs, scratching his chin. “And I like the food you make.”

Perhaps it’s the effects of living a life where cruelty, cold, hunger, and hard work were the norm. I know that I have yet to fully understand all that Jack says, but bits and pieces come together.

A place where there are no animals to hunt and eat, and beasts like him eat other beasts. Humans.

The way he moves. So strong.

The way he carried me home over the rooftops.

The odd things he does and says that are more than just being a peculiar foreign gentleman.

The pieces come cascading in and bring tears to my eyes—not because I’m afraid. Because I’m so foolish. So weak.

How could I have missed or ignored every clue?

Jack turns to face me more fully, and the sun shines—on two glinting bits in his hair. Two bits that stand out, hard in soft masses of his dark curls. The bits...The hard handles that I now vaguely recall holding onto as waves of pleasure washed over me.

Horns.

My Jack has horns.

He probably has hooves, too.

“Are you really a devil?” I whisper. If he is, it’s too late for me. I’ve become the devil’s whore.

Jack shrugs now. “I suppose humans call me that, but actually, I’m not. I’m neither demon nor angel. I’m a Flameheel. My kind once guarded the gates of Paradise and the Pit, but then were banished to a realm between the living and dead. Humans find such places more often than you think, and we must not let them pass to either destination alive. We are in the Middling. I was forced to come here and don’t know how to get home. Nor do I wish to. I want to remain here to feast and watch the humans in their natural habitat, where they’re so much more amusing, so much more beautiful.” His eyes fix on mine. “Where there is one human in particular that I would

like to remain beside—if she would like that. I promised her I would never do things she didn't like. It is up to her if I go or stay. I am a monster—and perhaps a hero. I do not really know, but I have learned one thing,” he sighs, his smirk breaking in the middle, sort of sad and crooked, “I am hers to command. Her pleasure is my highest desire, her companionship worth starving for. I don't understand it, but I don't wish to change it.”

My eyes do overflow now, and my heart tumbles and twists in my chest. How can a killer, a demon, say such beautiful things?

And to say that he lives for my pleasure and starves for my company? Isn't that love?

“Oh, Jack!” I dart across the room to him, springing into his arms and burying my face in his shoulder.

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What is this feeling?

When she came to me, running, crying, smiling—and leapt into my arms and clung to me?

I could crush the world in one fist with the power I suddenly felt coursing through me.

“What is this?” I whisper in her hair, stroking her back, nuzzling her cheek. I lap her tears away, then kiss the salty trails.

She is as delicious as ever.

“I don’t know. I think it might be love,” she whispers as if she’s afraid to believe it.

I share her fear—but I’m not foolish enough to pretend it isn’t happening. This feeling—this almighty rush. It’s strange. Never felt it before. I thought I had felt everything. Fear, joy, pain, amusement, desire, lust, anger, rage, delight...

But never this.

“I think you’re right,” I say in wonder. “I think it is.”

SHE WEARS A SOFT GREEN dress with darker green panels. She has a silly little hat that has a long black feather and a short white one tucked into a satin band. I think the hat is ridiculous, but when Polly puts it on... Her eyes light up. She stares in the looking glass for several long minutes in silence. She even leans forward and taps the

surface, bright blue eyes wide.

“It’s me. This isn’t a dream.”

That my Polly should think living with me is a dream and not a nightmare...

“Do I look all right?” I ask. I’m well aware that few people would even recognize the woman standing before me if they’d known her five days ago, a trembling thing in threadbare clothing with a tearful, desperate voice.

“You look ever so handsome.” Polly smooths down the lapels of my jacket and buttons it over my waistcoat. “Ever so smart. Except for those boots.”

“You and these boots.”

“You’re about to be married. Why not put on a polished pair?” Polly asks, sticking out one foot, showing me soft black calfskin ankle boots that have a row of tiny buttons up the side. The heel of it gives her calf a delicious arch, and my mouth starts to fill again, teeth aching to bite down—not too hard, though.

“I don’t have another pair. You cannot polish these in all your finery, nor can I,” I declare. “But tomorrow, Mrs. Springton, you shall polish to your heart’s content.”

The smile that fills her face wraps itself around my heart and whatever passes for a soul. “This will be my home?”

“Well, it was already. You lived here!” I point out.

But Polly shakes her head vigorously, biting her lip. “Never. Never had a home where I could truly say it was mine. I don’t remember where I lived before Bunson’s, not clearly, but we were put out of it, and my mother passed soon after. Bunson

tossed children out all the time. And even coming here—a servant only has a home as long as her master wishes to employ her. You could have thrown me out after a day, a month, or a year—and just like that—I’d have nothing and nowhere to go,” she whispers.

I seize her hand. “This is your home now. Wherever I am, that’s where your home will be, and then you can never lose it as long as we’re together. As for this,” I gesture around the flat I’ve taken, the topmost one because I could come in and out of the windows as I pleased, “the house stands empty of occupants and full of furniture and fripperies. Be a little magpie and beautify our nest.”

“Oh, it doesn’t need anything, —except the drapes could use a wash and your room needs a good clean. The wardrobes could do with a proper airing...”

“Come, little magpie,” I purr and pull her close to me. “There’s a registrar’s off Regency Street. After the wedding, we will go to that restaurant. Simpson’s?”

“Oh! No, . No. I couldn’t.”

“Why not? You will be the wife of a wealthy ‘foreign’ gentleman with a flat in Pimlico. We could let out the rooms below, I suppose. You’d be in your element, Polly, looking after a property like this.”

“Could I?”

I nod, warming to the idea. “And if one of the tenants is late with the rent, I’ll—”

“, no!”

“I’ll bite him. Just once?” I suggest. Mind you, I don’t say how hard I’ll bite.

“Perhaps. But Simpson’s... Even I know what that place is. It’s not for people like me. Why do we have to go have tea out in a restaurant? I still have plenty in the larder.”

“I thought perhaps we ought to save your strength for later,” I whisper, whisking her ahead of me. I catch her against the wall, letting her feel that I’m suddenly hard against the curve of her rear. “I don’t know if I can wait until we get to a bedroom. This entire house stands empty. Would you like to take my cock right here, Polly? Skirts lifted up, knickers around your ankles while I squeeze into your tight little sheath?”

She gasps against me, moving away. I catch her by both elbows and wait until she goes limp against my chest. “Don’t you think we should wait a few days?” she whispers, blushing.

“Why?”

“Well. Men don’t... Not when a woman’s bleeding.”

“Silly. Why shouldn’t I? We’ve got a bath and towels. Plenty of soap. It’ll wash off.” I run my hands over her hips, concentrating. With my eyes closed and my more primal senses alerted, I can feel her heat, even through the gown she wears. Her hips are feverish under my hand. I risk pressing my palm between her thighs, and my skin practically boils. “So hot inside. You want those feelings I give you. I felt you riding my fingers like a runaway horse. Did I make your little cunny feel good?”

“Yes,” she admits, leaning back into me.

“I will never do things the proper way. I will want you every way. I will want you to take me in the places they tell you that you shouldn’t, on the days they say you shouldn’t.” My hand switches like lightning, going from front to back, skirt hoisting

up as my fingers lodge between her cheeks. “Here.”

A moment of hesitation, and then she nods.

“And here.” My hand clasps her throat, then strokes upward over her mouth. To my surprise, she nods eagerly, instantly.

“My good girl.” I rub my jaw against her cheek, nearly knocking off the dratted hat with all its plumes.

“You do the same for me,” she admits, a hint of a giggle under her breathless voice.

“And I’ll need to. Your nectar dulls my other appetites, Polly. The lust I have for fucking you is the only thing I’ve ever known that outweighs my need to feed.” It’s my turn to laugh, twisting her to kiss me. “Bedding me saves lives. You’re the heroic one now, miss.”

I love the way her innocent face suddenly reflects the crooked smirk on mine. “Not until you make me a ‘missus.’ And I suppose we can go to Simpson’s if you really want to. I bet they have beefsteak and roast potatoes all year ‘round.”

“Mmm. That sounds tempting. Perhaps I’ll learn to live off of these inferior creatures—as long as I still have you to dull my other appetites.”

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I never thought I would have a husband. Or a home of my own. I thought I would live at Bunson's all my days, or until they realized I was getting a bit long in the tooth, and then they'd put me out in the streets to beg or to find work in the meanest circumstances.

"Would you like the optional readings, sir?"

"My bride may have whatever she likes," Jack says, and I feel my heart surging. His face is all grave intensity as if he's plotting to break into my thoughts or perhaps break the neck of the sniffling clerk who can't stop coughing into his handkerchief. Despite the grim look he wears, I have an odd security that I've never had before.

Jack wants me. Begins to love me. Will never let me go. He'd kill me first.

Somehow that's comforting, in a peculiar way. I've been something one step above rubbish all my life, something anyone could toss into the gutter. A thing, not a person.

"I would like a reading," I say, voice faint.

"And have you the rings, sir?"

"I have one," I say quickly, sliding off the diamond he gave me only yesterday.

"And I shall have one in a moment. Must it be gold?"

"No, sir, any material will do."

“Good.” Jack turns and fumbles in his pocket, then pulls out a crown from the handful of copper and silver. He runs his thumb over the surface, grunting softly, and then a silver circle with Queen Victoria’s face on it tumbles to the floor.

I try not to let my mouth hang open like a cod in the fishmonger’s window. Monster, hero, Flameheel, guardian, whatever he may be, he’s not human. No human man can cut the center out of a coin with his fingertip. He slides the thin circle he’s left whole around his finger. “Yes, I have mine,” he says.

“Then I shall begin,” the registrar says in a dull, reedy voice. “I call upon the people here present to witness that I— your name, sir?”

“Jack Springton. This is Polly.”

“Her surname?”

“Bunson,” I whisper. I don’t recall any other one. Maybe my mother never told me before she died.

Jack lets out a long, low snarl that makes the registrar look up, his tiny spectacles falling off his fleshy nose as he swings his head wildly, searching for the sound. “Willis! Shut the door. There must be a mad dog in the street!”

“Yes, sir!” The snuffling clerk goes away to do just that.

“Can we get on with it?” Jack demands.

I stroke his hand with mine, hoping to soothe his impatience.

“We must have him back. He’s a witness to your marriage. Seeing as you came alone, we’ll need him and the page.” He clicked his fingers together and summoned a young

man with hair falling over close-set eyes in a sallow face. He leaves his position by an inkwell on a polished wooden desk and scurries forward as the clerk returns.

“Now?” Jack asks in that silky, sinister voice that people should be wary of.

“Very well. With Mr. Titus and Mr. Merriweather standing witness, we shall proceed. I call upon the people here present to witness that Jack Springton takes you, Polly Bunson, to be his lawful wedded wife. Mr. Springton, you will repeat after me.”

“Which bit?” Jack snaps.

The registrar sighs. “Just say this. ‘I, Jack Springton, take you, Polly Bunson, to be my lawful wedded wife.’”

Jack rattles the words off, staring at me, his impatient frown gone. His gloved hands caress mine and a true smile blossoms on his face.

“Excellent, sir. Now, continue, ‘I promise to love you, to care for you, and to respect you for all of my life.’”

The smile growing on my face stills. Love? Respect? I’m sure those words are for everyone. People probably say them all day, every day, and no thought goes into it. I would have said it to any man who would take me away from my old life.

But I would wish it were true. I don’t know if Jack can say such things and mean them. Love? Perhaps, in the way we’re learning to. Respect? Well, I suppose he cares what I think and feel, and that’s more than anyone else ever has.

His voice scrapes out, so dark and raspy that the registrar peers over his book in alarm.

“I promise. I’ll love you. I’ll care for you. I’ll respect you, Polly. You are... You are my guide to happiness in this city, this life, and this world.”

His claws dig into my palms through our gloved hands.

My breath catches and swirls in my throat. All the air is gone as I nod. No one could doubt that Jack meant it. If they did, they’d be dead. “I know,” I whisper.

“Right, then. Now you, miss. Repeat after me, ‘I, Polly Bunson, take you, Jack Springton, to be my lawful wedded husband.’”

“I, Polly Bunson, take you, Jack Springton, to be my lawful wedded husband.”

“I promise to love you, care for you, and respect you for all of my life.”

“I do!” I bounce once on the balls of my feet, rocking forward. “I will!”

“Say it, Polly,” Jack reminds me.

“I promise to love you, care for you, and respect you for all of my life!” I vow. I have bound myself to something inhuman. Probably unholy. But I can’t see him that way. So many people in this city would have classed me the same as him, dog shite, lower than low because of my poor birth and rough upbringing. Jack will cherish me, in his own odd way, and I shall do the same for him, ever grateful.

But what I feel as he pulls off my glove and presses my ring over my finger is far from mere gratitude.

The registrar clucks his tongue. “I see we’re skipping the optional readings, are we? You may exchange rings,” the registrar says in a disapproving tone, put out that Jack beat him to it.

I push the silver in my hand over Jack's gloved finger, not daring to expose his claws.

"Sign, madam."

Madam. I truly am! I'm a madam, a married woman, no longer Miss Bunson, but Mrs. Springton.

I take the pen from the page with the lank hair and feel Jack's hips pressing into me through the full skirt of my gown. He stands indecently close, sniffing me loudly, one hand tracing down the back of my neck.

No one dares to say anything—and why would they? I'm free from Bunson, but in the eyes of the law and England, a worthless woman of no parentage or means is only an extension of her husband. I belong to Jack Springton, not just as his wife, but his property.

A slick of desire and a whisper of fear mingle between my legs.

I liked belonging to Jack Springton's household as his housekeeper and servant—but servants can leave if they must. For a wife to leave her husband... Well, I don't think Jack would ever allow me to leave him while I drew breath.

His arms tighten around my waist as he dashes off his name beside mine, a scrawl he makes with one hand as his arms still fold me tight to his chest. To reach the book, his wrist presses firmly to my breast, and when he drops the pen, his fingers trail over my throat, turning my head for a kiss. "Come," he says.

Bespelled, I do, floating with him—and soon realizing that we are floating. Outside, we skim the ground, him pulling us upward as easily as if climbing invisible stairs. In moments, we rest on a rooftop as the sun casts dull beams across steeples and the proud, clean facades of the beautiful bits of London—a few miles and a million lives

away from the place where I was brought up.

“It’s still several hours until the night falls,” Jack says, squinting into the sun.

“Time for tea?”

“Indeed. And then the darkness will belong to us.”

“Wh-what does the darkness matter?” I ask. The whisper of fear becomes an insistent voice, a child’s call from far away.

Desire only shouts louder as he licks the side of my neck and stops at my earlobe, lips closing over it, sucking as he sucked my nipples earlier, as he sucks my hidden pearl while his fingers ravage me.

“You like things to be done a certain way, my Polly,” he moves his mouth a fraction higher, speaking into the shell of my ear. “You wouldn’t want to be bedded unless it was on our wedding night—and that night is closing in fast. I think I can wait. I used to wait months before hapless humans straggled into my domain. I can wait another few hours before you fall into my bed.”

That makes it sound as if he’s going to fuck me—and possibly eat me. If he eats me in the way that he has been, a sort of licking and chewing without ever swallowing, I will be quite content. If only the little voice would stop its frantic calls. Nothing to be afraid of...

Of course there is. But I think... I hope that there is even more to love.

SHE IS SOMEHOW EVEN more lovely now that she’s mine—and her face has lost that thin, pinched, parched look it had the first time I saw her. My blood was burning with lust, and now it boils with anger. I wonder how often she went hungry.

I have felt those pains. Can relate to them.

“The entire rack of roasted lamb, sir? And new potatoes, minted peas, and a spiced pudding with brandy sauce to follow? Now?”

The waiter stands at my elbow, a frown on his face. “The entire thing. Now.” I don’t repeat my order, but I see most people around us have lighter fare.

“I...”

My glare warns the man in his stiff white shirt and jet-black jacket not to press me.

“Very good, sir.” He retreats, and I can return to my favorite hobby—gazing at my wife.

“Can you do that to all people? Look at them and they obey you?” she asks, sincere curiosity in her sweet voice.

We sit close together at Simpson’s, basking in the darkest corner they had to offer, again something I requested to which the waiter was hesitant to agree. My stare was all he needed to comply.

“I don’t know how well it works,” I say smoothly. “Let’s test it.”

Polly stills, looking at me with nervous expectation in her eyes, fingers splayed on the edge of the thick, creamy linen that covers our table.

“Give me your hand,” I say, sliding my chair even closer to hers.

She obeys, instantly.

I would love to tell her to slide her fingers under her dress and start to stir her fingers in her hot, unopened box, but with the acres of fabric that protect her womanhood from outsiders, that notion is frankly quite ridiculous. She couldn't obey without overturning the table. Instead, I simply hold her hand, stroking the finger that wears my ring.

"Is that how you got the registrar to marry us so quickly?" she whispers.

"Oh, no. I didn't want to risk a problem with anyone important today. I simply gave him a handful of banknotes and explained we had an urgent situation."

Polly jerks her hand away to bring both to her mouth, eyes darting around. "Jack! He'll think I'm in the club."

"What club? Why?"

"The pudding club! Going to have a baby," she hisses.

"Hm. Don't you want one?" I ask, and I'm suddenly concerned I won't be able to give her one.

The thought of Polly lying face down, knees denting a mattress while both of her holes spill my seed in copious, sticky trails down her thighs fills my mind.

If I can't give her one, I'll have fun trying.

"I'd love a little one of my own one day, but I wouldn't mind if I couldn't. There are hundreds of children with no mother and no father."

She is so good—which must be why she tastes so divine. A gift on my tongue. Her blood is like air and wine in one, and I don't have to tear into her to receive it.

“A Flameheel mother doesn’t even raise her own spawn, let alone someone else’s.”

Polly’s face loses its soft, contented look. “I hope the children at Bunson’s are faring better because of your kindness, Jack. I don’t know Eric Bunson as well, but he always struck me as cut from the same piece of cloth as his brother. Still, knowing the children have some generous benefactor willing to protect them from him must give him pause.”

My shoulders jump. Kind? Generous? Benefactor, protector? Is that what I am? “Do you like that I’m willing to bring them gifts and threaten Eric Bunson’s life if he misuses them?”

She laughs! A sparkling light laugh that must make me the envy of all the other patrons here.

I wish it was night. I wish our food would appear. I want to grip Polly’s thigh in my hand while I suck meat off bones, I want to grope her soft, heavy breasts when I tear into flesh that isn’t hers, that won’t cause her any pain.

“Your first course, sir. Madam.” The waiter is back with some dark brown broth in bowls with bread rolls beside them.

“Ooh, thank you!” Polly breathes out, and grabs my hand tighter, a happy little clutch.

It occurs to me that she has probably never eaten a meal that she didn’t have to make herself since she was an adult—and that the quality of the food was probably nothing like this. Even my nostrils are twitching with delight just from the steam rising over them. “I love seeing you happy,” I say, and I realize it’s true.

She reaches out and strokes my cheek. Hesitates, and then her fingers slide through

my hair and across my horns. For a second, she runs her fingertip along the faint ridges in them, and I feel her touch go straight to my cock—and my heart.

No one has ever come to me to touch me willingly, save her. “You are such a beautiful thing. Such a strange gift,” I whisper, finding her free hand and kissing her knuckles just once. I want her to be able to keep touching me but still eat.

“I was thinking the same thing about you,” Polly whispers back. Her hand finishes its circuit and trails down my face once more.

“I make you happy?”

“Yes. Sometimes you scare me—but not more than Mr. Bunson, if I think about it.”

I don’t know whether to feel pleased, insulted, or just horrified that an adult human inflicted such fear on an innocent young woman—an innocent child! Polly was raised by the horrid scum I killed. Right now, I wish I could spit him out and never dirty my lips with his blood. “My vows were true. And I will still make sure that you like the things I ask you to do. You never have to say yes to something if it doesn’t please you or bring you pleasure.”

Polly nods, cheeks flushed. “We should eat before it gets cold.”

I nod. We should eat—because I want her wrapped around me.

TENDERNESS IS SOMETHING reserved for ladies, genteel folk. I tell myself that if I were a normal housekeeper, married to any normal bloke, my wedding night would be a drunken round of slap and tickle and then a hurried rush in the morning to appear decent before my employers.

The idea that tonight will be something new—and definitely not something

tender—weighs on me as Jack carries me home in the darkening sky. He clutches me close as he rises, climbing, jumping, soaring over chimney pots and rooftops. No one seems to notice. I stare behind us and see the smokey blue haze cast by his heels.

“I can hear you swallowing, and I wish you would stop. It makes me want to wrap my hands around your throat while I bury myself in your mouth. And I haven’t figured out how to position us to do that.”

“Mr. Springton!” I gasp, startled by the image he puts in my head—and how wet the throb of his voice makes me.

“Mrs . Springton. That makes it all quite proper, doesn’t it, Polly?” he asks as we land lightly on our own windowsill.

“I... The fires need to be laid,” I squirm down from his grasp, not entirely frightened, but not entirely ready. I play for time.

Jack lands next to me and smiles, a slow, impudent smile as he stamps his foot once and pivots on his toe. A blast of bright blue fire spurts into the hearth and the dead logs roar to life.

“The lamps—”

“I don’t need them. I can see you in the pitch blackness. Oh, yes. That’s right. When my head is between your thighs, you’re not hiding any secrets from me. I can see straight into that tight little cunt of yours, all the nectar dripping from your walls, waiting to coat my tongue. I can see that tight little pucker down below, too, the second—or perhaps third—place I intend to bury my cock.”

Jack swaggers to me. There is no other word for it, unless perhaps it’s prowling. Yes, he prowls around me, some hungry beast in the wild, shedding his clothes. Hat, cloak,

stick, gloves, they peel off in a line as he circles me. “Light the lamps if you like, love, if you want to share the view.”

“F-firelight is fine,” I squeak as he grabs me and kisses me.

“I do love you, you know?” Jack breaks the kiss to squint at me as if I’m something strange he’s just discovered. “This all-consuming desire, the choice of starvation with you rather than fullness without you... That’s love.”

“You won’t starve! You ate almost an entire rack of lamb and twelve potatoes,” I chide, but I’m not truly scolding. I’m singing inside. He said it again. Love.

Is love supposed to be so scary, so exciting, and so comforting all at once?

“Say it back.” Jack’s voice is harder now. His fingers tighten on my wrist, and I almost pull back, but I stop. “Say it.”

The voice was a command, now it’s a plea.

My tongue freezes to the roof of my mouth. “N-no,” I say, and he throws my hand back as if it’s burnt him. “No, Jack! I... It’s hard for me to say the pretty things sometimes,” I stammer, holding my hands out for him to grab, heart hammering when he does, clutching them so that his claws break the skin. “If you put me on the spot like that, I go to pieces. Freeze up. I never... I never had anyone to love of my own. Not that I can remember.” I try to concentrate on my mother’s face, and it’s a blur of tired eyes and graying hair, a hurried shove from her lap, a quick kiss on the head as she rushed to scrub a pot or carry out tubs of filthy water to throw in the gutter.

“Ah. Well. Maybe you’ll say it in a little while?” he asks, his lips brushing mine, then sucking my bottom lip into his mouth. His teeth crush it, pulling it in until it’s swollen and tingling from the force of it.

“Oh, yes. Yes, I know I will. Because I do.”

I SHED MY CLOTHES EASILY , while Polly is in a tangle of buttons and hooks and straps. She vanishes like a ghost into the privy while I stand with her gown in my hand. “Polly!”

“Just a minute! Won’t be a tic!”

I sulk. My bride is probably washing off all the delicious scents and flavors I wanted to imbibe. I can smell her blood, pooling between her legs, and I wanted to inhale her as a drunkard buries his face in a snifter. Well...

After tonight, there will be a fresh flood, once I impale her on my length.

If she doesn’t come out soon, I’m going in.

“How long is a moment?” I demand, pacing.

“Till I’ve had a good scrub.”

“I don’t want you scrubbed. I want you as you are—the wetter and messier the better,” I give one rap on the door, controlling my strength so my fist doesn't go through it.

There’s hurried splashing and a squeak from inside. Ooh, those little sounds. My ears tingle, listening for the sounds of my prey. My hooves itch, my horns ache. I want to touch her. Fuck her.

She’s mine now.

“You’re mine now,” I sing against the crevice of the door, claws tracing down the

wood.

I'M HIS NOW. MY HEART pounds, anxious and eager. I clean myself up thoroughly, luxuriating in hot water and fragrant soap, towels that rinse out, and pipes that take it all away. My sighs of relief come out shaky as his claws scrape against the door. "Don't mark the door," I call out, voice quivering.

"Then open it so I can mark something far softer and sweeter," he croons.

The second my fingers touch the handle, I fall through the door and into Jack's embrace. His bare chest collides with mine as I drop the towel I had wrapped around myself. He's still in trousers and those boots. Will I ever find out if he has those hooves like he said?

Do I truly want to know?

"Bed. Now. Or floor. Wall. Settee. I don't care," Jack growls against my neck as rough hands squeeze my breasts, setting my nipples to searing with sudden, sharp pleasure.

"Bed!" I shout as he knocks me off my feet, only to catch me in his arms and carry me to his room—not mine.

This room is bigger, the bed is bigger, but the whole place seems dark and barren. Jack slams his heel to the ground and the fire roars to life behind the fancy iron grate. In the shadowy glow of the fire, Jack plants my rear on the very edge of the bed and drops to his knees.

I'm learning what he likes, but my stomach is still in knots as he tips my nude body back and splays my legs far apart. With one hungry groan, Jack falls to his work, lapping me up like I'm a custard, his tongue working across me and then in me, his

fingers prying me wide open tonight, leaving no trace hidden.

“Jack, please...” I don’t know what I want the end of my plea to be. He pushes his tongue deep inside and it swirls, touching some crinkled spot that makes my knees slam into his shoulders and my breath escapes in a long hiss.

“Oooh. Is that a good sound? I already know your answer.” Jack withdraws, licking his lips. “I can barely scratch the surface of that spot. You narrow inside, a tunnel waiting to be opened. Fingers would be better, but...” Jack stands up suddenly and leans between my legs.

Lit by the firelight, all I can see is the long, thick erection he holds. He jerks it hard with his hand, and I can see that it would easily take both of his hands to cover it. A spasm of pain and pleasure rushes across his face as his shoulders go slack and his head lolls.

“I think this will reach far better, Polly.”

I swallow and sit up, years’ worth of whispered comments and overheard gossip puddling in my brain about what men want women to do, what they ask, what they demand. I know what Jack wants, and I’m not sure I’m going to be good at it. So far, all he’s done is serve me, a thing most women in the world probably know nothing about (well, if the world is anything like Whitechapel).

With my eyes on the floor, I reach for his length, wrapping around it with my fingers. I’ve touched him before, but he seemed smaller then. My hand slides for inches, up and down, feeling coarse hair at the base and smooth, satiny skin at the top, with slick streams running from a wide, oblong tip.

“Not quite like a human’s.”

“More like a cart horse’s,” I blurt, and some of the tension I feel melts as Jack laughs.

“You are a wonderful wife already, Polly. Such a fine light touch—which I imagine is suitable for most humans. The ones I’ve—encountered—seem to have something the size of a walnut.”

I laugh again. “I doubt the men you’ve ‘encountered’ were feeling their oats, Jack. More like terrified for their lives.”

“That could be it. But I’m not like human men. A little harder,” he urges, showing me, wrapping his fingers around my hand and gliding with me, up and down his rigid cock.

Glide isn’t the word. Soon, we are pumping hard, like working a bellows. Both my hands are around him, and my shoulders begin to ache from going so hard and fast, but Jack is twitching and moaning my name, his fingers buried in my hair.

Until one hand is suddenly under my chin. “Open,” he commands.

My lips part and his length steams in, an angry train that’s hot to the touch and leaking salty drops into my mouth. Inch after inch piles in, hitting the back of my throat, and I gag, dizzy as I lose air and fall back.

“Do you like when my tongue works against your bead?”

I do, but I can’t make a noise.

“I want to feel your mouth. Your tongue. Sucking, licking, biting...”

I bite softly and Jack backs up a bit, a wide smile on his face. “Perfection,” he praises.

SHE IS PERFECTION. Her tight, hot mouth is the perfect channel, the right dock for my vessel. I plow forward, hips fucking her mouth more gently than I will fuck her slit, but with a delightful cacophony of noises. She gurgles, gags, and slurps around me, sucking and drooling as I chase completion. Her eyes keep seeking mine, waiting to see if this is what I want.

“It’s perfect. Everything I desire, an expert’s touch—and yet I know I’m the first one to so defile such an innocent mouth.” I tell her, stroking underneath her watering eyes. “You’re warming me up nicely for your sweet little snatch. Of course, if you want me to warm it up further, I will. I could dine between your legs a dozen times a day, particularly now. You told me these bleeding days are considered forbidden? Then we will break all the rules, because I want your blood, and this is the way nature will gift it to me without causing you anything but pleasure.” I can see her face turning a deeper red, although I’m not sure if that’s because of exertion or embarrassment. I pull my cock from her mouth and she coughs and gasps for air. I don’t let her gasp for long, bending down to kiss her. “I would love to keep playing this game, but I’ll spend down your throat if I do—and I want to come inside of you, buried deep, pressed as far as I can go in your tight, hot tunnel. Will you let me?”

Her voice is rough and weak at the same time. I think I hurt her throat.

Must do better next time.

“All men do that.”

“Well, I shan’t if you don’t like it. I want to, though. I want to pump my spendings deep inside of you and watch it flow back out. I’ll clean you afterwards. And... And I will make sure not to be so vigorous.” I run a hand over my horn, uncomfortable. Flameheels are not apologetic by nature. “I’m sorry. I promised not to do things you disliked, and now you will dislike taking me in your mouth.”

Ugh. Loving a weaker species is problematic—although fucking a female Flameheel is much less enjoyable. Nowhere near as soft.

And they certainly do not reach for me with love, the way Polly is doing. “We are both learning. I didn’t dislike it. It was exciting. It made me dizzy.”

I bend to kiss her swollen lips and flushed cheeks, my fingertips sliding between her legs. The slick sound of me slipping through her folds fills the room. “Very exciting.”

I EXPECT THAT JACK will flatten himself on top of me now, but he doesn’t. Instead, he rolls me to my stomach and, when I begin to rise, pushes my knees to the bed so that I’m on all fours. “Stay,” he purrs.

He kneels again, lapping me from behind, suckling on my pearl from underneath. Knowing he can see every part of me leaves me feeling a bit shaken and very exposed—but there’s an odd sort of thrill in knowing he loves to see me like that.

But the rush of excitement and pleasure pales a bit when he grips my cheeks and parts them wide. “Jack!”

“I’ve neglected this spot.”

His fingers dip inside of me, and he rubs my juices around my bumhole. For a moment, I worry that he means to push that long cock of his inside me now, taking every virginity I have in one night.

My stomach tightens, and my quim throbs suddenly. I don’t think I’d mind. The forbiddenness of it mixed with the first feeling of true safety and pleasure I’ve ever had wraps everything in a haze of want and soft, blurry acceptance.

His finger pushes into me, just to the first knuckle, but I gasp loudly and pull forward.

“Please...”

“Stop?”

“No.”

“Please what?” His finger burrows deeper, causing a strange fullness, but no pain.

“I don’t know.”

“I won’t go in deep here, if you’re worried. But I do intend to take you here, as often as you like. If you’re afraid of a mess, don’t be. I can tell when entrails are full and when they’re not. I could fuck you quite comfortably tonight, spread your cheeks and slide in to my hilt.” His finger begins to work, thrusting in and out slowly as my head dips to the mattress and my knees slide far apart. “Good?”

“Not... yet?” I don’t feel pain or pleasure, only a confusing sense of shame and excitement.

“Then we’ll wait. Time enough for that later, but fill you I will. Every spot. All mine.”

“Oh, yes,” I breathe out as his finger leaves me and both hands fasten to my hips again. He dips down, licking a slow, teasing line across my quim, a line that turns to a sloppy feast as he rubs a palm against my curls while lapping me, faster, harder, scraping over my tight nub with his teeth and sending me keening and shaking to the very edge—but not over it.

“Budge up, love,” he orders, scooting me forward. His knees plant themselves alongside mine, bare hairy legs next to mine. I hear two heavy clunks and a rustle of fabric. “What was—”

His hands slide over my back, then around my front, anchoring to my breasts as they sway and bounce as we jostle. “I can feel your cunt pulse. A heartbeat. Hungry. Not as hungry as I am. Do you know... Do you know how badly I wanted to consume you? To tear you open to find your soft, red flesh?”

“No. I can’t only imagine. Was—Do you still?” I whisper as his back weighs heavily on mine, his hips cradling my arse. I feel that wide, thick head of his cock rubbing between my legs.

“More than ever, but I could never. Not now. Still, I think the only thing that will soothe the urge is tearing into you some other way. Feeling your hot insides coating me, one way or another.” His whispered words press into my shoulder as his mouth opens and his teeth clamp down.

There’s a flash of pain at the nape of my neck and an answering shooting sharpness as his cock forces its way in deep and hard, all at once. “Ohh! Oh, oh, Jack. Oh, God.” I cry out, pitching forward, but Jack holds me up, forcing my quim to stretch around him as inch after inch opens me.

“I’m sorry, love, I’m sorry.” One of his hands kneads my breast, working the nipple, the other slips around my waist to rub my aching cunt. “Are you in pain?”

Yes, a little. A lot.

There’s the burning sting of being stretched and so full. Tears start to my eyes, but I don’t think it was Jack’s intent to hurt me. His fingers and hands have worked diligently to bring nothing but bliss. “You’re just a big lad, and all virgins have a bit that has to be broken,” I reassure, eyes shut.

“I’d hoped I’d stretched you enough with my fingers,” he murmurs, holding still inside of me.

“You did, for a cock belonging to a man. Yours is much larger.”

Much larger—and maybe that’s good. The sting is fading. The pressure builds and I like it, the heaviness of his rod weighing inside of me, the stretch now starting to lose its sharp edge. Pleasurable waves work through me as my body adjusts.

“You just soaked me, pet. Is your body trying to soften the blow?” he whispers.

“Mm.” A noncommittal noise as I push back against him, an obscene squelching of stuffed cunt and fluids assaulting my ears. I bite my lip, ready to stammer an apology when Jack sighs and kneads my rump and breast harder.

“What a glorious sound.” He licks my cheek, and I feel his hard horn brush my temple. “Open your eyes, sweet, delicious Polly. The view is... stimulating.”

For him perhaps, but I can’t see anything like this. I thought all women laid on their backs or stood bent over if they were in a hurry or afraid of being caught.

“I can’t see your face,” I complain.

“You can’t see a lot of me. Not yet.”

I WANT TO SEE HER FACE , but I don’t want her to see my monstrous legs or my hooves. Not yet. Besides, the sight I have now... I don’t know how any other position can compare to this one.

When I straighten up, I put my hands in the small of her back, letting her begin to speed up, each bump of her hips earning a deep, surprised sound of pleasure from her. I want to comment on her noises, on her scent, on how good it feels to plunge myself into her flesh without hurting her—but for the past minute, all I can do is moan and grunt, and try not to come too quickly. When she slides forward, she reveals her

blood-stained outer lips, the ones that used to be such a pretty peach. Now, they are crimson, and so is my cock.

My cock, covered in her blood, feeling her hot walls squeezing on me...

“I want to fuck you now,” I whisper through clenched jaws.

“I thought—oh, God... I thought that’s what this was called?” she whimpers in delight, her walls fluttering against my rod.

“It is. But You’re stretching nicely, aren’t you? Ready for more,” I praise. “Ready to let me fuck you properly, my good girl. My perfect, darling wife.” Each word earns a hard thrust, a squeak from her as I ram in, a moan of loss as I pull out. “Tell me I can fuck you hard and make you come, Polly. I want to feel your cunt gushing out your juices. Tell me I can?”

“You can!” Her voice breaks as I reach under her and diddle in her messy curls, stroking circles around her bead and slamming my hips against her soft, white globes.

“Jack, Jack, Jack, Jack, Jaaaack !” Her calls of my name rise, crescendoing desperately while I beat myself with her softness, my cock swelling, thickening, preparing to let loose the second she arrives.

I feel it happen, the torsion of her walls that milks me as she buries her face in the covers and screams out a guttural, animal-like cry.

The blood cry, without the killing.

It’s glorious. There’s a spray of blood and her cum against my balls, and I dig my claws in, leaving ten perfect diamonds of blood on her arse, a bridal belt for my lovely wife, no longer my virgin bride.

My own cum leaves me in heaving explosions, violent jerks by an unseen hand. It's like nothing I've ever felt, and it fills her and overflows her opening, still tight, even after I've stretched it so viciously. Hot cream streaked with her blood flows down the backs of her thighs and spills onto the bed.

I pull back, and she falls forward, curling up as if she would hide what a beautiful, soaking mess she is.

“Please, Jack, I’m—”

Whatever protest she was about to make, I ignore, pushing her onto her back, no longer caring if she sees me. With a harsh pant, I stuff three fingers into her swollen, ruined slit and swirl my wrist around. “So hot and wet still.” She quivers, a mix of pain and pleasure on her face. I remove my fingers and hold them up, showing her our glistening combined offering in the firelight. “Want a taste?” I ask.

Polly hesitates, mouth open, lower lip trembling.

I expect to shock her, to see her refuse.

It stuns me when she nods once and softly says, “All right. A little one.”

I suck greedily on two fingers and lick my palm, but I dab my forefinger on her plump, quivering lower lip and watch her lick up my cum.

“It’s a bit bitter,” she says.

My dear unshakeable, brave, beautiful Polly. “Look at me?” I whisper.

She does, taking me in as I stand by the bed, covered in our fluids.

Her eyes travel down. Human-like thighs that turn to hairy hocks, then shining black hooves.

“You’re ever so handsome,” she says.

The swelling and bursting I had in our coupling is nothing compared to the feeling in my chest as she holds out her arms to me, nothing but gentle happiness and exhaustion in her eyes.

“Will we do this face-to-face now?” she asks as I join her on the bed.

I want to. I crave it.

But she’s probably a little sore.

I’m such a selfish creature by nature, and I see nothing wrong in putting one’s own needs first. But for once, or maybe more than once since meeting her, I would rather take care of her first. “When you’re rested and ready,” I reassure.

To my surprise, her fingers trace down my chest and close over my wet cock. “In a few minutes?”

“I love you,” I sigh—and I mean it.

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“Excuse me? Excuse me, my good sir,” Eric Bunson was used to playing the part of the charming (if thin and sometimes a bit shabby) businessman. In Whitechapel, he stood out as someone who looked too clean and neat to live there permanently. In Pimlico, he looked questionable, which is why he was doffing his hat and bowing to common cabbies as if they were the bleedin’ lord mayor.

The cabbie stopped slapping his reins and slowed. “Where to?”

“I’m here, or at least, I’m hereabouts. I’m looking for a dress shop that’s in Grosvenor Road, but I can’t seem to find it. M’Lady’s?”

The cabbie let out a long, low whistle. “Ooh. If you’d come just a few days earlier, sir. Now, if you’ll go left at the crossing there at the corner, there’s a very good dressmaker and tailor, little husband and wife shop, it is.”

“No, no, it must be this shop. There’s someone— There’s a problem with a dress that I bought, and I need it altered,” Eric put his hand on the neck of the dark bay horse as the cabbie began to flap the reins.

The cabbie looked at him, one cynical eyebrow rising in a sceptical face. “Where is the dress you want altered, sir?” he asked pointedly.

Eric fumed. Common nag-driver. Didn’t have to make him feel so foolish. “Of course I’m not carrying a frock with me all over ! I’ll be sending the dress on, but I want a word with the proprietor before I do as I’m most unhappy with the quality of her work! I mean, my wife is most unhappy.”

“Well, your missus can rest easy in the fact that the shop is closed and get the alterations done cheap elsewhere.”

“Closed? It can’t be. It was just...” Eric stopped to count in his head. When had the mysterious man with piercing eyes and almost inhuman strength appeared with his load of goods from the dress shop? It wasn’t yesterday, but two days ago. He had it in mind to go and hunt the blackguard down at once, but his wards were getting awfully chipper and needed something to sort them out. A nasty “accident” this morning involving a pan of hot fat and some girl’s skirt somehow catching light had been enough to send the older ones into a somber mood and forced the younger ones into their normal, miserable routine simply as a way to avoid thinking about the horrible howls and screams of their little playmate.

She was rather ugly anyway, with her freckles and squashed little nose. Never would have made it into my bed. If she died or went septic—no great loss.

Apparently impatient with his silence, the cabbie suddenly slapped the reins on the horse's neck and set him in motion. “They only shut down two days ago, the way I hear it! Two old maids ran the place, and one of ‘em had a nasty accident. Unbelievable, it was. Fell right out of the window of her little flat above and went splat all over the street, almost like she was a bag of blood that split.”

Eric swallowed. An uncanny similarity to the way his brother’s remains had been described—a bag of skin and bones in a puddle of blood. Middle and meat all gone.

“It was there, on the corner!” The cabbie shouted and pointed as he drove out of sight.

M’LADY’S LOOKED LIKE a quiet, respectable sort of place—an upscale sort of a place where the latest fashions for wealthy matrons or young debts expecting to marry the sons of cabinet ministers or conservative MPs would find adequately stylish (yet

modest) fashions. When Eric arrived, he paused for a minute to admire the lavender dress that hugged the dress form in the window, wishing for a moment that he knew a girl who would fill out the dress so thoroughly.

All the current pickings at Bunson's Home for Unwanted Urchins were thin and scraggly, even the older girls.

Except Polly. Polly had nice big milk bags, even half-starved. A nice shape, but naturally full-breasted. Polly would have looked good in that frock.

She'd look better out of it, and by Jove, he didn't care if she had killed Robert with her own two hands, he was going to fuck her before he wrapped his hands around her neck and choked the life out of her.

"We're closed! Permanently!" a thin, frightened voice called out from above, and Eric looked up in time to see a shutter slamming closed on the side of the house.

He crept round the side where the street ended and a boxy row of hedges had been planted to shield the upper-class merchants and shoppers from something as ugly and common as traffic. Eric stopped, foot in mid-air, and froze. The bloody outline remained on the pavement and splattered into the hedge, turning the overwintering bushes a rusty red on one side. The outline... it wasn't of a human. It was an oval.

A splash. A splat.

Maybe she did fall.

Or maybe she was pushed. Then savaged, as if by wild dogs. That was one theory they tried to palm off on me. Down in Whitechapel, I suppose it might be true, but here? I can't see wild packs roaming the streets in this upmarket little place.

I wonder... Does this madman travel with a pack of hounds, or is he the one doing the savaging?

“I said we’re closed!” The thin voice was back, this time accompanied by a thin face, gaunt and gray, with the skin hanging in pouches, a telltale sign of someone who has lost weight quickly.

“I’m with the police. A detective,” Eric doffed his hat again. “I’ve got some questions for you, miss.”

“I’ve spoken to them again and again! It won’t bring Agnes back!”

“No, I don’t reckon it will, but if you don’t cooperate, I shall have to charge you,” Eric said, trying to look self-important and mildly threatening, a combination that worked exceedingly well on stupid children.

It worked well on frightened spinsters, too. She slammed the shutter, but Eric soon heard the bolts drawing back from the front door and hurried around to enter the shop.

The sight that met his eyes! It looked like a windstorm had blown through the place, tearing fabric in half, and ripping dresses from their wooden and cloth-covered forms.

“Are they going to listen to me this time? That stupid constable had the doctor give me sleeping powders. I’ve been dreaming the most horrible dreams, and when I wake up—just look! It’s all real, just as I said. And they won’t help clear up, you know. I’m closed until further notice. Permanently. Yes, closed forever, for I can’t do this without Agnes.”

“There, there. I’m in the special branch, sent down from Scotland Yard. I’m thinking there’s a new angle to be discovered,” Eric said with an air of sage wisdom, clasping

his hands behind his back.

The little woman nodded eagerly. “Will you have tea, Constable?”

“Detective. Detective Bu—Burns. Yes, a cuppa would be just the thing,” he smiled his best ingratiating smile until the old duck scampered to the back rooms.

Eric’s smile faded. There must be a thousand pounds of bits and bobs lying about this place. Silks and laces, costume jewelry with pearls the size of robins’ eggs... His fingers were quick and silent, stuffing anything small and valuable into his trouser pockets, confident the grieving woman wouldn’t pick it out in all this chaos.

“The kettle is warming up. Now, Detective, I told the constables who came that there was no way Agnes could have fallen out of the second-story window. You see, she wasn’t even upstairs! We took it in turns to count out the till and lock up, and it was Agnes’ turn. Not only that, but she spent a good deal longer than usual downstairs and I had been having trouble with a bunion and was soaking my feet—though I would never say such a thing if you weren’t a detective, of course.”

“Of course,” Eric reassured.

“Well, I called down to her that it was very late for her to be locking up and she told me, ‘Edith, I want to scrub the place properly after that foreign gentleman and his tart were on our premises!’ and I told her, ‘Agnes, they didn’t even try anything on in the store!’ But she would have none of it, Detective Burns.”

“Tart? Foreign man? Can you describe them to me?”

“Oh, he spoke English well enough, even sounded quite well-bred in his tones—but not his words! He slammed his walking stick on the counter and reached right into a box of—” Here the timid Edith dropped her voice, “ladies’ undergarments! He

looked clean enough, but he was no gentleman. And the woman with him! She was as common as muck. Hardly knew how to look us in the eye, and she allowed her escort to manhandle her in the most intimate fashion, right in front of us!”

“Horrible. Did you catch any names?”

“Oooh. I can’t recall. Polly, I think I might have heard him say—no, more like a snarl! Ooh, he was a nasty, domineering sort of man. Agnes was livid about his behavior, and he threatened us both. I said, ‘I never saw the like,’ and he came back, sharp as you please, ‘Mind how you speak to this young lady, or it may be the last you’ll ever see.’ And he brandished his cane.” Edith mimed a wild wave and wallop with the walking stick. “He might have hit her with it! But instead... Instead, he came back. I heard wild tearing and shouting, but it was over in seconds. By the time I had dried my feet and put on my slippers, Agnes was gone. It was only—” Edith swallowed and let out a shaky breath, “it was only a few minutes later that I heard a great, heavy thud from outside. And it was what was left of her. The police said she must’ve come up the rear stairs while I came down the front, but we never use those stairs. They said a burglar must have scared her and she ran in a panic to flee from him, and tripped and fell out of the window while trying to get away in the dark. But that makes no sense.”

“No, it doesn’t.” Eric frowned. Really, how daft the police could be. Oh, well. Their eagerness to make a case closed or accidental had certainly served his family well in the past. “But how do you explain what happened to her, then?”

Edith hesitated. “Have you heard, sir, of the beast called the Spring-Heeled Jack? They say he can fly and shoot out blue flames, and his... his face is pale, and he’s the devil himself!”

“I’ve heard a little bit about that, yes.”

“I wouldn’t normally hold with such superstitious nonsense, but that man... The man who came in sounded English but acted so very odd, and was so very pale and peculiar. I think it was this beast. Oh, I’m sure he’s no demon, but he could have something—a ladder he folds up, maybe, or he could be one of those French balloonists with a balloon made of black silk so that no one sees it go up and down!”

Eric understood why the police had not taken her wild claims seriously.

But, yet...

“Could he have climbed out the window carrying her? My men are already aware of this man, and he is terribly strong.”

“Indeed, he is! I saw him pick up the young lady he brought into the shop with one hand and move her to him as you or I would pick up a cat or dog!”

“Tell me about the young lady. Was she his accomplice? Were they here earlier in the day to view the place before breaking in, do you think?” Is this how Polly’s fine friend gets his money? Robbery? He’s no gentleman! He’s a murderer and a common thief.

But very good at his job, it seems...

“She was a very common sort of girl, flaxen hair, beautiful skin, wide eyes. A nice figure in a dress that was far from suitable.”

Polly! Eric rubbed his hands together as pieces of this thorny jigsaw slotted together.

“I wouldn’t say she was his willing accomplice, for she seemed almost afraid of him at times. Mind you, she did show some ill temper, and we saw the fire in her then. I doubt she was here that night.” Edith jumped when the kettle in the back began to

sing. “Oh my! Perhaps we should take the tea upstairs, sergeant.”

“Detective.”

“Yes, perhaps we should if you’d like to look out the window and see— It’s too horrible,” Edith staggered away, muffling her cry of anguish.

Eric grabbed a gold (probably plated) hatpin and jabbed it into the lining of his coat as he made appropriately sympathetic noises.

The fiend probably held the old bag out the window, slit her down the middle like a butcher gutting a pig, and then dropped her. Why? To scare her? Make her think he would drop her? Perhaps he was mad and liked to watch things fall.

Or because... No. Too impossible...

But if these mad stories about a flying demon creature were true, then maybe he didn’t kill her while holding her out of the window. What if he could fly and he simply flew out of the window and killed the old girl on the roof, then chucked the body over? No one would ever check the roof to see if a bloody murder had been committed up there.

But then again, no one in is as clever as I am, Eric Bunson thought to himself, strolling after Edith as he pocketed three more hatpins and added them to his collection.

ERIC BUNSON DIDN’T need to climb out onto the roof. All he did was crane his neck and squint.

Faint drops of blood splattered along the wall going down. She was already bleeding. She didn’t “burst” when she hit the ground. She was already injured, if not dead.

Now, he balanced himself and held his breath, turning and half lying on the window sill, his head at an odd angle as he tried to survey the wall above the window.

It was faint, but it was there. Red streaks. Rivulets. Tiny and scattered drops of blood rained down above the window as if they trailed down from above. From the roof.

But there is no way that Eric could see that he would be able to go from this window to the roof, even if he were the strongest man in the world. “Is there an attic?”

“A small one, but we’ve blocked it up for the winter. So drafty.” Edith moved the tea things around on a small side table, clinking cups and saucers. “Why? What have you seen?”

Eric stumbled as the older woman craned her neck and tried to jostle past him. They both unbalanced, and her hand caught his jacket as she gasped and tried to right herself.

The gasp ended with a sharp cry as the gold-plated hat pins he’d been discreetly lining his coat with pierced her palm. “I’m ever so sorry, Detective! Your wife must have sent you off held together with pins and good wishes. Please, I can sew up whatever—”

“No, that’s fine,” Eric protested, pulling his coat from her hand—but she was surprisingly stubborn. The lining of his jacket, which wasn’t particularly fine even though he cut a respectable figure in it—tore in her grasp, revealing four glinting gold pins and their jewel-topped friends.

Edith backed away, shock and horror on her face. “You... you are no detective! You are some ghoulish sneak thief! You are one of those foul scandalmongers from the papers who wanted to know all about Agnes’ death! I... Police! Police !” Edith tried to push past him, screaming so that her wrinkled jowls wobbled.

Eric reacted without thinking. He must shut the old bat up and vanish from the area at once. No time to look for the strange man and Polly now. The cabbie would know his face and recall that he had been asking about the shop, by name. Damn him for having such a handsome, charismatic face. Entirely too memorable.

With a sudden sidestep and a push, he sent the babbling, screeching Edith through the open window. She was so startled, she didn't have time to cry out, and the fall was short.

Eric stared down at her for a moment. Her eyes were still open, and she moved feebly. Red was spreading around her twisted and bent limbs—but she was no burst berry of flesh, hollowed out and bleeding.

The police were wrong. Something or someone had mangled Agnes. It had not been a simple fall. Edith's violent end proved it.

"Science, me old muckers," Eric whispered with a kind of shaken satisfaction, and then he fled.

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:31 am

My toes are warm and pink, brushing against Jack's shining black hooves. I switch from brushing to tapping.

Jack snores on. With a wince, I ease from his side and slide down to the end of our rumpled bed. I shall have to buy more sheets and must do ever such a lot of washing.

"What are you doing?" Jack asks, making me jump.

I feel momentary fear when he addresses me, but I'm coming to realize that I always jumped like that, inside. I rarely let it show, but whenever Mr. Bunson spoke to me, my entire body pulsed with fear. Would he throw me out? Tell me bad news? Mistreat me?

"I didn't mean to scare you," Jack says softly, sitting up.

His arms curl around me, and his lips press kisses to my shoulder.

My heart fills up so fast that tears leak from my eyes as if there is no room left inside for the waves of emotion he gives me.

Two days of marriage have seen Jack's possessiveness deepen, but also change. All of him has softened—at least toward me.

A thick, hard rod rests against my back and reminds me that there is one part of Jack that has hardened since our wedding night, and he has used it to turn me into the most whorish woman—at least for him. He makes me reach that hard throbbing peak again and again, until I beg him to bed me when he asks if I'm ready for more.

“, love?”

“I wanted to see your hooves better.” His love makes me bold. With a saucy pout I remind him, “This marriage has been a little uneven, Jack Springton. I believe that you have explored every inch of my body and been very selfish about what I’m allowed to see and touch.”

Jack laughs and pulls me back into his arms, back into our sheets, which we have barely left in two solid days. “That’s not true. I intend to explore several pieces far more thoroughly tonight.”

“Tonight? Are we actually going to stop and get dressed today?”

“I fear that we must. Humans are such weak little things, and my wife is a horrible nag. She keeps on about needing to get to the market and do the washing. I’ve told her that I can live on the juice of her sweet fruits alone, but she insists that I try something called ‘sausage and chips.’”

“And blood pudding,” I point out.

“Temptress.” Jack laughs and crosses his legs, one drawn up over his opposing knee as we lay back. “Take a good look, then.”

It’s not like an animal hoof—not quite. It’s black, shiny, and hard as I sit up and tap the surface. Oval shaped and long like a goat’s instead of rounded like a horse’s, but there’s no split in it. He’s not an animal, so I suppose it makes sense that there’s no match that I know of among the livestock I’ve seen.

“Careful!” Jack cautions as I run my hand along his hairy leg where it meets the hoof. “Here, at the back,” he flexes his foot and points to a spot at the back of the shining black bone, “is where my fire comes out.”

“Actual fire?” I ask.

“I don’t think it is, but it creates a flame-like substance. Whatever it is, you haven’t got a name for it that I know of. Scientists might call it a flammable chemical, something that reacts with the air.”

Jack speaks about the world as if he knows how it was made, talking about gases and invisible things we can’t see, but that he says are all around us.

I like this side of him, and I find it odd that I can lie against him, naked bodies touching, and listen to him talk, ask any question I like, and he teaches me, touches me... loves me. “You are such a dear, good husband,” I whisper, right in the middle of his explanation about oxygen and hydrogen (which are apparently right in this room with us, right now).

“What is good in your eyes, ? I’m puzzled about that at times,” Jack confesses, rolling easily on top of me. “You would seem to be the definition of good—caring, forgiving, gentle, helpful, hardworking... And yet people in this city would treat you poorly because of what bits of cloth you wear and where you sleep.”

Funny how a demon-like being sees all of humanity so much clearer than we do... “Good to me. Everything you have done since I’ve met you has not been what the law would call good, but it has been for my good. You stole meat for orphans. You stole dresses and fabric for children freezing away in Bunson’s Home. You killed several people, but each time, somehow it was connected to me, to protecting me?”

“There was that prostitute I killed. She looked very like you. I killed her to see if it would stop me wanting to eat you.”

I’m silent for a moment, trying to decide just how evil it is to kill someone to prevent one’s self from killing someone else. I bite my lip and put a hand against my head,

stopping a sudden ache as I sigh. “I think I ought to thank you, but I wish you wouldn’t do that again.”

“I thought prostitutes were considered evil by humans.”

“Maybe they are. But maybe they were once just girls like me, put out in the streets with no references and no skills.”

“She was passing on bad ailments, from what I ascertained.”

“Well... I suppose you stopped disease from spreading, which is good. Oh, Jack.” I have to laugh at the strangeness of the life I’m now living, and at myself for how much I love it, how much I prefer it to my old one. “You are the finest of husbands. Of humans? I’m not sure.”

“Ah, but I’m not human. I don’t think a human would make you come like I do.”

I blush as he begins to suck one breast into his mouth while kneading the other. My legs part instinctively, slick, cum-filled slit ready for another pounding, my nub throbbing and ready just at the mere suggestion of pleasure. “I’m sure you’re right.”

Jack bites down hard, and I gasp and arch back, which only tugs my nipple harder into his mouth and sends a confusing spiral of pain and delight into my quim. “You’ll never find that out, will you, ? No human will ever fuck you now, do you understand? You’re mine. My wife. And this—” his cock plunges into my wetness, “is all for me.”

“Yes, ye-esss,” I agree in a breathless hiss.

Jack seems to be worried by the turn our conversation took, leaning back on his haunches and grabbing my hips so he can grind his long, thick cock against me as I

whimper, suddenly filled and stretched so full.

“Your human men have nothing like this—and they won’t devour you as I will.” Another thrust, then he leaves me empty, changing position to fuck me with his tongue, working it inside of me while lights and bells go off in my head.

His clawed thumb is on my bud, working it up and down, flicking it and rubbing it as his tongue mimics his cock with shallow, swirling strokes.

“You’re the best, Jack. All I want,” I wail as he forces a hard, rapid peak from me.

“And you are all I want. All I will have.” Jack slips up my body again, dizzying me with his energy and speed. His cock invades my tunnel as it spasms in climax, soaking him and milking him as a torrent of wetness soaks my bum and thighs. “I haven’t claimed you as thoroughly as I’d like,” he hisses, cock leaving me and pressing down a bit lower.

I can only breathe out, eyes fluttering closed as he pushes his own slippery essence and the puddles of mine around my tight pucker to ease his passage.

Images that would make a vicar die of shame fill my mind from our last two days of coupling. The time he held me by the hair and his cock spurted deep in my throat. Moments later, he insisted I do the same to him, his mouth pressed over my sex while his fingers did something inside of me, pressing up and thrusting hard until I feared I had relieved myself in his mouth, but he told me it was simply a trick of pleasure to make a woman spend as a man can.

He has fucked me from behind, his fingers in my back passage, thrusting in time with his cock, the sensation of being filled in both holes at once enough to make me dizzy and my peak the most intense I’ve ever felt.

“Put your fingers in your quim and fuck yourself for me. You like when both holes are filled,” he purrs, pressing in, the head of his cock squeezing in past the tight ring.

“Jack...” I lick my lips and hesitate.

He doesn’t like that.

“It’s your body. Your own parts. Why am I allowed to touch you, but your own fingers aren’t?” he demands.

“Well... It’s not...” I can’t argue that it’s not proper, for I doubt anything we’ve done would be considered proper by most people.

“If you don’t do as I say, I shall say you are a disobedient wife and give you new orders as my housekeeper and my bride,” he threatens, but there is a glint of mirth in his eyes.

Still—I wouldn’t like to displease someone I love, especially if that person is as dangerous as my Jack.

“I will spread you wide on the dining room table and make you pleasure yourself until you’ve come three times while I watch. Would you like to give me such a show, ? I would like it. I might ask for it anyway, to watch your dainty little fingers trying to fill your cunt the way only my cock can. Watch your pretty cheeks flame bright red with exertion as I sit there, drinking my wine while you rub your bead. How will I ever stop from lapping you up between courses?”

The image he creates... I would be mortified. And yet, my guilty quim twitches at the thought of Jack’s cold, silent eyes watching me as I rub and pant, trying to peak, knowing he won’t let me stop until I’ve done what he asked.

My fingers push through my soft folds as he breaks down the tight squeezing ring of my hole, and several inches of his cock fill me at once.

“Oh!” One strangled bleat escapes me and gives my fingers urgent messages to rub my pearl until the pain stops.

“Squeeze on me, and you’ll feel better,” Jack says.

I try, and he’s wrong. “That didn’t help,” I whimper.

“Should I not?”

“No, stay!” I beg, wanting to get to the place where his cock feels as good as his fingers.

Jack leans over me, kissing me as his fingers and mine play in my soaking curls and sopping slit. Tangled together, we start thrusting in.

“Ooh, such a soft spot,” Jack praises. “You’re so divinely soft after I’ve pounded you. Tenderizing the meat.”

Knowing what he’s done—what he still could do, that wording is scarily accurate.

Suddenly, I can picture him between my legs, preparing to bite. To consume. I know he won’t hurt me, but dark and twisted desires fill us both now. I can imagine him eating my quim and all I would feel is pleasure.

“You do things to me, Jack,” I whisper, eyes closed. It’s easier to talk when I can’t see his face, his eyes studying me every second. “I long for all the things you give me. All the pleasure. The bits of pain. Being yours and doing what you say. All my life it has been a hard burden to bear, practically being someone’s slave... and now

you are here, and I can't stop craving your orders. You tell me to do such wicked things, and they feel so good."

As I've been speaking, my body loosened and accepted his thick cock in my ass. Now, he's pumping in and out, steady and slow, each time making me grunt and groan, too full, but loving the stretch and the very sinfulness of it.

When my eyes open, Jack is looking at me with raw hunger, a starving man spotting a meal.

My breath catches, but I'm not afraid. I'm only excited to see what comes next.

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My perfect little Polly. I've ruined her. Defiled her.

She doesn't seem to mind. My cock spreads streams of pre-ejaculate inside of her, creating a slick sheath of binding muscle that's far tighter than her cunt, and now nearly as wet. We move together, my growls and her harsh, high-pitched cries speeding me towards the edge. I can picture my cum flowing from this second opening and satisfaction fills me.

She is thoroughly mine.

In my own haze of lust, I try to remember my wife. My wife! My treasure, one perfect for me. My fingers spar with hers, inside her quim, across her bead, pressing her fingers deeper inside her tunnel so she can feel my cock moving against them, separated by thin, pink walls. "You are the very best wife," I say suddenly. "A queen. My queen. And we shall have our own little kingdom, you and I."

"Yes, . Yes! This house and you, that's all I need. All I've ever wanted," she whispers. She kisses me back, her tongue the aggressor, sliding into my mouth, taming me with one touch as much as I've tamed her with my words and my powers.

I burst inside of her and feel her walls dancing their familiar, convulsing dance.

"Now, you will be a good husband," Polly says in a surprisingly firm voice, "and strip these sheets while I run a bath. We're going to have a very busy day, Mr. Springton."

"I look forward to it—Mrs. Springton."

THE WORLD SEEMS A GLORIOUS place today. Polly tells me it is because spring has finally sprung and the sky is blue. Polly says she might even hear a cuckoo near our home, something that rarely happened near Bunson's Home for Unwanted Urchins. She is so excited by this that I want to go out and buy her all the pretty birds in cages so she can hear them sing whenever she wants.

"That is a sweet thought, but the money you have would be better served by buying a few dozen pairs of good boots and shoes with thick soles."

"I shall buy you any shoes you like," I say.

"Not for me! For the little ones." Polly puts her arm through mine and hugs it close to her breast as we stroll. She's in lilac lace, a string of pearls at her throat.

My cum would look far prettier there, sliding between her soft, luscious globes.

"The little ones. Fine. Pick them out. I believe I saw a shoemaker somewhere south of—"

I stop.

Constables are everywhere in their dark blue-black uniforms, marring the end of the Grosvenor Road. Polly clutches my arm.

“.”

"Not my work," I hiss, and I continue marching us past.

There is a crowd gathering, and the police disperse them as best they can, but gossip runs riot among well-dressed servants and the occasional matron and merchant.

“The old lady what’s sister fell out of the window. Did herself in.”

My keen ears hear whispers that Polly cannot. She’s pulling away from me, pushing through the crowd. “Polly!” I call, but she’s away, gloved hand tapping someone’s shoulder.

“Martha! Martha, it’s me, Polly!”

Martha turns around and reveals a stunned, tired-looking face that must’ve been quite stunning once, with gingery hair frizzing out from under a plain black bonnet. “It never is! Polly! I haven’t seen you in—”

“At least five years! Oh, you’ve found work in service.” Polly clasps the girl’s hands.

“I should say I did— finally . I worked at the button factory until last year, and then the manager thought I’d make a nice sort of helper for his old parents, now that they’ve moved up a bit in the world. I’m the maid of all work, and the cook bullies me and the gardener pinches my bum, but it’s a far, far sight better than old Bunson’s!” Martha giggles and squeezes Polly’s hands like she’s spotted a long-lost sister. “And you? What are you doing, dressed up so fine— Polly!” Martha gasps and lifts up Polly’s hand with a soft squeal. “Married! Clever girl!”

“Oh, I should say lucky and blessed more than clever,” Polly’s smile is tight. “What’s going on here?”

“I’m supposed to pick up the old girl’s dress, but the shop is closed. Both the old girls who run it are dead! One an accident, and one offed herself. I don’t know which is which, but I only hope it was the older one, the one with a face like a pig’s arse, what met with a messy end.”

“Martha!”

“She didn’t like gingers, or servants with a voice louder than a mouse’s. I’ve been wishing the missus would pick a different shop, and now she’ll have to.” Martha rubs her hands in delight. “But of course—”

Polly stiffens. “What? Both?”

“That’s right. Three days apart, tragic!”

Polly’s eyes land on mine and what I see is not the tender, docile Polly of earlier in the day, or even the timid yet brave victim I first “hired.” I stride over and link my elbow through hers. “Polly. Introduce me to your friend, dear.”

“This is Martha. She was at Bunson’s when I was younger. Much younger.”

“We grew up together, ‘bout the same age and all.” Martha’s vocal quality shifts, becomes coarser, and letters fall from words. “Init funny that you lasted longer with old Bunson than I did? He got his leg over and tossed me out the day after. Guess you escaped before all that.”

“Only just,” Polly says faintly, her arm rigid against mine. “Why are the police here if it was a suicide? Why so many ?”

Martha shrugs, then whispers, “I suppose it seems worth looking into when two sane, respectable sorts keel over like this, so close together. Although, I did hear that young constable over there—the one with the floppy ears like a spaniel—he said there were two cups and saucers found on a little table near the window.”

“Those could have been left there from the other day. People might not clear up when they’re grieving.”

“And someone else said a man was asking for the shop and that they heard

screaming. I say she went mad, off her head, but the merchants down this end of the road are all in arms. Say it'll hurt the trade. Never will!" Martha scoffs. "Never seen this quiet bit of town so bloody packed."

Polly pulls her arm from mine. "It was good to see you, Martha. Steer clear of Bunson's, won't you? Eric Bunson must be in charge now, and he's just as dangerous as his brother to my way of thinking."

"I'll never set foot near that place, not for a thousand pounds!" Martha declares, then groans. "I suppose it's home again and a devil of a time explaining that the shop is shut and the owners have popped their clogs." The redhead waves and strides off.

"The shoemaker is further ahead," I murmur, guiding Polly along, but she doesn't reply.

I didn't mind her cheerful silence when I first brought her home, and then I found I quite enjoyed her fearful, breathless quiet as she learned who and what I was. This silence is a pestilence and a plague. It eats me.

Is she going to be like this every time I eat an old lady?

I quite prefer the beefsteak... although her steak and kidney pie will always be my favorite. "Can we have steak and kidney pie again?" I ask.

"Whatever you like," she answers in a flat voice.

I shake her. Only ruffians shake their wives, I'm sure, but I'm so much worse than a common ruffian. "None of that. What good is my sparing your throat if you won't use it."

"Did you kill the other one?" Polly demands in a rushed whisper, stopping and

pulling her arm from mine with a fierce glare.

I love it. I love when she shows that rebellious spirit. The spirit that ran from her “lord and master” Bunson, the spirit that stamped her food at the rudeness of the dressmakers, the spirit that dares to look a killer in the eye and challenge him. “I told you I didn’t. When would I have had the chance?”

“When I slept.”

“But I don’t lie to you. Why would I tell you that I ate the one and not the other?” I ask in an undertone.

Her glare softens. “I... I don’t know. You wouldn’t, I suppose.”

“You suppose?” It is my turn to glare. “Have I ever lied? I told you I was a beast, a killer, that I wouldn’t take my boots off lest you see my hooves. Whether you believed me or not, I didn’t lie. I may have been somewhat economical with the truth. Even the night I rescued you from that loathsome oaf, I told you I had a better position for you. I did. In small pieces, resting in my stomach.”

The fact that Polly doesn’t run, scream, or slap my face for the horrors I say to her shows that she has more mettle than most humans on this foul plane.

“I know,” is all she says. “You didn’t lie. I’m sorry. I just thought... I think it seems odd, that’s all. Two cups? A man asking for the shop and then she dies so shortly afterward? People hearing her screams...”

“She might have been murdered, Polly. Humans kill each other, too, and not for sustenance, for petty things like jealousy and drunkenness. In my defense—not that I need one—Flameheels have no other natural prey in our realm. We don’t eat often, nor could we, even if we needed to. Imagine starvation being all you know, and then

you enter a realm full of plenty, where food surrounds you, where the papers report the killings of humans every day, where you hear of deaths daily. All you think at first is that the food is going to waste. And then... Then, you begin to live among them. Then, you learn that you can live off of other beasts, the cows and sheep and pigs that you never see in my world.” My steps are fast as my words pour out, and I drag Polly with me, my heels clicking, spurting, raising me up in the air on every other step, bobbing us through the crowds and past cabs and horses. The horses see me as I truly am and whinny, starting in their traces, but the rest of humanity stares right through me as if I don’t exist. When I stop, we are in an alley that leads to a lane of grander shops, and Polly’s lips are trembling and her cheeks are flushed from running to keep up with me. Only belatedly do I think of how sore she must be from all we’ve done for nearly all of the last three days. “Then, I met you. A fighting spirit, a trusting nature, and a superb cook. I... I give myself to you as thoroughly as you’ve given yourself to me, Polly. These teeth and claws are yours, as much as I am loathe to say so. I will be your tamed beast so that you never doubt.”

Polly leans forward and kisses me hard, until I’m breathless, dizzy, and don’t know if I truly need air to breathe, as I don’t need food and water to exist. “I give those teeth and claws back. I am sorry I doubted. Only promise me that you will never kill unless it’s needful. That’s all that I ask. I couldn’t bear it if they took you away from me,” Polly’s cheeks are damp against mine. “If they catch you, they’ll hang you, .”

“And I will rip the rope from the gallows, Polly, and fly to your arms. We’ll escape somewhere far across the sea if we have to, across the world.” My heart thrills that she loves me. Loves me still.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:31 am

Eric Bunson fumed. When he returned to the home, he found a mutiny brewing. Spindles were silent. Faces were grim. The oldest boys had formed an unspeaking line, mostly composed of ragged and scrawny youths, but menacing.

“You ‘urt our Kate,” one growled. “She said you pushed ‘er into the stove and tipped the pan. Greg took ‘er to the vicar, and they’re going to have the law on you.”

Eric blinked in disbelief. “What? She’s a clumsy child! A club-footed little snout. She shouldn’t have been in the kitchen!”

“We ‘ave to ‘elp in the kitchens since Polly left and there’s no matron, no cook, no nothin’!” One of the three ringleaders came forward, chin jerked upward in defiance. “Where does all this money we make for you go, eh? Not on ‘iring staff. Not on fixin’ the bleedin’ roof, or settin’ traps for the rats, or food, or blankets.”

One of the younger girls, hiding under a mop of string brown hair, dared to shout out, “We’ve only got enough to eat because of the meat that got dropped off, and it’ll all spoil soon.”

Another voice joined the disgruntled chorus. “Kate’ll be in ‘ospital. She’ll get better! She’ll ‘ave ugly scars on ‘er legs, and she’ll show the police! You’ll go to jail!”

“Oh?” Eric’s voice rose in a harsh shout, a bullying bluster that had always seen his brother through ugly times. “Who will pay for this hospital visit, hm? And let’s say the law does have me bunged up, then what’ll happen to all of you? There’s only money coming in, little as it is, because of the clients and contracts I have. You’ll all be put out in the street. Tarts and beggars, every one of you. No one is going to want

you—you with the wonky leg and you with the staring eye, you dozy cow!” He shoved his way through the startled line of older boys, only kept on so long as they had been because they could do the heavy work. He shoved one of the little ones with a turned-in foot, another one with one eye staring. “The older boys acting so high and mighty? They can afford to talk like this. They’ll get snapped up by a factory, quick as you like. The older girls... You’ll be flat on your backs, on the game in no time. It’s the little ones that’ll suffer. Starve. The nights are still awfully cold, and there’s someone roaming about, killing. Ripping. Shredding little tykes like you.” Eric shoved one of the smallest to his backside and strode over him, almost crushing his fingers, just because he could. “Get rid of me if you like. It’s your own necks you’re putting in the noose.”

He kept walking, up to the room he now occupied, not letting them see how pale he was, nor how he was shaking.

Once inside, he sat on Robert’s bed, fingers laced under his chin.

The girl and the man must be Polly and her rich punter. Even on the game, she was acting as pure as the driven snow, using her cunt for charity.

What a laugh.

Her punter probably killed Robert to get ownership of that pretty face and those big tits.

And now I can’t even hunt her down properly, not with half the police in Pimlico looking for me. Why’d the old bitch have to scream so bloody loud?

But perhaps... Perhaps she’s as slow-witted as Robert always said. Perhaps she’ll be back, or she’ll send her demon lover over with a roasted pig this time, or a sheep on a spit.

And when he comes, I'll do him in, nice and quick. And if she comes... I'll do her in. Long and slow.

JACK SLUNG THE LONG burlap sack over his shoulder. Polly sat perched in one arm, her fingers stroking lightly over one of his horns.

"You mustn't do that."

"Why?" Polly asked, her hand dropping at once.

"Because when you do that, I want to stop, lift your skirts, bend you over, and slide into you until you can't take another inch." He smirked at her, pecking her lips. "I would say practice improves the depth and girth you accommodate. Our first night, you barely took half of me. After supper, you were so warm and ready, mewling like a cat, practically begging me—"

"Stop!" Polly admonished, gripping his horn in protest. "You've been so good."

"I tell you, I haven't been. I've been busy and fed. That's not the same as good."

"Good to me." Her fist wrapped around his horn now, and she dared to return his smirk, stroking his length like a cock. "Why does this inflame you so?"

"It's sensitive. Like the pink pearl you hide between your legs."

"So you want me to suck on it?"

Jack alighted on a rooftop, shuddering. "Polly!"

"What?" she asked innocently. "That's what you do to me."

“Hmm. Maybe if you kneel in my lap... Yes, my face buried between your soft pillows,” he ran a hand covetously over her breast, “and my cock deep inside one of your holes... Yes, with my head bowed, my horn just might meet your mouth.”

“Like this?” Polly tugged his strong jaw in her hand, bringing his head lower. A deft swipe of her tongue against the faint ridges and grooves sent him weak-kneed against a chimney.

“My wicked wife.”

“My loving husband.”

“I tell you, I’m n—” Jack stopped. “No, never mind. I cannot argue with that. Only love of your smile and wanting to ensure your happiness would see me carting twenty pairs of shoes across in a horrible fog like this.”

“It’s the warm weather and the damp,” Polly reassured him.

“I’m surprised the lamp boys can find their way in this. I can see in the dark, but they must be wandering about the streets by sense of smell.”

“And you make your own light.” She clung to him tightly.

“You know, most humans are afraid to fly, I think. The one I grabbed—I took her straight out of the house and up to the roof. If people would come running in, I didn’t want to be disturbed. I don’t know if she was screaming more because of me or because of heights.”

Polly gave him a long-suffering sigh. “You needn’t tell me how you fed. Not this time.”

They soared on in silence.

He would not apologize for killing the middle-aged woman in the dress shop. She was, although humans couldn't necessarily see it, an unkind, belittling sort of person with a hard heart. He supposed he could be as well, but not towards Polly.

And perhaps that little wrinkled woman also had a person who softened her heart. Perhaps even the wicked ones do. She insulted Polly. She deserved to have her ugly tongue ripped out.

But Polly would have forgiven her. Polly would have thought about the other sister, the scared little thing that probably relied on the stronger one.

The way Polly relies on me.

A pang struck him as he thought of all the girls like Polly in the world, waiting for their lovers to return, all the Pollies who would remain lonely and waiting, for their men had been slain.

For the first time ever, his actions caused him pause, and then something like guilt.

"I loved the steak and kidney pie, pet. What will we have tomorrow night?"

"I thought you might like to try pork. Some nice, fat chops, sizzled up in the pan, with sprouts and potatoes?" Polly jumped into the conversation, her voice warm and eager.

"Ooh. That sounds delicious."

"Would you—would you kill a pig for me, Jack? You could buy one cheap in the Smithfield market. It'd be nice and fresh, and we could take the rest—"

“To the little ones. Yes, I could do that. In fact, I imagine I would enjoy doing that, especially since you’d like it better, too.”

Polly’s hand returned to his horn, and she snuggled to his side. “You might like a diet of steak, kidneys, chops, and sausage. If it helps, I’ll keep you fed, Jack. In any way you fancy.” Her voice dropped into the seductive range that he seldom heard but was beginning to crave.

“That’s a dangerous bargain to make with a demon.”

“Ah, but you’re my demon, and you never lie to me. You have never tricked me, have you, Jack?”

He shook his head. “No, I haven’t. Now, listen. I’ll take the shoes down, and you stay up here.”

Polly clutched him, her tender touch suddenly fearful as they stopped in a mix of smoke and fog over Whitechapel. “Up on the roof? Alone?”

Jack set her down lightly on the half-rotting roof. “I’ll be right back up. I don’t want Bunson to catch a glimpse of either of us.”

“He’ll catch me, full stop, when I crash through this roof.”

Jack groaned faintly. That would be the next thing his wife would want. How in the world would he steal a roof ?

Polly was tugging the bag from his grip. “I’ll slip it ‘round the back. Through the kitchen!”

“You can’t carry this lot, Polly, it must weigh fifty pounds.”

“I can carry that and more. I know the way to get in and not bungle it—and not be tempted to eat anyone if I do.”

Well. He couldn't fault that particular bit of logic.

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:31 am

I sit on the very edge of the dilapidated roof, my heels burning the yellowish fog into green as the blue flames flow out steadily, seeping through the holes in the heels of my boots. I don't put my weight on it, and I'm glad I didn't leave Polly up here, now that I think of it. If she'd fallen through, Bunson surely would have seen her.

What if Bunson sees her now? I watch her slide into the back door through the rat-infested alley. What if Bunson is in the kitchen, having a late-night nibble? I should have left her at home.

But how can I? Now that I've been wrapped in her wet silk, squeezed in her grasping walls, even spent down her throat and lapped her blood from between her thighs... I'm welded to her. I will have to train myself to be apart from her so that I can go out and do unpleasant things—like killing pigs.

Human swine or the animal kind, it doesn't matter to me. But it matters to her.

I do quite like the way her eyes light up when I come home.

Home.

The empty house that was a monument to dirt and death is clean and sparkling, filled with good smells and her humming as she sweeps and washes.

I could read the paper (well, hold it as if I'm reading it) and stare at her as she works, and I would be content.

Why isn't she back yet? I thought she was simply dropping the shoes off inside the

door and slipping away.

With a curse, I drop to the ground.

“WHAT IN THE WORLD HAPPENED here?” I almost fall into the old rusted stove, my feet slipping in a pool of oil. The slab floor is slick, and I can’t get my balance as my new, smooth shoes slide in opposite directions. The heavy bag drops from my hands as I put my arms out to feel around in the dark, looking for something to catch myself on.

And I don’t.

“Oh, my dress!” I can’t help but whisper sadly. It’s so new and so fine, proof that Jack looks after me and gives me the riches I could never have dreamed of until I met him. Now it’s covered in fat, and I’ll have to use lye and a scrub brush to get it out, and that’ll ruin the lace.

I could sob.

Stop that, Polly Springton! You have a wardrobe full of beautiful frocks, thanks to Jack. Leave the shoes and get out. There are more important things than a clean dress.

If Jack has his way, he’ll get it all sorts of dirty before the night is through, anyway.

A shiver of anticipation makes me pause on my hands and knees, eyes closed. The memory of him sliding into me from behind, stretching my cunt until I began to leak hot juice as I throbbed around him, each pulse seeming to squeeze his thickness tighter inside of me, tighter and tighter until we both burst as one, crying out in chorus—

“Well. The whore came back.”

My eyes fly open, and my throat unleashes a scream that's choked off. A single match flicks from Eric Bunson's fingers as he drags me up by the hair. "I'd do you on the floor, Poll, but my trousers'd get all dirty," he jeers in a whisper. His face presses close to mine, his stubbled cheek against my pale one, the smell of alcohol on his breath wafting into my nose.

I throw my elbows back and slam my heel down into his foot, but something silver flies from the side of my vision and then the world goes black.

"POLLY?" I HISS IN THE dark.

Nothing. Not a sound from her.

Sleeping breathing surrounds this place, and my supernatural ears are bombarded by the sound of soft snores, deep, even breaths, and fitful mutterings.

None of these sounds belongs to Polly.

In the dark, I see the floor is slick, and trails and scuffs are scattered through it—as well as footprints in the congealed white grease. Polly's?

A man. A man in heavy shoes with a thick tread. A man who affords decent footwear. Eric Bunson.

I'm torn between roaring in rage and not wishing to wake every child in the place.

Then I'd have witnesses to deal with, and I cannot kill a child, for practical purposes as well as for Polly's sake.

No, I soar forward, in the dark, taking care that my flames don't ignite the drippings on the floor.

THE DARK FACTORY IS a rabbit warren of machines and cots, shivering little bodies under thin blankets, and a fortunate few sleeping soundly under blankets made of the fabric I gifted last time.

“Polly?” I breathe out.

Nothing.

I listen for rustling, for the sound of her skirts and petticoats moving—and instead I hear heavy breathing. Grunting. Dragging.

My blood runs cold and my flames run hot, flaring to twin blue waves as I bolt down a narrow passageway. Was this what Polly did before she crashed into me in that alley? Did she run for her life from one brother as I now run for her life to save her from another?

Why would he attack her?

Because he knows she had something to do with his brother’s death. Because he’s evil. He wants her.

And she’s mine.

No one touches what’s mine.

I splinter the door and torch the remains, wood turning to ashes at once.

Eric Bunson freezes, his head turned towards mine, his foul, thin body halfway over Polly’s as she lies on his bed.

“Ohhhh, human,” I growl, slashing the air in front of me, clawing my way toward

him. “You’d best hope she’s only sleeping, or you will never find your eternal rest. I’ll keep you alive. Living off an inch of flesh a day. An eyeball tonight. A toe tomorrow. I’ll slice your cock off and shove it down your throat. You can eat it, but I never will,” I threaten, leaping onto his back and hauling him off.

“You!” Eric Bunson’s voice is far too calm for someone who has just been threatened with a gruesome, lingering death. “You’re the one that scared the old girl in the dress shop!”

The alcohol on his breath explains his delayed fear.

“How would you know that—unless you went looking for us and killed the other sister?” I challenge, spinning him to face me. I want him dead. I want him gone. I don’t want to taste him, I just want to rip him into tiny pieces—but I should probably take him outside so no one will hear his screams.

But first—my wife. “Polly! Polly, darling,” I whisper, throwing Bunson down as hard as I can, hoping I crack his bones into bits.

His alcoholic stupor cushions the blow, and he sags one second, then lunges up the next, a glint of silver catching my eye before it catches my side.

“You killed my brother! And the dressmaker. Her sister could have identified you. I did you a favor, keeping her quiet.”

“I didn’t fear her voice, or I would have killed her myself.” I pull the knife away and toss it behind me.

Can I die here? In the Middling, I would have said no, but here... Blood streams from my wound as I cock my head. Polly’s breathing is normal. Steady. I can see a bruise already forming on the side of her face.

“You hit her. You hit my wife,” I snarl.

“Wife! You married that little twit?”

“No. I married the incredibly sweet and kind person who outsmarted your fat, idiotic brother and led him right to me. And then—” I ignore the wetness leaking from me and manage to get my hands around Bunson’s throat, “I ate him.”

The look of horror is so very rewarding. “But you... your fate is in Polly’s hands. Tell me, what were you about to do to her? Bringing her to your bed? Tuck her in? Keep her warm?” Each word tightens my grip. Eric Bunson couldn’t have answered if he’d wanted to.

“Jack?”

A faint, cracked moan sends me spinning, my attention back on Polly. “I’m here, love.”

“I can’t see anything,” she whimpers.

“It’s dark, pet, but I’m right here.” I relinquish my grip on the murdering rapist long enough to help Polly sit up and yank the dirty curtains from the window. With the fog and the building’s proximity to the alley, it doesn’t help. Light doesn’t reach us.

“Eric Bunson is here,” she whispers, reaching for me.

But footsteps racing away tell me that he isn’t. Not at this moment.

“Come. He can’t get away.” I haul her in one arm and push ahead with the other, alarmed to feel myself weakening.

“We should run! Jack, we should leave,” Polly urges.

“He had you in his bed, Polly. He should pay.”

She’s silent at that, but I feel her body shaking in fear as we fly.

It’s easy to follow Bunson’s footsteps. He’s following the steps of his ill-fated brother, I imagine, running after his prey, only tonight, he’s running from his hunter.

“Down here,” Polly urges, and I turn, bursting through a side door I would have missed. We’re back in the alley, and Eric Bunson is only a few yards away. With a hungry cry, I drop Polly and pounce on him, my fist in his hair, my knees in his back as I bring him to the ground.

There’s a scuffle. For the first time, I’m not sure that I’ll win—unless I act fast.

But how can I, with Polly slowly walking towards us? She stops in front of us, looking down as I perch atop Bunson as he lies on the ground. I jerk his head up by the hair so his bleary eyes meet Polly’s.

“Tell her you’re sorry,” I snarl.

He wriggles and spits, one hand shooting out and clawing for her ankle. His apology never comes.

“Polly...” I snarl, claws digging into his scalp, my teeth bared. Like this—I’m the inhuman beast I told her I was. If I kill in front of her, will she ever look at me the same?

She continues to stare, bright blue eyes slowly focusing after her blow to the head. “Go ahead, darling. Have your supper,” she says in her soft voice, her face unsmiling.

“What?” Bunson screeches.

Polly turns and glides away as I fasten my hand around his throat and tear.

With the first bite, I feel the bleeding stop.

For all of his evil, this Mr. Bunson tastes surprisingly good.

“Would you make sure you clean up when you’re done, Jack?”

I tear a long piece of flesh from his shoulder, the muscles still twitching as life leaves him. “Of course, my dearest.”

“YOU GET STRAIGHT INTO that tub. I’m burning these clothes. I’m polishing your boots, too, and you’ll not argue.”

Jack obeys with a languid smile and drowsy movements. His shirt falls free and his white muscles gleam in the dim lamplight, but the wound on his side is an angry red. “It’s already healing. I have a theory. Would you care to hear it?”

“Yes.” I run the hot water and collect the clothes as they drop. There’s comfort in routine. Washing. Laying fires. Making supper—although we’ve already eaten, it’s after midnight, and I daresay Jack is full. Very full.

“In the Middling, I believe we Flameheels are immortal. Not so here. We can be hurt, but the flesh of humans restores us. Now, one day, I shall age here. I shall age with you, and when you greet death, I will greet it with you, and take your soul to the gardens of Heaven. And you... Perhaps you will look out and wave to me throughout eternity, for I will stay in the Middling, waiting by those gates just to be near you.”

“Or perhaps we’ll both live on that road between the Middling and the gardens you

speaking of. Because in life or death, I will stay with you, Jack Springton. If I didn't stop loving you tonight, I never will, not even in death," I say, trying to steady my voice.

I fail.

It feels like so much has failed tonight. Bunson's home has no living owner now, and I don't know what will become of the children! Bunson is dead, and my sinful soul rejoices. My husband was stabbed. My face throbs, and I shall have to hide inside for a week until the bruise fades lest people think Jack beats me.

"You are worried about the children?" he asks, sliding into the tub and moaning when hot water covers his torso.

"Yes, very."

"Would you like to run the place yourself? Properly? Or... Or how about if we shut it down? The older ones can be helped along into jobs, and the little ones can live here on the ground floor until they're older."

"There must be... ten children too young to find work, Jack. Maybe more."

"Springton's Home for Children. I like it." He closes his eyes, ignoring me.

I sigh and walk to the fire, wincing as his good clothes go in it.

I remember Eric's hands on me before I blacked out. If Jack hadn't been there...

I tear the dress off, sleeves first, then the shredded bodice, and the skirt falls free as I dismember it and let it follow Jack's clothing into the flames.

"It'll only be temporary. We'll find good homes and proper orphanages. Families that

want children.”

Standing in nothing but my chemise and knickers, I head back into the privy and stand beside the tub. The hungry look in Jack’s eyes comes back at once, and I’m rather relieved. It must mean he’s not in grave danger from being stabbed. “Don’t you think it’s risky? Children might say something,” I whisper, kneeling next to him.

He holds my hand, my fingertips dangling in the water. “Think, Polly. Think about all you’ve done for them and all he hasn’t. I would wager the only thing they’ll say when we bring them here is thank you. It’s a nicer part of London. You couldn’t ask for a more loving figure to feed and clothe them,” he gestures at me, “ and—and—”

“And you’ve become a bit of an expert on London, love, and being a hero,” I sigh. “Let’s give the police a day to do their work—and then we’ll return and see what’s to be done.” I shall have to wear a hat with a heavy veil. Do I have such a thing? Well... I’m sure I can make one tomorrow.

“Mm.” Jack reaches for my hand—and doesn’t let go. “Get in with me.”

“Jack!”

“It’s lovely and warm.”

“There’s no room.”

“You’ll sit on my lap.”

It’s a test. There’s a silent challenge in his eyes, asking me if I still feel the same desire I did, if I can still stand to share the same intimacy. I pull my fingers away and watch the sadness fill his eyes—until I hook my fingers into the waist of my knickers and start to slide them down. “Give me a minute.”

SHE LIES ON ME, HER back to my chest, her thighs on mine. Her slit brushes my cock, wetness that defies water coating me as my erection surges. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have let you risk it. Going in," I mutter, kissing her neck. "You could have been killed." By someone else. That's somehow so much worse than if I did it.

No. No, if I did it... How would I ever live with myself? How would I live without her?

At least almost losing her has completely cooled any remaining bloodlust I might have had toward Polly. I wrap my arms around her waist with sudden ferocity, sloshing water over the tub and making her squeak as her ribs complain.

"I should have listened to you. I suppose I wanted to help, not keep asking you to be my 'errand boy.' Having someone so willing to care for me and help me when I've always had to scrape along and manage without any help is a big change for me. But you did it, Jack. You saved me. You save me again. You've always been there in a pinch, when I needed help and it seemed as if none would come. No one has ever saved me before, Jack. Never." She cranes her neck, her bruised face looking up at me.

"I didn't quite save you this time," I say, and something horrible happens. My eyes fill without my control, and when I blink, tears come trailing out. "I could have lost you," I whisper, pressing a kiss that's more air and intention than lips to her bruised forehead.

"But you didn't, Jack." She beams up at me.

My Polly. Bloody but unbowed.

"You saved me. Twice ." Polly sighs and stretches out against me, her arms coming up to twine around my neck. "My hero."

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:31 am

London, 1882

The Springton Home for Children is the brightest spot on the quiet Pimlico street it occupies. When it first opened, neighbors objected, saying this well-heeled neighborhood wasn't fit for such things. But then Mr. Springton, who can be very persuasive by all accounts, stopped round for tea one day, and each objector was charmed into changing their minds. Now, the ten children under fourteen who make the neatly furnished flats their home are the most beloved sight as the kindly Mrs. Springton walks them to the local primary school that opened in St. Gabriel's Church right off Cumberland Street. Most mornings, Mr. Springton walks with them.

“GET YOUR PAPERS! MORNING papers! Hear the horrors of the Spring-Heeled Jack! Now sighted in Pimlico!”

Polly finishes dropping off the little ones who live in the lower floors of our home. Truth be told, I don't mind having them about. They stay away from me, and I stay away from them—except for the littlest one, Kate, with her badly burned legs and clubbed foot, and Charlie, the littlest lad, with his twisted foot that turns in at the ankle. Something about the agony of always having special footwear has made them my particular pets. I often get the paper and read it aloud to the older ones, but Kate and Charlie are the only ones who would dare to sit upon my knee.

“Jack!” Polly comes back from the doors of the school, a paper in her hand and her hat clutched to her head. “Jack, look at the photograph.”

I look at the grainy photograph on the sheet of newsprint, my jaw immediately locking closed over a fit of oaths that wouldn't go over well in front of St. Gabriel's.

It's me. From the white streaks in my hair to the smirk on my face and the beautiful blonde I'm carrying—it's me.

"Look at the building. Oh, Jack." Polly is almost in tears. "It's our home."

"I know who took this picture. That squinty little rail of an amateur photographer, Wilson Waterford, who lives across the way. I scared him properly when he came sniffing around Hildy." Hildy being fourteen and looking like she's seventeen, and having the gentlest nature—she reminds me of Polly. Waterford reminds me of Bunson.

"Well, he's getting back, isn't he? He's been watching the house, and now... Oh, God. Jack. They'll come to investigate, won't they? And those people who lived in the house before—before you made it yours," she stammers, skipping over the grisly details that made the place mine. "What will they think? What will they find out about the old tenants?"

Normally, I wouldn't care. Let the investigators come, and let me feed. "I should have eaten Waterford," I grumble.

"You mustn't eat the neighbors, Jack," Polly sighs. "That's part of the problem now, isn't it?"

"To be fair, they weren't neighbors originally," I point out.

Polly groans. "What'll we do? What if they take the children? What if they arrest us? Who will take care of Kate? And Charlie? The rest are almost old enough to find work, but they're only five and six."

I walk along in silence for a minute, my cloak blowing out behind me in the stiff March breeze. "Artie and Martha are coming to tea on Sunday, aren't they?"

“Yes, and I expect that Martha will ask me to be godmother.”

“Excellent.” I nod as I think about one of the oldest boys at Bunson’s, now a strapping lad of eighteen and wed to Martha, who is a few years older than him. She was put out of her job as a maid when her pregnancy was discovered (silly humans, punishing people for making more of their own species!) and they’ve been struggling along on Artie’s salary as a laborer at the docks. “Go to Martha. Tell her that we’re leaving them in charge of the home as matron and headmaster, or whatever you call it. Artie’s a good boy. He railed against Eric and whipped the others into shape—and I’m fairly certain he’s the one who convinced the others to lie to the police and say Eric Bunson ran off with all the money and legged it to Spain.”

“He is, not that the children were hard to convince,” Polly says faintly, clutching my arm.

If we hadn’t come the next day to sort things out, he would have kept the place going. He’ll manage the new home. There’s certainly enough money to keep it running for a few more years until all but the youngest are out on their own.”

“Where will we go?”

“Somewhere... Somewhere where my kind are allowed to exist. There’s a town that I’ve heard of. Dr. Ellsworth, the specialist I’ve been taking Kate to see—he’s leaving for Pine Ridge, New York, so he can have a chance at a proper life, even with his mutation. He’s heard that paranormal creatures and humans live in peace there. Innocents are protected. Evil beings are hunted and removed.”

Polly gives me a sidelong look, and I purse my lips. “I’m a reformed evil being. I only hunt evil things... at the moment.”

“Jack Springton!”

I wince. Polly only uses both names when she's truly put out. It's happened only once in the year we've been married, and that was when I killed the Christmas goose in front of Hildy and Henry (who oddly enough didn't seem to notice). "I mean, I only hunt evil things because my family is in no danger. But I've got to get you and the children away from Waterford or anyone else he sets on us."

"But... But you said Martha and Arthur could—"

"I meant Kate and Charlie," I say, blinking in surprise as the words leave my lips. "They... They have new procedures in America. Ellsworth will be leaving soon, and his mutation process has been refined. He tells me small doses could regrow Kate's skin and tissue. She might be able to walk without pain one day. And Charlie! There are surgeries for clubbed feet and all sorts of lameness. Ellsworth told me of a children's hospital in Boston. That's on the eastern coast of America, the same as New York."

"You would... You would take Kate and Charlie with us?" Polly whispers. "As our children?"

I nod, firmly.

"As our family? Or as mere wards?" Her eyes burn into mine, and I know there is much more to this question than simple logistics.

"It would be easiest to get them across as our son and daughter."

"Oh. It's just a matter of ease. It's not about wanting a family or anything like that?" she murmurs.

My lips brush her ear as I bend towards her. "Do you think... Do you think perhaps they'd ever call me father?"

“It depends on if you’d allow it, Jack. I know Kate would in a second! But the true question is, do you want to be a father?”

A father to just any scruffy, miserable human? No. To Kate and Charlie, and even the older ones, if pushed? To a child made with Polly?

The thoughts that fill my head are not exactly paternal, but they could lead there—if I wasn’t what I am.

I walk along, pushing her in front of me while my lips whisper wicked words in her ear. “Tell me again how often I’ve been seeding that tight little quim of yours? Tell me how often I hold your hips up when you’re full of me, so that my cock strikes your womb and my seed flows straight to the place it should take hold? Of course I wish my wife would carry my child, but I know it might never—”

“I think it’s worked. You’ve been so busy taking Kate to her appointments and trying to help some of the older ones find apprenticeships with joiners and seamstresses and whatnot, that you haven’t noticed. Your monthly feed didn’t come this month.” Polly’s fingers dig into my arm, and she spins me to face her under the small trees that line Cumberland Street. They’re just beginning to bud, tight green pops of color on full brown branches.

Like my Polly. In bloom. “Are you certain?”

“Not yet. But I’m beginning to think it’s not just being a little late. Four weeks gone,” she says faintly.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I thought you’d notice.”

“But when I didn’t...”

“I thought you might be a bit upset. Things will change, Jack. They’ll have to.”

I laugh and hug her to me. “Things have been changing since I met you, Polly. It turns out—I like being your hero and your husband. But! This means more than ever we need to leave. Get Martha and Arthur over today, then pack. I’ll book a steamer to New York by the end of this week.”

Polly nods. She’s used to things moving fast. Between us, they always have.

“No child of mine will live in fear of some nosy neighbor and his camera,” I vow, a hand on Polly’s middle. “Pine Ridge is a little town, a peaceful place in the mountains, that’s what Ellsworth says. Quiet streets without crime and papers, without the evils of London,” I pledge, smiling crookedly, for I am one of those evils, and perhaps legends of some “Spring-Heeled Jack” flying above the roofs will live on long after I’m gone. “I’ll make a home for us, Polly.”

Her eyes shine. They are the only light in me, and she gives it so freely, lends it to me always. “Jack, you already have.”

I throw out my arms. “Well... A better one! The Springtons of Pine Ridge. It sounds quite nice.”

“Ever so respectable.”

Polly’s eyes have regained their happy sparkle so quickly. My resilient, unbeatable, unstoppable bride. My heart flips inside my chest. “Polly?”

“What?”

“It doesn’t hurt the baby when we have our little games?” I whisper, one finger tracing over the smile I’ve come to love so well.

“He’s built of sturdy stuff, like his father.”

Like his father. I’m going to be a father. I’ll be the first Flameheel ever to know my own child. Raise it. Watch him grow into a man, and what a fine man he’ll be. Something better than me, thanks to his mother.

“None of this would have happened if I hadn’t come to London,” I murmur, awed.

Polly stands on her tiptoes to kiss my cheek. “I’m so very glad you did.”