



# Across Space and Time (Tales from the Tarot)

**Author:** *Kit Barrie*

**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** A monster stalks London's streets, but is he friend or foe?

Hugh Danbury knows there are monsters in the world; being a constable with London's police has shown him that. When young homosexual men are found murdered, no one cares enough to investigate except Hugh, who has had to hide his own proclivities toward men in conservative Victorian society. In addition, there are sightings of an ephemeral creature people are calling Spring-Heeled Jack. Is this who has been committing these atrocities?

Upon confronting the mysterious Jack, Hugh learns that sometimes love can be found across space and time and that fate can bring two people together for a reason. But he also learns that there is one thing that can tear love apart: death. And its coming for him.

**Total Pages (Source):** 18

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:16 pm*

## Chapter one

“ W atch! Watch!” came the cry in the night, echoing over the damp cobblestones, nearly lost in the mist that clung to the air like so much scum to a riverbank. It was not an unfamiliar shout on the streets, but every time he heard it, Constable Hugh Danbury’s stomach twisted inside of him. Violence was prodigious in London at night.

He hurried along, lifting his police lantern to try to throw some light into the darkness that seemed stuck to the stone walls and alley entrances. If one were to imagine a haunted moor or a deserted ruin, neither would ever equal the spookiness that was London’s streets at night. Shadows leaped away from the light like scattering roaches, crawling up the side of the darkened buildings to disappear over the rooftops, waiting for the light to pass before descending once more.

“Watch! Watch!” came the cry again, closer now, and Constable Danbury lifted his whistle to his lips, blowing a long, tinny blast in response. The sound seemed to be swallowed by the edifices of stone and glass surrounding him. He sensed more than saw two figures in the vaporous fog as he came closer. One was a man standing, his head turned toward where the muffled footsteps approached. The other figure was slumped against the wall at the mouth of an alleyway, though Constable Danbury did not get a good look at him until he was nearly upon them both.

The feeble light from his lantern played over the man who was standing, who had a big silver mustache and heavy lines that creased the corners of his eyes. “Constable Hugh Danbury,” he said as he came to a halt. “What is going on here?”

“I only jus’ found ‘im, sir,” the mustached man said, motioning to the prostrate individual.

The figure lay on the ground, slumped face-first against the wall in a way that would have been impossibly painful for a living person. A quick glance told the constable that the limp body was male. His breeches were around his ankles, his long shirt tails falling slightly over the curve of his bare backside. The back of his shirt and waistcoat were unblemished, but there was a widening pool of blood under him that was slowly seeping outward and also up the fabric of his clothing. Hugh’s stomach dropped as he surveyed the limp form. With that much blood, there was no way the man was still alive. He set down his lantern and grasped the man’s shoulders to pull him away from the wall and lay him down flat on the pavement.

The man’s head lolled back at an unnatural angle, both without life to support it and a massive gash across his throat that had nearly severed head from body, only the intact spine keeping the head attached. Across the chest of the corpse were several long lacerations, starting at the left shoulder and dragging down to the right side, the skin ripped apart like bread under a dull knife. The pool of blood beneath him was so large, he might not have had any blood left in his body at all.

“Was he alive when you found him?” Hugh asked the man standing nearby.

The man with the bushy mustache shook his head. “No, sir, not’n that I could tell.”

“What is your name?”

“Kingston, sir. I own the butcher shop just down the way, work overnights gettin’ the meat prepared for the morning.”

“Thank you, I will need your formal statement shortly, but for now, let me see to this man.”

Mr. Kingston nodded and backed away. He looked a little pale but resolved, and Hugh wondered if the man was used to seeing gore as a butcher. He opened up the tattered remains of the dead man's shirt. The marks on his skin were ragged and ripped, the flesh hanging in ribbons where it still clung to the body. He was a young man, Hugh noted, probably not much older than his own twenty-two years. And his face, while covered in blood, was a nice one. Soft, one might even say pretty. His green eyes stared vacantly at the sky, unseeing, and Hugh hoped that his final moments had been quick ones. There was blood everywhere, so it was hard to see if the man had fought or been tossed around. But judging by his trousers around his ankles and his prick between his legs, still stiff despite the corpse's lack of life, he wondered if the man had been in the middle of a rut with someone else. Was it consensual? Was his partner a woman? He examined the man's genitals carefully, but there did not seem to be anything on them that would indicate he had been penetrating someone else.

Two silhouettes materialized out of the gloom, and Hugh recognized his fellow officers. One was a younger constable like him, the other a middle-aged man with dark eyes and a sour expression. The younger constable looked pale despite the tawny brown of his Indian skin. "Constable Danbury," the Indian man said, nodding at him.

"Constable Depesh," Hugh replied. "And Constable Michaels."

Constable Robert Michaels let out a huff. "Well, what do we have here, Danbury? Crime of passion?"

"If the passionate person was a tiger," Hugh said, moving aside for the others to see the body. Constable Rezal Depesh gasped and turned away, gagging. Constable Michaels frowned.

"Good lord," he breathed. "What in the world?"

Hugh was wondering that himself. He spread his hand apart to judge the distance between the slashes. They were all going the same direction. If this had been a knife attack, the attacker would have had to cut the victim from behind very quickly to follow the same trajectory, but that just didn't seem likely. Even if he had been surprised, Hugh was sure the young man would have at least attempted to move away from multiple slashes.

Michaels cleared his throat. "Constable Depesh, go fetch the mariah. We need to bring the body to the coroner."

Depesh swiped at his mouth again, looking a little green under his mahogany skin as he turned and hurried away.

Michaels turned to Hugh. "Did you see anything, Constable?"

"No, sir," Hugh said, nodding his head toward his witness. "Mr. Kingston here called for the watch, and I was the first one to arrive. The man was already dead on the ground when I got here."

Michaels turned to Mr. Kingston. Hugh stared at the corpse at his feet again. What could have done such a thing? He rested his spread fingers just above the marks. They were wider apart than his hand, but the look was distinctly like that of a massively clawed hand coming across the body. But that wasn't possible; even long fingernails were nowhere near strong enough to rip into skin enough to kill someone. Perhaps some sort of large creature, something escaped from the zoo or a travelling carnival. But there were no carnivals currently in London, and surely an escaped animal would have been reported. And if the young man had been in the middle of something with someone else when they were attacked, where was the other someone? If they had both been attacked, surely there would have been screaming, or the other individual would find a policeman to report the animal to.

Despite the lateness of the hour, people were starting to gather around the area to gawk. Constable Depesh returned moments later with another set of constables and their police wagon drawn by two horses. The two officers jumped down, collecting the body and its various scraps of clothing into the back of the wagon. A large puddle of blood still spread over the sidewalk, seeping in between the cobbles like mud.

Depesh stepped back into the shadows, his hands on his knees as he sucked in air. Hugh did his best to block the man from the spectators. He liked Rezal Depesh. They had come onto the Metropolitan Police at the same time just over two years ago, and while he was not good at handling blood and gore, he was kind-hearted and a competent officer of the law, especially with children, having two of his own at home. “All right?” Hugh asked as Rezal straightened up and rubbed at his black mustache.

“Yes, thank you,” Depesh said, still looking a bit green about the gills as he glanced around at the assembled crowd. “We should interview the crowd.”

They swept the surrounding streets looking for evidence, witnesses, anything that might indicate who had committed this vicious crime. But despite London being one of the most populated cities in the world, everyone seemed inclined to mind their own business. No one reported seeing a thing. There were certainly a lot of people willing to gather around the space to stare and gossip though.

“Do you think there will be an autopsy?” Depesh asked Hugh as they walked back to Scotland Yard, the headquarters of the Metropolitan Police, finally looking like he was not about to vomit on his shiny, black shoes.

“I imagine there will be,” Hugh said, giving his friend a light pat on the back. Autopsies were not encouraged by the local magistrates and other government officials when the cause of death could be easily determined. But in the matter of a suspicious death, it was often a necessity.

The body was being delivered to the building behind Scotland Yard. It was run by a man Hugh had known all of his life, Doctor Nathaniel Ledbetter. Dr. Ledbetter had been a friend of his father's when he and Patrick Danbury, Hugh's father, had been in the military together. The older man was one of the smartest men Hugh had ever known, and he had even considered going into the medical field to follow in his father's best friend's footsteps. But medical school had been too expensive for his lower middle-class family, so he had contented himself with learning from Dr. Ledbetter and following him to Scotland Yard to get a job as a constable. His willingness to go into the long, low deadhouse with its ever-lingering scent of decay and rot that clung to everything also made him one of the de facto constables to get the information from the surgeons and examiners there and disseminate it to his colleagues.

"Depesh! Danbury!" came the bark from their sergeant, John Reardon, a severe-looking man with large, graying muttonchops and a balding pate. Depesh had once compared Sergeant Reardon's face to that of a ferret, and now Hugh could not unsee it every time he looked at their beady-eyed, pointy-nosed commander.

Hugh and Depesh made their way over to where Sergeant Reardon sat at his large desk. "Do we have an identity on the body yet?"

"No, sir," Hugh said. "It only just was sent back to The Yard, and no one in the crowd seemed to recognize him."

Reardon sighed. "Fuck it all, some molly boy gettin' his bell wrung for cheating a punter."

Hugh gritted his teeth. There was no friendship lost between himself and his older sergeant, who purported to be a man of God but certainly espoused some of the most hateful rhetoric Hugh had ever heard when it came to London's poor and working classes. He already knew that Reardon looked down on Constable Rezal Depesh

simply for the color of his skin, despite the fact that Depesh had been born and grown up in Notting Hill; he was the son of a brick layer and a washer woman and had made himself into a constable with the Metropolitan Police despite great hardship and poverty growing up, and the added difficulty of his Indian-brown skin.

Hugh, on the other hand, had less of a visible slight against him than his skin tone. But he knew if Reardon ever found out the truth about him, he would likely find himself turned out from his position, perhaps even fined or imprisoned. For while he had the benefit of a fair complexion, his own queer proclivities were still considered a moral failing. The fact that he liked men, whether or not he even was caught engaging with one, was enough to end his career and more. Hugh had found that to be dismally unfair. While it was not the traditional role within society, he could see no harm in two people of the same gender caring for one another, or for a man to go about in lady's clothing or vice-versa. What one did in the bedroom hardly seemed to be a matter of importance beyond those involved in it. But he still had much to lose, so he kept his mouth shut, gritting his teeth at Reardon's casual cruelty toward the dead young man.

"It was quite a mess, sir," he said with a glance at Depesh for confirmation, and Depesh nodded. "I don't think it was something as simple as that."

Reardon scoffed and waved his hand. "Of course. Obviously, it's ol' Jackie back at it again, eh?"

The Jack the Ripper murders were fresh in everyone's minds, having occurred only two years ago, with no formal charges ever brought against any one individual. Hugh had been on the Metropolitan Police Force for less than two months before the murder of Mary Ann "Polly" Nichols at the end of August 1888. Those had been a scary few months, with new murders popping up left and right. The public had been afraid, as they rightly should have been, and Hugh himself had had more than one occasion on patrol when he was worried that he might not come back alive. But since



November of that same year, with the brutal slaying of Mary Jane Kelly, the Whitechapel murders had become an interesting unsolved case in the annals of the Metropolitan Police, a stain on The Yard's reputation since no one had ever been convicted of the crimes. Occasional murders popping up between then and now sometimes spurred the fear that Jack was back, continuing his horrific spread of murder and mayhem. But the brutality was often much less than what had come to be expected from the notorious killer, and no other single murder had been attributed to Jack the Ripper since then.

"I do not believe it is the Ripper, sir," Depesh said, and Hugh nodded in agreement.

"Well, as long as you believe that, it must be true, sahib ," Reardon said with a sarcastic roll of his eyes. The Indian word was supposed to be respectful, but it always sounded like a slur coming from Reardon's mouth. Hugh felt his lips press into a tight line as he forced himself to not say something he'd regret to his commanding officer. "Danbury, you were our first man on the scene?"

"Yes, sir," Hugh said.

"Good. Then you can be the contact for the inquest and any inquiries. Find out from the backyard butchers who he is and what happened to him."

"Yes, sir," Hugh said again, trying not to frown at the derisive name most people called the coroners and other medical examiners in the long building behind The Yard where autopsies and other post-mortems occurred.

"Coroners won't be in until morning anyway. Get going and finish your reports."

"Yes, sir," Hugh and Depesh said together. They both stood and hurried away from their commanding officer without a backward glance.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:16 pm*

### Chapter two

At the end of his shift, shortly before dawn, Hugh was more than ready to return to his little flat. He walked home through the dark streets, illuminated by the flickering glow of gas streetlamps. Everything was still fairly quiet, though London was slowly beginning its process of rising and shaking off the mantle of night. The walk home always gave him time to think. What had really happened to this young man? Who was he? Was he simply the victim of a random act of violence? He had no idea what to think. Hopefully the coroner would have a better idea when he returned to work the next day.

A scraping sound above his head caught Hugh's attention, and he glanced up into the darkness at the roofs of the tenements above him. The gas lamps did not throw their light very far up the building. He squinted, trying to find the source of the noise, but he could see nothing amongst the shadows. Probably just a window opening, or a cat scrambling over the rooftop. Being a police constable always put him on high alert whenever he heard an unfamiliar sound, and it was both a blessing and a curse. He was able to avoid a number of unsavory things tossed out windows, but it also meant that the unseen presence of an alley cat and homeless person made the hair rise on the back of his neck and heat prickles down his spine.

Nothing moved, and he heard nothing more above him, so Hugh continued home. Sleep did not come easily. He kept seeing the young man's torn flesh and lifeless eyes. He slept fitfully, his dreams full of dark shadows and pools of blood.

When he woke, he was covered in sweat. Hugh bathed, ate a simple meal, and put on his cleanest uniform. The Metropolitan Police liked their officers to be in uniform

whenever they went out so people could see them in their community and also to hold them to a higher standard of morality. He didn't know if that second part really was effective or not, considering the corruption he was aware of amongst some of the police that he did his best to stay out of.

As he walked through the late-afternoon London streets, he felt a prickle on the back of his neck. Perhaps someone he knew was waving to him, or someone was watching him. Maybe someone who meant him harm. He glanced around, trying to keep the movement casual and small, but he saw no one paying undue attention to him. He frowned a little, pausing to buy an apple from a street vendor. The feeling of being watched went away, and he headed into Scotland Yard without a backward glance.

Hugh had only just sat down at his desk when he heard, "Excuse me, sir?" He looked up to see a young man in front of him. Not much more than a boy, really, maybe close to his own age. His face was pale and lined sharply from the hollowness that accompanied a hard life living on London streets. His eyes were an icy blue, his hair black and slightly curly, with a sprinkling of freckles across his nose.

"Yes, Constable Hugh Danbury. May I help you?"

"My name is Anthony. I was told at the front, sir, that you might know what happened to Mallory." The pale-faced boy fidgeted a little.

"Mallory?" Hugh asked in confusion.

"Oh, uh..." The young man flushed a bit. "Christopher O'Malley. We heard that he... he was killed last night."

"Oh," Hugh said, feeling guilt and sadness wash over him in equal measure as he gazed back at Anthony. "I don't know if he's been identified by the coroner yet, but I can... take you back to see if you recognize him."

“Much appreciated, sir,” Anthony said, bobbing his head respectfully. Hugh rose to his feet, gesturing for Anthony to follow him. The young man was silent as he led him down the hallway and outside, crossing the path to the stone outbuilding that comprised Scotland Yard’s morgue. The coroner and his assistants inside had several corpses in various states of decomposition stretched out on wooden tables across the long space. The smell of death and decay was so strong that both Hugh and Anthony covered their noses with their hands as they entered.

Dr. Ledbetter, who was a former military surgeon, looked up as they entered from where he was studying the bloated corpse of a middle-aged woman that looked and smelled like she had been fished out of the Thames. “Ah, Constable Danbury. I was hoping to hear from you. I had a few questions about the young man you found last night.”

Hugh motioned to Anthony at his side. “Yes, of course. This young man thinks he might know the victim and would like to identify him.”

“Oh, certainly,” Dr. Ledbetter, looking over his spectacles. “Are you ready, son?”

Anthony nodded and squared his petite shoulders. “Yes, sir.”

Dr. Ledbetter led them over to a table where a humanoid shape was draped with a white shroud. “Here,” he said, folding down the sheet from the corpse’s head, only over his chin. A few drops of blood were still smeared on the young man’s cheek, but his face otherwise remained relatively intact.

Anthony inhaled softly and nodded. “Yes, sir. That’s Mallory. Er, Christopher O’Malley.”

Dr. Ledbetter folded the sheet back up over the bloodless face. Hugh glanced over at Anthony, whose thin shoulders were shaking a little. He touched them lightly.

“Would you like to step outside with me?” he offered. “I have some questions about Christopher, if you’d be willing to answer them.”

Anthony swiped at his eyes with the back of his hand. “Yes, sir,” he said. He nodded politely to the doctor before turning and hurrying out of the deadhouse.

Hugh glanced at Dr. Ledbetter. “I’ll be back after I talk to him.” Dr. Ledbetter bobbed his head in acknowledgement, too busy writing on a piece of paper to look up. Hugh followed Anthony outside. The area was protected by a stone wall, with several benches placed around the green yard. Hugh gestured to one of them. “Shall we sit?”

Anthony nodded and sank onto one, scrubbing at his nose with the cuff of his sleeve. Hugh reached into his pocket and pulled out a handkerchief, handing it to the young man. Anthony took it in silent appreciation, wiping at his eyes and nose before offering the handkerchief back. Hugh shook his head. “It’s all right, in case you need it again. What can you tell me about Christopher?”

“He was a good soul,” Anthony said, scuffing his toe into the ground underneath them. “Kinda brash sometimes, but nothin’ that would make someone wanna hurt him.”

“How old was he?”

“Twenty-four, sir.”

Hugh nodded. Only two years older than himself, a young man cut down in the prime of his life. “What did he do for work?”

Anthony’s cheeks suddenly went pink, and he ducked his head. “Uh... He were a laborer.”

“What sort of laborer?”

“Anythin’ that needed laboring, sir.”

Hugh watched the boy’s face go an even darker shade of crimson. He had a sneaking suspicion that Anthony was keeping something from him. “We found him with his pants around his ankles. Do you know why that might be?”

Anthony hesitated, and Hugh felt his breath catch in his throat. He knew that look. He felt it sometimes inside of himself when he felt eyes on him, studying him, judging him. “Was he... a prostitute?” he asked, his voice dropping a little.

“Um...” Anthony ducked his head.

Hugh glanced around to make sure they were truly alone out there before he gently reached out a hand and placed it on Anthony’s bony wrist. “If that is the case, I won’t tell anyone,” he said softly.

Anthony glanced down in surprise at the hand touching his wrist before looking up into Hugh’s brown eyes. “Uh... Yes, sir, he was.”

Hugh gave him a compassionate smile. “Thank you. Do you know if he was meeting a particular client last night?”

Anthony shook his head. “No, sir. Sometimes we-” He suddenly flushed, clamping his lips together, seeming to realize he had just implicated himself as well. Hugh gave his wrist an encouraging squeeze.

“It’s all right,” he said. Since the attacks on prostitutes by Jack the Ripper, there had been a number of raids on brothels around London, and female prostitutes were punished with hefty fines or jail time. He imagined it was not much different,

probably worse, even, for male ones. “I’m not going to arrest you or out you. I only want to know the truth so I can help. I want to find out what happened to him and bring his killer to justice.”

Anthony looked skeptical for a moment. Hugh glanced down at where his hand still rested lightly on Anthony’s wrist, hoping to convey without words that he understood the boy’s proclivities, because they shared them. Anthony looked down at Hugh’s hand, then lifted his light blue eyes back to Hugh’s face. He must have understood what Hugh was trying to convey, because he swallowed hard and nodded. “Thank you, sir. Um, sometimes we go out to meet customers while some of us stay back at the brothel.”

“Did you and Christopher work together at the same place?”

“Yes, sir,” Anthony said with a bob of his dark head.

“Where is it?”

“It’s in the upstairs of The Bull and Parasol. Mr. Galloway, he’s the owner.”

Hugh nodded, filing that information away for later. “And did Christopher go out to meet a customer?”

“Not specific, but he did go out to the street,” Anthony said. “Usually them in the street is supposed to bring them back to the brothel. Get ‘em to buy drinks and dances with the boys and the like. But if the bloke jus’ wants a quick fuck, they might just take the money and do it in an alley or something.”

“What sort of clientele do you usually encounter on the street?” Hugh asked.

“All kinds,” Anthony said. “Some gen’lemen, some real classy, but a lot of ‘em are

just normal people. Sailors, fac'try workers, coppers.”

“Coppers? You mean, police officers?” Hugh asked in surprise, and Anthony flushed again.

“A few, sir.”

“While they were in their uniforms?”

“Yes, sir.”

Well, that was interesting. Hugh had never considered having a tumble with a street lad while he was working, and especially not in uniform. Any time he had slipped out to a secretive location to indulge his fancies, he had worn clothes that would not give away who or what he was. “What time last night did Christopher go out?”

“It must’ve been half twelve or so,” Anthony said thoughtfully. “He’d already brought back one gen’leman earlier in the evening.”

The watch had been summoned at around 2:30 am. Two hours from Christopher leaving the brothel to when he ended up dead in an alley. Who had he met in that time? Obviously not someone who wanted to go back to the brothel, so someone looking for a ‘quick fuck’ in the alley and then to be on his way? Unfortunately, that could be anyone of any class.

“What happened to the man he brought back earlier in the evening?”

“Oh, he had a few rounds, played some cards with a few’a the fellas. And then he had a shag, but not with Christopher. After that, I think he left.”

“Was he someone you knew?”



Anthony shook his head. “No, not that I recognized. But I don’t think he did anything to Christopher, he seemed like a nice, quiet bloke.”

Hugh hummed thoughtfully. “Do you have any regulars that you think could do something like this?”

Anthony frowned and looked thoughtful for a minute. “There’s a few blokes, mostly the richer ones, who seem to think they can get away with whatever they want. But I don’t think they’d do something like that. Killin’ is different than hurtin’.”

“Do you have customers who hurt you?” Hugh asked with a dark frown.

“Comes with the territory,” Anthony said with a shrug. “But Mr. Galloway is pretty good about keepin’ them away from us unless they pays extra. And he’s got a few boys who like that sort of thing, or at least, can tolerate it better. He tries to do right by us, Mr. Galloway does.”

Hugh wanted to have to have a word with this Mr. Galloway, but perhaps not in his official capacity as Metropolitan Police. He wondered if Anthony could get into trouble if it was known that he was telling the police about The Bull and Parasol.

“Do you know if Christopher had any family that we need to alert?”

Anthony looked a bit sad. “No, sir. Most of the boys under Mr. Galloway are on their own in this world, y’know? Family dead, or might as well be, treatin’ them like shit after they find out about them. You know...” He waved his hand vaguely.

“You mean, their families throw them out if they find out their proclivities towards men.”

“Yes, sir,” Anthony said with a small nod. “It ain’t an uncommon story for those of

us in the brothel.”

“How many young men work in the brothel with you?” Hugh asked.

Anthony scrunched up his face. “It changes, but around a dozen or so. Some move on elsewhere or are only there to make a bit of money before they shove off.”

“What about you?”

“Me? Oh no, sir, I been with Mr. Galloway since I were fifteen.”

“And how old are you now?”

“Nineteen, sir.”

Hugh didn’t like that Anthony had been so young when he had first submitted himself for prostitution. But life was hard on London’s streets; he saw it all too often. “Does Mr. Galloway take good care of you?”

Anthony nodded. “Yes, sir. He might raise his voice nowan’ again, but he ain’t much for the beatin’s or the lashin’s. He wants his boys to be able to work. He’s one of the good ones.”

Not beating or lashing his prostitutes seemed like a very low bar to be considered a ‘good one,’ Hugh thought, but he supposed that in the rough life that was London’s poor, it was better than could be expected.

“How many other brothels with... with male courtesans are there?” Hugh asked.

Anthony’s freckled nose wrinkled worriedly. “I... I probably shouldn’t say, sir,” he said softly. “No offense, but you is police, after all.”

Hugh couldn't fault the boy for not wanting to snitch on his friends, especially if it could potentially lead to raids on the brothels. "I understand."

Hugh knew that prostitution was a lucrative business for those who had very little left to sell, but it still baffled him that so many people, especially young men, had to turn to selling sexual favors to provide for themselves. It seemed that the government could not be bothered to handle the poor and needy its system created, only hang them if they committed a crime.

Anthony looked a little uneasy. "You think that whoever killed Christopher might do it again?"

"I don't know," Hugh said, feeling guilty that he could not give Anthony a better answer, one that might help assuage his mind. "Hopefully not. But my job is to find whoever is responsible and bring them to face justice."

Anthony nodded, rising to his feet. "My room is at The Bull and Parasol on Lime Row, sir, if you need to find me again."

Hugh stood as well, holding out his hand to Anthony to shake. "Thank you. I will do my best to find who did this to your friend and see that he is punished for his misdeeds."

Anthony gave him a small, hopeful smile before he turned and left, heading out one of the side gates onto the bustling London streets.

Hugh watched him go. How could a boy so young, barely into adulthood, have had to live in such a manner for years already? His own situation might not have been any better though, he realized. Often it was simply a matter of luck. He had been lucky enough to be born to parents that could afford to clothe and feed him, a family that had wanted him. Parents that hadn't known about his proclivities towards other men.

And now his mother and father were gone, only his two sisters around, both of whom were married, both of whom were supportive of him even if they did not completely understand his unusual attractions. There but for the grace of God go I, he thought to himself.

He turned back to the morgue, taking a deep breath of fresh air before heading inside the cool, dimly lit room. Dr. Ledbetter had pulled the sheet off of Christopher O'Malley, and the young man now lay exposed on the table, nude, his insides laid bare for the world to see.

"Poor young fellow," Dr. Ledbetter said, barely glancing up at Hugh. "Hardly a drop of blood left in him. It would have pumped out of him in a matter of moments."

"Do you think he suffered?" Hugh asked softly.

"No," Dr. Ledbetter said with a shake of his graying chestnut head. "He has no defensive wounds, no fresh bruises or signs of a struggle. I think he was surprised by the attack from behind, probably did not even see it coming."

"Do you think he was in the midst of a... passionate encounter when it happened?"

Dr. Ledbetter nodded. "I do. There were traces of seminal fluid as well as oil at his rectum. I'd say the killer, whoever it was, either was whoever was en flagrante with him, or someone who surprised them both."

"How exactly did he die?"

"Exsanguination. He lost too much blood in a short period of time. Not surprising, considering these wounds."

"What caused those?" Hugh asked.

“I wish I knew,” Dr. Ledbetter said with a frown.

The ferocity of this murder did give Hugh pause. Even in the Metropolitan Police, where encountering death was a common occurrence, this was not normal. It was not a gunshot or a stab wound or a strangulation. He reached out to trace his fingertips in the air over one of the rips in Christopher’s skin, as if trying to sense what had made them. “This doesn’t look like a knife.”

Dr. Ledbetter nodded slowly. “If I had to guess, I’d say they were claw marks. From something rather large.”

“Like what?” Hugh asked with a frown.

“I’m not sure. Something like a bear. But there is one thing about it that bothers me.”

“What is that?” Hugh asked.

Dr. Ledbetter pointed to the five lines of ripped flesh. “Bears don’t have thumbs.”

Hugh was left to contemplate Dr. Ledbetter’s words as he went about his late afternoon and evening rounds. Surely a large creature would be spotted running around the streets. A bear, or a wolf, or some other creature capable of killing a fully grown man with one swipe. But there were no reports that had come in, no concerned citizens or panicked zookeepers. And the words echoed in his mind. Bears don’t have thumbs. Something with five fingers, including a thumb, had struck down Christopher O’Malley and then vanished without a trace. Surely someone or something with blood all over it would be noticed on the streets in the dead of night by someone.

The streets were not very quiet as darkness descended on London. The gas streetlamps were lit, casting a yellow-hued glow over the cobblestones that were

flecked with dirt and horse droppings and various other substances. Had Christopher O'Malley's blood been cleared away? Had it flowed down the cobbles, so small that it could not be seen, and he was walking on it even now with his shined uniform boots? How many others had died on these streets, their blood soaking into the stone like the foundation of the city?

Something prickled at the back of his neck. Hugh glanced up, feeling like there were eyes upon him again, as he had felt earlier in the day. He scanned the crowded streets of straggling people making their way home or to work, though he saw no one focused on him. But the feeling of being watched did not dissipate. The hair on the back of his neck stood tall, and his stomach felt like there was a family of butterflies trying to break free from inside of it. He looked around again, but he could see no one in the shadows, no one lurking around a corner, no one peering at him from under a hat or around a newspaper.

He swerved around a baker's cart that was nearly empty from the day. A few small pastries sat in their brown paper wrapping. He held up his hand and nodded to the man pushing the cart. "I'll take those," he said, pulling out a few coins.

The man took them and handed him the remaining crumbly pastries. "Apple hand pies, sir, made 'em meself this morning. Enjoy."

"Thank you," Hugh said, taking a bite of one. It was a little stale after sitting all day, but the apple filling was sweet and tangy with the spiced fruit, and he hungrily devoured all of them. Apples were one of the few fruits that were easy to get year-round in London, with so many orchards and farms nearby and the ability of apples to be packed to withstand the cold winter months.

The sense of eyes on him had not abated, and Hugh cast about again with no luck. Perhaps he was simply paranoid now that he was looking for a violent killer on the dark streets of London. A little suspicion was probably good as a constable; it kept

him on his toes and alert in case of danger.

After a few minutes, the feeling subsided, and Hugh found himself back to examining the passersby as he nibbled on the pies. Who could have killed Christopher, a young, fit man in the prime of life, without so much as a struggle? Who had that kind of strength? That kind of fury? That kind of vile disposition? And, just as important, why had they killed him? Christopher had had no weapons on him, and surely if the motive had been robbery, a young man with his pants around his ankles was hardly a threat. And what had become of the person, likely a man, that he had been coupling with? Could that be the person who killed Christopher? But again, Hugh was struck with why. It didn't seem like the young man had been struggling or resisting. But even if he had been, why strike him dead, when a hand gripping his throat or the back of his neck could have rendered him docile in a matter of moments? And while Christopher was a young man, he wasn't that much bigger than Hugh himself, who was already on the smaller side when it came to men on the police force.

The gas lamps glowed in the streets now, the sun having dipped behind the many houses and shops, casting long, gloomy shadows over the streets. Very soon, the world would be in full darkness, with only the streetlamps and the occasional glow of a candle in a window to illuminate the cobbled streets once more. London was a spooky place at night, even without the ever-present threat of violence or danger. Shadows became ghouls, dripping water became footsteps, every echo was a monstrous growl.

There was a soft rustling sound somewhere above his head. Hugh jumped, wondering if someone had opened a window, but no heads peered out from open tenement windows. But above him, on the rooftop of the building, something moved, the glint of lamplight catching something light-colored. Hugh squinted, trying to make out what it was. It seemed to be a figure, but there was something odd about the shape of the head. But whomever it was, was cast in shadow. And then, as suddenly as he had seen it, it was gone.

Was someone watching him? Were those the eyes he had felt earlier? Rooftops were popular hangout places for people; it was possible that someone had simply been leaning over the roof's edge to look below, and the living shadows had created a fantastical shape around them. Hugh stared at the spot, but no figure reappeared. He felt a little unsettled as he continued on his patrol route. The sun had completely vanished below the horizon now, the streets plunged into cool, damp darkness. He passed many people as he walked, looking into each face, as if he could see the killer of Christopher O'Malley in their eyes, but he found nothing.

Jack

It had taken some searching, but this was the one, he just knew it. The burning inside of him settled as he watched the young police constable walk down the darkening London streets. He was beautiful. It seemed like a waste for such a lovely creature to be tucked away in darkness every night. Darkness was where monsters lurked. He had watched the constable check the young man last night and seen the anguish that had overtaken him at the life gone from someone so near his own age. Hugh had a soft heart. Soft hearts could be easily broken.

Soon, we'll be together , he thought to himself as he ducked out of sight over the edge of the rooftop. He just had to wait for the right moment to reveal himself.



### Chapter three

S PRING-HEELED JACK SIGHTED ON LONDON STREETS declared the newspaper that Hugh picked up as he went about his shopping later that day for his day off. He puzzled over that for a moment. He had heard of Spring-Heeled Jack. The first records about him had been over fifty years ago, in 1837, with various sightings over the years in different areas of the country. He paid his coin and picked up a copy of the paper to read it. ‘Demonic spectre has remained unseen for a number of years, but several recent sightings have been verified by multiple individuals in the greater North Western London area.’

There was an artist’s sketch on the front of what Hugh assumed was meant to be Spring-Heeled Jack. A figure, dressed in a gentleman’s style coat and breeches, with a long, black cape, looked human enough. But the face was oddly sharp and angular, the eyes blazing even in the pencil sketch. And from the forehead of the mysterious creature sprouted two large horns, as if Spring-Heeled Jack were a manifestation of the devil himself. Hugh studied the drawing intently. He thought that Jack was meant to look monstrous and evil, and he was certain he would not want to meet Spring-Heeled Jack in a dark alley while on patrol. But there was something about him that wasn’t quite as demonic as Hugh thought the papers meant him to be. He couldn’t say what, and he skimmed the article instead, though he stopped short when he read the description.

‘The spectre takes the guise of a tall, pale man, with eyes that resemble wheels of fire. His cloak gives the impression of a large bat or bird of prey, made all the more spectacular by the large, iron claws the miscreant has on the tips of his fingers.’

The vision of the five deep ribs in Christopher's flesh came to Hugh's mind. Spring-Heeled Jack, suddenly spotted in London after an absence, and then a young man turns up with slashes as if from a great clawed hand. Hugh frowned thoughtfully at the drawing again. It could just be a coincidence, of course. It was convenient to attribute unnatural sightings and attacks to a supernatural creature so those responsible did not have to be found and brought to justice. There were enough monsters with human faces walking the streets of London without adding a demonic, horned beast to their ranks. But that didn't mean that there wasn't someone masquerading as a spectre to hide their identity either. Hadn't people fifty-odd years ago thought Spring-Heeled Jack to be an Irish Marquess in disguise or something like that?

Further down the page was information about the death of Christopher O'Malley, who was listed as a 'rent boy' which Hugh knew was a tasteful way of saying that the young man was a prostitute. The paper speculated that Christopher might have been a victim of Spring-Heeled Jack due to the nature of the slices across his flesh. Reporters had gotten wind of that detail quickly. But beyond that, there was very little about the murdered young man. Just one more dead body in the bloody gutters of London.

He was passing the local cemetery, and Hugh felt the heavy sensation of eyes watching him once again. He lifted his head from the paper, scanning the area intently, first the street, then the gravestones beyond the wrought-iron fence that demarcated the cemetery from the street. There were many people about, as it was a fine October day, but no one seemed to be giving him much heed. He lifted his head to even look at the rooftops of the buildings nearby and the mausoleums in the cemetery but found nothing out of the ordinary. He felt the prickle on his skin though, and he hurried past the cemetery and turned down another street. He was not one to be spooked by the idea of ghosts and other beasties from beyond the grave; he had never met a ghost, or any other such creature. But that did not mean that he knew all there was to know about their existence.

The feeling of eyes on him once more abated, and Hugh started to crumple up the newspaper to throw it in a bin. But his hand caught as he looked at the picture of the mysterious Spring-Heeled Jack, and he instead folded up the paper under his arm and took it back home with him.

When he returned to The Yard the next evening, there had been no new developments on Christopher O'Malley's case. Dr. Ledbetter's autopsy had revealed nothing more that could help determine who the killer was, and the body had been taken away to be buried in one of the local potters' fields. That left Hugh with an ache inside of him. The young man had had no one to turn to, no one who could pay for a proper funeral and a plot where he might rest in peace. If he could have afforded it himself, he might have done it. But, as it was, all he could do was make a silent promise that he would find whoever killed Christopher and bring him to justice.

He was out on patrol that night when he heard a scream from nearby. His mind instantly filled with images of Christopher's ruined body and the puddle of blood on the sidewalk as he ran towards the sound. A woman in a dark dress stood, staring up at the rooftops overhead. Several other people were approaching her as well, as they must have heard her scream. "Ma'am?" he asked.

She turned to him, her face pale in the lights from the streetlamps. "It was him! Spring-Heeled Jack!" She pointed towards the rooftop. Hugh craned his head back, but there was nothing that he could see on top of the building.

"What happened?" he asked.

She looked frantically around. "He... he was standing on that railing." She pointed to one of the fire escapes above her head. "When I screamed, he climbed up the rails faster than a monkey, and then he was on the roof and gone."

"How do you know it was Spring-Heeled Jack?" Hugh asked. The small crowd was

looking cautiously about, as if Jack might suddenly land in their midst.

“He looked like his picture in the paper,” the woman said, clutching at her breast. “A great black cape, horns like the devil, and those eyes. Like a raging inferno inside of them.”

“Witchcraft,” muttered someone in the crowd, and Hugh let out a huff.

“Come now, ladies and gentlemen. This is 1890. Witches certainly don’t leap around fire escapes in London.” He gave the people a reassuring smile. “I’m sure that whomever you saw was probably a burglar, ma’am, and your scream scared him off.”

The woman looked uncertain, but a man in a bowler hat stepped up and offered her his elbow. “Come along, Minnie, let me escort you home.” She nodded and took the man’s arm. Her departure seemed to break the hold on the group, and they set about their business. Hugh watched them all go. He lifted his eyes to the rooftop once more and thought that he might have seen a shadow move there in the darkness that the streetlights did not reach, but then it was gone again, and he was alone once more. Hugh circled the block several more times on patrol, keeping an eye out in case someone was trying to break in somewhere, but the rest of the night held no spooks or spectres amidst the quiet streets.

Hugh woke up and prepared for work the next afternoon with a feeling inside of him that something important was going to happen. He didn’t know what, or if it would be good or bad. But he had learned to trust his gut in his time as a constable. He was on extra high alert as he walked his patrol in the early night gloom. The fog was particularly thick tonight, a real peasouper.

He heard a soft sound off to his left. Nothing unusual, just a slight rustle. Probably just an alley cat, but something itched inside of his brain and told him that he should go look. He stepped off the sidewalk and into the alley, made all the darker by the air

that felt like he could cut it with a knife.

Something was crouched in the dimness. Something larger than an alley cat. A dark silhouette with hunched shoulders. It took Hugh a moment to realize why the shape looked so odd before it hit him. There were horns protruding up and out from the form's head. His heart skipped a beat.

The figure turned to him, and even through the darkness, Hugh could see the bright red of the creature's eyes, as if two bonfires blazed inside of them. The glow cut through the fog as the figure stood up from where it had been kneeling. Hugh realized with more than a little panic that the creature, even without the horns, was almost a foot taller than he was. He couldn't see distinctly in the dim light, but he could see too that the shoulders were very broad.

The shape took a step closer to him, and then another, and Hugh felt as if his feet had grown roots, tethering him in place. He could see more clearly now; the figure was indeed very muscular. He wore black trousers and boots on his bottom half, but his top half was covered only with a scandalously tight white oilcloth that seemed to cling to him in all the right places. He had a black cape around his shoulders that flowed like water in the soft breeze as he moved.

Now that he could see, Hugh realized that what he had thought to be a mask with horns attached was indeed mask-shaped on the man's upper face, but he had never seen one that blended so seamlessly. It folded into the creature's sharp cheeks and up over his forehead into slick, black hair. The mask was bone white, as if the man's face were covered by his own skull, though his dark eyebrows stood out in stark contrast on it. And his eyes held that strange, firelight blaze in them. He was tall and lean, and Hugh couldn't stop a soft inhale. The creature... man... whatever he was, was beautiful. Ethereal and haunting and more than a little frightening. And there was only one person he could be. "Y... You're Spring-Heeled Jack," Hugh said, his voice oddly high and nervous.

The horned man laughed, spreading his arms wide and bowing low, like an actor at the end of a Shakespearean drama. “At your service.” He said the words with much bravado and pomp, upon a stage only he could see. His voice was low and lyrical, and Hugh could feel it in the marrow of his bones, like a plucked string on a cello.

Hugh stared at the horned man for a moment before remembering that Spring-Heeled Jack had been crouched over something when he arrived. He shifted to look behind Jack. In the dimness, it was hard to see, but something was sprawled on the ground in a dark pool.

“Most unfortunate,” Jack said, turning his head to follow Hugh’s gaze to what he assumed must be a human. It was too large to be a cat or dog. He stepped aside for Hugh to see better. Despite his better judgement of approaching Spring-Heeled Jack, Hugh slipped past him, pressing himself against the brick wall as he did to keep as far away from Jack, until he could see clearly.

It was another young man, similar in age to Christopher O’Malley. Close in age to Hugh. His hair was red, made darker by the clumps of blood and other things that clung to it. His eyes were brown and stared at nothing, jaw slack. His skin was fair and his cheeks slim. He had long lashes, with a large freckle under his right eye. His trousers were around his ankles, and his shirt and vest had been ripped open to expose his chest underneath. His head was barely attached to his body by his spine, the young man’s throat nothing but a gaping mass of blood and meat. He didn’t have to check for a pulse to know that this boy was no longer amongst the living.

“You killed him.” The words left his throat before he thought about them, turning to Spring-Heeled Jack, who stood watching him.

“I did not!” Jack sounded indignant.

“You were leaning over him just now,” Hugh said pointedly.

“Just because that is where you found me does not mean that I am responsible for his death,” Jack said. He held up one of his hands in what was probably meant to be a reassuring gesture. Hugh realized that at the tip of each finger was a sharp, iron claw; and Jack’s hand was covered in blood.

Bears don’t have thumbs. The words rang in Hugh’s ears. But Spring-Heeled Jack does. He took an involuntary step back from those claws, wondering if he was about to join this anonymous young man in a pool of blood in a stinking alley.

Jack watched him step back, then glanced at his hand. “Oh, fife and fiddlesticks, I forgot about these things.” He put the hand behind his back and gave Hugh a smile that in any other situation might have been charming. “Please do forgive me.”

Jack was turning out to be the politest murderer Hugh had ever met. “Why did you kill him?”

“I already told you, Hugh Danbury, I did not kill him,” Jack replied, his tone light and patient.

Hugh stared at him. “How do you know my name?”

“I know a lot about you,” Jack said with another dashing smile.

Well, that wasn’t unsettling or anything... Hugh was torn between finding out why this strange apparition knew his name and doing his duty. Duty won out. “Spring-Heeled Jack, or whatever your real name is, you are under arrest under suspicion of murder.”

Jack let out a heavy sigh. “Oh dear, we are really not off to a good start, are we?”

Hugh wondered if he would be able to arrest Jack on his own. Somehow, he doubted

it. He grabbed his police whistle and blew a long, sharp blast with it that echoed off the building walls. Jack flinched, his hands flying up to his ears. “Purgatory’s penguins, that is incredibly annoying,” he said.

Hugh glared. “Get down on your knees and put your hands behind your head.”

“Why, Hugh, darling, we’ve only just met!” Jack said, giving him a wink. “Isn’t it customary to at least offer to take you for a drink first?”

Hugh felt his cheeks go red. Sometimes it was hard to determine if a salacious remark was made in seriousness when one met a new potential partner and was trying to decide if making a move would result in a punch in the face or worse. But there was no mistaking that one. The musical rumble of words went down his spine like a cold raindrop and settled low in his belly. He reached for his truncheon at his side to distract himself from focusing on the tease. He did not want to get into a scuffle with a horned man who was so much taller and broader than him, but he might not have a choice. “I said, put your hands behi-” A whistle blast answering his own sounded from what sounded like less than two blocks away, cutting off his words. At least reinforcements were coming.

Jack sighed. “I do apologize, this is not how I intended for us to meet, and I’m afraid this situation is too fraught. But don’t worry. I’ll be watching you.”

And then Jack had leaped up, planting his heels against the wall of the brick building to push off of it, and he soared up five stories over Hugh’s head to the rooftop and vanished over it. Hugh was left gaping at where he had been only seconds earlier, the man suddenly gone in a snap of black cape.

He was still staring when Constable Michaels came running to the mouth of the alley. “Who’s there? Identify yourself!” he barked.



“It’s Constable Danbury,” Hugh said, shaking himself from his stupor. “I’ve found another body.”

“Bloody hell,” Constable Michaels said, his lantern lifting to cut through the fog a little, and Hugh held up a hand to shield his eyes. Michaels approached him, looking at the bedraggled corpse on the ground. “Well, that ain’t from no footpad.”

Hugh shook his head. “Definitely not a robbery,” he agreed. He debated if he should tell Michaels about Spring-Heeled Jack, but he realized that the words sounded mad even in his own head. He wasn’t even sure he believed them himself. He cast another glance up at the rooftop, but there was no sign of movement anywhere, other than a few windows open and heads sticking out to observe the carnage in the alley.

Michaels sighed. “Well, another one for the backyard butchers. I’ll go get the mariah.”

Hugh wrote up his report for Sergeant Reardon without including anything about Spring-Heeled Jack, just mentioning that he had heard a suspicious noise, went to investigate, and found the dead body with no one else around. He had a feeling that Reardon would not take kindly to him blaming a strange, spectral figure that only a handful of people had seen. The man already disliked him enough.

As he walked home in the wee morning hours before the sun had even started to show itself on the horizon, he wondered about Jack’s parting words. “Don’t worry. I’ll be watching you.” The words sent a shiver down his back. Who was this peculiar man who knew his name and could leap five-story buildings like hopping over a mud puddle? Was that the mysterious presence he had felt watching him the last few days and nights? And, if so, why? Why was Spring-Heeled Jack, or whoever he actually was, watching him? And not only watching, but following him? Did Jack know where he lived too? That thought nearly sent him running, but he kept his head high and tried to look calm as he walked, his fingers grasping his truncheon lightly in the

event he needed to defend himself. But he reached his rooms without any interruption or feeling of unease. He pulled the curtains of his bedroom window closed to block out the daylight that would soon be creeping in before he slid into his bed.

He slept, and he dreamed of the handsome, dark-haired man with horns following him into an alley and pushing him against the wall, their bodies pressed together in all the right places. The spectre's body was hot and firm, holding him with ease. The bulge in his trousers pressed between Hugh's legs, rubbing against his own. Spring-Heeled Jack leaned in, and his lips met Hugh's mouth in a searing kiss. His hand, now suddenly devoid of blood and claws, slid down between them to squeeze at his prick inside his trousers, and Hugh couldn't hold back a gasp. Jack's mouth trailed across his jaw to his neck, planting a row of kisses down it as his hand stroked over his police uniform, squeezing and rubbing at his need with a desperate urgency. His hips bucked into the touch as Jack's tongue slid over his neck, up to his ear, giving the lobe a nip before soothing it with his tongue. He moaned, holding onto Jack's broad shoulders as the hand continued to move up and down his length, still trapped inside of his blue constable uniform. His pleasure was building quickly, each stroke bringing him closer and closer to sweet bliss. Jack pulled back and gave him a saucy wink just as Hugh spilled himself inside of his pants, Jack's large, warm hand continuing to massage and caress him through the fabric...

He woke up in a sticky mess. Get ahold of yourself, Hugh chided as he cleaned up himself and his sheets. You have a job to do. But that didn't make the image of Jack winking at him any less prominent in his mind.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:16 pm*

### Chapter four

That afternoon, Hugh went out to the morgue behind Scotland Yard. “Just got finished with that boy you found,” Dr. Ledbetter said as he walked in.

“Do we have an identification?” Hugh asked.

Ledbetter shook his head. “Not yet, I’ll let you know if we do.”

“What can you tell me about him then?” Hugh said.

Ledbetter frowned and tapped the end of his pen against his lips. “Late teens or early twenties. Fluid around the rectum, but none on his penis.”

“So, he was probably in a tryst with someone,” Hugh said.

Ledbetter nodded. “Very likely.”

“Similar to Christopher O’Malley.”

Ledbetter hummed a bit. “Similar, yes. Though this young man wasn’t slashed.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, the marks on his throat, or what’s left of it, anyway, are not from claws or a knife. They’re teeth marks.”

“Teeth marks?” Hugh repeated.

Ledbetter nodded again. “Yes. Pretty sharp ones too.”

“So, not human teeth?” Hugh asked with a frown. He couldn’t remember if Spring-Heeled Jack had regular-looking teeth or not, despite his charming smile. It irked him that he couldn’t remember a detail like that.

Ledbetter frowned. “Well, let me show you.” He led Hugh over to one of the far tables, folding the sheet down from the red-haired boy’s face to below his armpits. His brown eyes were still slightly open, staring vacantly at nothing, like sunken glass marbles. “I couldn’t honestly say what made these teeth marks.” He used his pen to point to several holes and indentations in the skin. “The sharpness of them would suggest a carnivorous animal. But you see the shape here?” He swirled his pen in the air above a half-moon of markings. “Animals tend to have more elongated snouts and jaws. Humans are much more snub-nosed than most animals, so our bites are circular. Bites from, say, a large dog, would be more conical.”

Hugh stared at the tattered skin. “So, a human with very sharp teeth made these marks?”

Dr. Ledbetter shrugged. “If I had to guess, that’s what I’d think.”

“Can humans have teeth that sharp and do that much damage?” Hugh asked.

Dr. Ledbetter tapped his pen against his lips again. “That’s what troubles me about it. I’ve seen human bite marks before. I’ve even seen a man take a bite out of another’s neck before. Our necks are surprisingly vulnerable, considering they balance our brains, but there are still a lot of bones, tendons, and tissue to get through. It’s not impossible to do this kind of damage, but it would be difficult. And messy.”

“How messy?” Hugh asked curiously.

Dr. Ledbetter pointed to a spot. “The carotid artery runs through the neck on both sides, as well as a number of smaller veins. There would be a substantial amount of blood coming out of this wound, including some arterial spray, which can travel a fair distance while the heart is still pumping. And the young man was facing his killer when he was bitten. So, your murderer would have quite a bit of blood on him.”

Hugh thought back to Spring-Heeled Jack in the alley. His clothes had been pristine; his white oilcloth and the strange bone-white of his face and horns had been clean too. The only blood on him was on his hand; Hugh had gotten similar stains on his own hand when he moved Christopher O’Malley’s body to check him for signs of life. Had Jack really been telling the truth, that he did not kill the young man?

“Thank you,” he said, giving the older man a grateful nod. “Please let me if you get a positive identification from the detectives.”

“Will do,” Ledbetter said, giving him a salute with his pen before he went back to make some more notes.

Hugh walked through the cool, autumn air from the morgue to the offices. No new information about Christopher O’Malley had landed on his desk, and Hugh was beginning to wonder if the investigation was going anywhere. It had been several days, and yet there was nothing. He steeled his nerves and approached Reardon’s desk. “Sir? I haven’t received any information about the O’Malley case.”

Reardon looked up with his beady ferret-eyes at him and laughed raucously.

“A dead boy whore is hardly a concern for the Metropolitan Police, Danbury.”

Hugh frowned, his lips tightening at the words. “Sir. Christopher O’Malley was

murdered. That young man from last night was killed in a similar manner. Finding their killer should be a priority for the police.”

“They probably cheated their johns and got slashed for the trouble,” Reardon said with a shrug. “Happens with that lot all the time.”

“What do you mean, that lot?” Hugh asked, feeling a pit in his stomach.

Reardon sighed, the air ruffling his gray muttonchops a little. “Whores, without even the decency to have proper fannies to fuck.”

“With all due respect, sir,” Hugh said, the respect barely there. “People are not cattle for slaughter. They are human beings. We have a duty to find who did this and bring them to justice.”

Reardon laughed loudly again. “Caring so much for the nancy boys, eh, Danbury? Any particular reason?”

Hugh’s hand curled into a fist, and he exhaled sharply. Hitting his sergeant was not going to help his case. “Sir. Please.”

“I’ll tell you what,” Reardon said with a small smirk. “These mollies mean so much to you, you can investigate it yourself. In fact, these cases can be your sole responsibility. You find out who killed those boy whores and bring them in to face justice.”

Several of the men around him snickered, and Hugh gritted his teeth. His sergeant was setting him up for failure, of that, he was sure. They did not think he would solve the crimes or find the attacker. “I am not an inspector, sir,” he pointed out.

Reardon shrugged. “Consider this your chance to prove that you’re worth more than

being on patrol. Otherwise, we might just have to re-evaluate your route.”

Hugh could hear the threat loud and clear. Find the killer, or he was going to be demoted to some of the most dangerous areas in all of London, which would either end with him dead, or injured enough to quit the police force. Neither was appealing, especially when all he was doing was ask Reardon to have the detectives do their job to find a murderer. “Yes, sir,” he said, giving the man a thin-lipped smile. “I will find the killer.”

“I’m sure you will.” Reardon might as well have patted his head like a puppy.

Hugh walked away, not letting his fists clench at his side until he had closed himself in the privacy of the privy. He wasn’t an inspector, but if he was the only one who would care about the young men out on London’s streets, then he would do what he had to do to find out what was happening to them.

### Chapter five

The next evening, Hugh dressed in casual clothing rather than his police uniform. He told Reardon he was going to go look for more information about Christopher O'Malley's customers, and he received nothing more than a handwave in acknowledgement. So, with determined steps, he headed out onto the street.

It was still light out, not quite dusk. Hugh found himself glancing up at rooftops as he walked. He wasn't sure what he expected to see. Did he really think Spring-Heeled Jack was there, watching him, following him? What reason did Jack have to follow him anyway? He didn't really like the answer. Two attractive, young men, engaged in sexual trysts with another man, both of them around Hugh's age, had been brutally murdered in the unforgiving darkness. Was Jack targeting him? The man not only could leap impossible heights with ease, but he was bigger and stronger than Hugh by a not insubstantial amount. Hugh's mind wandered back to his dream the other night, with Jack pressing him up against the wall, his hand moving between his legs, those scorching, fire-red eyes...

Stop it! he scolded himself as his prick gave a hopeful jump in his trousers that he hoped hid his growing need. Now was not the time. There would never be an appropriate time to think about the dark-haired apparition that way. He glared at one of the empty rooftops, as if Jack were perched upon it, watching him like a gargoyle on a parapet of Notre Dame. He had a job to do; he couldn't let himself be distracted by spectres that he couldn't even see.

Hugh found his way to The Bull and Parasol, which was a grimy-looking establishment on Lime Row. The front parlor had a bar where several young men



served drinks. Another boy sat playing the piano in the corner and singing a bawdy song that he looked almost too young to understand. Hugh felt his breath catch. The boys ranged from barely teens to around his age, with various skin tones and looks to them, but most of them were dressed in some variation of women's clothing, with corsets, stockings, bloomers, and headpieces. He moved to the bar, hoping that he did not seem too nervous. He had purposely worn his most scuffed up shoes with his plainest clothes so his usual spit-and-polish appearance would not give him away as a police officer, but he still felt like every eye in the room could see that he did not belong there.

The boy at the bar was probably sixteen, with soft, cherubic cheeks. "Evening, mister," he greeted. "What can I get ya?"

"I'm... not sure. I've never been here before," Hugh said, giving him a slight smile. "But I heard about this place from... one of the boys who works here."

"Oh, if you're new, you'll want to talk to Mr. Galloway," the bartender said, nodding his head at a corner of the room. "He'll get you all settled, sir."

"Thank you." Hugh gave the boy another smile before making his way across the room. He tried not to pay too much attention to the boys but did try to note the faces of the men who appeared to be customers. Could one of them have killed Christopher? Most of them seemed to be middle-class like himself.

Mr. Galloway was a large man with an even larger mustache that looked determined to fly off of his face with every breath. He seemed like a jovial man, talking with customers, laughing, slapping backs, but there was a shrewdness in his blue eyes that told Hugh the man was not as congenial as he played. Mr. Galloway was standing in the corner of the room, talking to a handsome, young man with very dark hair and dark eyes, obviously more well-to-do than most of the other customers in the room. The young man's clothes, while simple, were finely cut and tailored. A gentleman of

some kind, Hugh figured.

He felt both men's eyes on him as he approached, and he forced himself to hunch his shoulders just a little. His ramrod-straight back could give him away as an officer as easily as shined shoes might. "Mr. Galloway?" he asked when both of the men remained silent as he came to a halt. "I apologize for the interruption."

"Oh, no, I was just leaving," the gentleman said, putting a gray top hat on his head and giving Mr. Galloway a nod. "Good evening."

"Good evening, Your Grace," Mr. Galloway said, giving the man a slight bow, though it was not obvious with his waist being so large. The man with the top hat gave Hugh a small smile, his dark eyes drifting from Hugh's face, down his body, and back up again, before he strode across the room to leave. Hugh felt like he needed a hot bath and a bar of lye soap.

"Hello, good sir," Mr. Galloway said, drawing his attention back. He gave Hugh's hand a shake, covering it with his other hand as he did. "What brings you into my fine establishment?"

"I heard that you serve a variety of tastes," Hugh said, trying to sound confident, though he was sure he would not be the first young man to sound uncertain about how to ask for what he was looking for here.

"We do indeed, sir," Mr. Galloway said, his dark eyes studying him carefully, and Hugh felt a bit like a rabbit trapped under the gaze of a hound. "Are you looking for a companion to spend a pleasant evening with?"

"I... Yes," Hugh said. He wasn't sure how to ask to talk with the boys to find out if they knew more about Christopher without completely giving himself away. But if he could find Anthony, that would probably be a good starting point.

Mr. Galloway held out one large hand to him. “Angus Galloway.”

Hugh took the hand and shook it lightly. “Hugh.”

Mr. Galloway’s eyes raked over him. “What do you do for a living, Mr. Hugh?”

Hugh swallowed hard, giving a wavery smile. “I’m a bookkeeper, sir, for a pub down on Henry Street,” he said, glad he had decided on that backstory beforehand.

“Are you now?” Mr. Galloway’s hand came up and suddenly grasped Hugh’s chin with his large fingers, tipping his head this way and that to examine it. “You have a fine face, young man. Would you care to change your occupation? I could offer you twice what you make as a bookkeeper.”

“Doing what, sir?” Hugh asked, suddenly not liking where this was going.

Mr. Galloway laughed, a sound that was meant to be light-hearted but sounded to Hugh like the toll of a bell signaling a terrible tragedy. “Why, exactly what you came here to do, I’d wager. My boys are the finest and prettiest in all of London. You would fit right into their ranks.”

Hugh’s stomach curdled. This man who had only just met him was seriously trying to convince him to become one of his whores? “I’m afraid I don’t work well on my knees, sir,” he said, trying to keep his tone light and playful, but he wasn’t sure he succeeded.

“Well, anyone can learn,” Mr. Galloway said. “What do you say, my boy? Perhaps a test run for a night or two? See how much you can make just by lying on your back?”

“Very kind of you, sir,” Hugh said, having to take a deep breath to calm his stomach. “I’ll consider it. But for tonight, I’d rather be a patron.”

Mr. Galloway nodded, his white mustache bobbing. “Very good, very good. My boys are the best in the business, after all. I’m sure if you have questions, they can answer them for you.”

“Do they all work here? Or do you have other locations?” Hugh asked.

“This is our main establishment, but we do private special events for certain individuals.” Mr. Galloway tugged lightly on one end of his mustache. “I do sometimes have lads who come in only for those special events, if you’re looking to be a little more discreet. Pays extremely well.”

“What sort of special events?” Hugh asked, trying to keep his tone casual.

“I’m afraid I can’t say much more than that,” Mr. Galloway said, his eyes twinkling in a way that was meant to be cheery, but Hugh knew the man was watching him like a snake watches an approaching mouse. “But talk to me again if you might be interested. We have one coming up soon.”

Hugh wondered if Anthony knew anything about these ‘special events.’ “I will keep it in mind,” he said, trying to keep his voice from shaking. “I... think I would like to see one of your boys for myself. I mean, that is why I came here, after all.”

“Oh yes, of course,” Mr. Galloway said. He pointed across the room to a boy who was wearing a corset and bloomers, with a peacock feather tucked in his curly, fair hair. He couldn’t have been older than fifteen. “Rose there would take good care of you.”

“I... like them to be a little closer to my age,” Hugh said, giving Mr. Galloway what he hoped was a sheepish smile. “You know how it is, the ol’ boarding school fantasy.”

“Ah, yes, I see,” Mr. Galloway said.

“Maybe... dark hair?” Hugh asked, trying to sound like he was thinking of someone else. “Very Irish-looking, perhaps?”

Mr. Galloway chuckled. “Ah, schoolboy crush, eh, son?”

Hugh laughed and held up his hands. “Yes. Unrequited, unfortunately.”

“Mm, I have just the one,” Mr. Galloway said. He snapped his fingers at the boy named Rose. “Go get Rachel.” The boy nodded and scurried off through the crowd and up the stairs.

“Do all of your boys have female names?” Hugh asked, trying to play it off as curiosity. He had no idea what Anthony’s name might otherwise be.

Mr. Galloway chuckled that dark sound again. “Yes. Helps build the fantasy for some men. Of course, if you prefer something more masculine, we can accommodate that as well.”

Hugh had a vague wonder of what his name would be if he were to take Mr. Galloway up on his offer. Not that he would, of course. Just being near the man was making his skin crawl.

Rose came back through the crowd, and behind him was Anthony. The young man was dressed in a velvet dress with black ruffles that looked like they were in need of a good wash, and it took Hugh a moment to recognize him through the freshly-applied kohl that lined his eyes, accentuating his pale irises and long, dark lashes.

Mr. Galloway turned to Hugh with a cheery grin. “What do you think?”

Anthony gazed back at Hugh, his expression unchanging from the slightly sultry pout he had. If he recognized Hugh, he was doing a good job at hiding it.

“He’s perfect,” Hugh said, giving the man a smile. “I... I’m afraid I’ve never been to a place like this before, sir. What do I do?”

“You can just give the money to me, and then you have him for an hour. You can purchase more time for a bit of a discount if you’d like too.”

“I think an hour should be sufficient,” Hugh said, pulling out several coins from his pocket. Oh, wouldn’t the police department love to find out what he was spending this petty cash on.

Mr. Galloway took the coins and pocketed them. “Take the gentleman upstairs, Rachel.”

“Yes, sir,” Anthony said, giving the large man a nod before turning to Hugh with a polite smile. “Right this way.” He offered Hugh his elbow. Hugh didn’t want to make Anthony uncomfortable, or himself either, but with multiple pairs of eyes watching him, he felt like he didn’t have much choice. So, he took the arm and allowed Anthony to lead him through the crowd and up a set of creaky, wooden stairs.

Anthony led him down a hallway to a room. He pushed open the door to reveal a sparsely furnished room that had not much more to it than a bed, a vanity, and a wardrobe. A few watercolor painting postcards of flowers hung on the wall, the only real sign that anyone had tried to make it their own. Hugh stepped inside as Anthony closed the door. Once it was shut, Anthony let out a breath. “Hello again.”

Hugh gave him a weak smile. “I hope that I haven’t potentially gotten you in trouble.”

Anthony frowned. "Does anyone know you're police?"

"I don't think so," Hugh said. "I'm here undercover."

Anthony glanced over him. "Yeah, you look ordinary enough without that copper getup."

"Thank you," Hugh replied, glancing around the room. "Is this yours?"

Anthony nodded. "Yes, sir."

There was almost nothing here. How could Anthony live like this? "Well, I'm afraid it may not be much of a respite, but I have bought your time for an hour, so please... Make yourself comfortable, I suppose?"

Anthony sat down on the bed, undoing the laces of the corset of his dress before bending down to undo the little black boots he wore as well. There was one chair at the vanity, with a dressing gown draped over it. Hugh held out the dressing gown to Anthony before he perched awkwardly on the edge of the chair, averting his eyes as the boy slid it on to cover his mostly-bare frame. "I did have some more questions that perhaps you could answer now that we're not in as public of a place."

Anthony nodded, sitting down cross-legged on the bed. "All right."

"Is there a particular customer that you think might have wanted to hurt Christopher?"

Anthony hummed thoughtfully. "Not that I can think of. Some fellas think they's tough, but they have to pay extra, and not all of the boys are willing to service them."

"Do you think that Christopher could have met one of these tough customers the

night he died?”

Anthony shook his head. “I mean, I suppose it’s possible, but most guys that like to get rough aren’t as violent as all that. They might like to choke you or use a riding crop on you. They get off on hurting others. But hurtin’, not killin’.”

“Mr. Galloway mentioned ‘special events’ that he sometimes brings in extra lads for?”

“Oh, yes,” Anthony said with a slight frown. “I went to the last one.”

“What sort of event was it?”

“I couldn’t say for sure, sir. We actually were blindfolded in the wagon that brought us there.”

Hugh imagined that would be terrifying. “What happened then?”

“We were taken inside and down a ramp of some sort. Something inclined, anyway, each step down my stomach dropped more.”

“You still couldn’t see?”

“No, sir. It was only after we were inside at the bottom of the ramp that they took the blindfolds off. Said it was because there were very important guests about, and they didn’t want us accidentally seeing their faces or where we were.”

“What did you see around you after the blindfolds were off?”

“Stone,” Anthony said. “Lots of stone with archways and such. It looked like we were underground, cause there were no windows anywhere, and we had gone down.



There were gas lamps on the wall, and some torches and candles too.”

“Who else was there with you?” Hugh asked.

“It was me and five other boys from Mr. Galloway’s, and there were some ladies too. Probably ten or so? Different ages, I hadn’t seen any of them before.”

“Then what?”

“We were all given outfits to change into. Real skimpy things, just fabric draping over the bits, you know? And then, the man who seemed to be in charge, he had us drink something,” Anthony said with a frown. “It tasted like champagne. But soon after I drank it, everything became really fuzzy. I don’t remember much about that night, just flashes.”

“What sort of flashes do you remember?” Hugh asked.

Anthony frowned thoughtfully, rubbing at a little scar on his chin with his thumb. “Lots of bodies moving. Everything was warm and bright. There were people in masks.”

“What kind of masks?” Hugh asked.

“Um... Like the kinds actors wear. With the big noses and colors and feathers.”

“Comedia masks?” Hugh asked, and Anthony shrugged. Hugh gestured for him to go on. “Were you wearing a mask?”

“No, sir. None of us that came in the wagon were. A few people were in plain black masks. Like the ones that handed us out the drinks. I figured they were maybe employees? But then we were taken into other rooms, and the people with the fancy

masks were there.”

Hugh tried to picture what Anthony was talking about. “Did you recognize anyone with the masks?”

“No, sir. To be honest, everything was so fuzzy, I’m surprised I even remember that much.”

“I appreciate that you do. What else can you tell me about it? The people, the location, anything that might help? Did you hear anything?”

“A lot of it was pretty distorted,” Anthony said. “But... I remember the smell.”

“The smell?” Hugh asked curiously.

“Yeah. There was the usual smells like you got in the brothels. You know, sweat and sex and lamps and oils. But there was something else.” Anthony screwed up his face, his icy eyes narrowing and then closing fully. He stuck his thumb in his mouth, chewing on the nail there for a moment. “Apples.”

“Apples?” Hugh asked in surprise.

Anthony nodded. “Yeah. I thought that was strange, that I could smell fresh apples when we were someplace with no windows. But I would get whiffs of apple from some of the people. Not the workers, I don’t think, just the people in the fancy masks.”

“Was it some sort of perfume?” Hugh asked. Apple blossoms were sometimes used by perfumers; perhaps there was a new popular scent making the rounds amongst the gentry?

Anthony shook his head. "I thought that too. But it didn't smell like any perfume I ever smelled before. It was so distinct and clean. When I smelled it, it was the only thing I could smell right then."

"Did you see any apples there?"

"Not that I remember," Anthony said.

"What else happened?"

"I don't honestly know," Anthony said. "Sex, obviously. But I don't know how long or what or anything. I must have fallen asleep, because when I woke up, I was here, in my room. I was naked, but my clothes were on the foot of the bed."

"Do you know what time it was?"

"Maybe early afternoon? A lot of time had passed, at least." Anthony chewed on his thumb nail again. "I don't remember what happened to me, but I probably don't want to. Cause I was pretty banged up."

"What do you mean?" Hugh asked.

Anthony gave a vague wave in the vicinity of his abdomen. "Pretty achy. I know a few of the boys were unable to do ass work for a few days."

"Do you remember anything else about that night?" Hugh asked, trying not to think too hard about what might have happened that would cause that kind of pain for the young men.

"No, sir," Anthony said. "Except... Victoria disappeared that night."

“Victoria?”

“Oh, um... His real name was Alexander. He was one of the boys that worked with us. It seems like he didn’t come back with us, because no one saw him. Mr. Galloway said that one of the people at the party took him.”

“Took him?”

“Yes, sir. Sometimes a client really likes one of us, and he’ll pay to keep us for himself.”

A private whore, probably not with the boys’ permission, and definitely without any rights. Hugh felt his stomach surge at that. Anthony actually sounded slightly excited by the prospect. Perhaps that was what they hoped would happen; someone would take them away from their life of anonymous sex with strangers to live specifically with one man and satisfy his personal desires. He wasn’t sure if that was any better, considering that anyone rich enough to afford their own personal prostitute wouldn’t necessarily take good care of them. But what did he really know about it? Perhaps there were some good men out there who treated their boys with respect and kindness.

“Did you ever hear from Alexander again?”

“No, sir. But we usually don’t once they go live with some fancy toff.”

“Did anyone else go missing that night?”

“Not from here,” Anthony said, thoughtfully. “But I ain’t sure about the ladies either.”

“How often do these kinds of events happen?”

“There’s other sorts of parties all the time,” Anthony said thoughtfully. “At fancy houses, or pubs, or them fancy clubs that the rich folks go to. Have one of those every week or two. But the one like this, I think it only happens once a month? I’ve gone to the last two? Three? Something like that.”

“Do you know how long they’ve been going on?”

Anthony shook his head. “Mr. Galloway keeps pretty shut up about them. Concerns about privacy, I guess.”

“But the one where Alexander disappeared was the most recent?”

Anthony nodded. “Yeah. And that was the one where things got all fuzzy.”

“That’s not a common occurrence?” Hugh asked, wondering how often Mr. Galloway drugged his boys.

Anthony shook his head. “No, sir. Just when we go to this particular place. Usually, we can find out some information about it, but this particular event was really hush-hush.”

“And how long ago was this?”

“Hmm. Two-ish weeks ago?” Anthony said thoughtfully.

Hugh nodded. “Thank you for answering my questions, Anthony. I really hope I can figure out what is happening to keep you and your friends safe.”

“Will you look for Alexander?” Anthony asked hopefully. “I know Mr. Galloway said that he got taken away, but it just don’t feel right.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Hugh said. He suspected that finding a single prostitute in London, especially one that might be under private engagement, would be difficult, but he had to at least try. His mind flitted back to the boy in the morgue. “Does Alexander have red hair?”

Anthony shook his head. “No, he’s got dark brown.”

“Do you know of any other young male prostitutes with red hair that might be missing right now?”

Anthony’s face screwed up thoughtfully. “Not that I know of,” he said finally. “There’s a couple here, but I seen them all tonight.”

“He would have disappeared two nights ago,” Hugh said.

Anthony shook his head. “Nobody from here then, but I’ll ask around for ya.”

“Thank you. Would Mr. Galloway have any reason to want Alexander gone? Or Christopher?”

Anthony shook his head. “No. We make money when we’re alive, I can’t think that he’d let somethin’ happen to us. Unless it was a helluva lot of money.”

Every soul had its price, Hugh supposed. “Has that happened before? Someone got too violent with one of you?”

“Not usually here,” Anthony said. “One scream, and we got lots of people that will come running. But sometimes at special events, if they’re looking for something in particular and had enough money, I suppose anything is possible.”

He rose to his feet. “Thank you for answering my questions. I will do my best to find

out who killed Christopher and bring him to justice.” He had no idea how much he could actually do. He was a patrolman, not an investigator. But he found himself caring about this group of boys he had never met. Boys who had been rejected by their families or run away from home because of who they loved. Forced to sell their bodies to strangers to keep a roof over their heads and food in their stomachs. At least here was safer than out on the streets.

Anthony slid off the bed. “Much appreciated, sir.” His icy eyes narrowed, and he smiled sweetly, closer to the flirty smile he had had downstairs. “You did pay for a full hour. Anything I can do for you while you’re here?”

He hated to admit that he was tempted. Anthony was beautiful, and it had been months since he had had his last encounter in a furtive tumble in the back room of one of the pubs. But he was still a police officer, and he was technically on the clock, investigating two mysterious deaths. He was not going to break that trust with Anthony by not being better than any other corrupt police officer. “Thank you, but no,” he said gently. “I appreciate the offer though.”

Anthony smiled, a genuine smile now, and gave Hugh a gracious nod before opening the bedroom door for him. “Thank you for coming.”

Hugh nodded in return, not wanting to say anything more with the door open and people passing by in the hallways, so he just put on his cap and headed down the stairs. Mr. Galloway waved him over, and Hugh reluctantly moved to the big man’s side.

“How was Rachel?” he asked.

“Oh, um, wonderful,” Hugh said, giving him a polite smile. How was one supposed to talk about something so intimate with a complete stranger? “Thank you.”

“Will you be visiting our establishment again?” Mr. Galloway asked.

Hugh nodded politely. “I very likely will. Thank you, sir.”

Mr. Galloway tipped his head. “Good night.”

“Good night.” Hugh gave the man a last nod, then turned and headed out the door and up again onto the street, taking a deep breath of outside air. The brothel had been so full of perfume and musk and bodies that stepping out into the cool night air of London was actually a relief to his senses. He turned toward Bowery Lane where Christopher had been found. He could try to trace Christopher’s path, at least, and see if anything occurred to him.

There were people about on the streets, though not as many as during the day, and Hugh at first didn’t notice the shadow that darted overhead, keeping pace with him. He was on his usual high alert that he maintained while doing his patrolling, though he forced himself to walk a little more casual, so he looked less like a police officer. The gas streetlamps flickered and cast strange shadows over the cobbles and the mouth of darkening alleyways. He had to admit that London was more than a little sinister in the darkness. It was no wonder that people envisioned ghosts and spooks, along with the usual cutthroats and other vagabonds.

He paused at a corner as a gentleman’s horse-drawn carriage rolled past, the clip-clop of hooves unnaturally loud in the night’s stillness. The few people he could see were all heading about their business, shoulders hunched and heads swiveling to watch for trouble the same way he was. He let his eyes wander over the buildings, searching the windows and rooftops that he could see, but there was nothing that caught his eye. Was Christopher O’Malley a ghost now? Wandering the streets of London, lost, crying for justice for what was done to him, for the life that was so abruptly and viciously snuffed out? Was he perhaps following after Hugh, encouraging him to find the monster who did this? Was he angry that nothing had been done thus far? He had



no idea if spirits were tied to a particular place or if they could go anywhere they chose. Perhaps he was just being paranoid, walking in the footsteps of the murdered young man. Or maybe... He pictured the tall man with the ghostly mask and horns. Jack had said he would be watching him. Was he following him right now, his blazing inferno eyes on him at this very moment?

Was Spring-Heeled Jack keeping an eye on him, to see what he would learn? But that also didn't make sense. Spring-Heeled Jack, with his uncanny ability to leap around and disappear over rooftops, could easily evade police, even if they determined that Jack was the killer. Why would he care if Hugh found evidence that linked him to the crime?

Something glinted at the corner of his vision, and Hugh turned, lifting his head to the rooftop of the nearby tenement building. Was it only his imagination, or was there something there? The gas lamps made it difficult to make out anything their light did not touch. He thought he saw a shadow on the rooftop, crouched there like an animal-shaped stone spout, but when his eyes were finally able to focus on the darkness, the dark shape was gone.

Something hit the ground by his feet with a soft slapping noise. Hugh glanced down in surprise. Something white lay on the ground by his shoe. He bent down to pick it up. It was a single white rose. The stem was not very long, and the petals were still curled up into their protective teardrop shape, not quite bloomed into the graceful curls of a mature rose. He glanced up at the roof above him. Had someone tossed a rose out the window? But there was no one looking out, no vases in any open windows that might have dislodged a bloom. He lifted the flower to his nose, inhaling the distinct scent of roses. Fresh flowers were not common this time of year, with the weather getting so cold. It would have come from one of the hothouses where flowers were carefully cultivated to grow year-round in very controlled situations.

He stared at the roof where the bloom must have come from. He felt like he was

being watched now, but it was not the feeling he got when there was a thief or other troublemaker watching him. Whatever he was sensing didn't feel like it was intent on hurting him. He had no idea why he thought that. He had been alone on his patrol a number of times since he had first felt the strange presence; if Jack, or someone else, had wanted to hurt him or kill him, they easily could have by now.

He continued his walk, and the presence followed him. But whenever he looked up, he saw nothing. He approached the street where Christopher had been found by the butcher. The blood was gone now, having been washed away by time and weather. If he had not seen the young man dead on the ground, the brick wall and stone pavement would not have looked any different from any other patch of ground. There seemed to be nothing special about this place. It was just an ordinary street with an extraordinary murder.

Hugh had never been much of the praying type, but he sent up a silent prayer now to anyone who might be listening that Christopher was at peace. He glanced down at the white rose in his hand. White was so uncommon to see in London, where everything the city touched turned sooty and grimy. Its streets, its people, its buildings, all were covered with a fine layer of filth that would never entirely wash away. But he would do what he could to make the streets as safe as he could for the men and women who were forced to make their homes there. He knelt down on one knee and set the rose against the wall where Christopher had been slumped. "I'm sorry. I'll find who did this to you and bring them to justice." The only reply was a soft brush of wind and the distant clomp of horse hooves on the cobblestones.

### Chapter six

#### S PRING-HEELED JACK SPOTTED AGAIN.

The declaration on the front page of The London Gazette was accompanied by a sketch of a young man running in terror from the cloaked and horned figure of Spring-Heeled Jack who leaped above him with claws outstretched, like a cat about to catch a mouse in the cage of its claws. Claws tipped with spikes, like that of a bear or wild lion. Claws that could rip apart flesh as simply as a razor through paper. Claws that had been covered in blood, but nowhere else.

Hugh stared at the drawing in fascination. Even in the simple artist rendering, his eyes seemed to burn with flame, as if they would consume the very paper they were drawn upon. Jack looked positively monstrous and terrifying, and with those claws, he could do major damage to anyone he encountered if he wanted to. And yet, Hugh had come face to face with him over a fresh corpse and walked away unscathed.

He scanned the story, which mentioned that several people had seen Spring-Heeled Jack in the vicinity of Bowery Lane the previous evening. That was where he had gone, and where Christopher had died. His mind wandered to the hunched shadow on the rooftop. Had the feeling of eyes on him been Spring-Heeled Jack after all? Could the white rose that fell from the sky to land at his feet actually be from Jack? What reason would Spring-Heeled Jack have to give him a rose?

Dr. Ledbetter had a report on Hugh's desk when he arrived at work that afternoon. The red-haired boy's name was Toby Kelly; he had been identified by one of the women who lived in the same building as he did. He lived with an older gentleman,

but the man had been out of town for the last three weeks on business in France, so he couldn't have been the one responsible for Toby's death. The cause of death was listed as exsanguination from an injury to the throat, though what caused that injury was unlisted.

The alley where he had been found was behind Toby's flat, so Hugh went to go look again early that evening to see if he could find any clues while it was a little lighter out. There was something on the ground in the place where he had found the body only days earlier. Hugh crouched down and found a single white rose lying on the ground, not unlike the way he had left the one for Christopher. Hugh felt a shiver run down his spine. He looked up at the building where Toby lived. What had the young man been doing in the alley? Obviously, he met someone and had been having relations with them. Was that the person who killed him? Or had that person fled when they had been attacked? There were still droplets of blood flecking the brick wall. Hugh shifted to lean his back lightly against it. Toby had been facing his attacker. Maybe coupling together, his leg up around the other man's waist as they fucked in the dingy alleyway?

There was a soft rustling sound above his head. Hugh jumped and pushed quickly off the wall. Balanced precariously on the sill of a window two stories above his head was Spring-Heeled Jack. His cloak moved the light breeze like giant bat wings. He gazed down at Hugh with a smile. "Hello again," he said, his voice that deep, musical rumble.

Hugh's heart did a little tap dance in his chest. It was just because Jack had scared him, he thought, not because of how he had dreamed again last night about Jack pinning him against a wall in an alley not unlike this one. His hand automatically went to the truncheon at his hip. Jack held up his hands defensively. No blood on them this time, though the iron claws on his fingertips glinted in the setting sun's light. "Please, that is not necessary."

“What do you want?” Hugh asked, fingers hesitating on the smooth wood of the truncheon but not drawing it yet. Jack was gazing down at him with an expression that he was finding hard to read. It wasn’t cruel or mischievous. It almost seemed like curiosity.

Jack stepped off the windowsill and dropped onto the alley floor in front of him with barely a sound, landing as light as a cat. His cape billowed before settling around him again. They were closer than they had been a few nights ago, and Hugh could see him much clearer without the fog and darkness. Jack’s ears were long and pointed on the sides of his head. His eyes still glowed, though they were not as brilliant in the light as they had been in the dimness. “I wish to speak to you, Hugh Danbury.”

“That is the second time you’ve called me by my full name,” Hugh said, fingers curling around the truncheon handle. “How do you know who I am?”

Jack held up his hands again in what looked like a show of truce. “I am here for you.”

“Are you going to kill me?” Hugh asked warily.

Jack threw back his head and laughed. “Saints and serpents, no! Why would I do that?”

“You’ve been following me,” Hugh said, narrowing his eyes at Jack.

“Yes,” Jack replied.

“Why?”

Jack frowned thoughtfully. “There is a lot to explain, Hugh Danbury.”

“You can just call me Hugh.” The words came out before he thought about them.

Why was he giving this spectre permission to call him by his first name instead of ‘Constable’ or ‘Mr. Danbury?’

“Hugh,” Jack said, rolling the word around in his mouth like it was a lump of sugar. “And you may call me Jack.”

“I would call you by your real name,” Hugh said. “Who are you?”

“I have actually become quite fond of Spring-Heeled Jack,” the man said, giving a slight bow of his horned head.

Hugh frowned. He could admit that Spring-Heeled Jack was an appropriate name for this spectre. And right now, Jack’s identity was less important than his intent. His eyes drifted to the metallic-looking claws on the ends of Jack’s hands, razor sharp. The kind that could have cut into Christopher O’Malley like a knife through butter. “Did you kill Toby Kelly?” he asked, gesturing to the area where the white rose lay, where Toby’s body had been.

“No,” Jack said. He lifted his chin and said, quite grandly, “I give you my word, Hugh Dan- Hugh, I did not kill that man, nor any other on these London streets.”

“Then why are you here?”

“Mm, that is a question with a surprisingly long answer,” Jack said. “Would you care to join me for some tea, and we can discuss it? That is how people generally discuss things, is it not?”

Hugh raised a brow. “You might have murdered someone, and you’re asking me to join you for tea?”

Jack gave him a pointed look. “Apparently tea is very important in the conversational

process. And I did not kill that young man, or the other one on Bowery Lane. I swear it on Plato's pinwheel."

"How do you know about Christopher O'Malley on Bowery?" Hugh asked.

Jack lifted his head and smiled again, and Hugh realized that Jack did indeed have very sharp teeth, sharper than any regular human's. Had he filed his teeth down to those severe points? Or was he wearing some sort of covering? His speech was clear, not like he had a mouthful of wax. "I first saw you when you were there investigating his death. And last night, you went back there." He gestured his arm to the side, indicating the white rose that lay on the ground a few paces away. "What use the dead have for flowers, I do not understand."

"Were you the one who dropped the rose last night?"

"Yes. Do you not like roses?" Jack asked. "I can get you something else."

Hugh blinked. "I... like roses just fine," he said. "But, why?"

"Why?" Jack repeated blankly, tipping his head curiously.

"Why did you drop a rose for me?"

"It was a gift," Jack replied.

"That doesn't explain why," Hugh said with a frown.

"Aren't flowers part of the courting ritual?" Jack asked.

Hugh felt his jaw drop. "The what?"

“The courting ritual,” Jack repeated, a little slower, as if that was why Hugh had not understood him the first time.

“Are... are you trying to court me?” Hugh asked.

“Oh yes. Well, in a manner,” Jack said, rubbing thoughtfully at his chin with his hand. “Is that a no to discussing it over tea then?”

Hugh held up his hands. “Wait, wait. You need to explain this right now.”

“Ah, well. The short answer without tea is that I am your soulmate here to help you,” Jack replied. “There is much more to tell you, but I don’t think this is an ideal place to go into it.”

“You’re my what?” Hugh asked with a frown.

“Your soulmate,” Jack repeated.

Hugh tried to process the words, but they might as well have been Chinese for all the sense he was able to make of them at the moment. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Mmm, shall I show you instead?” Jack suddenly moved in close, and Hugh could feel warmth envelope him, like he had stepped up to a fireplace in winter. Jack was much taller than him, even without the extra height from his horns. Jack reached up his hand. Hugh sucked in a sharp breath as the iron claws came close to his face, tensing for them to rake across his flesh. But Jack turned his palm away and gently ran the back of his hand down Hugh’s cheek in a sweet caress. Hugh stared up into Jack’s eyes. It was his dream all over again, Jack’s hips pressed to his, the rough brick at his back, their mingled warmth.

Jack leaned in, and Hugh inhaled softly. Was Spring-Heeled Jack trying to kiss him?



He knew that should make him feel panicked, even frightened, but instead he only watched the man's face come closer to his. His chin tipped upwards without him realizing he had done it, giving Jack better access to his mouth. Jack's lips were only inches away...

"What's going on?" came a shout from nearby. Hugh turned his head to see a man standing a little way away, squinting at him and Jack in the dim light.

"Drat. Some other time then," Jack said, pulling back and giving Hugh a quick smile before he suddenly gave a great leap. In a flash of horns and black cape, he had leaped up to the roof of the building and vanished over the top of it.

Hugh stared at where he had gone, his heart hammering in his chest. Had Spring-Heeled Jack really just tried to kiss him? He quickly brought himself back to the reality that was this stinking alley. The man had come a few steps closer, staring at him expectantly. "Wh... what?" he asked, his mouth suddenly gone very dry.

"Are you all right, sir?" the man repeated. "That looked like Spring-Heeled Jack!"

"Oh, yes, it... it was," Hugh replied.

"He ain't hurt you, did he?" the man asked, giving him a long once-over look.

Hugh shook his head. "No. No, I am just fine." He straightened up, squaring his shoulders. "Thank you for your assistance."

The man nodded. Hugh hurried out of the alley before he could think too much longer about the fact that Spring-Heeled Jack, the terror of London, had tried to kiss him, or that he had been perfectly willing to let him do it.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:16 pm*

### Chapter seven

The first part of the next evening was strangely quiet. The air felt heavy and oppressive, like just before a storm. It licked at his skin beneath Hugh's heavy uniform, making sweat break out on his face and breathing a bit more difficult. The few people out on the street hurried past him with their heads down, and darkness fell over the city like a wool blanket. Hugh traced back the route from The Bull and Parasol to the area where Christopher had been killed, again finding nothing. He felt the eyes of Spring-Heeled Jack on him again, and he tried not to sigh in frustration. He almost wished that if Jack was going to do something to him, he would just do it so that they could stop playing this odd game of Follow the Leader.

He wasn't sure what it was that finally caught his attention. Some sort of sound that his body sensed, even if his brain did not. It was a few blocks from the site of Christopher's death, and he passed the mouth of a dark alley, the kind that would make him nervous whenever he walked by it on patrol, as it was long and shrouded in darkness so thick that he could not see the end of it. Something felt off. He could feel it crawling on his skin like a plague of flies. He lit his police lantern, lifting it to cast at least a little light into the void before he stepped into the alley.

He could hear something toward the other end of it. He couldn't place the sound exactly, a muffled sort of ripping, dragging noise, and a sort of snuffling sound. Perhaps a dog foraging for scraps in a waste bin? Hugh's footsteps echoed softly against the walls of the buildings that loomed to either side, preventing most of the light from the street from penetrating that far. He was more than halfway down the alley before his feeble lantern finally illuminated something close to the ground a short distance away.

Something dark was hunched over a prostrate form. Hugh could see a limp hand lying on the ground, pale in the sickly light. The scene was much too reminiscent of when he had found Toby, and now it seemed that someone else was dead. He was determined that this time Spring-Heeled Jack would not get away from him. He pulled his truncheon from his belt. "Jack!" he said loudly, his voice echoing off the brick and stone around him.

The creature lifted its head from where it had been stooped over. Long legs unfolded, bent almost like a dog's. An elegant, black cape was thrown over its shoulders, and atop its head was a gentleman's top hat. It rose up, its bulk becoming more apparent as it unfurled from its crouched position. The moonlight struck the face of the creature as it turned toward Hugh, and, for a moment, he was confused about what he was seeing. Whoever- whatever- it was was not Spring-Heeled Jack. What looked back at him might have been a man, but it was no manner of man that Hugh had ever seen before. Stringy, dark hair, covered in a variety of viscera, hung over its craggy face, a face sharp with angles that cast much of it into shadow. There seemed to be no lips, the mouth stretched unnaturally wide and long to reveal thin, pointed teeth. He could not see eyes beneath the shadow of the top hat and the hair falling over it, but he could feel what he could not see. The creature held him frozen, paralyzed in place as the mouth stretched wider still. It let out a sound, somewhere between a hiss and a growl, a sound he had never heard before but one that he knew he would never forget.

The vile creature took a step toward him. Run! Hugh tried to command himself. But his body felt as though it were locked in place, unable to do anything but stare. His truncheon fell from his hand and hit the ground, the wooden sound echoing in the alleyway as loud as a tree being felled by a woodsman. The creature took another step, then crouched, coiled like a cat about to pounce upon a mouse. Hugh's breath froze in his lungs.

Something suddenly dropped to the ground in front of him, in a swirl of black and white, landing almost silently except for the snap of a dark cape. Hugh nearly leaped

out of his skin. He wondered for a moment if the creature had moved that quickly, but he realized that the figure in front of him had his back to him and was facing down the monstrous creature, poised in a similar crouch. Light glinted off of metallic claws at the end of hands that were spread wide. It was Spring-Heeled Jack, his arms up to keep Hugh away from the creature, or the creature away from Hugh, he wasn't quite sure which yet.

The creature at the end of the alley let out a snarl, the sound making every hair on Hugh's body stand on end. It suddenly charged forward, dropping onto all fours to run like a canine.

The next moment, the alley was suddenly almost as bright as daylight. White and blue flames erupted from Spring-Heeled Jack's mouth in an almost biblical torrent of flame that Hugh felt heat his skin even with the man's back to him. The creature was still moving, but it had ceased its dash, now flailing and roaring, the sound echoing off the walls so loudly that he had to put his hands over his ears. The flames licked over its body, consuming it as the roars died away, and the creature collapsed into a heap of charred flesh and bone in the middle of the alley. The air smelled of smoke and singed hair and burning flesh.

And then Jack turned to look at him. Without breaking his gaze, he reached down and scooped up Hugh's truncheon from the ground where it had fallen, holding it out to him, handle pointed toward Hugh. "Glittering guinea pigs, I was almost too late. Are you all right?"

Hugh reached up to take it, wrapping his palm around the handle. For just a moment, they both held it, before Jack let go, and Hugh let his arm fall to his side.

"I..." Hugh realized with a start that Jack had asked a question. "Yes, I'm all right," he said. "Are you?"

Jack laughed, a sound so lyrical it might have been arranged by an Austrian composer. It was the exact opposite of the sound the smoldering creature had made when the flames had encased its body. "I am fine."

"What was that thing?" Hugh asked, glancing past Jack to the burning pile of flesh and fabric.

"I believe that is the reason I am here," Jack said.

That cryptic answer was not helpful in the moment, and Hugh had a thousand more questions flying about in his head like a flock of starlings. "I... I need to report this," he said, his voice dropping a little. How was he going to explain any of this to Sergeant Reardon?

"Oh, of course," Jack replied with a polite smile that showed off the pointed tips of his sharp teeth. "I shall retire away from the scene while you alert your authorities. I shall return for you when the coast is clear. But please wait a moment on that blasted whistle blast. It really is terribly aggravating to my ears."

And then Jack bent his knees and gave a great leap, landing on the sill of a window three stories above Hugh's head. With another leap, he had reached the rooftop of the tenement building and disappeared up and over the edge of it.

And suddenly, Hugh was alone again, in the dark alleyway with its monstrous shadows from the flames that still licked and lapped at the monster not far from him. He wondered for a moment if he had simply imagined this whole thing. But the blazing corpse at his feet beleaguered that question. He certainly had not set the creature aflame.

The sound of feet running alerted him to the presence of others, and several men in work clothes appeared at the entrance of the alleyway, one holding a broken bottle,

another a sharp knife. All of them stared at Hugh, then at the mess on the ground. Hugh saw the tension ease from them as they realized that the threat was no longer a threat. “Are you all right, sir?” one of them asked, pulling off his bowler hat to scratch at his balding head.

“Yes,” Hugh said, starting toward the men before realizing that his legs were trembling. He could not appear weak or collapse. He had to be strong and do his duty. “Excuse me, I must call additional officers.” He raised his whistle to his lips and blew a note on it. It rang off the walls, and more than one window opened, sleepy heads poking out to see what the commotion was about. A moment later, he heard an answering whistle.

“That fella, he’s dead?” asked one of the men, gesturing to the pile of charred and smoking flesh with the knife he held. Hugh realized it was a steak knife; the man must have grabbed it off of a table at a nearby tavern when he and his friends came running to help.

“Yes. Very much so.” Hugh’s mind turned back to what the creature had been crouched over when he had come upon it. “I must check the victim, please wait here.”

The three men did not look all that eager to follow him past the flaming pile of meat and blackened clothing. Hugh edged carefully past it, half-afraid the beast would suddenly lunge in a shower of fiery sparks and latch onto him, but it did not move, beyond the flames continuing their mad dance over the gentleman’s cape.

He smelled the body of the victim before he saw it clearly, the scent of fresh blood and other innards thick in the air, coating his tongue and the inside of his nostrils. Hugh shifted to try to get as much light from the alley entrance and the flames as he could.

The victim was definitely dead, ripped open from throat to groin, ribs broken and

pulled aside, as if the creature had been searching for the organs beneath it. The internal body cavity was a mess of meat and blood and bile. Hugh gagged but pressed his hand to his mouth to keep back any additional reaction.

The victim's head was turned away from him, and he shifted around, trying to avoid stepping in any blood or other things that littered the ground. It was a man, with blond hair that lay ragged, coated in sticky clumps of drying blood. He was not a child, but neither was he very old. Perhaps late 20's, though it was obvious that London streets had not been kind to him. He had healing bruises on one cheek. Whether he was a prostitute, Hugh could not immediately say, as his clothes were strewn about as nothing more than rags; they looked as if they had been ripped or slashed off of him.

He heard shouts and feet approaching, and then another constable reached the alley mouth where the laborers still stood with their makeshift weapons. Two more followed close behind him as they began to talk to the men there. One constable detached himself from the group, and he recognized Depesh. He gave the Indian man a tired look. "Another one," he said, and Depesh nodded, looking pale in the dim lights around them. "Deceased."

"What is this?" Depesh asked, pointing to the smoldering remains, the flames nearly out now.

"Whatever it was, it was... I think it was eating the victim," Hugh said. There was so much viscera and not enough light for him to tell if the boy at his feet was missing anything from inside of him, but he couldn't think of any other explanation for what the monstrous figure had been doing stooped over the body like that.

Depesh pressed a hand to his mouth quickly. "Good God..."

Hugh nodded. He had no other words for it himself.

As he walked back into Scotland Yard with Constable Depesh after interviewing witnesses, in what was becoming a very familiar and uncomfortable pattern, Hugh saw no sign of Spring-Heeled Jack. He sat down with Sergeant Reardon to give his statement about what he had found, describing how he had stumbled upon the monster in the alley, with the body of the dead blond man.

“Surely you don’t expect me to believe that there are creatures of the supernatural sort traversing around London, preying on people in the black of night,” Reardon said as Hugh described the monstrous creature that had attacked him.

“I might not have myself, sir,” Hugh said, heat rising in his cheeks as he realized what he was about to tell his sergeant. “But I encountered someone else in the alley as well.”

“Oh? And who might that have been?” Reardon asked, his voice dripping with detestation.

“Spring-Heeled Jack.” The words sounded ridiculous coming out of his mouth, and Hugh thought that he would not have been surprised if his commanding officer thought that he had gone mad.

Reardon snorted. “Spring-Heeled Jack? What sort of a fool do you think I am, Danbury?”

“No fool, sir,” Hugh said with a frown. “But I swear that I did.”

Reardon laughed, slapping his thigh as if Hugh had told a most thrilling joke. “Are you on opium, Constable?”

“No, sir. I know it seems unlikely, but I swear that it was Spring-Heeled Jack, as clearly as I see you before me now.” He debated telling Reardon that he had seen



Spring-Heeled Jack at the site of Toby Kelly's murder as well, but he realized he wouldn't sound any less mad than he already did, and that he would be admitting to lying on his report about finding Toby's body.

Reardon snorted again, and Hugh imagined him as a large ferret-faced bull in a pen. "You are obviously overworked, trying to solve the other cases assigned to you. Take the rest of the night off."

"But, sir—"

"That's an order, Constable," Reardon said firmly. "Go, now."

Hugh opened his mouth to protest, but Reardon just gave him a pointed look. Hugh closed his mouth again, nodding and getting to his feet. He hadn't been dreaming or overworked. He knew he hadn't been. He could still feel the heat from Jack's blue and white flames on his skin as it ignited the charging monster that would likely have torn him apart the same as it had that young man.

He nodded to Depesh and told him he was going home on Reardon's orders and would return tomorrow to check in with Dr. Ledbetter about the autopsy before stepping outside and onto the quiet, gaslit street.

It was the middle of the night, and very little stirred around him. The sounds and smells that normally accompanied the daylight hours were absent now. No hackneys and their horses and drivers, no vendors selling wares, only a few people walking the streets, and most of them were swift, keeping their heads down and their eyes up, watching for footpads or other ne'er-do-wells. He looked around but saw no one waiting for him, either in the shadows or atop the rooftops. Perhaps Jack had vanished in the chaos that had ensued after the other constables had arrived on the scene. He headed for his flat, keeping to the light from the streetlamps as much as he could. He turned off the main thoroughfare and onto a more residential one.

Hugh nearly leaped out of his skin as Spring-Heeled Jack suddenly slid down a pipe attached to a fire escape to land gracefully and nearly silently on the pavement next to him. It was no wonder that people were encountering Spring-Heeled Jack and being so frightened by him. “H... Hello,” Hugh said, giving him a smile as he tried to calm his racing heart.

Jack nodded to him, and Hugh still found himself fascinated by how tall the man was. “Have the police combed the scene?”

“They have.” He gazed back at the man in front of him. Perhaps Reardon did not believe him, but the spectre before him was solid as any man. Of that, he was sure. “My sergeant does not believe that I was saved by Spring-Heeled Jack.”

“Ah. I am not surprised,” Jack said with a bit of a chuckle. “It is hardly the sort of thing one encounters on the streets of London.”

“Neither is that creature that attacked us,” Hugh said, not sure why he had suddenly used ‘us’ instead of ‘me’ in that statement. The creature had no doubt been coming for him, and might have reached him too without Jack’s interference. “I... thank you, for saving me.”

Jack nodded and waved his hand with a dramatic flourish. “It was my pleasure, Hugh.”

“What was that thing?”

Jack suddenly stepped back into the shadows and lifted his cape up to shield himself, seeming to become no more than a shadow in the mouth of the alley as a middle-aged man walked past Hugh. “Good night, constable,” he said, touching the brim of his hat politely. Hugh returned the gesture. The man did not seem even slightly aware that Spring-Heeled Jack stood less than two feet away. When the man had walked on

beyond earshot, Jack stepped out of the shadows again. “Is there a place where we may go? I would be delighted to answer all of your questions, but surely the middle of the street is no place for such. Tea is not required.”

Hugh glanced around. He too was suddenly feeling the need to get out of the darkness and fog, and into some place warm and familiar. “My home is just a few blocks away.”

“Excellent,” Jack said and started to walk off at a fast pace. Hugh raised a brow. How did Jack know where his rooms were?

“Have you been following me home?” he asked.

“Of course. I’ve been following you everywhere.”

“What? Why?” Hugh asked, having to jog to catch up to Jack’s longer, more rapid strides.

“All in good time,” Jack replied.

Hugh frowned. His room was on the fourth floor of the building, but knowing Jack’s ability to easily jump up and down from great heights, that was not reassuring. “Have you been watching me at home?”

“Oh, muskrat’s whiskers, no,” Jack said, giving him a polite smile. “Your home’s privacy and virtue remain unmolested by my eyes.”

Hugh’s cheeks went red. Jack followed him around all of London, but he drew the line at peeping in Hugh’s bedroom window? At least Hugh kept the bedroom curtains closed when he slept, so he didn’t have to worry about Jack finding out about the times he had woken up in a sticky mess after dreaming about Jack pushing him

against the alley wall.

They reached his building, but Hugh could already hear some voices in the hallways and foyer. “Can you put your cape over your horns or something?”

Jack looked affronted. “Don’t you like them?” he said, a tease of mischief in his voice.

Hugh glowered, his cheeks going red again. “You can’t just walk into my building like this.” He gestured to Jack’s horns and his lack of proper attire. The white oilcloth left very little of his chest to the imagination.

“Which window is yours?” Jack asked.

Hugh motioned around the building. “Fourth floor, second from the right.”

Jack nodded. “Excellent. I shall meet you at the window forthwith.”

“Don’t let anyone see you!” Hugh hissed. He could only imagine what that headline might be, and the last thing he needed was to draw more attention to himself.

“I shall be as sneaky as a lamb’s tail!” Jack declared, and then he turned and vanished around the side of the building.

Hugh hoped that a lamb’s tail was very sneaky as he made his way inside the building, nodding at a few of the residents who were up and talking. Even in the middle of the night, there was always someone up; London was never fully asleep. He headed up the stairs to his rooms on the fourth floor. He unlocked the door and lit several candles, then turned on the gas lamps to illuminate the space. His front living room and kitchen were small but clean, furnished with second-hand furniture. He moved over to the fireplace grate, bending to stir the embers back to life. The little

room was fairly cold, as it usually was. He fed several pieces of wood and paper into the fire to help build it up. Then he headed into his bedroom. He pulled back the curtains and found Jack gazing back at him through the window. Hugh jumped, clamping a hand to his mouth to stifle a yell of surprise. He threw up the sash, and Jack slid inside with ease, despite his height.

“If you do that in other windows, it’s no wonder you are frightening people half to death!” Hugh scolded as he closed the window and pulled the curtains again.

Jack rolled his eyes, glancing around the small bedroom. “I am no snoop. This is your abode?”

Hugh nodded. “This is my bedroom. The kitchen and parlor are here.” He gestured through the door. “It’s warmer in there too, I got the fire going.”

“Please, do not go to trouble on my account,” Jack said, giving a slight bow before heading out into the main room.

Hugh looked around, realizing with consternation that he had very little in the way of seating for guests. He so rarely had them, there had never been the need. He gestured to his own comfortable armchair in front of the fireplace. “Please, sit.” Jack glanced at him, and Hugh nodded encouragingly. “Oh, may I... take your cape?” He glanced at the almost batwing-like cloak around Jack’s shoulders.

Jack smiled and removed his cape with a flourish before handing it over. Hugh hung it on the hat rack by the door as Jack moved to sit in the armchair. Hugh bustled into the kitchen, beginning to prep things for tea. He glanced over at Jack to see the man looking curiously about from his spot in the chair. He smiled a bit when Jack stood up again and crossed over to the mantle to look at a photograph there. “Who are these?”

“My mother and father,” Hugh said as he grabbed china from his cupboards, giving them a cursory wipe to ensure they were not dusty. “They both passed away a few years ago.”

“I am dreadfully sorry to hear that,” Jack said, his fingers brushing lightly over the corner of the frame as if caressing a loved one’s cheek. “I am sure they would be proud of you being a police constable.”

Hugh smiled a little at that. “I would like to think so.”

“Do you have other family?”

“Two older sisters,” Hugh replied as he prepped the tea kettle. “Both of them are married and have children, so I don’t see them very often.”

Jack nodded, continuing to wander about the room, peeking into the washroom before returning once more to settle into the armchair. Hugh dragged one of his wooden kitchen chairs over to face the armchair before returning to the kitchen to fetch the tea things. He laid them out on the hassock in between them. “May I ask you questions now?”

“Yes, of course,” Jack said.

“What was that thing in the alley?” Hugh asked as he set down the tea pot and poured both himself and Jack a steaming mug. “It looked like it might have once been human.”

“It still was,” Jack said, as Hugh held up the milk, and he shook his head in silent response.

Hugh frowned. “It certainly didn’t look that way.”

Jack picked up his own cup, and Hugh was surprised that he took a sip straightaway of the hot brew without so much as a flinch. “It was human, but a twisted, evil aberration. A creature of vileness. Evil and cruelty brought forth.” His bonfire eyes flickered like the flames dancing on the hearth, his voice rising in both pitch and volume with each word until he was nearly leaning out of his chair with what one could almost say was excitement.

“But how?” Hugh asked.

Jack shook his head slowly as he sat back, taking another sip of his tea. “I wish I could say. I only know that something is causing this vileness to awaken within them.”

“Them?” Hugh asked in surprise. “You mean, there is more than one person like that?”

“Yes,” Jack said. “I am unsure what is causing the transformation. I am only aware that it is happening.”

“Have you seen more than the one we encountered tonight?”

“Yes,” Jack said.

That thought chilled Hugh despite the warm fire only a few paces away. “How many are there?”

“I do not know,” Jack said with a frown that etched darkness into the sharpness of his forehead and cheeks. “Besides the one we encountered tonight, I have seen one other. Whomever killed that first boy.”

“Christopher?” Hugh asked in surprise.

Jack nodded, taking another large swallow of the hot tea.

“You saw him kill Christopher?”

“No, but I saw him running off when the man with the big mustache approached. I didn’t get a good look at his face, but he had a long, whippy tail. He looked different than the man who attacked the red-haired boy.”

“Toby Kelly,” Hugh supplied, and Jack nodded.

“But I do believe whomever attacked Toby Kelly is also the creature we encountered tonight,” Jack said thoughtfully.

He had so many more questions pertaining to the thing in the alley, but he realized he knew almost nothing about the man sitting across from him that he had just invited into his home. “You knew my name, before I had ever introduced myself to you,” Hugh said. “You said that you knew more about me than I would expect. So, tell me, Spring-Heeled Jack. Who are you, and why have you been following me?” Hugh set down his teacup and looked up at Jack curiously.

Jack laughed in his musical way. “Alas, my powers of concealment were not as stealthy as I had hoped. You are an observant man, Hugh. Or I am terrible at sneaking.”

Hugh suspected it was probably a bit of both. Hopefully he had not been observed jumping up to Hugh’s bedroom window. “When did you first start following me?”

“The night of that Christopher’s murder. I arrived here, and I was drawn to a commotion that turned out to be someone running away from Christopher’s body.”

“You ‘arrived’ here? From where?” Hugh asked.



“Tell me first. Do you believe in magic?” Jack asked, gazing at him with intrigue.

Hugh blinked, then really thought about the question for a moment. “If you had asked me a week ago, I would have said no. But after some of the things I’ve seen recently with these killings and transformations, I am very much reconsidering my position on it.”

Jack smiled, the firelight catching his pointed teeth. “That is a fair assessment. If you believe in magic and the supernatural, it will make what I’m about to tell you make a lot more sense.”

Hugh nodded, waving his hand for Jack to continue as he picked up his tea again. Jack was thoughtful for a moment. “I will try to explain as best I can. Beyond this world lies hundreds of other worlds. They all exist at different times and in different places. You can’t see them unless you have very special magic. I have the ability to travel through these different times and places. I am not from this world and this time originally.”

The universe beyond London suddenly had gotten much bigger in the last few seconds, and Hugh swallowed a bit of tea down the wrong tube, coughing and clearing his throat. “You are magical?” he asked when he was able to speak again.

Jack’s smile was a little self-indulgent. “I am.”

“So where are you originally from?” Hugh asked, as if Jack would say that he was from some place he knew like Ireland or one of the Americas, and not some place outside of the planet they currently resided on.

“That is also a little difficult to explain,” Jack said. “This body is a form I have been given to emulate yours. But my natural form would not be recognizable as human. It would appear to you as... I think you might call it a will-o-the-whisp. A sort of figure

of light, similar to the flame you saw earlier.”

“What do you mean, to emulate my form?” Hugh asked.

Jack took another sip of his tea. “I am not human, obviously. I suppose the closest equivalent that you might understand is to consider me a corporeal soul.”

“You mean, a ghost?” Hugh said with a bit of a frown.

Jack laughed. “Ah, yes, we do live in such times. Not a ghost, though many may believe so based on my appearance. Allow me to try to explain. In my original form, I do not have needs and desires the way you do. I simply exist, with knowledge of the many worlds at my disposal, as do the rest of my kind. Our... essence, I suppose, is a good way to put it. Our essence is drawn to specific events in various places and times. When that place and time beckons each of us, we travel to it.”

This was much more existential than Hugh had ever considered himself to be, and he wondered if this was like trying to understand the existence of God before there was anything else created. “What beckons you?”

Jack smiled a little, setting down his teacup and saucer with a soft clink. “Our soulmate.”

Hugh blinked. “You used that word before. But I still don’t understand what it means.”

“The reason for our existence. When the time comes, we are drawn to that individual, wherever they may be, and it is our sacred duty to protect our soulmate and help them with the problem assigned to them.”

“Assigned to them?” Hugh said, raising a brow.

“Well, that does make it sound rather intentional. Really, it is simply random chance,” Jack said. “But then, relationships often are, aren’t they? Two or more people in the same time and place under the right circumstances. It is quite scientific, I’m sure. Perhaps there will be studies in the future. Ah, I am speculating again, my sincerest apologies. It really doesn’t help answer your question.”

“What question?” Hugh asked.

“There is another question!” Jack said with a wave of his hand. “But your original question was about the problem assigned to you. You may have already figured out that there is something vile afoot.”

“I got that impression,” Hugh said flatly. “What does that have to do with problems and soulmates?”

“Ah, yes. You see, the universe has assigned you as my soulmate. Therefore, it is my duty to help you solve these ghastly crimes, and then do whatever it is you do in the pursuit of justice.”

“What does that mean though, that you are my soulmate?” Hugh asked. His mind wandered once more to his dreams of Jack pressing him against the wall, his hand moving between his legs, and he shifted a little as his prick stirred to life in his trousers.

Jack sprawled in the chair with an arm dramatically up to his head. “Ah, I know it sounds theatrical and lovelorn. A Shakespearean tragedy, lovers locked together in mutual passion and pining. It is simply that our souls are connected because we can help one another in some way.”

Hugh brushed his hands uneasily over the sides of his pants. “You have been specifically sent to help me then? To solve these murders?”

“It would seem so,” Jack replied. “The specifics are yet to be determined. I have no knowledge of what the future holds or what my role is to be, other than support you and protect you.”

“Can you read my mind or anything like that?” Hugh asked.

Jack laughed his deep, resounding laugh. “Jumping giraffes, that would certainly make things much simpler, wouldn’t it? No, I am afraid my mental capacities and capabilities are quite similar to yours.”

“But physically, you are different,” Hugh said.

“Oh, yes. As I said, we take on a form that is similar to that of our soulmate.”

“I do not have horns and pointed ears,” Hugh said with just a bit of a huff.

“I’m afraid that the universe is not precise,” Jack said with a bit of melancholy, his hand coming up to trace over the mask of bone that seemed to cover under his cheeks.

Hugh had to laugh. “The universe knows when I’m in trouble and sends you to help, but it cannot be bothered to give you a fully human appearance?”

Jack snickered and clicked his tongue against his pointed teeth. “Perhaps it knows what you seek.”

Hugh stiffened at that. “What?”

Jack suddenly leaped up onto the chair, spreading his arms wide. “You are a police officer. You seek protection. You seek justice. You seek truth. Perhaps this form encompasses all of those things.” He cocked one hip to the side and rested a clawed

hand on it. “Or perhaps it is simply that you find this form pleasing.”

Hugh felt his cheeks go bright red. “I... I do not.”

“Oh? Did I mistake your assessment of me?” Jack said, raising a brow, which still seemed strange to Hugh that his brows were on the skull-like mask over his upper face. “Do you not find aspects alluring?”

Hugh’s mouth opened, but all that came out was a soft exhalation of air. Jack smirked and tossed his head. “I see that I have hit the nail upon its head! I do hope you won’t find this form too distracting, as I’m afraid I cannot do much to change it.”

“It is less that I find it distracting and more that you easily attract unwanted attention this way,” Hugh said defensively, gesturing to the horns on Jack’s head. He might as well have had goat hooves and a tail to go with it.

“Perhaps that is part of the plan,” Jack said, spreading his arms wide to show off his physique. “A boon from the universe to help solve this mystery!”

Hugh had no idea how anyone with the horns of a devil and eyes like flames could help solve these dreadful murders, but Jack was here. He had come to help. That had to mean something, didn’t it? And Jack wasn’t entirely wrong. He did find this form pleasing. A little odd, perhaps, but the man’s firelight eyes were entrancing, and his face was exquisitely crafted, as if made by a Roman sculptor. And what he could see of Jack’s body in the strange garments he wore was also stunning. It was probably why his mind had gone to fantasizing about Jack in the alley.

“Well,” he said, not sure what else he could really say. “I... suppose we should work together then. Though I very much doubt the Metropolitan Police will be willing to enlist Spring-Heeled Jack to the force.”

“Of course. I do not expect that I shall be working in an official capacity,” Jack said with a chuckle. “But I shall do what I can to help you solve this mystery.”

“I appreciate any help I can get,” Hugh said with a sigh. “Hopefully the autopsy on whatever killed that young man will turn up some clues tomorrow.”

“You have a good heart, Hugh Danbury,” Jack said. “I am certain that we will solve this case, if for no other reason than because you care.”

“I hope that’s enough,” Hugh said with a weak smile. “It hasn’t been so far.”

“Ah, but now you have me!” Jack added with a mischievous twinkle in his eye. “I have a feeling that with both of us working together, we’ll be unstoppable.”

Hugh chuckled at that. “We really only just met each other, Jack.”

“No matter,” Jack said, waving his hand. “When two people are destined to be together, they make things work.”

Hugh hoped that Jack was right about that. This case was perplexing, and he wanted to stop anyone else from being killed. “Thank you,” he said. “I’m sure we have much we will need to discuss, but for now, I should probably get some rest. Where are you staying?”

Jack blinked in confusion. “Staying?”

“Yes. Where do you live?”

“I do not have a permanent home here,” Jack said with a long-suffering sigh. “I have been staying in cemeteries when I am not on the rooftops.”

Hugh stared, then put his head down into his hands. “Well, no wonder people have been frightened out of their wits by you,” he said with a grumble.

“I have not intended to scare anyone,” Jack said, petulance like a child filling his voice.

“I know, but cemeteries are frightening places for some people, made even more so by unknown apparitions.”

“Point taken,” Jack said. “What do you propose I do?”

Hugh glanced around his tiny rooms. He was not exactly set up for guests, nor would his landlady be pleased to find that he had a gentleman staying with him under his roof, even if nothing untoward was happening. But he couldn’t just turn Spring-Heeled Jack back out onto the streets. If they were supposed to work together, if Jack was supposed to be his soulmate... “I suppose you shall stay here,” he said, giving him a wan smile. “You may have the bed. I’ll sleep here in my chair.”

Jack initially looked delighted by the suggestion, but then he frowned. “I shall not put you out of your own bed, Hugh.”

“It is no trouble.”

“I shall sleep in the chair,” Jack declared. He stretched out over it, draping his knees over one of the arms like an oversized cat. “See? I am quite comfortable.”

Hugh snorted a laugh. He himself would not have been very comfortable in that position, and Jack probably even less so being so much taller than him. But he just nodded. “Very well. There is a blanket in the corner if you need it, and the washroom is over there.” He gestured, and Jack nodded.

“Thank you, Hugh, you are most kind.”

Hugh grinned and shook his head. “Well, having a terrifying spectre in my house who could incinerate me at any moment tends to make one put on their best manners.”

Jack threw back his head and laughed. “Really, now, do not be so dramatic, Hugh. I would never harm you.”

“How can you know that?” Hugh asked with a slight frown.

Jack gave him a surprisingly solemn look. “Because there is goodness in you. You are a very kind and compassionate person.”

Hugh flushed a little. He was so unused to compliments, especially not from handsome strangers sitting in his living room. He ran his hand through his curly hair and gave Jack a slightly nervous smile. “Well, good night.” And he hurried into the bedroom, closing the door behind him so Jack would not see the blush that burned his face or the bulge that was starting to tent the front of his trousers.

Sleeping in his own home, knowing Spring-Heeled Jack was just on the other side of the door, was strange. Hugh wasn’t exactly afraid. He trusted Jack when the man had said he wasn’t going to hurt him. He had had countless opportunities to do so if he wanted to. But he had learned so much tonight, as well as had a brush with death, and he was unsure what to think anymore. The universe was suddenly much bigger, his own knowledge and part to play in it so small.

And all of this strange talk of ‘soulmates.’ While he still wasn’t entirely sure what that meant, he rather liked the sound of it. His life since his parents had passed had been rather lonely. He counted Constable Depesh and Dr. Ledbetter as friends, but it was not as if he spent time with them outside of work. Having someone to talk to had been pleasant, and Jack, in spite of his eccentricities, was delightful to talk to. And



quite handsome to look at. The most handsome man Hugh had ever seen, he had to admit. They had barely touched, but Hugh's mind still drifted back to a few days ago in the alley when Jack had nearly kissed him. What would it feel like? He had kissed before, but, as with any of his sexual encounters, they had been furtive and hurried. Here, in his apartment with no one to see them, maybe he could actually kiss Jack without fear or hesitation, assuming Jack was still interested in kissing as well. Hugh fell asleep with that hopeful thought running through his mind.

### Chapter eight

Hugh wondered to himself if last night had all been a very strange dream. Maybe he really was so stressed about this investigation that he had imagined a creature eating a victim and Spring-Heeled Jack coming to his rescue. That thought immediately went out the window when he heard a clatter in his kitchen. He slid out of bed and hurried over to open the door. Spring-Heeled Jack looked sheepishly at him from across the small room in the little kitchen area, where the tea tray had landed on the floor. “I’m sorry, did I wake you?”

“No,” Hugh said, rubbing at his eyes and stepping out into the main room before realizing that he was only in his nightshirt. At least it was quite long, almost to his knees. “Can I help you with something?”

Jack shook his head. “I was going to make you breakfast, or perhaps it would be considered lunch at this time of the day. Breakfrunch? Hmm, there must be a better word.”

“You don’t have to do that,” Hugh said quickly. “I can make food for both of us.”

“I insist!” Jack said, tossing his hand dramatically into the air. “I am a guest in your humble abode, and I shall earn my keep by making you lunchfast. Hmm, no, that doesn’t really work either. I shall keep thinking on it.”

Hugh found himself smiling. “All right. Do you need any help?”

“Certainly not!” Jack said. “Do not mind me, I shall have a meal made up

momentarily. Well, perhaps several momentarilies.”

Hugh sent up a silent prayer that Jack would not burn down the building as he headed into the washroom to prepare for the day. He scrubbed himself down with cold water and combed his curls so they were not sticking out at strange angles. He only rarely had to shave. He had never been able to grow a mustache the way that many of his fellow officers did, and he was sure that his boyish face was one of the reasons he was not often taken seriously as a police officer.

He dressed in his uniform pants and under shirt but waited to put on his long-sleeved blue uniform coat. He came back out into the main room to find Jack laying two plates of something on the kitchen table. One plate held a piece of toast that was nearly charcoal, the other a piece that was only barely browned. A pile of scrambled eggs lay on top of each piece of toast, along with some sliced apples. Jack gestured to the lighter of the two pieces of toast. “My first attempt was a little dark. This one should be better.”

“We can share it,” Hugh offered, but Jack waved his hand again.

“No, no. I shall not starve, I promise.”

Hugh sat down at the table, and Jack poured him a cup of tea, adding a dash of milk the way Hugh had last night. Hugh smiled a bit. It was such a small detail, but the fact that Jack had noticed and remembered was rather sweet. “Do you eat food?”

Jack nodded. “I do, though I need far less to sustain me than humans do. Your digestive systems are remarkably inefficient.”

“You don’t have to constantly eat with all of the energy you expend jumping around?” Hugh asked, picking up a fork and knife to start eating the eggs and slightly warmed over bread.

“Surprisingly, no,” Jack replied, taking a sip of the tea that was once again almost boiling hot without even a flinch.

“Can all of... you... um... the other... will-o-the-whisps jump great heights like you?”

“I honestly don’t know,” Jack said thoughtfully. “We don’t know what our final form will be until we are summoned to our soulmate.”

“You weren’t by any chance running around London fifty years or so ago, were you?” Hugh asked curiously.

“Not that I know of!” Jack said, giving the question a great deal more thought than Hugh figured it warranted. “Was there another Spring-Heeled Jack running around then?”

“Yes,” Hugh replied.

“Fascinating. I suppose it’s possible that there was another of my kind who found their soulmate then. Or, perhaps the universe just has a sense of humor.” Jack flicked his hand with the iron claws on the tips of them, and they made a metallic scraping noise that made Hugh’s teeth hurt.

“So, you don’t know where the others of your kind end up?” Hugh asked, taking a sip of the tea. That had at least turned out quite well. He wondered if Jack had watched him make it last night and learned from that.

“No,” Jack said, taking a large bite of blackened toast and egg. His sharp teeth crunched through the crispy toast loudly.

“Did you have friends or family?” Hugh asked curiously.

“No,” Jack said again, seeming to swallow the mouthful almost whole, and Hugh took a reflexive swallow of his own. “We are rather unique beings, as far as I am aware. However we come to be, our purpose is to help our soulmate. We gain much knowledge when we enter through the portal into our soulmate’s realm.”

“The... portal?” Hugh asked in confusion.

Jack nodded. “It’s quite fascinating, I shall show you sometime if you’d like.”

“I’d like that,” Hugh said.

“I suppose you are working again today,” Jack said, glancing over his uniform pants.

“Yes,” Hugh replied. “I will talk to Dr. Ledbetter and see if there is any information about the identity of the victim and the creature we encountered last night. Hopefully that will give me an idea of what to do next.”

“Excellent,” Jack said with a wave of his hand. “Where shall I meet you?”

Hugh frowned at that. “Jack, you can’t go with me.”

Jack blinked. “Why not?”

“I don’t want people seeing you.”

Jack let out a huff. “I am quite good at evading detection.”

“That is why your picture has been on the front page of every newspaper from here to Wales?” Hugh said pointedly.

Jack heaved a sigh and tipped his head back. “I had to watch out for you. This is

certainly not an unpopulated location.”

“I know,” Hugh agreed. “But please. If there are monsters or strange creatures running around London, the fewer of them that people can report, the easier it might be to pinpoint the others.”

Jack screwed up his face in thought, then nodded. “I suppose that is true. But what if you encounter danger again? There is at least one more of those creatures running around.”

Something in Hugh’s chest warmed at Jack’s concern for his safety. And, he had to admit, if Jack had not been watching him last night, it was very likely he would have been ripped apart by the monster in the alley. “Well, you know my patrol,” he relented. “Can you at least wait until after dark so you’re less likely to be seen? And maybe find a way to cover your horns?”

Jack’s hand slid up to stroke over his horns, as if he had forgotten they were there. “Oh. Yes, I shall find a way to hide them. Thank you. I shall find you after the sun has set.”

“All right. Thank you for making food, Jack.”

Jack nodded, gazing back at him for a long moment. “Hugh. May I embrace you?”

Hugh blinked at the sudden request. Since their attempted kiss in the alley had been interrupted, Jack had made no move to touch him. “You... you want to... hug me?”

Jack was supposed to be his soulmate, whatever that meant. They were working together to solve these gruesome mysteries. And, as strange as it seemed, considering the circumstances, he really did find Jack attractive. Certainly, his appearance was a little frightening, or perhaps a lot to the unexpected observer. But he was also

stunning, and clever, and his dramatics were quite entertaining, which surprised Hugh, who was normally such a stoic person. Had he been a man of fewer principles, he might have already tried to act upon his baser instincts by now. What would embracing mean? Would they be more than just partners in policing? And, if so, would he be all right with that?

Jack looked chagrined. "I'm sorry. That was presumptuous of me."

"No!" Hugh said quickly. "No, it wasn't. I just... am not used to people asking such a thing of me."

Jack gave a small smile. "I promise you that I shall be a gentleman and shall not make advances."

Hugh felt his own lips curve, though he couldn't tell himself if it was a smirk or a pout. "You won't?"

Jack gazed back at him before his grin turned positively lascivious, showing off his pointed teeth. "Well, I shall if you wish me to."

Hugh laughed, feeling a nervous flutter in his stomach. "I, uh... I suppose embracing for now would be a good start."

Jack nodded and stepped closer, so that Hugh could feel the unnatural warmth of his skin through his clothing. Jack lifted his arms and, moving them slowly enough that Hugh could pull away if he so wished, wrapped them around Hugh's shoulders.

Hugh's arms moved of their own accord, sliding around Jack's waist, and suddenly they were pressed together from neck to knees. Jack's arms were around him, holding him close, warm and secure, like a blanket had been draped around him after coming in from the cold. And then Jack's arms tightened a little, just a small squeeze to keep

him close, and Hugh felt like the world had dropped out from underneath him. He closed his eyes, his own arms tightening around Jack's waist as he leaned his cheek against the firm chest.

He couldn't remember the last time he had been embraced like this. Maybe he never had. Even his few sexual encounters had been quick and furtive, no long embraces or romantic kisses exchanged, only a hurried exchange of pleasantries in upper rooms or back alleys, followed by a few quick kisses and half-hearted promises to meet up again sometime. That was how men like him had to find partners, anonymous and rushed. But here, in his own rooms, where no one would see them, he could just be. They could just stand like this, holding one another, for as long as they wanted. For all eternity if that was their choice.

It was so nice to be held. He hadn't really realized it before, but he went through life without touching very many people. When he did touch someone, it was usually because they were in distress, or he was trying to stop them from doing something they shouldn't. Those were entirely different from physical affection too.

"Jack?" he said softly but did not pull away from the embrace.

"Yes?" Jack asked, also not moving.

"We're going to solve this case, right?"

"Yes," Jack replied firmly. "We will."

"What happens after we do?"

"What?"

Hugh pulled back just enough to be able to look up into Jack's face. "After we solve



this case, what happens to us?”

“Are you asking, will I be leaving?” Jack asked.

Even though that was exactly what he was asking, hearing the words spoken out loud sent a pang through him that he had not been expecting, despite only knowing Jack a short time. “Yes,” he said, forcing the single word out as if it were stuck in his throat. Solving these murders was the most important thing right now. But Hugh found himself wondering. What would it be like to have someone by his side? In his bed? Someone tall and lean and handsome, like Jack? Surely ‘soulmates’ meant more than helping each other to solve a problem.

“I do not know what the future holds,” Jack said thoughtfully. “But once we have completed this task, I am not required to leave.”

“Do you think you will stay?” Hugh asked.

“Would you like me to stay?” Jack asked, using one finger to tip Hugh’s chin up to look at him.

Hugh flushed a little, lowering his eyes to the floor as Jack held his chin. “I think I would.”

Jack smiled softly, the gas lamps catching the sharp ends of his teeth. “Well, we’ll have plenty of time to decide.” His large hands slid up to lightly hold Hugh’s jaw, his claws carefully angled away from skin. His head dipped, and his mouth pressed to Hugh’s in a light, sweet kiss. It was softer than Hugh had thought it would be, which surprised him. He held still, his eyes drifting closed. The kiss tasted a little smoky, Jack’s lips warm against his. It lingered only for a moment before Jack pulled back, not too far. Hugh opened his eyes, finding himself staring up into Jack’s inferno ones behind his skull-like face. They were absolutely entrancing. “Was that all right?” Jack

asked softly.

In response, Hugh wrapped his arms around Jack's neck, having to stand on tiptoe in his shiny boots to do so, and pressed his mouth eagerly to Jack's. Jack let out a sound almost like a growl, pulling him close with his hands on Hugh's waist as he kissed him back. Hugh's hands slid to hold Jack's jaw like Jack had done with him earlier. The spectre's skin was so warm, but not unpleasantly hot. Hugh slowly opened his mouth against Jack's, delighted to feel him mirror the movement, and he slid the tip of his tongue out to brush lightly over Jack's lower lip.

Then their tongues and lips were tangled together in a passionate embrace, bodies pressed flush to one another as Jack held Hugh against him. Hugh moaned softly, his hands sliding up over Jack's jaw to stroke up his pointed ears. The times when he had met up with other men, it had been furtive in dark alleys or upper rooms of pubs, places where being caught was always a possibility. Places where sound carried, and one could never truly block out the world. The laughs, the conversations, the clink of glasses, and the stamp of feet. Where lovemaking had to be done in whispers and stifled noises into sleeves and pillows. Here, in his own rooms, where no one could see them, it was just him and Jack, together. "Jack," he said, reaching up to stroke his hand over the ivory bone-like mask of Jack's cheek. "I want you."

Jack gazed back at him. "I want you too, my darling," he said softly.

"Will you take me to bed?" Hugh asked.

Jack smiled, the firelight catching his pointed teeth. "Yes." He had scooped Hugh up in his arms and carried him into the bedroom, setting him gently down on the mattress with a kiss to his forehead.

Hugh swallowed hard and reached for his shirt. Jack mirrored him, reaching for his own clothes, and they silently stripped in the warmth and peace of the small room.

Hugh was curious as he slid off his own clothes if Jack's body was going to be different than a human's, considering his already inhuman appearance about the face. But, as Jack slid his trousers down and off, Hugh saw that he was just as human as he himself, with a finely sculpted chest and stomach, shapely legs, and a thick patch of dark hair that led down to his very human-like prick. He even had dark, rosy nipples on his chest.

He sat back on his bed, naked as a newborn, and held out his arms to Jack. Jack smiled and slid into his arms, stretching them both out on the bed on their sides. Jack's body against his own was warm, like embracing a bag of roasted chestnuts in the wintertime. Jack's hands slid down his bare back in a loving caress, and Hugh realized with a start that the pointed metallic tips of Jack's fingers were no longer there; he had shed them along with the rest of his clothes. He didn't know why he had thought that they were part of the man.

Hugh rolled onto his back, Jack on top of him, their bodies pressed flush to one another as Jack's warmth enveloped him. He sighed as Jack trailed soft kisses down his throat, over his chest, his tongue pausing to lap at one of Hugh's nipples. That was something no one had done before, and Hugh squirmed, gasping. His hands pressed to the sides of Jack's hips. Jack smiled in delight and flicked his tongue over the nub, watching Hugh moan and writhe beneath his ministrations. He nipped ever so lightly at the pink bud with his sharp teeth, careful not to break the skin, and Hugh's back arched a little towards his mouth. Jack moved to the other nipple, giving it the same treatment as it pebbled under his touch. He gave it a slightly harsher nip, watching it turn a darker pink color for a moment, and Hugh gasped. "Jack..."

Jack smiled and kissed down the center of his chest again, his tongue stroking the plane between his ribs and his navel, peppering kisses along the skin. Hugh's fingers slid up his back to tangle lightly in Jack's dark hair, sliding through it, then over his temples to lightly skim the base of the horns there. "May I touch these?" he asked.

“Yes,” Jack replied, giving his stomach a reassuring kiss. “You won’t hurt them.”

Hugh’s fingers brushed them curiously. They were sturdy but surprisingly light. He supposed most of Jack had to be if he was as nimble on his feet as he seemed to be. He stroked his fingers up and down them, and Jack let out a moan. “Does that feel good?” Hugh asked in surprise.

“Very,” Jack purred. Hugh smiled and wrapped his hands lightly around the horns, stroking up and down them lovingly. Jack suddenly ran his tongue over the swollen head of Hugh’s prick. Hugh let out a gasp, his thighs tightening. Jack laved over it with his tongue, stroking long and slow, each one in a different spot to find what made Hugh light up. He nosed lightly at Hugh’s sac, brushing his tongue over it and up the underside of his shaft. Small whimpers of pleasure escaped Hugh’s lips as he shivered beneath Jack’s mouth on him.

And then Jack opened his mouth wide and slid nearly the entire length down Hugh’s shaft. Hugh gasped, his hands squeezing the horns. Heat filled his veins from Jack’s mouth and throat closing around him. Jack slid down to brace himself on either side of Hugh’s hips, starting to bob his throat up and down on Hugh’s length.

Hugh tried to keep himself still as Jack’s hot mouth slid up and down his cock, sending delicious sparks through him, up his spine and down his legs, making his toes curl. “Mmm, Jack,” he breathed. His hands tightened further around the horns, pulling slightly, and he gasped, quickly letting go. “I’m sorry.”

Jack moaned around him, sliding up to the tip to give it a loving suck. “You can use my horns, my darling; you won’t hurt me.”

Hugh blinked, smiling sheepishly. “I’m not very used to this.”

“That’s all right. Allow me to acquaint you with pleasure,” Jack said. He took Hugh’s

hands and wrapped them around his horns again before dipping his head again to take Hugh down his throat. Hugh cried out, his fingers tightening. Jack began to tease him with his tongue, and when he found a particular spot on the underside, Hugh's hands on them gave a little jerk. Jack grinned and repeated the motion. Hugh let out another cry, and Jack bobbed his head to slide over that spot with each movement. His horns with the weight of Hugh's hands acted as leverage, and before too long, Hugh was using the horns to push Jack down onto that spot over and over again, Jack eagerly sliding his mouth over him and letting Hugh steer the angle how he wanted it. Hugh writhed beneath Jack's sinfully delicious mouth, fire building in his belly. "Jack," he warned, and Jack squeezed his thigh encouragingly as he continued to suck him fast and deep. Hugh rutted against him a few more times before the pleasure overwhelmed him, and he spilled himself into Jack's open throat, his hips grinding up toward him of their own accord. Jack continued to lap and stroke over him as Hugh writhed and jumped with little jolts of pleasure traveling down his spine. Only when Hugh sagged against the mattress and had loosened his grip on Jack's horns did he pull back, swallowing what was in his mouth and running his tongue over his lips.

"My sweet darling," he cooed.

Hugh breathed deeply beneath him, chest rising and falling in a steady rhythm as he waited for his heart to stop racing, little lightning strikes of pleasure still coursing through his body. He had closed his eyes at some point, and he opened them now to find Jack still tucked in between his legs, gazing fondly up at him, his cheek resting on Hugh's lower stomach. He gave him a hazy smile. "Wow."

Jack laughed and pressed a kiss to a soft bit of skin. "Wow indeed. I also accept 'amazing' and 'well done, old chap.'"

Hugh snorted a laugh, clapping a hand to his mouth. "You really are too much."

Jack smiled and pressed a soft kiss to Hugh's throat. Hugh felt something warm brush

his thigh and realized that Jack had not yet spent himself. He slid his hand down to grasp his shaft, stroking over it, using the dampness there to ease the movement. Jack moaned against his skin and gave his neck a little nip with his sharp teeth. Hugh gasped, his hand moving faster, and Jack nudged against his neck and kissed down over his shoulder. “Yes,” he encouraged, his hips pushing into Hugh’s touch eagerly. Hugh pulled him up to kiss him as he stroked, and Jack let out a pleading sound against his lips that made Hugh warm all over. He stroked Jack firmly, watching the man’s eyes roll upward before he spilled himself over Hugh’s hand with a loud gasp.

Hugh flushed, continuing to stroke Jack through his pleasure until the man shuddered and rested down against him. Hugh lifted his hand coated in Jack’s seed up to his mouth and licked at it. Jack grinned as he watched him. “You are beautiful.”

Hugh smiled and licked his hand clean before pulling Jack up to rest next to him on the pillow. Jack curled close, spooning behind him on the small bed. Hugh sighed contentedly. If this was what having a soulmate was, he didn’t want it to end. He would have to get ready for work soon, but right now, just lying in Jack’s arms, satiated and content, was incredible. “So, how do you know I’m your soulmate?” he asked curiously, pressing his cheek into Jack’s arm.

Jack hummed thoughtfully. “It’s hard to explain, because I don’t entirely know how it works myself. It’s almost like I can feel you. Like you are at one end of a string, and I am at the other. You pull on the string, and I feel it, no matter where I am.”

“Do you know if I’m in trouble or anything?” Hugh asked curiously.

“No,” Jack said with a heavy, forlorn sigh. “Nothing so nuanced as that, I’m afraid.”

“Just a gut feeling?” Hugh said.

Jack frowned a bit. “A what now?”

Hugh laughed, a bit surprised that Jack did not understand that phrase, considering some of the others he had come up with before. “Your body feels something, even if you don’t know exactly what it is or why.”

“Yes, just like that,” Jack said, pulling him close and pressing a kiss to the side of his neck. “I look at you, and I feel. I feel like the stars have aligned in the universe, like I am under a warm waterfall, like I am watching puppies play in a mud puddle.”

Hugh couldn’t stop a snort of laughter at that. “You’re ridiculous, you know that?”

“Mm, I have wondered if I come on too strong for you,” Jack said, tracing his fingertips lightly over Hugh’s thigh, and Hugh was glad that the metal tips were no longer on them. “But I suppose the universe must know what it’s doing if I am your soulmate.”

Hugh raised a brow. “Are you saying I’m too serious?”

Jack chuckled and nipped lightly at Hugh’s neck again. “Perhaps.”

“I suppose I am,” Hugh said thoughtfully. “Always have been too much in my own head.”

“It’s easy to do,” Jack agreed.

“Does it bother you?” Hugh asked softly.

“Hmm? You being serious?” Hugh nodded. “No, it doesn’t bother me at all,” Jack replied, tracing his fingers over Hugh’s soft sides. “I think sometimes opposites are meant to be together. To support one another. To be the strength where the other might be lacking. It doesn’t always work, of course, but when it does, it creates a beautiful harmony.”

Hugh smiled and hugged Jack's arm tightly. "I hope we can create that harmony together."

"Having hope is always a good first step," Jack replied. "A good second step is a willingness to let go of your soulmate's arm so he can get you some tea."

Hugh couldn't stop a laugh. "Oh, very well," he said with a dramatic roll of his eyes. "I need to get ready for work anyway."

It was strange to have someone to say goodbye to before he left for work. But it was also nice, to know that someone was watching out for him. Hugh cleaned up and dressed in his uniform. He almost didn't want to leave Jack, but he knew he had a job to do, and he would see him later that night, once Jack was able to move around without being spotted as easily. Hugh kissed him goodbye, something he wondered if he would be able to do every day going forward, before he headed out of his apartment and down to the busy London streets to Scotland Yard. Dr. Ledbetter had left him a note that the burned body had been identified and to come see him as soon as he arrived, so Hugh made his way out back to the backyard butchers and the morgue.

He stared down at the charred corpse on the table in front of him in confusion. He knew that the fire had probably burned the creature pretty severely, but what lay on the table now, still smelling of ash and burned meat, was not the monstrous fanged creature that had lunged at him. This was a man, his teeth of average length, his cloudy eyes looking as human as a corpse could. His hands were simply hands, though several of his fingers had been burned almost to the bone.

"Was this what he looked like when he was brought in?" Hugh asked.

Dr. Ledbetter stood next to him and frowned at the question. "I mean, the body has decomposed and collapsed a bit more in that time."



“But his teeth looked like this? They weren’t bigger and sharper?”

Dr. Ledbetter raised a brow behind his spectacles. “No. That is not how teeth work.”

“I know that,” Hugh said with a slight glower at his friend. “But the thing that attacked me was larger and had clawed hands and pointed teeth.”

“Well, this is the body that came in from Prosperity Way.”

That was where he had encountered the creature and its unfortunate victim. Hugh sighed as he studied the body again. The clothing looked right; the battered top hat sitting off to the side appeared to be the one that had been perched on the creature’s head, and the cape, while a bloodied and burned mess, also looked familiar. Another aspect to this strange case that was only getting stranger by the moment. “Who was he?” Hugh asked with a slight frown.

“Viscount Emeril Jardin,” Dr. Ledbetter said. “His brother identified the body, and this,” he pointed to a silver pin on a side table next to the top hat that had survived the blaze, “is their family crest.”

“A viscount,” Hugh said with a frown. A viscount attacking a prostitute in the street would be unusual but certainly not unheard of. The rich often thought that the law did not apply to them, since they had any amount of money to buy their way out of trouble. That was often the way of the world, he knew, but that certainly did not make it right.

Dr. Ledbetter nodded. “I have already spoken with Sergeant Reardon. There will be an inquest as required, but the death will be attributed to an accident.”

“An accident?” Hugh said with a frown. “He butchered that poor young man.”

“From what I have been told, he stumbled upon the man who was already dead, and when he leaned down to see if he was still alive, his cloak was ignited by the lamp he had with him.”

Hugh frowned darkly. “That’s complete and utter bullshit.”

Ledbetter gave Hugh a pointed look. “I know that, and you know that, Hugh, but we have to play the game the rich people are playing.”

“Even if that means he gets away with murder?” Hugh demanded.

“That is not my call to make,” Dr. Ledbetter said, though he sounded highly apologetic.

Hugh sighed in frustration and rubbed at his eyes. “Nathan, do you believe in the supernatural?”

His friend looked up at him in surprise. “You mean, ghosts and the like?”

“Something like that,” Hugh said. “Ghosts, monsters, demons, any of that?”

Ledbetter stroked his beard in thought. “I’m a man of science, Hugh. Whether I believe in it or not, I’ve never seen a ghost or a demon, and the only monsters I know of are the human ones who kill other humans. Plenty of those around.”

“But do you think they could exist? That monsters, actual monsters, could exist?” Hugh asked.

Dr. Ledbetter sighed. “I think it’s a possibility. There is plenty we don’t know about our world. But whether they are running around the streets of London, well... That, I don’t know that I could believe as easily.”

Hugh nodded. If he hadn't seen it for himself, smelled the blood in the air and the rot of flesh, felt the mind-numbing terror as those vicious teeth turned to him in the darkness, he might have agreed with his friend. Monsters and ghouls were for the dark forests and foggy moors, not the gaslit streets of London. But they were real. And Jack was real. He was alive because of that.

"I examined the contents of the viscount's stomach," Ledbetter said, gesturing to a glass jar filled with a gunky fluid that was tinged bright red with blood, and Hugh felt his own stomach squeeze. He quickly turned his eyes back to the doctor. "I found a fair bit of human tissue in it. Some pieces of organ, bits of bone. What I could distinguish matches the damage done to the young man found in the alley with him. But I found something else in his stomach as well."

"Oh?" Hugh asked when it seemed that Ledbetter was waiting for his reply. Dramatic bastard...

"In addition, I found apple and pastry in it. Some sort of apple pie or cobbler, perhaps?"

Hugh blinked. "Apple pastry?"

Dr. Ledbetter nodded. "Yes. And remnants of alcohol and a half-digested meal of beef and carrots. But he would have eaten this pastry shortly before he died. Perhaps an hour at most. It was barely digested, like the human flesh."

Apple was common, but it was a starting point. "Did you also finish the autopsy on the victim?"

"I did," Dr. Ledbetter said, gesturing him over to another table. The youth's soft blond hair was clumped with dirt and clots of blood, his eyes wide and staring at nothing, his mouth gaping open in a silent scream. He looked terrified, and, based on

what he had encountered in the alley, Hugh could not blame him. Dr. Ledbetter gestured to the table behind them. “Not much remarkable about him, I’m afraid. A few coins in his pockets, and a small tin of hand cream. But I did find one thing interesting.” Dr. Ledbetter used a pair of forceps to lift something that was wadded up in a tight ball. He held it up for Hugh to get a better look at it.

It was a piece of gold paper. It was crumpled into a ball and nearly soaked through with dried blood. Only the corner Dr. Ledbetter held it by was clear of blood, with a greasy spot on it. Hugh frowned. “Where did you find this?”

“In the chest cavity,” Dr. Ledbetter said, gesturing to the young man on the table. “Not like he had swallowed it though. I am fairly certain it fell in there from someone bending over him, and it absorbed his blood.”

“Someone bending over him,” Hugh said with a frown. “You mean, like the murderer?”

“Plausible,” Dr. Ledbetter said.

“Did the viscount have anything like this paper on him?”

“No, but if he did, it’s also very likely it would have been destroyed when he ignited. I would guess that, if the viscount is indeed the one who murdered the young man, this fell out of his pocket after the chest was ripped open, and he was too distracted to notice it.”

“Too busy eating him,” Hugh mumbled.

“Yes,” Dr. Ledbetter said with a wrinkle of his nose. “That.”

“What sort of paper is it?” Hugh asked, examining it as best he could in the fading

light from the window and the flickering gas lamps.

“As near as I can tell, it looks like decorative folding paper, but this grease spot leads me to think that it was perhaps used by a food stall or restaurant, to wrap around something,” Dr. Ledbetter said. “If it was recent, and not left over from some other time, my money would be on the apple pastry. Meat and potatoes seem an unlikely culprit.”

Hugh would agree with that assessment, though he had never seen a place that used gold paper such as that. Most places used simple brown paper, or even newsprint for greasy things like fish and chips. Of course, assuming that was the case, tracking it down might be next to impossible. Apples were a common ingredient, as was flour and sugar. There were hundreds of bakeries and food stalls just in London by itself, and that did not include the home bakers.

“Were you able to identify the victim?” he asked, motioning to the young man, whose lifeless eyes stared up at the ceiling, as if he was shocked to be there. Blood spattered his face, but Hugh could see that he was young and handsome, like the other recent victims.

Dr. Ledbetter shook his head. “Unfortunately, no. One of the inspectors took a photograph to put out to see if anyone recognizes him. I will let you know if I hear anything.”

Hugh nodded. For right now, the young man would have to wait to receive the justice he deserved.

“These killings remind me of the Ripper murders and the torso murders,” Ledbetter mused, stroking his graying chestnut beard thoughtfully. “The killer of those women was never found. The attacks were savage, committed mostly on the street where anyone could come upon them, and committed mainly against prostitutes or other

destitute individuals.”

“Do you think that one of the killers of these young men might be Jack the Ripper?” Hugh asked curiously.

“I suppose it’s possible,” the doctor said. “The savagery is there. But those murders were much more precise and methodical. These slayings are more frantic. Animalistic, even. It would be strange for someone to kill so precisely and then suddenly devolve into this level of violence. Even if the killer’s mind was becoming more unstable, his experience and handiwork would likely improve, not reach this level of unhinged ferocity.”

The last thing they needed was a killer like Jack the Ripper preying on the vulnerable people of London. The viscount was dead, but Jack had said that he had seen a different creature running away from Christopher’s body that first night. And that still left many unanswered questions, not the least of which was, what caused the strange transformation from man to beast to man again?

“I suppose a good next step would be to visit the home of the viscount and see if his widow or his servants can tell me anything about what his plans were for that evening,” Hugh said, glancing over the blood-stained gold paper once more.

Dr. Ledbetter nodded. “Good luck, Constable. I have a feeling you’re going to need it.”

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:16 pm*

### Chapter nine

Hugh hated to intrude upon a family so soon into their mourning, but memories were fleeting. So, he took a hackney to Elm Square, where the front of the viscount's townhouse had been draped in black mourning silk and a black wreath hung on the door. He knocked on the door, and it was answered by a young maid with a black armband around her upper right arm. "Hello, miss," he said, giving her a gracious nod. "I am Constable Hugh Danbury, of the Metropolitan Police. Is your mistress in?"

"She is, sir, but I'm afraid she's quite unwell," the maid said with a polite curtsy. "Took to her bed when the news of Master Emeril arrived."

He was sure it had been a shock. "I understand. Is there someone else with whom I might speak? I have some questions pertaining to the investigation into what happened."

"Yes, sir." The girl curtsied again. "Please, come in. I'll fetch the housekeeper."

"Thank you, miss," Hugh said, stepping inside the parlor where the girl gestured. She turned and hurried off, leaving him alone in the room. The mantle looked as though it were made of marble, a warm fire glowing behind a cut-glass screen to keep away the autumn chill. The furniture was polished and brightly upholstered, with no visible patches or repairs. Several porcelain figurines stood on the mantle, and he studied them. His mother had loved porcelain figurines, though she could not afford many of them.

A soft trod of feet alerted him to the arrival of the housekeeper. She was a round-faced woman, her graying dark hair swept up into a simple bun. Her gray dress was modest, and she too had a black mourning band around her upper arm. She gave him a polite smile as she entered. "Good afternoon, sir. I'm Mrs. Pitman, the housekeeper. Please, sit." She gestured to one of the chairs that Hugh guessed was worth more than his entire month's salary. He sat down uneasily on the edge of it, and Mrs. Pitman took a seat on a matching chaise.

"I am very sorry for your loss," Hugh said, giving her a sympathetic smile. "It must have come as quite a shock."

"Oh, yes," Mrs. Pitman said with a rusty sigh. "Tragic."

"How is Lady Jardin holding up?"

"She has never had great health, and Lord Jardin's death was quite overwhelming for her," Mrs. Pitman said. Hugh noticed that she hadn't actually answered the question, but he let it go.

"I can imagine," he said. "I do have some questions about Lord Jardin from last night."

Mrs. Pitman nodded. "I will answer what I can, sir."

"Last night before he went out, what did the viscount have for dinner?"

"Oh." Mrs. Pitman seemed surprised by this question and had to think for a moment. "Roast beef, and pickled vegetables."

"What about dessert?"



Mrs. Pitman shook her head. “No, sir. He never had much of a sweet tooth.”

“So, you did not prepare anything with apples in it?” Hugh asked.

“Oh, heavens, no!” Mrs. Pitman said. “We don’t even have apples in the house, sir. I’m allergic to ‘em, you see. Break out in hives if I even touch them.”

“Oh!” Hugh said. “But did Viscount Jardin eat apples?”

“Sometimes, sir. Lady Jardin, she likes blueberry tarts from this bakery on Fleet Street, and I think the viscount would get some apple turnovers for himself. Actually, last night, sir, he sent lil’ Robbie out to that bakery. Robbie’s the groom’s son, runs errands and the like.”

Hugh raised a brow, making notes on his notepad. “What time was this?”

“Oh, he sent him out... must have been shortly after five or so. Dinner was at six, her ladyship likes to retire early on account of her health. Robbie came back as dinner was finishing.”

“I see,” Hugh said slowly. “Do you know what the viscount did after he ate dinner?”

“Let’s see... He took his brandy and a cigar, like he usually does. Her ladyship went to bed, and he went up and changed clothes, said he was going to go out.”

“What did he change into?”

“Out of his dinner jacket, at least, sir. He had his top hat and his black cape on when he left.”

That was what both the creature and the charred corpse of the viscount had been

wearing. Hugh nodded thoughtfully. “After he changed clothes, what happened?”

Mrs. Pitman rubbed her hands on her apron. “Before her ladyship went to bed, she did have one of the tarts Robbie had brought back. I know because Lord Jardin brought the plate to the dining room and handed it to me. I was finishing clearing the table. He said he was going out, and then he left.”

“Did he say where he was going or if he was meeting anyone?” Hugh asked.

Mrs. Pitman shook her head. “No, sir. I know he sometimes goes to one of those fancy gentlemen’s clubs, but I couldn’t say if that was where he went last night.”

Hugh made another note. “Do you know which clubs he frequented?”

“I couldn’t say, sir,” Mrs. Pitman said. “He did not take his horse or his carriage though, the groom would have mentioned it to me.”

Hugh frowned as he studied his notes. A possible visit to a gentlemen’s club, which was hardly unusual for upper class men to do, did not give him much to go on. “And he did not return home again?”

“No, sir.”

Hugh nodded, looking around the room as he tried to think if there was anything else, anything at all, that might help trace the viscount’s whereabouts. His eyes flicked to the little porcelain figurines and their gold-edged gilt wings. “Oh. Do you know, did he have anything wrapped in gold paper?”

Mrs. Pitman looked surprised, and she smoothed her apron with her liver-spotted hand. “As a matter of fact, yes. The basket with the tarts Robbie had fetched from the bakery was still on the sideboard. Before he left, he did take something out of it.

Wrapped in gold paper, it was.”

“What was in it?” Hugh asked.

“He didn’t open it, sir, but it was like this.” She made a few motions with her hands to indicate the size. “He left with it.”

“Still wrapped in the gold paper?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Do you think it came from the bakery?”

“I figure it must’ve, sir. It was in the basket with her ladyship’s tarts.”

“There was apple and pastry found in the viscount’s stomach, along with the remains of dinner,” Hugh said. “Could it have been an apple pastry of some kind?”

“Oh, certainly, it was about that size,” Mrs. Pitman agreed.

“I am going to need the name and address of that bakery,” Hugh said.

“Yes, of course,” Mrs. Pitman said, rising to her feet. She moved over to the desk, writing something down before handing it to him. “Is there anything else I can help you with at this time, Constable?”

Hugh took the paper with a grateful smile. “One more question, ma’am. Lord and Lady Jardin, how was their relationship?”

Mrs. Pitman’s polite smile suddenly froze on her face, and Hugh knew he had touched on something with his question.

“I do not wish to speak ill of the dead, sir,” she said, clasping her hands in front of her.

“The dead cannot hurt us, ma’am. It is the living we should be concerned about,” Hugh said with what he hoped was an encouraging smile.

Mrs. Pitman slowly sat down on the edge of the chair, leaning closer to him and dropping her voice a bit. “Lord Jardin, he is- or rather, was a... complicated man. Never been one to show much affection, even towards his wife, delicate thing that she is. Sort of gruff and stubborn. A bit of bulldog in him, I’m convinced.”

“Did he hit Lady Jardin?” Hugh asked.

“No,” Mrs. Pitman said, shaking her head gravely. “Not with his fists. But his words, certainly. To be honest, I don’t think she’s all that upset that he’s gone. I never did like the way he treated her ladyship either.”

Hugh nodded and rose to his feet. “I have taken up enough of your time. Thank you very much, ma’am.” He patted the pocket where her folded paper lay. “I shall continue my investigation. My apologies again on your loss.”

Once out of the house and inside the hackney, Hugh pulled out the folded piece of paper. Elysium Bakery and Emporium, it read, with an address on Fleet Street. Hugh glanced out the window. It was getting dark now; most bakeries closed around sundown, as the bakers were often up quite early in the morning to prepare the daily wares. He figured he might have better luck going to the bakery tomorrow. He returned to The Yard to write up some notes before he went out on his patrol in the dark, making sure he had both his lantern and his truncheon at the ready. Jack had said there was at least one more of these creatures running around the streets. As much as he didn’t want to encounter another of these monstrous beings or find any more corpses, he also wanted to find out what was causing these strange occurrences.

And hopefully live through it.

Jack

Jack was surprisingly on edge with Hugh gone. Hugh had locked the apartment door, with Jack's reassurances that he could easily get in and out via the bedroom window. As if something as simple as a locked door could keep Spring-Heeled Jack in, or out! But he also understood Hugh's trepidation about him being out when people could still easily spot him.

He was curious what was causing this sudden appearance of monstrosities. It had to be the reason that he was here, why the universe had suddenly summoned him to his soulmate. And Hugh had a good heart. He had seen that the moment he first observed him talking to witnesses and his fellow officers after Christopher's murder. And their first shared kisses and caresses had been divine.

He impatiently waited for the sun to go down; the final sliver of sunlight had just vanished over the horizon when he threw open the bedroom window to leap onto the rooftop of the nearby building. To his credit, he did try to be as quiet and stealthy as possible. He wanted Hugh to be proud of his sneaking abilities, but even more so, he wanted to make sure that Hugh was safe.

True to his word, Jack kept an eye out for options to hide his horns. Many of the ladies wore large hats, with bright colors, feathers, ribbons, and other fancy things attached to them. Jack thought he would look rather fetching in a large, plumed hat, but unfortunately, the style for men was much less ostentatious. He observed several men on the streets, wearing various types of hats upon their heads, before deciding the tall ones would likely serve his purpose. He had overheard someone call it a 'top hat,' which seemed rather silly. Of course, a hat went on top.

He found a shop that had a display of wooden heads out front with a variety of hats.

He picked up one of the top hats and slid it carefully over his horns. There was a little silver mirror there, and he picked it up to admire himself. Satan's bonnet, he looked rather dashing! The brim of the top hat shaded his bonfire eyes a little; he might even be able to pass for human at a glance. Hugh would be so proud!

Jack was no thief, of course. He took a handful of coins from his pocket. He had no idea what the currency of his current location looked like, so he just dropped all of them next to the empty wooden head before taking to the rooftops again. An actual gentleman would walk on the streets, but Jack was too impatient to find Hugh and make sure he was safe, and using the roofs was much faster. He could move quite quickly when he wanted to, both running and jumping, so he made quick work of the distance between Hugh's home and Scotland Yard.

It only took him a few minutes to find Hugh on patrol. The young man looked so handsome in his police uniform. Jack admired him from the roof for a moment before he slid almost silently down a pipe attached to the building, landing on the ledge of a second-floor window just above Hugh's head.

"No murder tonight?" he asked, gazing down at Hugh from the window ledge.

Hugh looked up, and the smile that crossed his face at seeing him was the most beautiful thing Jack had ever seen. "So far, so good. I like the hat."

"I just picked it up," Jack replied, hopping down to land next to him. He touched the brim of the hat the way he had seen other men do. "Do I pass for a gentleman? Or am I still a scoundrel?"

Hugh chuckled. "Keep your cape around you while we're out, and you should look respectable enough. We'll have to find you something to cover your chest."

"I thought you liked it," Jack said with a playful grin at Hugh.

Hugh's cheeks went pink; he really was so easily flustered by Jack's flirting. "I do," he said softly. "But if you want to pass for human, you won't want to attract attention."

Jack rolled his eyes and gave a playful yawn. "You are the one who wants me to pass for human, my dear Hugh. I am perfectly happy to be Spring-Heeled Jack."

"Point taken," Hugh said. They drifted over to the shadow of the building, and Hugh recounted his conversation with Dr. Ledbetter and the strange appearance of the body.

The details about the viscount's changed appearance from the monstrous creature back to his human form was rather troubling, Jack thought. "I suppose that whatever is causing the transformation may be begun and ended at will. Or perhaps it only can be maintained while the person is alive. That does, of course, present quite an interesting problem."

Hugh nodded in slight frustration. "Because it could be anyone, and we may not know who it is before it's too late."

"Precisely," Jack said.

"There's no indications that you're aware of that differentiate these monsters from other people?"

"Such as?" Jack asked curiously.

Hugh shrugged. "I don't know. An aura? A smell?"

"Good heavens, Hugh, I am not a bloodhound," Jack replied with a good-natured roll of his eyes. "No, I'm afraid there is nothing distinct about these creatures compared

to any other humans.”

“Oh! There was also something found on the victim’s body, inside the chest cavity,” Hugh said. “A crumpled piece of gold paper, like it had fallen as the killer devoured the victim.”

“Gold paper?” Jack asked thoughtfully.

Hugh nodded. “I may have a lead on that too.” He told Jack about his conversation with Mrs. Pitman regarding the viscount’s final meal and leaving out the door with a gold paper-wrapped parcel.

“It would stand to reason that they are one and the same!” Jack said, slapping his knee in excitement. “Jupiter’s jellyfish, you are an excellent investigator! Well done, Hugh!”

Hugh flushed a little. “Well, it is my job.”

“Indeed, but that is most exceptional sleuthing. What is the next step?”

“I’m going to visit the bakery tomorrow,” Hugh said. “See if I can learn anything about the viscount. Unfortunately, beyond the gold paper, I have no idea what I’m looking for.”

“A decent start anyway!” Jack declared. “We shall investigate the bakery forthwith!”

“We?” Hugh asked. “Jack, you can’t go with me.”

Jack frowned. “But I hid my horns,” he said, a slight pout in his voice. Hadn’t that been what Hugh asked him to do?



“Yes, but you still don’t look human enough in daylight,” Hugh replied. He reached up his hand and touched it to Jack’s chest. The warmth there sent a thrill through Jack, and he placed his own hand over Hugh’s. “I know you want to come with me and protect me, and I appreciate it, I really do. But for things like this, you have to let me do my job.”

Jack heaved a deep sigh. “Very well, I understand. But please promise me that you will take someone with you to the bakery in case of trouble?”

Hugh smiled and squeezed his hand tightly. “I will,” he promised.

Hugh

The next afternoon, Hugh enlisted Constable Depesh to go with him to the Elysium Bakery and Emporium in Fleet Street. It was a nice-looking two-story building with a staircase on the outside of the building that looked like it led up to a set of rooms above. They arrived during what must have been the dinner rush, as the shop was quite busy, so they wandered about, looking at the various shelves. While the bakery had many pastries and confections, it also held a number of colorful bottles with neatly printed labels that were oddly generic. ‘For Finding Love,’ read one. ‘For Health,’ read another. There were also packs of tarot cards stacked neatly on a shelf, and, besides that, a display of necklaces with colorful crystals dangling from them.

Depesh ran his finger over the box of one of the tarot cards. “Strange thing to have in a bakery,” he murmured.

Hugh nodded. “Perhaps that is the ‘emporium’ part. But I agree, it does seem odd.”

Depesh picked up the ‘For Finding Love’ potion in a bright red bottle, turning it around to read the back. “Really just seems like a novelty,” he said. “Simple ingredients, though there’s enough alcohol and opium to make anyone feel like they

might be in love.”

Hugh chuckled, examining one of the necklaces that had a fiery red stone that reminded him of Jack’s eyes. “You don’t believe in magic?”

Depesh frowned thoughtfully as he replaced the bottle on the shelf. “I don’t really know. I wouldn’t discount it.”

The shop had cleared out enough for them to speak to the girl behind the counter now. She looked to be in her late teens, and she tossed her strawberry blond hair over her shoulder as she smiled at the two police officers. “Good afternoon, gentlemen. How may I help you?”

“Hello, miss,” Hugh said, nodding to her. “My name is Constable Hugh Danbury, and this is Constable Rezal Depesh. Do you know the owner of this shop?”

“My father and mother own it, and they do most of the baking too.” She glanced between them. “Is there a problem?”

“No problem. We just have a few questions about a recent customer.”

The girl smiled again, still looking a bit uneasy. “Perhaps I can help?”

“Perhaps,” Hugh said, giving her a reassuring smile. “What is your name?”

“Prudence, sir. Prudence Wilcox. My father is Hamish Wilcox, and my mother is Elizabeth.”

“Miss Wilcox,” Hugh said, giving her a polite nod. “This is quite the fine shop.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“When was this bakery opened?”

“Only last year, sir,” Prudence said.

“Only a year in business, and you seem to be doing quite well,” Hugh said, glancing around at all of the brightly colored bottles of tinctures and the glass domes over delicious-looking cakes, the airy curtains that fluttered in the breeze.

“Yes, sir. My father is a very good baker,” Prudence said.

“What else do you sell besides pastries?” Depesh asked, motioning to the bottles and tarot cards.

Prudence giggled softly. “My parents are quite the believers in the mystical. My mother believes crystals and potions can solve most of life’s problems. She reads the cards for women who come into the shop sometimes too.”

Hugh didn’t want to get too sidetracked from the reason they were here. “Tell me, Miss Wilcox. Do you use gold paper to wrap any of your pastries?”

Prudence stared at him in surprise. “Gold paper?” Hugh nodded. Prudence frowned thoughtfully. “Not that I know of, sir. We use the usual brown paper. My mother does like to do paper folding, and I know she has some gold paper upstairs. But we don’t use it down here in the bakery.”

“What sorts of clients do you usually have?” Depesh asked, looking around the shop again.

Prudence shrugged. “All kinds, sir.”

“Would you know if one of them is Viscount Emeril Jardin? Perhaps his boy, Robbie,

or his housekeeper, Mrs. Pitman?"

"Oh, yes, sir," Prudence said with a nod. "Robbie was in here just a few days ago for the viscount. And a few more days before that too."

"Is that common for him to be here that frequently?" Hugh asked.

Prudence shook her head. "No, sir. We usually only get an order from them once a month or so. But my father had a special request from the viscount."

"What sort of special request?" Depesh asked.

"It was only one thing," Prudence said. "An apple turnover."

Hugh frowned thoughtfully. That matched up with the apple pastry found in the viscount's stomach shortly before he died, and Mrs. Pitman's story that he had taken a gold-wrapped pastry from the basket out with him. "What is so special about these apple turnovers?"

"I don't rightly know, sir," Prudence said, frowning a bit. "They don't look any different than our usual ones."

"Where do you get your apples?" Hugh asked.

"Most of them are grown outside the city, and the farmers bring them in fresh every week."

"Do you know which farm?"

"I'm afraid I don't, sir. I could ask my father if you need to know."

Hugh wasn't sure if that information would do them any good or not in this investigation, but it couldn't hurt to ask. "If you could find out, that would be excellent."

Prudence nodded, just as the door opened with a cheerful jangle of bells, letting in several ladies who made a beeline for the counter. "I'll ask tonight, sirs, if you want to stop back tomorrow?"

"Thank you," Hugh said, giving her a polite bow, and Depesh did the same. "We appreciate your time, Miss Wilcox."

Prudence nodded and gave them a sweet smile before turning to the women who were oohing and ahing over some little macarons in the display case. Hugh and Depesh walked outside into the late afternoon sun. Depesh turned to Hugh with a hopeful expression. "Learn anything useful?"

Hugh sighed. "I don't think so. At least I know I have the right location. But what an apple turnover wrapped in gold paper has to do with this whole thing, I don't understand."

"It's such an odd detail," Depesh agreed. "Have the coroners identified the victim the viscount was... found with?"

"Not yet," Hugh said. "Hopefully his identity will give us an idea where to look next."

### Chapter ten

FIRE RAGES THROUGH FLEET STREET, DESTROYS BELOVED BAKERY, FIVE DEAD, read the headline in the paper the next morning. Hugh stared at the photograph there in shock. Where only yesterday he had stood inside the Elysium Emporium and spoken to Prudence Wilcox, there was now only a pile of ashes and cinders. He read through the article, which mentioned that the fire seemed to have started in the back of the shop at one of the ovens and spread quickly. Five victims were listed, though their names were not. Hugh wondered if sweet Miss Prudence had been amongst them. It seemed likely.

“I don’t think this was a coincidence,” Depesh said when he and Hugh arrived at The Yard to prepare for their shift. “You identified the location of the gold paper, and that night it goes up in flames?”

“And the fact that it sounds like the family who owned it appears to have perished in the fire as well,” Hugh added.

Depesh nodded, swiping at his nose with his handkerchief. “That poor girl. Do you think she found something that could have given us insight into this investigation?”

Hugh shrugged. “I wish I knew.”

“Danbury!” came a call from one of the other constables. “The backyard butchers want a word with you!”

“Thank you,” Hugh said, waving at the man. Depesh looked like he might turn green

again, and Hugh gave his friend's arm a reassuring pat. "I'll go myself. I'll catch up with you later."

Depesh nodded and hurried away. Hugh made his way through the police station to the morgue at the back, stepping inside the building and finding Dr. Ledbetter in front of another blackened corpse. That was starting to become a familiar sight, though this one was not Spring-Heeled Jack's doing.

"Ah, Hugh," Ledbetter said, glancing up at him. He motioned to a sheet of paper on his nearby desk. "I received an identification on that boy the viscount was eating."

He said it with such casual bluntness that Hugh almost laughed. He picked up the sheet. Joseph Cumberland, a known thief and prostitute. He had been arrested several times for soliciting gentlemen in the area near where he had been found, though never caught en flagrante . There was no address listed; Hugh wondered if the young man had had a home to go to or if he simply slept on the streets, as many of London's poor did.

"Hmm," Ledbetter said, examining the corpse in front of him curiously.

Hugh glanced up. "What is 'hmm?'"

"It's odd," Ledbetter said. "This corpse was obviously burned in the fire, but there is no sign of smoke inhalation."

"What does that mean?" Hugh asked with a frown, coming up to stand beside the table. He didn't know much about anatomy, but the insides of the person currently cut open upon the table did not look burned to him the way he would have expected someone in a blazing inferno to look.

"It means, he was dead before the fire was started," Ledbetter said, gesturing to the

lumps of charcoal that made up the bodies on the tables. “I will have to examine the rest of them to see if it’s the same. Unfortunately, with the state they are in, if they were not killed by the fire, I don’t know that I can determine a cause of death.” He reached up to open the corpse’s mouth, peering inside of it with a lighted lamp. “Hmm. Missing his front teeth, this one.” Hugh followed his gaze. Sure enough, the blackened corpse was missing its top two front teeth. “Yes, no sign of ash or burning in the airway. Definitely was dead before the fire started,” Ledbetter was mumbling to himself.

“Are his teeth being missing recent?” Hugh asked.

Ledbetter shook his head. “No. No blemishes or bruises or anything in the area. Probably was a past incident in his life.”

“Did you receive all five victims here?” Hugh asked, glancing around at the cloth-draped shapes on the tables. One of them looked a little more petite, about the size of Prudence, and his heart gave a sad little drop in his chest.

Ledbetter nodded. “I did. Haven’t had a chance to check out the others yet though.”

“Keep me informed, thank you,” Hugh said, giving him a polite nod, which Ledbetter returned without looking up from the corpse in front of him.

Hugh made his way back inside, sure that the scent of smoke and burned flesh would not be coming out of his nose or his uniform any time soon. Depesh was sitting at his desk and waved him over, holding up a sheaf of paper. “I was able to get the inspector’s notes about what we know about the bakery fire so far.”

“Great work,” Hugh said, sliding into the seat across from him. “The bakery had four employees,” Depesh said, studying the report. “Miss Wilcox, her father, his wife, and another bloke.”



“Four?” Hugh asked. “Who was the fifth body found in the bakery then?”

Depesh shrugged his shoulders. “No idea. All they know is that it was a man.”

That only left several million possibilities. Hugh sighed to himself. Who was the fifth victim in the fire? A friend? A customer? A good Samaritan who had been in the wrong place at the wrong time?

“Oh, curious detail though, he had no front teeth,” Depesh said.

“Dr. Ledbetter showed him to me,” Hugh replied. His tongue traced over his own top teeth thoughtfully. Many people, especially those who were not well off, did not have the money to afford proper dental care or to be able to have false teeth made if they lost some. He knew there were probably hundreds, if not thousands, of men in England who might fit that description, but it was still a place to start if he was able to find a way to determine his name and what his body was doing at the bakery. He picked up the newspaper again to study the article and the photographs.

Hugh glanced up as a shadow suddenly fell over both of them. It was an older man, his clothes clean but old and well-worn. He had large, bushy muttonchops, and he held his cap in his hands. “Excuse me, sorry to interrupt,” he said, glancing nervously between them. Hugh thought he looked a bit like an oversized rabbit, quivery and wide-eyed.

“Yes, sir, can we help you?” Depesh asked politely.

“I’d like to report a missing person,” the man said, twisting the brim of his hat with his gnarled fingers.

“Oh.” Hugh glanced around the room, but no one else seemed to be taking much interest in the shabbily-dressed man. “Yes, of course. I can take of that for you.” He

nodded at Depesh before he moved over to his own desk, gestured for the man to sit in the chair across from him as he picked up his pen. “What is the name of the missing?”

“John Henries,” the man said.

“And what is your name, sir?”

“Michael Rhodes.”

“Thank you, Mr. Rhodes. How old is Mr. Henries?”

“I’m not exactly sure, sir, but probably late thirties.”

Hugh wrote down the details. “Do you have a picture of him, by chance?”

“No, sir,” Mr. Rhodes said, crinkling his hat in his hands again.

“That’s all right. What is your relationship to Mr. Henries?”

“We both work for the same man, sir. The Duke of Westchester.”

Hugh nodded. “What is his position there?”

“He is a gardener, sir, for the orchard at His Grace’s estate. And he also helps me in the stables.”

“You work in the stables at the Duke’s estate?”

“Yes, sir.”

Hugh nodded. "I see. How long ago did Mr. Henries disappear?"

"Yesterday afternoon, sir," Mr. Rhodes said.

"And he did not say where he was going?"

"No, sir," Mr. Rhodes said, twisting the hat brim so severely that Hugh worried it would never return to its original shape. "I asked His Grace about it, and he told me that John had left to go deal with a family emergency and probably would not be back for some time."

Hugh blinked and looked up at him. "And you do not believe this explanation?"

"Well, sir..." Mr. Rhodes swallowed. "I would, except I had been talkin' to John just minutes before he vanished, and he was going to help me with one of the mares who was expecting a foal any day now. He was very excited about it. And, when I checked his room last night, his things were still there. Nothin' had been touched. But then this morning, everything was gone. Not a scrap left in it. Which seems mighty odd if he was going to be comin' back."

"Can you describe the last conversation you had with Mr. Henries?" Hugh asked.

Mr. Rhodes nodded. "It was very normal, sir. We talked about the mare, and John said to come get him any time of the day or night when she started to labor. He wanted to be there. He loved that horse, sir. Always had a soft spot for animals, he did. This was by the stables, sir. And then he headed for the orchard, and I didn't see him again."

"And you do not think that he had to rush away due to a family matter?"

"That's what I thought, sir," Mr. Rhodes said. "But all of his things still there, no

horses missing from the stable, and no one having seen him go, it just... It didn't sit right with me, sir. It's very unlike him. He's usually very responsible. I can't see him leavin' without telling someone. And no one I talked to mentioned a call or a letter arriving for him."

Hugh frowned as he made notes on the paper. While it was still possible that Mr. Henries had vanished due to a sudden emergency that had called him away, the fact that no one saw him leave was concerning.

"Can you describe him?"

"Hmm, a little taller than me," the man said, gesturing with his hand. "Pretty slender, brown hair. Not much to look at, a sort of forgettable face, except for his teeth."

"What about his teeth?" Hugh asked.

"Poor man had no top front teeth," the man said, pointing to his own yellowed ones in demonstration. "Got kicked in the face by a horse when he was a teenager, swallowed 'em both, never had the money to get false ones."

Hugh's mind immediately went back to the fifth corpse lying in the morgue only a short distance away. A tall, slender man with no front teeth. Could that man, burned beyond recognition, who disappeared the evening of the fire at Elysium, be John Henries, the missing gardener? It could just be a coincidence, but Hugh was getting a sinking feeling in his gut that things were starting to fall into place. "Do you know if John Henries had any connection to the Elysium Bakery and Emporium in Fleet Street?"

"Oh! Yes, sir, that was part of the reason I wanted to report him missing," Mr. Rhodes said, rubbing at one of his muttonchops uneasily. "You see, he disappeared yesterday, and then that fire happened last night. And his sister, Elizabeth, worked in

a bakery, and I thought it was on Fleet Street. I heard there were some poor souls found dead inside. Just curdles my stomach, sir, that it might be John's family, and he might not know. Or..." Mr. Rhodes' voice dropped off, giving Hugh a pained look. Hugh could read the unspoken, Or he might be amongst them in those eyes.

"Elizabeth what?" Hugh asked.

"Oh, um... Williams? Willburn?"

"Wilcox?" Hugh suggested, and the man's eyes lit up.

"Yeah, that's it. Elizabeth Wilcox."

"Did Elizabeth have a daughter?"

"Yes. Miss Prue. Sweet thing, always has a smile on her face."

"Have you met Mrs. Wilcox or her daughter?"

Mr. Rhodes nodded. "Once or twice, sir, I went with John when he was making a delivery to the bakery. They buy fruit from the Duke's estate."

Hugh recalled Prudence telling him that they bought their fruit from a farm outside of the city. "What kind of fruit?"

"Apples, mainly, sir. Some rhubarb and blueberries too."

"How often were the deliveries?"

"About once a week, depending on the season."

Hugh swallowed hard before he said, “I do not wish to alarm you, Mr. Rhodes, but we do have a corpse back in the morgue who sounds like it might fit your description of Mr. Henries. Would you be willing to take a look and see if you can identify him? We have not had a positive identification of him yet.”

“Oh.” Mr. Rhodes’ face fell. “Oh, poor fellow... I... Yes, I suppose I can do that.”

Hugh nodded and rose to his feet. Mr. Rhodes followed him up, his hat wadded into a tight ball in his hands. “This way,” he said, keeping his voice as gentle as he could. “I will warn you, sir, the bodies are not in good condition due to the fire.”

Mr. Rhodes nodded miserably. “Yes, sir, I understand. But if it’s John, I’d rather know so we can all be at peace.”

Hugh nodded and led him outside and down the short path to the morgue. He knocked on the door as a courtesy to the team inside before opening the door to lead Mr. Rhodes in. Dr. Ledbetter looked up from another corpse he was working on, then quickly pulled a sheet over it. “Hello, Constable Danbury.”

“Good afternoon, doctor,” Hugh said, giving him a polite smile. “This is Mr. Rhodes. Can you show him the man you showed me earlier from the bakery fire? It’s possible it may be someone missing from the estate he works at.”

“Yes, of course,” Dr. Ledbetter said, moving a few tables away to another table with a sheet draped over it. Mr. Rhodes followed him to stand by the head. Dr. Ledbetter folded down the sheet enough to expose the man’s face. Empty eye sockets stared blankly at nothing, blackened skin cracked and flaking. The corpse’s lips peeled back from its mouth in a gruesome grimace, revealing the missing top front teeth. Mr. Rhodes clapped a hand to his mouth.

“Yes, that’s John,” he said, sounding a little faint. “That chip there on the sharp tooth,

that's definitely him."

Dr. Ledbetter quickly flipped the sheet back over the corpse. "I'm so sorry," Hugh said, gesturing to Mr. Rhodes to follow him out again, giving Dr. Ledbetter a grateful nod that the older man returned.

Mr. Rhodes hurried out of the deadhouse, leaning down with his hands on his knees to suck in air once they were enough away that the smell of decay did not completely permeate the air. Hugh debated patting the man's back in reassurance but wasn't sure if his touch would be appreciated at the moment, so he just let the man breathe until he straightened up again. "Thank you, I know that had to be very difficult to see," he said, giving Mr. Rhodes a kind smile.

Mr. Rhodes sniffed and swiped at his mustache with the back of his hand. "Poor, poor fellow. He was a good soul. Didn't deserve that."

"Can you think of anyone who might have wanted to hurt him?" Hugh asked.

Mr. Rhodes kneaded his hat between his hands like he was trying to make it into bread. "No, sir. Didn't have an enemy in the world, as far as I know. Kind of a quiet fellow but wouldn't hurt a fly."

Hugh nodded. "Is there anything more you can tell me about the afternoon he disappeared?"

Mr. Rhodes shook his head. "Nothing more comes to mind, sir."

"That's all right," Hugh replied. "Thank you very much for the information, Mr. Rhodes."

"Do you think it was an accident?" Mr. Rhodes asked suddenly.

“Was what an accident?”

“The fire at the bakery?”

Hugh was silent for a moment. There was too much coincidence for his liking. “I’m not able to comment on it at this time,” he said, feeling guilt wash over him like a tidal wave. “We are still looking into it.”

Mr. Rhodes took a deep breath. “Thank you, Constable. I appreciate it.”

“Thank you,” Hugh replied, giving the man a polite bow. “Shall I escort you out?”

Mr. Rhodes nodded, and Hugh led him back through the police station lobby to the front entrance, watching as the man put his mangled hat back onto his head, trying to straighten it, before he vanished into the busy London streets.

The tense feeling in Hugh’s stomach had turned into a writhing mass of serpents. There was a connection between the missing gardener and the burned bakery. John Henries had been at the bakery, or had been placed inside the bakery, to be disposed of alongside the bakery employees when the fire consumed it. And, for as much as it was certainly possible the entire thing was an accident, Hugh very much doubted that was the case. He wondered what Jack would think about the whole thing when he told him about it at the end of his patrol.



### Chapter eleven

Hugh brought the newspaper article home after work. Jack was stretched out in the armchair, as though he had not left it all night, though of course he had only just arrived home as well. He had followed Hugh on the rooftops during his patrol, because he had to make sure Hugh was safe. He knew Hugh had noticed him but had not said anything, just casting a small smile up toward the rooftop.

“Hmm, suspicious indeed,” Jack said, reading the article after Hugh told him about John Henries. “If they are not connected in some way, it is certainly a very odd coincidence.”

“I agree,” Hugh replied. “At least the inspectors will investigate a fire like that, since the victims weren’t prostitutes.” Jack could hear bitterness in Hugh’s voice, and he didn’t like it.

“You are the best investigator on the police force,” he said firmly. “If anyone will solve these fiendish felonies, it will be you.”

Hugh chuckled softly. “I appreciate your faith in me.”

“Shall we investigate the bakery?” Jack asked, giving an eager little jump. Hugh had not gone to the bakery during his patrol, and Jack was itching to see it for himself. “Or do you need to rest?”

Hugh chuckled softly. “You wanted to go now?”

“Why not?” Jack asked, throwing his arms up. “I have excellent night vision, and we will probably encounter fewer people in the dark of night than in the daylight.”

“Fair enough,” Hugh relented. “I would like to see it for myself anyway, to see if the detectives missed anything. We can walk there now. It is a bit of a distance though.”

Jack sprang over to the coat rack to grab his cape, whipping it around his shoulders. “Never fear, I shall have us there in minutes!”

“What?” Hugh asked, staring at him in surprise.

“Come!” Jack held out his hand to Hugh.

“Where are we going?”

“To the rooftop!” Jack declared.

Hugh’s eyes widened. “Jack! We can’t go leaping across the rooftops!”

“Why not?” Jack asked, tipping his head curiously.

“Because people might see us,” Hugh replied.

“People have already seen me,” Jack said with a shrug. “I am not an unusual sight in the city.”

“But they will see me ,” Hugh replied.

Jack raised a brow. “From the rooftops, no one will know who you are. And I shall wrap my cloak around you so your identity shall not be known. Come, we have a mystery afoot!”

Hugh opened his mouth to protest, and then he closed it again. What did he have to lose? If he didn't solve this case, he was likely going to end up losing his job. If it absolutely came down to it, he could claim to have been grabbed by Spring-Heeled Jack. It was not an unbelievable occurrence. And he certainly did not feel like walking miles again after his nightly patrol. "All right," he said. "You are able to carry me without dropping me?"

"I swear upon Copernicus's elephant, I shall not drop you," Jack declared, placing his hand over his heart.

Hugh blinked. "Did Copernicus have an elephant?"

"I have no idea," Jack said with a grin before he opened the door and disappeared into the hallway. Hugh quickly followed after him. He was still in his police uniform, which would at least help if they encountered any trouble at the bakery site, and the dark blue would be hard to see against the night sky and with Jack's cloak around him. He closed and locked his apartment door before following Jack several turns up the stairs until they reached the door that led to the roof.

Jack pushed it open and stepped out into the night, drawing in a deep lungful of air. "Ah, London," he said rhapsodically. "One of the most beautiful cities in the world, wouldn't you agree?"

"I'm afraid I don't have much to compare it to," Hugh said, closing the rooftop door behind them. It gave a rusty-sounding protest, and he winced, hoping he had not just woken up the entire building.

Jack frowned. "We shall have to travel once this mystery is solved."

"We?" Hugh asked, but Jack suddenly grabbed him, his black cape whipping around Hugh as he scooped him into his arms like a baby.

“Hold on!” he said, and Hugh barely had time to think before Jack had taken a running start and leaped across their tenement rooftop to the one across the road. The wind whistled past him, stinging his eyes, and his stomach clenched as he felt Jack rise into the air and then fall again before landing on the stone building with the grace and silence of a cat.

“Jack!” he gasped, burying his face in the man’s chest.

Jack glanced down at him. “Are you all right?”

“Y... Yes,” Hugh replied. “I was just not expecting that.”

Jack chuckled softly. “My apologies. I am not used to traveling with a partner. Put your face into my chest, and I shall make it as smooth of a ride as I can.”

Hugh felt his face turn absolutely scarlet. Put his face in Jack’s chest? He could hear the patter of Jack’s heartbeat, like the ticking of a clock. And, he had to admit, it was nice. Very nice. He had not been held like this since he was a child, and his body craved the warm touch of another human being. Or, rather, the touch of someone who cared about him. He swallowed hard. “All right,” he agreed softly. He turned his face in to press his forehead against Jack’s chest, so firm and muscular under him.

Jack took another running leap, and Hugh curled close to him so the cold air would not make his eyes teary or his skin prickle. He thought about everything he had learned so far as Jack ran. It was certainly a puzzling mystery, though one where people were ending up dead the longer he was unable to solve the case. His father had been a great fan of mysteries and had been the one to get Hugh interested in them. He had read many of them to Hugh when he was a child, including *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* with the brilliant inspector C. Auguste Dupin, Charles Dickens’ unfinished *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, and the tale of *The String of Pearls* with the disturbing barber Sweeney Todd as its villain. Hugh did not doubt that his desire

to become a police officer had stemmed from these tales of intrigue and investigation. He wondered what his parents would think of Jack if they had lived to meet him. He had not had a good opportunity to tell them that he was attracted to men before they passed away, but they had always been very supportive of him, and he thought that they would be understanding of his proclivities. And Jack was hard not to like, with his charming smile, dramatic way of talking, and his eagerness to help.

He pondered this as Jack ran and jumped from rooftop to rooftop, never moving his hands from holding Hugh securely against him. Sometimes there was a drop or a rise at uneven levels, and once Jack's foot hit a loose tile and started to slide. But within moments he had his feet under him once more and was continuing on his way. Hugh had to admire the confidence Jack had to leap across roofs like that, the ground dozens of feet away. He knew he would never be able to make most of those jumps himself, even with being in relatively good shape. Once in a while he thought he heard a noise or a shout from the street below, but he couldn't pull his face from Jack's chest to look. And really, he didn't want to.

He didn't know how long it had been, but it hadn't been all that long before Jack gave him a warning squeeze. "Going down." And then he had jumped off the rooftop they were on. Hugh's stomach rose in his throat, until Jack suddenly alighted on the pavement with only the softest click of his boot heels. Jack unwound his arms and his cape from Hugh and set him carefully on his feet. "All right?"

Hugh brushed himself off and laughed, running his hand through his windswept hair. "Yes. What a way to travel. Don't you get tired?"

Jack smirked. "Eventually, but not from so little exertion as that."

Hugh looked around. The acrid scent of smoke still hung in the air. They were at the back of the burned-out bakery, where the fire had been the strongest. In the darkness of the late night-early morning, the whole thing looked like the ancient ruins of some

long-lost Grecian temple or Egyptian tomb.

If he had not been in the bakery recently, it would be nearly impossible to determine the exact layout of the structure; everything had collapsed upon itself, and the water from the fire hose had sent scraps and debris tumbling everywhere. Walls stood half-erect. He could see into the front of the shop where he had talked to Prudence, because the dividing wall between the front and the back had nearly completely toppled. This back area had to be the bakery, with its many instruments and surfaces.

What he saw looked more akin to a tornado going through than a fire. The heat had destroyed much of it. But while Hugh did not know much about metal and bakeries, he knew that the ovens were built to withstand tremendous amounts of heat for long periods and should have been relatively intact. What he found instead was a mangled mess of metal, twisted and bent into a grotesque monument to pastry. It looked as though a child had taken an aluminum toy and stomped repeatedly on it until the metal had broken and warped into an unusable pile of junk. Someone did not want this oven to be used again and was trying to send a message as such. This was definitely no accident.

Jack hopped amongst the remnants, lifting a few pieces of debris up as if they weighed no more than paper. Hugh watched him in surprise but decided not to interfere with whatever Jack was looking at. Jack did several circuits of the backroom area before moving into the area where the front had been. A few broken trinkets glittered amongst the ashes. "I thought this was a bakery," Jack commented, nudging at a few things with the toe of his boot.

"It was," Hugh replied. "A bakery and emporium. They had other things for sale too."

"Like what?" Jack asked.

Hugh shrugged. "I'm not really sure. I saw a few tarot cards, some colored bottles. I

don't know what they were, but Miss Wilcox said her parents were fans of the mystic."

"Hmm." Jack picked up something and blew on it to dislodge the ashes from it. It was a piece of crystal quartz on a silver chain. He pawed through the ashes again and found a second one of dark green aventurine, and a third in tiger's eye. He picked them up, studying them all curiously, rolling the crystals around in his palm. "I've seen these before."

Hugh blinked. "You have?"

"Yes," Jack replied. "Have you heard of The Magic Shop?"

"What magic shop?"

"The Magic Shop," Jack said again.

Hugh frowned. "No. Should I have?"

"Mm, I suppose not," Jack said thoughtfully. "But the strangeness of this case makes me think now that it might behoove us to go there."

"We can go in the morning," Hugh replied.

"Oh, no need to wait," Jack said, waving his hand airily.

"But it's the middle of the night," Hugh protested.

"Are you tired?" Jack asked, tipping his head slightly to look at him.

"What? No," Hugh said with a frown. "But would the shop even be open?"

“Oh, yes,” Jack replied. “No fear of that.”

What sort of magic shop would be open at four in the morning? Hugh wondered. He also suspected too that when Jack said ‘magic shop,’ he was not referring to simply card tricks and making doves appear from a hat. He had seen too much in the last few days to discount the reality of actual magic in the world. Jack himself was proof of that. Hugh nodded. “All right. Where is it?”

“Not far,” Jack said, inclining his head down the street.

Hugh followed after him, making sure Jack’s top hat stayed on in case they ran into anyone. In his police uniform, he could easily look like he was escorting a gentleman home through the rough London streets. “What about this shop is so important that we have to visit it in the middle of the night?”

“I would like to introduce you to someone,” Jack said. “If these crystals are any indicator, I think we may not be looking for a simple explanation. The viscount’s transformation would also lead me to assume a sort of mystical connection, wouldn’t you agree?”

The viscount’s appearance, as well as his cannibalization of his victim, had certainly been disturbing, as was his transformation back into his human form after death. Hugh had no explanation for it himself, and he was also one of the only people who had seen the viscount as his mutated aberration. If Jack, who himself was not of this world, believed that there was a supernatural element to this mystery, he was inclined to believe it.

Jack motioned for Hugh to follow him down a narrow alleyway. If he had been walking down this alley alone, he might have been afraid. But with Jack there, he realized he wasn’t. Not even that Jack was strong and could defend him, but the man was a reassuring presence by his side, confident and level-headed. For as much as he



was a fan of the dramatic, he was also nice to talk to and bounce ideas off of. And, Hugh had to admit, he was certainly not unpleasant to look at. Despite the billow of Jack's cape hiding the exact lines of his broad shoulders that tapered down his narrow waist, he still was graceful and strong. He found his eyes sliding further down to catch glimpses of Jack's backside and legs when his cape swished. With the great effort that must come from being able to leap across rooftops, Jack's legs and rump were taut and shapely. Hugh cleared his throat, his eyes quickly darting away as Jack glanced back at him. "Everything all right back there?" he asked in a tone as sweet as honey.

"Just fine," Hugh replied, suddenly finding the fire escapes of the buildings they passed incredibly interesting.

They turned down another alley that spat them out onto a quiet street, lit by the glow of a single gas streetlamp. Jack stopped in front of one of the shops there. A red sign with fanciful writing read 'The Magic Shop.' No lights appeared to be on. Hugh frowned. "It looks like they're closed."

"Oh, never fear," Jack said, stepping up to the door and opening it. Hugh immediately could see a warm light that spilled out of the open door that for some reason did not penetrate the windows. "Come." He bowed his head and waved Hugh in like a servant waving in a grand prince. Hugh smiled at that and stepped inside the inviting glow.

The interior of the shop was larger than it had appeared from the outside, though the dim lighting made it a more intimate space. Hugh slowly turned a few paces inside of the entryway to get a look around. The shelves were stacked full of books. Dusty, heavy things, with worn covers, others slim and printed with cheap paper for quick consumption.

"May I help you?" came a pleasant voice from the back area. Hugh looked up but

could not see to whom the voice belonged. He took a few steps further into the shop, squinting, until he found a counter at the back and the figure the voice had presumably come from. He was a tall man, several inches taller than Hugh even without the black top hat on his head. Dressed head to toe in black except for the crisp, white shirt under his waistcoat and jacket, he might not have been any different from other book sellers in London. But the way his eyes caught Hugh immediately made him feel like this man was unlike any he had met before. “Constable,” the man greeted, and then, without changing his expression, he said, “Jack.”

“Good day, sir, or rather, good nightly morning,” Jack said, sweeping his top hat from his head to execute a deep bow. Hugh glanced around worriedly, but there did not seem to be any other customers in the shop to see this sudden display of horns. “I trust you are well?”

“Never better, never better,” the man said, waving his hand lightly.

“This is Constable Hugh Danbury,” Jack said, gesturing magnificently to Hugh. “Hugh, this is The Owner.”

“The owner of the shop?” Hugh asked.

“The Owner,” Jack repeated.

Hugh decided he was not going to try to play the game he had first had with trying to learn Spring-Heeled Jack’s name. ‘The Owner’ would have to work. “Pleased to meet you, sir,” he said, nodding his head at the tall, handsome man.

“A pleasure to meet you, Constable,” The Owner said. “What brings you fine gentlemen into my shop at this hour?”

Jack held up the crystals on chains that he had salvaged from the fire. “I believe I

have seen these in your shop before.”

“Oh, yes,” The Owner said, barely giving them a glance. “Very basic crystals, nothing too in depth. Where did you find those?”

“At the Elysium Bakery that burned down last night,” Hugh said, wondering if he should berate Jack for taking evidence from the scene of a crime but deciding not to worry about that at this particular moment.

“Ah, yes, I heard about that. Such a shame,” The Owner said.

“So, you did business with the Wilcoxes?” Hugh asked.

The Owner nodded. “The mother or the daughter were in here every few weeks. Nothing too fancy. A few healing tonics, a love potion or two.”

Hugh had a strange feeling that The Owner meant that literally. But instead, he said, “Jack said that you often have knowledge of the mystical.”

“That is very vague, but I suppose I do,” The Owner said thoughtfully. “What is it you are looking for?”

“I... don’t know,” Hugh admitted, with a glance over at Jack. “I am just hoping to find some answers.”

“Then I shall provide some questions to start,” The Owner replied. “Tell me, Constable, do you believe in magic?”

Hugh could not stop turning to Spring-Heeled Jack next to him, who gazed back at him without his expression changing. Jack had asked him the exact same question. “I have never put much stock in that sort of thing,” he said slowly. “Until I met Jack.”

The Owner smiled and waved his hand lightly. "One doesn't have to believe in something for it to be true."

"What should I believe?" Hugh asked.

"What do you believe?" The Owner asked.

"I believe someone is killing young men on the street and burned down the bakery when I found out about it. Someone of flesh and blood, like you or I."

"Ah, yes. The killer is flesh and blood," The Owner agreed with a knowing smile. "But, like you or I, well, that is another matter entirely." He suddenly clapped his hands together, and the sound echoed like a pistol shot in the stillness of the shop. "Now, what questions do you have for me?"

Hugh frowned thoughtfully. "When the viscount attacked me in the alley and Jack came to my rescue, he was not a man, but a beast of some kind. Jagged teeth, a distended jaw, bowed legs. Jack set him on fire when he lunged at me. And while the flames were hot, when I examined the man's corpse, he looked entirely human again. Well, as human as a burned corpse can. Do you know if it is possible for a man to transform himself from a creature back into a man after death?"

"I would imagine that some magic would be dependent on the host being alive," The Owner said. "So, I would think it quite possible."

"Elysium came to you for magic supplies. What kind of magic were they doing?"

"As I said, very basic," The Owner said.

"Anything that could cause someone to transform like that?"

“Not with what they purchased from me,” The Owner said.

Hugh frowned at the odd turn of phrase. The Owner obviously did not freely give information unless asked, so he had to figure out what he was supposed to ask about.

“The viscount had in his pocket a piece of gold paper from the Elysium Emporium where he purchased an apple turnover.”

“Was that a question?” The Owner asked, tipping his head slightly and giving Hugh a smile.

It hadn’t been, but Hugh wasn’t really sure what sort of question to ask.

“Did they purchase anything related to apples?” Jack suddenly piped in, making Hugh jump.

“Apples,” The Owner said thoughtfully. “My, that is quite unusual, isn’t it? But, then, I do specialize in the unusual.”

“That you do,” Jack said with a flick of his hand to encompass the entire shop.

“Have you? Sold anything related to apples recently? To Elysium, or anyone else?” Hugh asked.

The Owner cocked his head and rubbed at his chin, as if trying to remember, though Hugh had a strong suspicion that the man knew exactly what he was doing. “Not recently,” he said. “But how much do you know about growing apples?”

“Not very much,” Hugh admitted.

“You know where apples come from.”

“Trees,” Hugh said, with a slight frown.

“Indeed.”

The Owner went silent, and Hugh tried not to sigh. The Owner wasn’t going to tell him directly, just keep spoon-feeding him clues. “Do you sell apple trees?”

“No,” The Owner said with a small smile. “Not trees.”

Where did trees come from? Hugh had not had much reason to think about such a thing before, but he realized what The Owner was hinting at. Something much smaller than a tree. “Did you ever sell apple seeds? Perhaps not recently, but in the past?”

“Ah, you are a bright one,” The Owner said. “I did indeed. Nine years ago.”

Hugh wasn’t sure if the man was being genuine with him or not, but at this point, he just wanted answers. He didn’t know how long apple trees took to grow; Prudence had told them that the Elysium Emporium had only been open for a year, so he doubted they would have been the ones to purchase the seeds and grow a full tree nine years ago. And growing one’s own apple tree didn’t seem like the most practical option for a bakery in the middle of London anyway. “I am not familiar with your business, sir, but I assume that they were not ordinary apple seeds.”

“My dear boy, look around. Do you think I would sell anything so benign in this shop?” The Owner said with a chuckle, spreading his hands wide. “No, they were very special seeds. From one of the most famous trees. Perhaps the most famous tree of all. The one that changed the world.”

Hugh tried to think of famous trees, but he couldn’t even think of one. It was not like trees were uncommon or difficult to come by. But it was an apple tree. What famous

tree produced apples? He glanced over at Jack, who looked blankly back at him. He probably wouldn't know any famous trees either. Jack cocked his head, and Hugh's eyes caught on the devilish horns protruding from his forehead. A strange thought occurred to him. No, it couldn't possibly be the right answer. But yet, he had learned in the last few days that a good number of things he had thought impossible were indeed possible. "You don't mean... the forbidden tree from the garden that Adam and Eve ate? The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil?"

The Owner smiled. "Ah, you did get there on your own. Splendid."

Hugh frowned deeper. "You're saying that nine years ago, you sold seeds to someone from the biblical Tree of Knowledge?"

"Excellent deduction," The Owner said. "Conan Doyle would be proud."

Hugh had no idea who that was, but he was less concerned about that right now. "Whom did you sell them to?"

"Mm, a very distinguished gentleman," The Owner said. "The Duke of Westchester."

Hugh jerked at the words. "The Duke of Westchester?" he repeated. He had heard that name only a few hours ago. Mr. Rhodes had said that he and Mr. Henries both worked for the Duke of Westchester. Mr. Henries had been the Duke's gardener. And now Mr. Henries was dead in the bakery fire. "Why did he want the seeds?"

"Presumably he was going to plant them." The Owner held up his hands. "Once they leave my shop, what happens to them is not my concern."

"Would the seeds grow into another Tree of Knowledge?" Hugh asked. He tried to remember his Bible study.

“Some hybrid of it, yes. What its powers might be compared to the original, well, who’s to say.”

That was not reassuring. “A bite from the original Tree opened Adam and Eve’s eyes to good and evil, and they realized they were naked. And they became mortal instead of living forever.”

“Indeed,” The Owner said. “One could assume a fledgling tree born from its seeds would not have the exact same abilities, but perhaps something similar.”

What could possibly be similar to knowing good from evil? But then again, no part of this made a whole lot of sense. The viscount turning into a monster, the murders of the young men by what looked like a vicious beast, the apple pastry paper, the strange little bakery in Fleet Street, the missing gardener, the fire. What did any of it have to do with magical seeds from a biblical tree? This entire story was so far-fetched that Hugh was pretty sure he would not have believed it himself only a few days ago.

Hugh turned to Jack. “The fifth man that we identified as John Henries worked for the Duke of Westchester as his gardener. His sister, Elizabeth, was one of the shop owners of Elysium.”

“Ah hah!” Jack glanced over at The Owner, who was silently watching both of them, a bemused smile on his face. “So, he might have been the one to plant the seeds, or at least know of the tree.”

Hugh nodded. “It’s certainly possible, at least. The fact that he’s connected in multiple ways to Elysium too makes me think he might have something to do with what’s been going on.”

Jack glanced at The Owner. “Thank you. We appreciate your help.”



The Owner waved his hand airily in a gesture oddly similar to the one Jack liked to use. “Of course, of course. Have a good morning, gentlemen.”

“How do you know of this shop?” Hugh asked after they stepped out onto the cool, dimly lit London streets, Jack putting his top hat back on to hide his horns. There was the faintest hint of dawn making the sky a dark charcoal instead of black.

“You recall I said that my species travels through space and time to the area we are summoned by our soulmate?” Jack asked, and Hugh nodded. “Well, The Magic Shop has a portal in the back room. When we arrive at our destination, we come through the portal, where we are transformed into our new appearances. The shop has the ability to be anywhere at any time, you see.”

Hugh did not see, but he understood enough. Without Jack, he would never have known about The Magic Shop or The Owner. Just based on what he already knew too, he wondered if The Magic Shop would even be there if he had tried to look for it himself. Magic made its own logic, and it was sometimes nonsensical.

“Is The Owner a will-o-the-whisp type creature like you?”

“He is... something,” Jack said thoughtfully.

That was not a no, but neither was it a yes. Hugh was finding magic to be very frustrating with its rather precise nonsense. “Thank you for taking me there,” he said to Jack, giving him a bright smile. “It was very helpful.”

“Was it? I’m glad,” Jack said. “Now, I believe you need to get some sleep.” Hugh wanted to protest, but the day was catching up to him quickly, and he couldn’t stop an enormous yawn that almost split his jaw. Jack scooped him up in his arms. “We shall head back via rooftop before anyone sees us.”

Hugh nestled close to Jack's chest. "All right," he relented. And he just stayed there, curled in Jack's arms, until they returned to his apartment, and Jack sent him off to bed.

### Chapter twelve

“I should pay a visit to the Duke of Westchester,” Hugh said after he had risen from sleep, though he could hear the uncertainty in his own voice. He sat with Jack in their usual seats, drinking cups of tea and eating eggs and toast, which were not burned this time.

“Do you really think he would say anything that might help?” Jack asked, idly spinning his mug in his hands. Hugh noticed that Jack rarely sat still and was always fidgeting or moving or playing with something.

“No,” Hugh said softly, staring at the faded rug and scuffing his toe into one of the threadbare spots. “If he would even talk to me. We have no evidence against him of any wrongdoing. Mr. Henries worked for him, but that is coincidental. And if I asked him about the Tree, he could simply deny everything, and I would have nothing more to go on. He might even complain to Scotland Yard that I was harassing him, and that would be the end of it all.”

Jack shot up in his chair, so quickly that Hugh almost leaped out of his skin. “Hahah! I have the solution to this particular conundrum!”

“You do?” Hugh asked, trying to get his heart back under control. Jack’s sudden outbursts still startled him to no end, though he did enjoy seeing the man so excited.

“I do. He may not be willing to talk to you.” Jack suddenly leaped to his feet, and then gave a jump onto the back of the armchair, crouching on top of it like a tiger preparing to spring, throwing his cape around him with a fervent swish. “But he

might be willing to talk to Spring-Heeled Jack, visitor from another world. And very curious to know how he knows The Magic Shop that Jack uses as a portal.”

Hugh blinked, staring at Jack perched so effortlessly on the back of the chair that somehow did not fall over with Jack’s weight on it. It was true; Jack was not a member of The Yard, and as far as anyone knew, he was not associated with anyone from it either. And, frankly, he was not human. If the Duke had already visited The Magic Shop and The Owner, he would know about magic, so Jack’s appearance and otherworldly story would likely not seem out of place to him. “Do you really think he would talk to you?”

Jack threw back his head and laughed, causing the chair’s front legs to lift off the ground a bit, and Hugh reached to try to steady it, though he was hopelessly too far away. Jack immediately righted it again. “I can be quite persuasive. And what was that you called me? Ah, yes, charming.”

Hugh flushed a bit, running his hand through his brown curls. “Do you think you’ll be safe?”

Jack gave a cluck of his tongue. “My dear Hugh. Do you really think a mere mortal could harm me?”

“Are you immortal?” Hugh asked.

“No. I am sturdier than most humans, but point taken,” Jack said, flopping dramatically down into the chair again, as light as a cat. “I give you my word that I shall be as careful as a newborn hedgehog.”

“What does that mean?” Hugh asked, raising a brow.

“I have absolutely no idea,” Jack said, and they both laughed heartily.

Jack

That afternoon, Hugh set out for his patrol, and Jack rented a horse from a nearby stable to take to the Duke's estate outside of London. Well, perhaps 'rented' was a bit formal. He had taken the horse when no one was looking, leaving a pile of assorted coins in its stall. And he had only chosen that particular horse because it already had a saddle on, and Jack did not know how to attach a saddle himself. Really, he didn't even know how to ride a horse, so this whole thing was going to be quite jolly fun. He actually could have run all the way to the estate without too much trouble, but it was still daylight, and a man whizzing through the streets at the speed of a locomotive would have been quite visible. And he had promised Hugh he would do his best to be inconspicuous. So, horse it was, until such time as he would not be spicuous anymore.

After leading the horse away from its lodgings before it could be spotted, he gave a little hop that propelled him up and over the animal's back onto the saddle. The horse did not seem overly thrilled about having such a tall rider suddenly jump onto him without a proper introduction, and it shied a little under him. "Shh," Jack soothed, patting its neck. "You are a good horse. I shall call you..." His eyes roamed around for inspiration, settling on a paper advertisement attached to a fence for 'Mademoiselle Lucy, the famous Egyptian tarot card reader.' "Lucy. A fine name for a horse if ever there was one! And I suppose, for a human as well."

Lucy gave a snort and tossed its head, but Jack picked up the reins in his clawed hands, giving them an experimental flick. "I have never ridden a horse before, Lucy," he said, determined to make pleasant conversation with the beast. "You shall have to help me. So, to the estate of the Duke of Westchester, if you please."

Lucy tossed its head again but didn't move.

"Due north," Jack said, pointing one finger in that direction.

Lucy's tail flicked, but it otherwise didn't move.

Jack let out a huff of frustration. "Really now. You are a horse. This is what you do."

Lucy's ear flicked, and then it began to trot, though not the direction Jack wanted. "Lucy," he said sternly. "You need to go that way." He pulled the reins in the direction he wanted Lucy to turn, and the horse obliged. Jack beamed "Ah, I see now! Steady on, then!"

There had likely never been such an inexperienced duo on London's streets, Lucy shying every few steps while Jack pulled the reins in an attempt to get the horse to follow his directions. "Lucy," Jack said in exasperation as the horse turned in an odd little circle. "My dear, we would make better time with you upon my back. Really, you are a ridiculous horse." Lucy snorted and flicked its tail but plodded begrudgingly down the street, except for once in a while trying to run Jack into a wall on one side or the other.

Once they had left the city and were in more farm-like land, away from prying eyes, and the sun starting to sink, Jack found a grove of trees to put Lucy in, much to both of their relief. He then proceeded to run the rest of the distance to the Duke's estate, which really was much faster than trying to make the silly beast go the way he wanted it to. Horses were convenient for humans, he supposed, if one knew how to ride one. But he was not human, and his own two legs were much more accommodating than beasts of transportation.

Off in the distance there was a high-pitched whistle, and Jack paused in his run to scramble up into the trees to take a look around. He could see the Duke's estate on the horizon, and, off to the east beyond that, several plumes of smoke rose into the air, the source of the whistle. A train station. What fascinating times these were! Jack wondered if Hugh had ever ridden a train before. He imagined it must be thrilling for humans without their ability to move so swiftly. Though he was pretty sure it would

be old hat for him; he was probably just as fast as a locomotive himself, and far less noisy.

The Duke of Westchester's estate was large, with verdant gardens, leaves and bushes fluttering in the soft evening breeze. There were still people outside working in the lush flower beds and what looked to be an apple orchard, so Jack slipped around the side of the house, as silent as a dingo. He could hear voices from the first floor near what appeared to be a dining room, and he ducked underneath the window to listen.

"-never have trusted that son of a bitch," came a brusque, rather pompous masculine voice. "Do we know how many he nicked?"

"As far as I can tell, only the two," came another male voice, pleasant and soothing. "I found no more in his room or at the bakery."

"We should consider moving the tree to Eden," said the first voice.

"We can't simply pick it up and plant it in the stones," said the second voice, sounding just a bit harrumphy.

The first man blew out air, making his lips flap. "Well, we need to do something. I'll not have any more thievery. Handle it, Adam."

"Yes, sir," said the second man.

Then Jack heard heavy footfalls receding and deduced that the first man was leaving. He waited under the window, watching the house until he saw a light go on in a room on the third level, and then the casement window there opened. There seemed to be nothing more happening in the dining room.

He circled around the house until he was under the place where the light had come

on. He pulled off his top hat to expose his horns, setting it on the ground. Then, in one mighty bound, Jack leaped from the ground to the third story windowsill, landing on the ledge as easily and silently as a bird, crouching there in the open window. He peered in to see the profile of a very large middle-aged man in a fancy coat, sitting in a high-backed chair that looked like it might not be entirely able to hold his weight, smoking a pipe. He didn't seem to notice Jack on the windowsill. Jack raised his hand and tapped one of his claw-tipped fingers against the glass to get his attention.

The man looked up, then started, nearly dropping the pipe as he stared at the window, wide-eyed. Jack put on his most dashing smile. "Ah, Mr. Duke of Westchester, I presume?"

"Good God, man, this is the third floor!" the Duke blustered, standing up and brushing at his tailcoat.

"It is," Jack agreed. "Hardly a challenge."

The Duke blew out another breath. "You are Spring-Heeled Jack. The creature everyone has been talking about."

"Guilty as charged!" Jack said, hopping down into the room and giving a low, dramatic bow with his cape.

"What are you doing here?" the Duke asked, edging toward the mantle. Jack could see that he seemed to be trying to grab what looked like a pistol in a box.

"I assure you, sir, I mean you no harm." He held out his hands from his sides. "Please."

The Duke hesitated before slowly nodding. "Then what is it you want?"



Jack gave him another suave smile. “I believe we have a mutual friend. The owner of a certain... magical shop?”

The Duke stared at him for a long moment before he seemed to relax ever so slightly. “What has he got to do with this?”

“Nothing, really,” Jack said, waving his hand through the air. “But he gave me your name, as someone I might be interested in speaking to.”

“Oh? About what?” The Duke seemed intrigued.

“He mentioned that you purchased some seeds from him. Apple seeds.” Jack’s smile didn’t waver.

Neither did the Duke’s. “I have an apple orchard out behind the house. I have purchased seeds from any number of places.”

“Oh, these were quite special,” Jack said, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. “Perhaps even... biblical.”

The Duke laughed a bit. “What are you implying, sir?”

Jack grinned, then suddenly leaped up and onto the back of the chair the Duke had been sitting in, gazing down at him. “I have heard that there might be apples out there from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Goodness, that is quite the mouthful.”

“And where did you hear that?” the Duke asked, stumbling back a few steps, his large belly wagging as he did.

Jack tapped the side of his nose lightly with his finger. “I have my ways, sir. But I

have encountered at least one person who likely ate an apple from that tree. I don't know what is in those apples, sir, but that was quite the sight."

The Duke let out a frustrated sound through his lips. "That was an unfortunate accident. The Waking is supposed to be confined to Eden."

Jack cocked his head curiously. "I'm sorry, the what now?"

"The Waking," the Duke replied again.

"I'm afraid I'm not familiar," Jack said, tipping his head to the other side, as if it would make more sense in the other ear.

"You are not a creature of The Waking?" the Duke asked curiously.

"Since I do not know what that is, I would assume I am not," Jack said thoughtfully.

"But if you explain it, perhaps we shall both learn something new."

The Duke gazed at him. "Where are you from, Mr. Spring-Heeled Jack?"

"Ah!" Jack said, standing up on the chair and spreading his cape wide. On the back of the wingback chair, his horns almost reached the ceiling. "Delightful! I shall answer a question of yours, and you shall answer one of mine, yes?"

The Duke looked thoughtful for a moment before he nodded. "All right. Please, sit. Would you like a cognac?"

"Is that your question?" Jack asked, but he hopped down from the back of the chair and sprawled himself across it like he had in Hugh's chair at home. Goodness, when had he started thinking of it 'home?'

“Of course not!” the Duke said, frowning like a great walrus. “I’ll just make you one.” He moved over to a bar cart and poured two glasses of dark liquor. He brought one over to Jack, who took it carefully with his metal-tipped fingers. He saw the Duke notice them and blanch a little, and he quickly tucked them down.

“I assure you I mean you no harm. If I did, I would have done so by now.”

“Yes, well...” The Duke blustered about before sinking into another chair. “First question, then. Where are you from?”

“Some place far from here,” Jack said, stretching out his hand.

“The United States?” asked the Duke.

“I have no idea what that is,” Jack replied with a chuckle before taking a large swallow. “Oh, that is marvelous.”

The Duke seemed obviously pleased. “An 1811 Croizet B. Leon. Only the best, you know.”

Jack shrugged. “I do not know, but it is delicious. But as to where I am from, I am not from your world, sir. I came here across space and time, through a portal in The Magic Shop.”

“Oh, I see,” the Duke said with a nod. “What are you doing here then?”

“Ah, no, it is my turn now,” Jack said, waving his hand as if to brush the Duke’s question out of the air. “My question is, what does the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil do? That certainly is a lot of words. I will just call it the Tree going forward if that is all right with you.”

“Yes, of course,” the Duke said, not seeming to pay much attention to the reasoning. “Well, the Tree is... it is responsible for the Waking. Since I know that will be your next question, I’ll give you that one for free. The Waking comes from eating an apple from the Tree. Upon eating it, the apple causes a temporary transformation. Each person’s response is different, but the Tree brings out that inside you which you most desire.”

Jack frowned. “I’m afraid I do not understand.”

“Well... There is our face we present to the public, and our private desires that perhaps might not be... acceptable due to society’s morals.” The Duke took another sip from his glass, and Jack did the same. “It frees our bodies from those restrictions and allows us to do whatever we most desire.”

Jack wasn’t sure how much he should let on about what he knew about the viscount, so he only said, “Desires such as... killing people?”

The Duke let out a guffaw of laughter. “Straight to the point, I like you, sir. For some of us, yes. My own tastes are more... refined. But you seem to have the idea.”

Jack frowned a bit. “That seems rather dangerous, to have such a power in the world.”

“That is why we keep it so secret,” the Duke said, swiping at his beefy face with his hand. “An exclusive club, with only a few vetted members.”

“Is that the ‘Eden’ you spoke of?” Jack asked curiously.

“Indeed. My, you are clever!” the Duke said, slapping his thigh good-naturedly. “Now, I do think it’s my turn to ask a question. What are you doing here in London?”

Jack gave him a devilish grin. He had said he would answer the questions. He had not said he would tell the truth. “Why, to have fun, of course. My species is a sort of... pleasure-seeking race. A little chaos, a little mischief. We travel to different worlds and times, seeking the best that pleasure has to offer.”

“Indeed!” the Duke said. “Our Garden of Eden really is the finest place for any pleasures you might desire.”

“I should very much like to see that for myself,” Jack said, giving the man a delighted smile.

“Well, I certainly would not be opposed to inviting you to our next gathering,” the Duke said. “Of course, membership is quite expensive. Can’t just let anyone run about mucking things up, can we?”

“No, of course not. But I’m afraid I don’t have much money,” Jack said, a bit forlornly.

The Duke looked thoughtful for a moment. “Do you have the ability to travel between different worlds, Mr. Jack?”

“I do,” Jack said.

“Ah, then how about a deal?” the Duke said with a smile. “I am a man of quite exotic tastes.” He patted his round belly. “In case you couldn’t tell. If you can bring me some food and drink I have not seen before, I shall invite you to our next gathering and cover your membership fee. Our next gathering is in just over a week.”

“I should be delighted to!” Jack said, clapping his hands a bit. “Shall I return here with your prize?”

The Duke nodded. "That would be excellent. And don't worry. I assure you, sir, whatever your tastes are, it shall be a night to remember."

"I have heard," Jack said, treading carefully now, "that there are young men there?"

The Duke raised a brow. "Oh? Is that your preference?"

"Indeed," Jack said, spreading his hands wide. "Is that something you can accommodate?"

"Yes, of course," the Duke said with a chuckle. "We have a few members who are of the same inclinations. We work with several brothels in the city to procure the finest flesh."

"I have been to one. Run by a Mr.... Galloway?" Jack said, remembering what Hugh had said about Anthony and the other missing boy from the 'special events.'

"Oh, yes, we've worked with him before!" the Duke said, clapping his hands together in a sound like thunder. "Splendid fellow, has some of the prettiest faces in town."

Jack nodded, giving the Duke a lascivious grin. "Indeed. Will they be at this next gathering?"

"I'm sure I can arrange that," the Duke said with a grin. "I'll see to it myself. I shall send you instructions once you have delivered your end of the bargain."

"Deal!" Jack leaped to his feet, holding out his hand. The Duke looked down at his hand with its wicked iron claws on the tips. "Oh, pardon me. I forgot," Jack said with a laugh. "But you have my word, sir."

"And you, mine," the Duke said.

“Excellent! Until we meet again!” And then Jack had dashed to the window and leaped out of it, landing lightly on the ground as if he were stepping from a carriage. By the time the Duke had crossed to the window to peer down after him, Jack had disappeared into the trees around the property.

Jack ran back to London in the dim light, not feeling like trying to get on a horse again now that he was less likely to be seen. Lucy kept pace with him the whole way, which he appreciated. He returned Lucy to the stable he had taken it from, then heard a man yelling when he found it again. “Winthrop, you naughty horse, where have you been?” Ah, so it was not Lucy after all. Jack decided he did not like riding horses all that much. He preferred to be his own method of transportation. It was simply more convenient. And he smelled better too.

Hugh was astonished at the amount of information Jack had been able to gather from the Duke as he sat in the living room after his patrol, and Jack recounted the conversation he had had with the corpulent man. “Thank you, Jack,” he said, a bit breathily. “You didn’t have to do all of that.”

Jack shrugged. “I am happy to help,” he said with a chuckle. “Obviously I am here as your soulmate to help you with this situation, so I shall do what I can.”

“I appreciate it very much,” Hugh said softly.

Jack nodded. “I shall leave tomorrow through the portal to find some other-worldly delights for the Duke.”

“But you will come back?” Hugh asked nervously.

“Of course I shall,” Jack said. “Do not be concerned about me.”

Hugh gave him a weak smile. “You’re leaving this planet, and you think I’m not

going to worry? You worry about me when I go out on my usual patrol.”

“Point taken,” Jack said, reaching up to stroke his cheek gently. It was very sweet of Hugh to be concerned for his safety, though Jack’s form was much more resilient than Hugh’s. “I promise upon every star in the universe, I will be safe and will return to you.”

Hugh smiled shyly at that. “You are very certain of that.”

Jack leaned in to press a kiss to his lips. “I have never been more certain about anything. I will return to you, no matter what.”

Hugh slowly wrapped his arms around Jack’s waist, hugging him tightly. Jack pulled him close, resting his chin on Hugh’s brown curls. “Jack,” Hugh said softly. “I love you.”

The words went through him like a bolt of lightning, and Jack squeezed him tightly. “I love you.”

Hugh lifted his head to look into Jack’s eyes. “You do?” he asked, his voice hopeful.

“I do,” Jack replied. “I have known it from the moment I first laid eyes on you.”

Hugh’s cheeks went pink, gazing up at Jack through his dark lashes. “So, once we’ve solved this case, you will stay with me?”

Jack nodded, kissing his forehead. “I will, if that is what you want too.”

Hugh reached up to stroke his fingertips over the bone-like mask that covered his eyes. “I do.” His fingers were light and gentle. Jack turned his head to press a kiss into Hugh’s palm. “Jack?”



“Yes, my darling?” Jack asked, sliding a hand up Hugh’s back.

Hugh inhaled softly, his other hand pressing to Jack’s chest and curling his fingers into the white oilcloth there. “Make love to me.”

Jack didn’t need to be told twice. He scooped Hugh up in his arms, as easily as if he were a tiny kangaroo, and carried him into the bedroom. He deftly shucked off his clothes, and Hugh did the same, before Jack was over him again, kissing his lips and jaw, nibbling at Hugh’s ears and down his neck. Hugh was absolutely stunning; Jack had no idea what he had done to be so lucky as to find someone as beautiful as him for a soulmate.

He kissed his way down Hugh’s chest, then back up again, leaving little nips along the pale skin in his wake, making Hugh jump. He slid down over Hugh’s torso to kiss over his lower stomach, then his thighs and the back of his knees. He kissed over Hugh’s thigh as he lifted the leg and began to massage his foot, digging his thumbs into the arch and the tight muscles there. Hugh did so much walking; his feet were not the prettiest, but they were still perfect. Hugh moaned as Jack rubbed into the ball of his foot and then in between each toe, the muscles there loosening up under Jack’s ministrations. Jack switched to the other foot, giving Hugh’s ankle a kiss before rubbing his thumbs in small circles until Hugh was writhing under him. Obviously, his police constable enjoyed his feet being massaged after a long night on the job. He would have to keep that in mind.

Hugh peeked his eyes open to gaze up at him, brown eyes hazy. “Jack,” he pleaded softly. “Please. I want you inside me.”

“All in good time, my darling,” Jack replied, leaning down to kiss him. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

Hugh nodded and kissed him sweetly back. “There’s petroleum jelly in the washroom

by the sink,” he said.

Jack kissed him firmly for another moment before he slid off the bed, slipping into the washroom to grab the tin and return with it. Hugh had rolled over so his back and the pert mounds of his rump were easily visible, gazing at Jack through half-lidded eyes. Jack smiled as he slid onto the bed, pressing a hot kiss to the base of Hugh’s lower back. “Mmm, you are the most delectable treat.”

Hugh smiled at Jack over his bare shoulder. “And you are such a charmer.”

Jack laughed as he opened the tin, spreading the jelly over his fingers. His skin was so hot that the stickiness immediately warmed to a comfortable temperature. He ran two fingers down the crease of Hugh’s buttocks, letting the fingertips probe at his hole and spread the jelly around, massaging the area around his entrance with firm but gentle touches like he had on Hugh’s feet. Hugh closed his eyes, moaning softly into the pillow. Jack added more jelly to his fingers, determined he would not hurt Hugh in any way, before he began to work one finger inside of him, just past his tight entrance, then back out again, sliding in a little deeper with the next push. Hugh breathed deeply in and out with each thrust of his finger. Jack leaned down to kiss along his spine as his finger worked deeper and deeper inside of Hugh. Having the luxury to take their time here was something he understood the many male-attracted men in London did not have. But right here, right now, they did, and he was going to make sure that it was the best experience Hugh had ever had.

Hugh moaned, his hips rocking back a little into the fingers, and Jack let him set the rhythm he liked. “So beautiful,” he purred, pressing more kisses to Hugh’s smooth back, and Hugh sighed in delight.

After another minute, Jack added a second finger, slipping it carefully inside of Hugh’s tight hole. Hugh moaned and pressed his face into the pillow eagerly as his hips pushed back for more. Jack curled his fingers a little, and Hugh let out a needy

gasp, gripping the pillows tightly. “Jack, yes,” he pleaded, and Jack obliged by doing it again. Hugh writhed and squirmed on his fingers, so beautiful as his hips rocked. Jack let his fingers dive in and out of Hugh’s tight passage as he used his other hand to spread the petroleum jelly over his own shaft, moaning at his own touch there.

Hugh lifted his head from the pillow to gaze at Jack over his shoulder again. “Can we... try something?”

Jack blinked, tipping his head. “Yes, of course.”

Hugh pushed himself up onto all fours and moved out of the way. “Lie on your back.”

Hugh giving him orders, even if they were so very sweet and kind, made Jack’s heart dance a jig in delight. He shifted to lie on his back, his head on the pillow Hugh had abandoned as he gazed up at him.

Hugh hesitated, then carefully shifted to swing one leg over Jack’s hips, gazing down at him as he shifted for Jack’s cock to rub between his cheeks. Jack moaned softly. “Is this all right?” Hugh asked.

“Wonderful,” Jack replied.

Hugh gave him a slightly shy smile before he lifted himself up, positioning Jack’s cock at his hole as he straddled him. Jack slid his hands up to hold Hugh’s sides to help guide him as Hugh pressed the head of Jack’s cock to his entrance, letting out a breath as he slid down onto him, inch by inch. Jack groaned softly, Hugh’s body enveloping him like silk. He resisted the urge to buck his hips up, not wanting to hurt him or rush him. Hugh took a few deep breaths as he sank down until his backside was flush with Jack’s warm body beneath him. He rocked his hips forward, and Jack sighed in delight at the gentle motion. “All right, my darling?”

“Yes,” Hugh replied, his hands sliding down to splay lightly over Jack’s strong, broad chest. “You?”

“Never better,” Jack said with a smile, and Hugh chuckled softly.

“I haven’t really done it this way before.”

“Neither have I,” Jack said, guiding his hands over the curve of Hugh’s hips, and then stroking one hand down over his cock that was at such a perfect angle this way. “But I like it.”

Hugh’s back arched into the touch, and he began to ride his hips up and back on Jack’s prick, the movement slow and rhythmic. Jack kept up the stroking with his hand as he bucked his own hips a little to meet the downward press of Hugh’s body. Hugh made such pretty noises, his mouth open, his eyes closed, his head tipped back in pleasure. He was sure there was not a more beautiful sight in the world than Hugh Danbury in the throes of pleasure atop him.

Hugh shifted a little, and then gasped, his hips grinding against Jack eagerly. “Oh god, yes,” he groaned.

Jack laughed, giving a snap of his hips up into Hugh’s grinding, and Hugh let out a sound Jack had never heard before, a sort of pleading, desperate cry. And he wanted to hear more of it. He grasped Hugh’s hips with both hands to hold him in place and thrust his hips upward eagerly, faster now. Hugh cried out again, his own hips following the movement, his cock bouncing and slapping against his lower stomach as he bucked against Jack. His own moans of pleasure mixed in with Hugh’s eager gasps and cries. “Mmm, touch yourself for me, darling,” he purred, thrusting his hips up harder into him.

Hugh obliged, wrapping his hand around his own cock and stroking as his hips

pressed down into each of Jack's thrusts before he spilled himself over his hand with a soft shout, his hips stuttering and grinding against Jack's. Jack growled playfully and ground back against him, chasing the delicious pleasure and each sweet noise that he was able to wring out of Hugh. Only once Hugh had stopped twitching and had gone still on top of him did he grab his hips and continue his own thrusting into Hugh's tight, quivering passage. Hugh whined and arched, his hands pressing to Jack's torso as he rode out the overstimulation until Jack bucked up deep inside of him and lost himself deep inside his lover's body. He ground against Hugh for a few moments as his own pleasure spiked, his cock pulsing inside of Hugh's delicious heat, before he sank back against the mattress.

Hugh carefully slid off of him, making them both moan, before he shifted to lie down and curl up next to Jack. His skin was slick with sweat, his curls sticking to his forehead, and he looked absolutely perfect. Jack leaned in and kissed him firmly. "All right, my darling?"

"Mm-hmm. You?" Hugh asked softly.

"Never better," Jack said, stroking his cheek gently.

Hugh leaned up to kiss him before he pulled back and gave Jack a smirk. "Well done, old chap."

Jack didn't think he had ever laughed so hard in his life as he did at that moment.

### Chapter thirteen

The next evening, Jack disappeared over the rooftops of London to go to The Magic Shop and the portal there. Hugh watched him go with heaviness in his heart. He doubted Jack would be in much danger, but he still didn't like the man leaving so suddenly, not only away from London, but away from Earth. Hugh already was feeling like part of him was missing as Jack vanished into the dark night like one of its many shadows.

But now he had a mission. He had to figure out how to get into Eden without being suspected. He had a pretty good idea of how to do it too, and it involved another visit to The Bull and Parasol. So, he made his way there, once again in his street clothes. Mr. Galloway greeted him with a smile. "Ah, Mr. Hugh. Back again!"

"Is Anth- I mean, Rachel available?" Hugh asked.

Mr. Galloway nodded. "Just finished with another customer, I think. She's probably washing up." He held out his hand, and Hugh dropped his coins into it. Mr. Galloway signaled to one of the other boys. "Take this gentleman up to see Rachel."

Hugh followed after the other prostitute with his heart hammering. What was he getting himself into? But if this didn't work, he didn't know what else he could do.

Anthony had his dressing gown draped loosely over him. "Hello," he greeted with a much sunnier smile than Hugh might have expected.

"Hello," Hugh said, making sure the door was closed before he turned to Anthony

again. "Can you sneak me into the next gathering of Eden with your group of boys?"

Anthony blinked. "Oh, not even a Bob's your uncle, huh?"

Hugh snorted softly. "I'm sorry. But it's very important that I go to Eden."

"It's not going to be safe," Anthony replied. "Something bad might happen to you."

"Let me worry about that," Hugh said, placing a hand on the young man's shoulder.

"I'll take your place. You just tell me how to do it."

Anthony shook his head. "I can't let you take my place."

Hugh frowned. "Will they notice an extra person?"

Anthony gazed at him for a moment. "No. If they do, I can just say Mr. Galloway is sending a new one for free. Them fuckers won't give a shit as long as they ain't paying for it. Their next party is this Saturday night. We meet them at the back of the Penny Lane Pub at seven. If you can be in the back alley of the pub when we arrive at half six, I can sneak you in with me."

Hugh nodded. "Thank you, Anthony. Hopefully we will be able to find some answers for you."

"Did you find Alexander?" Anthony asked.

Hugh shook his head. He had looked in the police reports and death records but had found nothing from the past few weeks that seemed to be related to Alexander. "I'm sorry."

Anthony nodded, toying with a string on his dressing gown. "Thank you for looking."

“Have you heard of any other prostitutes going missing?” Hugh asked.

“No. I heard about Joseph and the fancy toff who ripped him apart though,” Anthony said.

“Did you know Viscount Jardin?” Hugh asked, wondering if perhaps the viscount had frequented The Bull and Parasol.

Anthony frowned. “No, I didn’t, but I heard of him. I think he frequented one of the other brothels though.” He wrinkled his nose. “Somewhere where they don’t play as nice as they do here.”

“Do you know what he was into?” Hugh asked, glad that Anthony and his friends were not in danger from the viscount any longer.

“Weird shit,” Anthony said. “I heard biting. Like, really bad. He liked to draw blood and then lick it up.”

Hugh thought about Toby with his throat ripped out, and Joseph with his insides torn apart. The viscount was gone, and the world was better off without him. Were all of the members of Eden so cruel and dangerous? Jack had said the Duke told him the Waking was supposed to be confined to Eden. But what if it wasn’t, and there were more creatures like the viscount running around the dark streets? And what was happening at Eden anyway? Were the strange creatures on the streets abnormal reactions to the Tree’s powers?

Hugh had taken himself to one of the public libraries to look at information about apple trees. He had learned that they took six to ten years to grow, and then they usually only produced fruit every other year. If the Tree fruited two years ago in 1888, Hugh wondered if perhaps that had been the origin of Jack the Ripper and why there had not been similar cases last year. Unfortunately, without knowing exactly



what the effects of the apples were and who the Ripper was, it was only speculation. But the brutality and timeline made sense. And that made him especially concerned that they needed to find out what was happening and put a stop to it; if the public found out that there was another Ripper-like murderer out there, there would be sheer bloody panic in the streets. “I’ll be there on Saturday,” he promised Anthony. “No matter what. We’re going to end this.”

Jack

It was late in the evening two days later, and Hugh was on his patrol. Jack found him on his route but did not go down to him, as the streets were still rather busy. But he made just a bit of noise on the rooftop to draw the pretty constable’s attention and allowed Hugh to glimpse him disappearing over the rooftops on the way to the Duke’s estate. Hugh smiled to himself as he saw the devilish man. Jack was back, and he was safe.

Jack ran all the way to the Duke’s estate, not bothering with silly horses this time. He left the bag containing the treasures he had procured from other worlds in the woods before he made his way around the Duke’s manor, into the apple orchard. He wanted to find the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil for himself. He wondered if it would look different than any other apple tree.

The orchard was laid out in neat rows. The trees were heavily laden with fruit this late into the season. Jack plucked an apple from one of the trees to examine it but found nothing spectacular about its appearance. He wandered to and fro, unsure what he might find or where to look.

He needn’t have worried. The Tree was deep inside the orchard but in a cleared spot. It was not overly unique-looking, except for what seemed to be the faintest golden glow around it. And a fence. A very tall wooden fence, with a heavy padlock and chain on the gate. “Very subtle,” Jack said to himself. In one bound, he was up and

over the fence, landing on the ground inside of it next to the Tree.

Up close, the Tree was no more remarkable. Its leaves and fruit were attractive and shapely, but he compared the apple in his hand to the apples on the tree and saw very little difference. He debated taking one of the apples and biting into it to see what it would do, but the memory of the viscount ripping apart first Toby and then Joseph was not something he wanted to risk for himself.

Once he had examined the Tree, he sprang back over the fence and headed back to the large house. The window of the Duke's private room had been left open, and he leaped up into it. The man was not there, so Jack poured himself a large glass of the cognac and stretched out in the chair to wait.

He did not have to wait long. The Duke entered the room with a large bottle of wine that he nearly dropped when he saw Jack. "You do know you could use the front door, dear fellow."

Jack laughed and jumped to his feet. "I would hardly be a harbinger of chaos if I used something as banal as a door."

"I suppose," the Duke said, then brightened as Jack picked up the bag and held it out to him.

"Food and drink from several alternate versions of earth, and from two other planets beyond our galaxy."

"Exquisite!" the Duke said, holding up what looked like a block of cheese except it was a bright purple color. "I dare say you've held up your end of the bargain. Where are you staying, that I might deliver your invitation?"

Jack almost listed Hugh's address before realizing that would be foolish, as the Duke

could have someone spy on the place and find out who Hugh was. “I have no one particular residence,” he said, lifting his hand to his forehead with tragic defeat. “But, if you leave the instructions under the little Pan statue in Whitecastle Cemetery, the one behind the mausoleum in the center, I shall check there.”

“I shall have your invitation delivered there in the next day or two,” the Duke said, already pulling out a large, blue fruit with a leathery-looking skin.

“I look forward to it!” Jack replied before heading out the window again.

Sure enough, very early the next day, there was a flat package addressed to ‘Mr. Spring-Heeled Jack, Pan Statue, Whitecastle Cemetery’ under the figurine. Jack carried the parcel back to Hugh’s home, and they opened it in front of the hearth, breaking the violet wax seal. Inside the black envelope was a gold-bordered invitation for Spring-Heeled Jack to attend the next gathering at The Garden of Eden, with instructions on where to meet. There was also a pretty, venetian mask included in the package, made of soft, supple leather. Jack laughed as he held it up to his own face to see his reflection in Hugh’s tiny washroom mirror. “As if I could hide my identity,” he chuckled.

Hugh laughed at that too. Perhaps without the horns and wearing the mask, Jack could pass for a very tall human, but the horns were very obviously attached to him in such a way that they could not be mistaken for any sort of mask or costume. “Probably just a formality in your case.”

“I am curious why they wear masks,” Jack said, turning it over thoughtfully in his hands.

“I suppose that they are concerned about people knowing their identities,” Hugh said slowly. “If it’s a gathering of such rich and powerful members, especially if they are doing things that are frowned upon or even illegal in society, they might want to keep

people from recognizing them.”

“Surely they would likely recognize each other,” Jack said. “If they would have had to make the Duke’s acquaintance like I did.”

Hugh suspected none of the other guests had accosted the Duke at the third floor window of his study, but it had been remarkably effective. “Perhaps they are not the only ones at this gathering. If there are others there for entertainment purposes, like Anthony told me, they might know who they are.”

“Hmm. I suppose that could be the case,” Jack said, poking a finger through one of the eyeholes of the mask and spinning it around it. “Do you think perhaps the guests are being violent with them?”

“It might explain why some of them have disappeared,” Hugh said with a frown. He was starting to suspect that might have been what happened to Alexander. “But, if one of them were to complain, it... it’s not like the police would take them seriously.” It hurt for him to say that. He would take it seriously, as he had when he had found out that Christopher and Anthony were prostitutes, because they were also human beings, worthy of dignity and respect. Being a prostitute meant that you got roughed up; it was an ‘expected’ part of the job they had chosen. But just because it was common did not mean that it was right, though he knew many of his colleagues would not feel the same way.

Jack looked over at the frown on Hugh’s face. “I am sorry,” he said softly. “I know that you are doing everything you can to help.”

“I wish I could do more,” Hugh said. “But I am only one person.”

“One amazing person,” Jack said pointedly, and Hugh chuckled a bit.

“Well, thank you, Jack, I appreciate that.”

“So, I shall attend the gathering and report back to you?” Jack asked.

“No,” Hugh said. “I’m going too.”

Jack stared at him in surprise, his bonfire eyes wide. “This does not seem like the type of gathering where plus ones are invited.”

Hugh nodded. “I know. I’m not going with you. I’m going to go with Mr. Galloway’s boys.”

“What?” Jack demanded.

“I will sneak in with his boys when they are taken to the party. Anthony is going to take me along.”

“You think no one will notice an extra person?” Jack said.

“Anthony said he can claim I’m new, and they don’t have to pay extra. And Mr. Galloway himself said that I have a pretty face. What’s one more pretty face?”

Jack shook his head. “Absolutely not. I am not putting you in that sort of situation.”

“We’re not going to argue about it, Jack,” Hugh said firmly. “I’m a police officer. This is my investigation. And I’m not putting anyone else into further danger. It’s bad enough that I am getting you involved in it.”

“It is my job to be involved in it,” Jack pointed out.

“And mine too,” Hugh replied. “As you said, this is not a place where I can easily

come with you.”

Jack sighed loudly. “I understand your logic, Hugh, but I don’t like it.”

“You don’t have to like it,” Hugh said.

“I don’t want you to be in danger.”

“I am in danger out on the streets every night,” Hugh pointed out. “At least if I go with you to Eden, we’ll be together, right?”

“What if we get separated?” Jack asked with a frown. “I may not be able to be by your side the whole time.”

“That is a risk we will have to take,” Hugh said softly.

“But you might get hurt,” Jack said, a frown deepening his bone-like forehead.

“Jack, I know you’re worried about me, but it will be all right,” Hugh replied firmly. “Please. We’ll never learn anything if we don’t take this chance. And it might be the only one we get.”

Jack heaved a heavy sigh. “All right. I suppose I must learn to trust your judgement.”

Hugh smiled at that. “A terrible idea, really,” he teased.

Jack slid the mask on again and lifted his arms to spread his cape wide. “How do I look?”

“Still only half-dressed,” Hugh replied, gazing back at him for a moment. Jack needed a coat or something on top of his white oilskin top. While he was very

obviously Spring-Heeled Jack, if the people that he would be meeting were rich or influential, trying to assimilate into their ranks seemed like a wise idea. His own clothing would be too small for Jack, and he didn't have anything that nice anyway. But then a thought occurred to him.

"Hold on," he said and retreated to his bedroom. He opened the trunk at the foot of his bed where he kept the few treasures he had. One of them was a tailcoat, a bit old-fashioned for their current time and in need of some ironing, but not enough to look entirely out of place. He carried it back to the sitting room where Jack had not moved from where he stood with the top hat on. Hugh held out the coat. "Try this on. It was my father's."

Jack ran his hand gently over the fabric of one sleeve. "I could not take such a memento from you."

"Please," Hugh said again, giving it a little shake. "My father has no use for it now, and he did love a good mystery. I think he'd be honored to have you wear it."

Jack frowned a bit. "Only if you are sure."

Hugh nodded. "I am. Please. I would not offer it if I did not want you to use it."

Jack turned his back and held out his arms for Hugh. Hugh smiled and slipped the coat on over Jack's broad shoulders like a valet. Jack turned toward him again, and Hugh leaned in to do up the buttons on the front before stepping back to eye it critically. It was not the most tailored look, but under Jack's cape, it would be entirely adequate to disguise Jack's fantastical appearance a bit more. "I think that will work."

Jack grabbed the lapels and did a little spin. "Ah, marvelous. Thank you, Hugh. I promise I will make you and your father proud."

### Chapter fourteen

Hugh's stomach was turning whirligig circles inside of him as the evening of the gathering for Eden approached. He had dressed in simple clothing, including his scuffed boots again, to look as non-police as possible. Jack dressed in the old-fashioned tailcoat that had been ironed and a few places mended. His boots were shined, his pants and cape washed, and he looked about as respectable as a spectral creature from another realm could look, Hugh thought. Quite handsome too, but now was not the time for a quick toss in the sheets. They needed to be focused and ready for whatever tonight was going to bring.

Jack gave him a loving kiss. "Be safe," he whispered to Hugh as he pulled his top hat on over his horns.

"You too," Hugh said softly, reaching up to adjust the collar at Jack's throat. "I love you."

"I love you," Jack replied, kissing him once more. "I shall find you at Eden."

Hugh nodded, and then Jack slid out the open bedroom window and dropped down into the street below, leaving Hugh alone to make his way to the Penny Lane Pub. Hugh crouched in the shadows in the stinking alley, waiting for Anthony to arrive. He still wasn't sure if this idea was going to work, but it was the only plan that he had for getting into Eden. And if he didn't get in, at least Jack would, so they could figure out what was going on.

A few young men and women began to trickle in through the back door, one or two



faces that Hugh recognized from The Bull and Parasol. Eventually he spotted Anthony, walking alone. Anthony gestured him silently over, and they slipped inside the back door of the pub, sitting down at one of the tables there.

There was an assembly of men and women inside, and Hugh felt like he might be a bit overdressed, considering what some of them wore. But as long as he didn't stick out, he figured he would just be another face in the crowd.

"Ladies, gentlemen," said a man from the door. "My name is Mr. Green. I will be your guide for this evening. Thank you for being here."

'Mr. Green' wore a bowler hat and a plain, brown suit. "We shall be departing for the gathering shortly. Once we arrive, we will have outfits for you to wear."

"Where are we going?" one of the young women asked curiously.

"I'm afraid the location is secret," Mr. Green said. "Our guests are sworn to secrecy, and you are as well. You will be blindfolded for the journey until we arrive at the location. If that bothers any of you, you are free to leave now."

Glances were exchanged between the assembled revelers, but no one left. The amount of money that some of them must have received probably tamped down any overriding concern.

Mr. Green smiled. "Excellent. We will go out to the carriage, and once you are all seated, my assistants will put on the blindfolds."

He led them out the door to where two long wagons pulled by two horse teams waited, not unlike the mariahs the police used when transporting criminals, though black fabric covered the few windows so no one could see in or out.

Two assistants were helping people into the wagons. The first one was a big man with red hair and a nose that looked like it had been broken several times in his life. The other one was a ferret-faced man with large, gray muttonchops, and Hugh's blood ran cold when he recognized him instantly. It was Sergeant Reardon! He turned to Anthony, his heart thundering so loud in his throat he could barely speak. "Shit. That man with the gray hair is my sergeant!"

"Are you fucking serious?" Anthony asked, his own voice low as he glanced over at him. Reardon was helping several of the ladies into one of the wagons, and Hugh didn't have to look very closely to see that he was taking an appreciative look at each one as he did. He felt sick. This was a terrible idea, and he was about to have his cover blown.

Anthony suddenly shoved Hugh into the line of people waiting to get into the other wagon before he trotted over to where Reardon was giving a push to the ample bum of one of the women he was assisting. Hugh lifted his arm like he was scratching his head to try to block his face as best he could as Anthony suddenly trailed his fingertips over the front of Reardon's coat. He said something in a low voice that Hugh couldn't hear, but the sergeant's eyes traveled down to look at the fingers, then back up to Anthony's face, giving him a wicked grin that made Hugh's stomach roil inside of him. He ducked his head a bit, taking the hand of the large, red-haired man that he luckily did not recognize to help him up into the back of the wagon. He sat down on a bench next to one of the other boys, a young man with red hair and freckles across his pale cheeks that looked like he might still be a teenager. He gave the boy a reassuring smile, and the boy gave him a tight-lipped one in return.

The redhaired man stepped up into the wagon with a handful of black fabric in his hands. He went around to each person, wrapping the fabric securely around their eyes. Hugh watched him approach the little redhead. The boy reached out a hand and grabbed Hugh's wrist. Hugh placed his own hand over the boy's and kept it there; the assistant didn't say anything about it, tying the black fabric around the boy's eyes

before turning to Hugh.

His brain screamed at him that this was a terrible idea, that he was going to die, that he needed to run and not look back. But Jack was counting on him, and he would not be able to find out what was happening if he didn't do this. So, Hugh just nodded and held still as the assistant slipped the blindfold around his eyes and tied it securely. He could only see the tiniest bit of light peeking from the bottom, but not enough to be able to tell where they might be going. Next to him, the boy was trembling a little, and Hugh gave his hand another squeeze.

One of the benches creaked, and Hugh guessed that the assistant had sat down, because the carriage suddenly began to roll. He swallowed down his nervousness, wondering if Jack was experiencing the same thing wherever his meeting place was. Would anyone dare to approach to blindfold Spring-Heeled Jack? He imagined a black cloth over Jack's eyes but the intense, red flames of them still burning through the fabric like lamps in the night. "Are we allowed to talk?" he asked, directing it to the general vicinity of the assistant.

"Sure," the man grunted.

Hugh gave the boy's hand a reassuring squeeze. "My name's Hugh," he said softly. "What's yours?"

"Morris," the boy said, his voice even softer.

"Glad to meet you, Morris," Hugh said. "Just hold onto me until we get there, all right?"

"Okay," Morris agreed, and his fingers tightened further around Hugh's wrist. Hugh didn't want to accidentally say something to throw suspicion onto himself, so he just sat and held the boy's hand.

The carriage moved along at a fast clip, and Hugh occasionally caught sounds from the streets they passed. He tried to take a guess where they might be, but there had been several turns, and nothing that he could hear gave him a good clue as to where they were. So, he simply sat. The ride took about twenty minutes before the horses slowed to a stop. Hugh waited, trying to see anything under the sliver left from his blindfold, but he could see nothing helpful.

After another minute, the carriage doors opened. “We have arrived,” said what he thought was Mr. Green. “Mr. Blue will escort you out of the carriage one by one and take you inside. Once everyone is inside, you will be able to remove your blindfolds.”

Mr. Blue must have been the big redheaded assistant, Hugh thought. He heard the man get up and help one of the passengers down, then moved to the next one. There was a soft murmur of voices outside, and Hugh guessed there was a system to escort the blindfolded guests with maximum efficiency. Mr. Blue tapped Hugh lightly on the shoulder. “Stand up,” he said, his voice not unkind but holding no room for shenanigans.

Hugh patted Morris’s hand, and the boy reluctantly let go of him. He rose to his feet, and a large hand kept his head bowed so he didn’t knock it on the carriage roof. Mr. Blue led him over to the carriage entrance, where he could feel a slight temperature shift. Though whether they were still outside on the streets or inside some sort of building, he could not be sure. “Step down,” Mr. Blue said as someone else took Hugh’s hand from the ground. Hugh carefully put his foot on the carriage’s step, using the hand to brace himself, and then stepped onto the ground.

“Right this way, please,” came a pleasant male voice from whomever the hand belonged to, and another hand touched the small of his back to guide him. It was not Reardon’s voice, at least, which was reassuring. He followed the prompting. “Watch your step,” the voice said. “The floor slopes.”

Hugh remembered what Anthony had said about going down a ramp into a possible underground area. His heart picked up a little in his chest as he carefully walked down the incline. It was not very steep, though it was decently long. He counted 127 steps before the voice said, “The next step is level,” and the hand holding his adjusted a little to steady him. The floor did even out, and he was walked along what he assumed was a short corridor, the light outside of his blindfold growing gradually brighter with each step.

After another short distance, the hands holding him adjusted positions again. “There is a chair right behind you. Please sit. You will be able to remove your blindfold shortly.”

Hugh carefully lowered himself into the chair. It felt like a simple wooden chair with a high back, though there were arms, which he was slightly grateful for, considering he could still not see much. He rested his forearms on the arms of the chair to steady himself as he waited, listening to the sounds around him. He could hear the soft crackle and sputter of gas lamps and the shuffle of feet. A few murmured voices, most of them giving similar instructions to what the voice had given him, directing people into chairs and offering polite reassurances. He inhaled, trying to see if there were any distinct smells. The air was warm and a little stale. He could smell perfume and other odors from those around him, the faint smoky smell of the lamps, but nothing else leaped to his mind immediately.

Someone cleared their throat, and then Mr. Green was speaking again. “Thank you for your patience, ladies and gentlemen. You may remove your blindfolds now.”

Hugh reached up and slid his quickly off without untying it, glancing around the room. It was brightly lit with covered sconces, but there were no windows anywhere. The room they were in was large, the walls made from some sort of stone. He was not familiar with what they might be, but they looked quite old and rough-hewn, as if they had been carved. It was yellowish sort of stone that helped to make the room

seem brighter than it was with the flickering lights.

The people he had been sitting with in the back room of the pub were now all seated in chairs as he was, arranged in a crude semicircle. Standing for them to be able to see him was Mr. Green, giving them all that friendly smile. Hugh quickly glanced around but did not see Reardon amongst the people. “We have some refreshments for you, and then I shall explain the evening’s affairs.”

Several people stepped forward, wearing black outfits that looked as if they might be servant uniforms of some sort, their eyes shaded with black domino masks. Each of them held a silver tray, upon which were glasses of champagne. Each person was handed a glass. Hugh gave it as unobtrusive of a sniff as he could, but he couldn’t smell anything beyond the bubbles.

“Please, drink up,” Mr. Green said after the last glass was handed out. Nearly everyone brought their glass to their lips. Hugh followed suit but did not open his mouth, letting the buzzy liquid brush over his lips but remain in the glass as Mr. Green began to talk again. “You all are here at the behest of our esteemed guests to serve as entertainment for the night, for which you and your employer, if you have one, have been compensated for. You will be given costumes to wear, and then we simply ask you to follow the whims of the guests.”

“Oi, they ain’t allowed to hurt us, is they?” asked a woman to Hugh’s right.

“Some of our guests have special tastes,” Mr. Green said. “But you may decide if you will be a willing participant.”

Hugh had heard enough police interrogation double-speak to know that Mr. Green had not said ‘No’ to the woman’s question, nor had he said that they would be allowed to deny a request from a guest, only that they could decide if they would be willing or not. His stomach tightened a little.

“Once our guests have been satisfied, you will be returned home,” Mr. Green went on with that same friendly smile. “Now, if you will please finish your drinks, ladies to the right, gentlemen to the left,” he said, gesturing to two archways where the black-clad servants waited with the trays to collect the glasses.

Hugh debated not drinking the champagne and just handing the glass back still full, but if they required him to drink it, they would be watching him much more closely, so he had to make the liquid disappear now. A swish around his mouth so his breath smelled of alcohol would probably be enough. He lifted his glass again. The champagne hit his tongue, the bubbles tickling. It would be so easy to swallow, and he could see how it would be quite tempting for the prostitutes to want to drink to help dull whatever was going to happen, but he forced himself to just hold it in his mouth for a few moments before he tipped the glass back down, letting the liquid flow out of his mouth and back into the flute. He glanced quickly around to see that the servers and the man in charge seemed to not be looking directly at him, too distracted by those already getting to their feet to head into the other areas. He lifted the glass to his mouth and upended it as if getting the last of the liquid inside, but instead he tipped the glass so the champagne flowed down his left cheek, down his neck, and over his back to slowly soak into his shirt. The bubbles tingled on his skin, and he swiped at his cheek with the back of his hand to try to clear away any obvious signs of it on his face. The room was warm; he hoped that the liquid on the back of his shirt would simply look like sweat.

He rose to his feet. Morris, the little redhead, was sitting a few chairs away and seemed to be waiting for him. Hugh felt his stomach clench again. The boy looked so nervous. He rose to his feet and nodded at him. “Come on,” he offered. Morris scampered to his feet and moved to his side like a quivering hare. Hugh gave him an encouraging smile. “It will be all right.”

Morris nodded, and he set his empty glass on the tray the server held out. Hugh set his own empty glass down too, then turned to hurry out of the gathering room and

through the archway so no one would see the champagne on his clothes. Morris followed at his heels.

Down a short, lit passageway they walked to another room that was full of changing screens, upon which were draped bits of fabric that Hugh at first thought were decorative, until he saw another young man step from behind the screen with nothing but a silky, violet-colored loincloth hanging in front from a thin, gold chain around his waist. His backside was bare. He had no other clothes on except for the purple drape. Hugh felt his cheeks warm. Next to him, Morris let out a squeak. “Is that what we’re supposed to wear?”

Another of the black-masked servants gestured to a nearby screen. “Yes. Right this way, sir.”

Morris cast a glance back at Hugh. Hugh gave him a weak smile. “It will be all right.” He hoped to any deity that he was not lying to the boy.

Morris retreated behind the screen, and the servant gestured to another one. “You may leave your current clothes back there, they will be returned to you at the end of the night.”

Hugh nodded and stepped behind the screen. The things he was willing to do to solve a mystery, he thought to himself as he stripped off his waistcoat and shirt, putting the shirt on the bottom so no one would see the damp patch of champagne there. He slid off his boots and socks, then his trousers and undergarments, leaving him without a stitch of clothing on. He picked up the violet garment, which had a clasp with an adjustable gold chain to go around his waist. The purple garment was silky and at least hung past his knees, so he didn’t feel quite so exposed. At least in the front. The air on his bare back, legs, and buttocks was more than a little disconcerting. Jack would probably have a good laugh at him when this was all over.



He stepped out from behind the screen. As he did, he started to feel a little dizzy. He steadied himself and tried to focus on the nearest wall. The wall seemed wavery all of a sudden, like it was the edge of the river Thames. The candles flickered, and Hugh thought for a moment that one of the candelabras at the corner of his vision had started to twirl. He turned his head, but the candelabra was as still as it had been. But the movement was spreading now, the shadows getting bigger, stretching, starting to consume his vision. He turned to look again, and the world suddenly flared brightly. He raised a hand to his eyes, his limbs suddenly feeling like they were filled with lead.

“Hmm, hit this one really fast,” he heard a voice say, and suddenly there were several pairs of hands closing around him. He looked around, but the movement made his vision turn blurry. He groped out, trying to steady himself. “Easy there, we’ve got you,” said the unfamiliar voice. Hugh felt his feet leave the ground and the world tip at an odd angle. There was a mess of black around him, blacker than nighttime against the yellow gleam of the sconces and the walls. He felt himself moving, though by what means he could not tell. And then everything went oddly silent and dark.

### Chapter fifteen

Jack didn't like being separated from Hugh. They didn't know these people or what they were capable of. What would happen if it was discovered that Hugh was a policeman? Nothing good, of that he was sure.

After he left Hugh at the door of the pub, Jack had donned his mask in a rather useless attempt to hide his identity, before he headed to another pub that was listed as the meeting place on his invitation. He was ushered into a waiting single-person coach that took off into the night. He wished Hugh was still next to him, but with their different roles to play, he had to trust that Hugh would be all right without him for the time being.

The coach traveled for about twenty minutes down London streets, the horse clip-clopping along the cobbles, until it pulled to a stop in front of what appeared to have once been a grand theatre but was now dilapidated and abandoned. Hardly the place for any sort of fantastical festivities, Jack thought, wondering if perhaps he and Hugh had already been made, and he had been taken to this solitary location to be questioned or murdered. They would not have him so easily as that, if that was to be the case.

The door was opened by the coach driver, who doffed his cap at him. "Here you are, sir."

Jack frowned, sliding out of the carriage. "There appears to be no one here."

"Inside," the driver said, pointing a finger as fat as a sausage to the lobby doors. "Go

into the auditorium, you'll be given instructions there."

Ah, just the sort of thing a secret cult might say. Or perhaps a suspicious assassin. Jack wasn't sure which it was yet, but standing here in the dark was not going to get him anywhere.

Another carriage suddenly pulled up behind the one he had just exited, and a man in a dark suit with a cape and top hat similar to his own stepped down from the carriage and held out his hand. A woman with red ringlets alighted from the carriage after him, dressed in a beautiful yellow gown. Both of them wore masks in a similar style to Jack's. The man tipped his hat at Jack. "Evening."

"Evening," Jack said, gesturing with his hand but not lifting his own hat.

"First time?" the man asked, and Jack gave him a chuckle.

"Indeed. Special invitation."

"Well, you are in for a treat," the man said, and the woman giggled. "Come, we'll help you find the way."

"Ah, splendid!" Jack said, offering his elbow to the woman's free side. The woman blinked behind her mask but then took his arm. The other man chuckled and then led them through the doors that gave a rusty-sounding screech as they were opened.

The lobby was also in disrepair, though it looked as though much of the debris had been cleared away. There were a few candles in globes further inside to cast villainous shadows about the walls and to lead them across the moldering carpet to the doors that led into the main theatre. The walls had been originally painted with fat cherubs and flowing-haired angels in a Renaissance style, though now much of the artwork was faded or had been defaced by vandals. Some of the plush red velvet seats

were broken or had been removed, but the first two rows were intact, and Jack could see several people already sitting in them, all with masks on as well. His escort and the woman he assumed was the man's wife led him down the aisle and gestured for him to take a seat in the second row. Jack did, sliding in next to an older-looking gentleman. He glanced around again, spotting the Duke of Westchester in the front row and a few seats to his right; he wore a mask like the others, but there was no hiding his portly body. Jack swiftly counted the assembled people as several more entered and took seats nearby as well. Eleven, including himself. He knew he could overwhelm several of them if needed, but he did not know how well Hugh was able to fight, or if he would even be willing to do so in the first place.

A man dressed in an elegantly cut gray suit with a gray top hat and wearing a gold mask over his eyes suddenly walked out onto the stage, stopping in the middle of it like an actor about to deliver a soliloquy. "Ladies and gentlemen." The elegantly dressed man lifted his hands, and the room fell silent. "I welcome you on this most auspicious night to our beautiful Garden of Eden. We have a new member joining us. The rather notorious Spring-Heeled Jack." The man lifted his hand and gestured straight at Jack. Everyone turned to look at him.

He had not been expecting to be introduced, but Jack rose to his feet and gave a dramatic bow, the way he had when he had first introduced himself to Hugh. "Thank you. My most gracious felicitations for allowing me to join your gathering."

Several people tittered, but the man on stage did not seem at all perturbed by his theatricality. "We are glad to bring you into our ranks, Spring-Heeled Jack. My name is Adam." The gray-suited man gave his own little bow, not quite as grand as Jack's had been.

Jack lifted his hat in acknowledgement; no reason to hide his identity now, he supposed. Gasps and mumbles went through the assembled group as he revealed his horns.

Adam clapped his hands, seeming to be delighted. “Stunning!” he announced. “Perhaps we could have a demonstration of your abilities later, Jack.”

Jack gave them all a dazzling smile. “As you wish.” And then he sat back down in his seat.

“Now,” Adam said, going back to addressing the crowd. “The entertainment is there for your pleasure. Nothing is off-limits, though we ask you not to leave Eden until the Waking has worn off. If there are any concerns, please bring them to me directly. Come.” He turned his palms up and made a ‘rise’ gesture. The assembled, masked group all rose, and Jack followed their movements. Adam moved to stage left and came down the creaking, wooden stairs there before he crossed over to one of the painted wall panels. Jack could see that it was a depiction of Adam and Eve, standing naked in the Garden of Eden on either side of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, a green serpent coiled around its trunk and entwining itself amongst the bright red apples there. Adam suddenly pushed a decorative piece of molding, and the Garden of Eden wall panel swung inward, revealing a lit set of stairs going down.

The rest of the group began to descend the stairwell, the Duke at the front. Jack followed them at the back of the group. Adam waited for him to step inside the hidden passage and head down the stairs before he came in after them and pulled the panel shut. Jack heard something click and realized the panel had locked itself back into place. He wondered if it could be opened from this side or not.

The lights leading down the stairs were not gas, but incandescent bulbs with wires running between them. Jack turned to look at them curiously. Adam stopped behind him. “Amazing, aren’t they? We had this fitted with electricity. It’s the way of the future.”

“Indeed,” Jack said, reaching up his iron clawed-tip fingers to touch one of the bulbs cautiously. It was hot, though it did not bother him. “Extraordinary.”

“Are you really Spring-Heeled Jack?” Adam asked.

Jack turned to him in surprise. “Have you met others with horns like mine?”

Adam laughed brightly. “Can’t say that I have. Are you the Spring-Heeled Jack that was seen at the beginning of the century as well?”

“Ah, no,” Jack said, waving his hand and giving a long-suffering sigh. “That was not I. Though it very possibly could have been another like me; we do tend to pop up in quite mysterious places and times.”

“Fascinating,” Adam said, gesturing for Jack to keep walking, and he did, the gold-masked young man following after him. “My father did say that you were able to scale his manor house with no trouble.”

“Your father?” Jack asked curiously.

Adam looked for a moment like he wasn’t sure if he should respond before he shrugged. “My father is the Duke of Westchester.”

“Ah, I see!” Jack said. “I’m afraid my knowledge of the aristocracy is lacking, so you’ll forgive me that I do not know much about either of you.”

“Quite all right,” Adam said with a smirk. “You do not need to know more to enjoy our hospitality.”

The stairs curved a little and then suddenly came to an end in a cavern that branched off in several directions. The people ahead of them seemed to know where they were going, and Jack followed them, Adam bringing up the rear. The walls were built of stone, and there were arches everywhere leading off into what looked like other hallways. It was a veritable rabbit warren, and even Jack, with his usually excellent

sense of direction, found himself quite turned around.

They came out into a large, open cavern that was brightly lit with gas lamps that sent flickering shadows up over the uneven stones. At the center of the room was a circular, wooden table with chairs arranged around it. In front of each place was a gold plate. And resting on each plate was a singular red apple, each one rosy and fresh as if it had just been plucked from its branch.

The other masked guests were already taking seats around the table in front of the plates. Jack turned to Adam, giving him a small smile. "I'm afraid as the newcomer, I do not understand this situation."

"You are more than welcome to simply observe for your first time," Adam said, gesturing to an empty chair, and he took the one to the left of it. Jack sat down, glancing curiously at the apple. There was a faint golden sheen on it when the lights flicked over it, but it otherwise looked and smelled like an ordinary apple.

Adam stood at his seat and raised his hands again in a showman's gesture. "Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the Garden of Eden. Where you may fulfill your wildest dreams and desires and become the gods you are meant to be."

Everyone was staring at Adam with rapt attention. Adam picked up his own apple from his plate, holding it aloft like a goblet. Everyone else mimicked the motion except for Jack, who watched them all with curious fascination. "'The day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.' My friends, eat, and Wake, knowing thy true nature." He put the apple to his lips and took a bite. Around the table, the others all did the same, the sound of teeth breaking the crisp flesh of each firm apple echoing off the stone walls.

Adam set down his apple with only the one bite taken out of it, but the others continued to eat theirs. Jack turned to Adam with a small smile. "What happens

now?”

“The apple will take hold in only a few minutes,” Adam said, sitting back down in his seat.

“And what exactly does it do?”

Adam’s grin beneath his gold mask looked almost feral. “As I said, we shall be as gods.”

“That is quite vague,” Jack said, waving his hand curiously.

“I think you will have to see for yourself,” Adam replied. “Do you know the biblical account of the Tree of Knowledge?”

“I have heard of it,” Jack said.

“Every man wears a mask of duality,” Adam said. “He contains within himself both good and evil. One could argue that the evil side of man is his true nature. The nature he is unable to show the world.”

There was a rustling sound, and Jack looked up to see several of the guests standing and beginning to remove their clothing. Hats and gloves littered the table next to the apple cores on the gold plates. And then off came jackets, shawls, corsets, waistcoats, shoes. Everyone except for Adam and Jack stripped off their clothing to their undergarments and then continued further, until each of them stood as naked as the day they were born in a sea of finery on the stone floor. Jack turned to Adam, opening his mouth to ask another question, when the man sitting closest to him, who was the man who had escorted him earlier into the theatre, suddenly arched his back, his body bowing backward at an angle that looked dreadfully impossible. He let out a sound almost like a howl as his legs began to grow longer and spindlier, claws



suddenly sprouting from his toenails as a blackness began to spread over his skin, like a piece of paper absorbing spilled ink.

Another cry rent the air, and Jack looked over at one of the women, who didn't seem phased that she was standing naked in a room full of men, her shoulders hunching as something suddenly burst from her back like the wings of an archangel, waving around her like a mass of snakes.

And then there was movement everywhere, all of the guests doubling over or falling to the floor, contorting, writhing, their bodies moving in agonistic movements as they began to transform. No two were the same. Jack watched with horrified fascination as the Duke of Westchester suddenly seemed to stretch and then expand, like a rubber hose filling with water, until he was nearly twice as long as he had been and so enormously wide around that he looked like a knobby slug, rolls of skin wrinkling at odd angles like a melted wax figurine. His mouth stretched wide, and a tongue that was larger than his head unfurled from the depths of the gaping maw that was filled with dripping saliva. Jack turned back to Adam, then realized that the man had doubled over, his hand pressed to his eyes over the gold mask he wore, his shoulders tense, making his body tremble.

Adam suddenly looked up at him. Behind his mask, his eyes that had been brown were now suddenly a violent bright purple, with a slitted, red pupil that seemed to be constantly shifting in a way similar to Jack's own bonfire eyes.

Adam's lips curled back in a smile that was still human but stretched a little further than a regular smile should, his teeth extended into almost needle-sharp fangs. "What do you think, my dear Jack?"

Jack gazed back at him. "I am not sure what I am supposed to think. You spoke of the duality of human nature."

“Yes,” Adam said, just a bit of a hiss behind his voice now. “The Waking shows us who we really are. What we most desire. The faces we cannot show on the streets. Here, in Eden, we are the truest forms of ourselves.”

The vile creatures around the table had stopped twitching and morphing now, bodies rent into nearly unrecognizable forms. Many of them were animalistic, though what the significance of each transformation was, Jack was uncertain. Either way, he knew it couldn't be good. But he gave Adam another cheery smile. “Fascinating! The apple alone does that?”

“Yes,” Adam replied. “In any form, the apple will Wake the desires inside of anyone who consumes it. I would assume even yourself, even if you are not of this world. Would you care to try it?” He gestured to the singular apple that still sat on the plate in front of Jack.

Jack wondered what he might transform into if he consumed the apple. But, he realized, he was not interested in finding out. He was already dangerous enough, with his ability to breathe fire and leap dozens of feet in the air, and he had no idea how much control he would have over himself if he did consume any of the apple at all. “I think I wish to just observe for now. I am curious to see how this transformation affects everyone.”

Adam nodded, waving his hands again, and the creatures seemed to disburse into the various archways, as if they all knew where they were going. “What happens now?” Jack asked, keeping his tone light.

Adam rose to his feet, offering Jack his hand. “I'll show you. What is your pleasure, sir? What thrills you?”

Jack took the hand, careful of his iron claws, and rose to his feet, taller than Adam even with his top hat. “I'm afraid I don't really know,” he said thoughtfully. He

didn't know what was happening in the dark archways, but he had to find Hugh to make sure he was safe. "Men?"

"This way then," Adam said, gesturing to one of the archways. Jack noticed that before he left the table, he took the apple with the singular bite out of it and put it into his jacket pocket. Jack followed after him, unsure what to expect. The hall was lit with the same gas lamps that cast shadows over the wall, even his own shape monstrous in the stretched and undulating flames.

There were smaller archways branching off of the main hall into what appeared to be more private rooms. Jack had good night vision, so he was able to see that each room was a little different in its offering. Some held beds, while others held a variety of what looked like sexual toys and other devices he was unsure about.

There was a large opening at the end of the hallway, and two of the monstrous creatures were coming out of it. Both were pushing people in front of them. Jack realized as they did the people were all men, mostly young, wearing almost nothing except for a single violet drape over their fronts held in place by a thin, gold chain. He quickly scanned their faces, but none of them were Hugh. But he noticed with dismay that all of the violet-clothed men looked hazy-eyed and dreamy, not paying any attention to him and Adam. And he could see that all of them sported erections under their flimsy coverings. Was that the effects of whatever had been in the champagne that Anthony had mentioned?

Adam led him into the large room the two monsters had come from, and Jack found himself faced with about half a dozen men, all dressed in the same purple sash and chain and nothing else. All of them reclined on pillows or sat in chairs, and all of them had the same sort of half-lidded expression that the boys in the hallway had. Jack scanned their faces. Where was Hugh? Had he already been taken? Was he not in this wing? He almost melted with relief when he spotted him. Hugh was also dressed in the violet silk, though it splayed rather obscenely to the side based on the

way he was lying on a pile of pillows, giving Jack a look at Hugh's half-erect cock beneath it. Hugh seemed to be asleep, his eyes closed.

Adam gestured around the room at the assembled young men. "You may have your pick, and you may do as you like with them. As you probably saw, there are rooms off to the side, and there are other rooms too if you wish to move around. If you get too excited and harm them, or go even further, we will take care of it at the end of the night, have no fear." He said this so calmly that Jack had to look over at him to see if the man was trying to make a joke. But despite the slightly bemused smile on his stretched mouth, Adam looked quite serious.

"Oh, thank you," Jack said, surveying the room. "Why do they all look so sleepy?"

Adam smiled further. "Ah. Trade secret, but we give them a special concoction that makes them less likely to remember what happens here. It also has the delightful side effect of making them deliciously pliant and wanton. If you wish for more lively prey though, we can also accommodate that, you need only ask."

Jack smiled, but the words bubbled inside of him like a geyser. Lively prey. "Thank you. Is it all right if I wander about? This whole thing is fascinating, and I wish to see everything I can."

"Yes, of course," Adam said. "The employees have the black masks on, they can assist you if you have need of anything."

Jack nodded, noting one employee dressed in all black with a black mask standing off to the side of the room. If she found any part of this disturbing, she showed no outward sign of it. "Thank you. I think I'd like to peruse the wares, if that is all right."

"Yes, of course," Adam said, waving his hand like he had to dismiss the monstrous crowd. "Please, enjoy yourself. If you have need of anything, please do not hesitate to

request it.”

Jack nodded, wondering if Adam was going to perhaps stay to observe him, but the man simply nodded his head before turning and walking out of the brightly-lit stone room.

Jack almost ran to Hugh, but he glanced over at the black-clad employee again. He had to assume that they were under the control of Adam and would report anything suspicious to him, so he wandered over to one of the other boys first, a darker-skinned man a little older than Hugh, with short, curly black hair and long lashes. He reached out his hand with its clawed fingertips to grasp the young man’s chin, tipping his face up to look into the glassy eyes. The young man smiled softly, leaning in to nuzzle his nose over the front of Jack’s trousers. Oh dear, that would not do. Even if he had come here alone, Jack knew he would not be all right with this situation. These boys might have been here as their job, if they came from Mr. Galloway’s brothel, but they were drugged and helpless and were not of a mind to consent to anything. He patted the young man’s umber cheek. “Maybe later,” he said. The young man looked disappointed, but Jack was all right with disappointing him if it meant he was not going to take advantage of him.

Instead, he moved over to where Hugh lay, still asleep on the pillows. He knelt by him, shifting a little so his back was to the black-masked employee, spreading his cape out a bit to try to block Hugh as much as possible as he gave his shoulder a light shake. “Wake up,” he whispered. How drugged was Hugh? And how long would it last?

Hugh stirred, blinking, a hand going up to shade his eyes, though his movement was sluggish. “Jack?”

“Shh,” Jack said, placing a fingertip lightly on Hugh’s lips, careful to angle the sharp points of them away from his skin.

Hugh reached for Jack, groping blindly where he seemed to think the man was. His hand connected with Jack's chest. "Are you all right?" Jack asked, concerned.

"Uh huh." His voice came out slurred as he leaned up toward Jack's embrace.

"I thought you didn't drink the champagne," Jack whispered.

"N... Din't," Hugh said, turning his eyes up, though they looked a little glassy. "But go'sum in my mouth."

Jack made a soft sound in his throat. "Whatever was in it must have absorbed through the inside of your mouth."

Hugh frowned. He clutched at Jack's chest, groping for anything he could grab. "Everything ishso shiny an' warm."

Jack couldn't leave Hugh alone like this. If one of the monsters came back to take him, Hugh was in no state to defend himself. Jack glanced over at the black-masked woman. "Could you please bring some water?"

The woman bobbed her head in agreement before she turned and hurried down another small hallway. This whole place was an absolute maze. Jack had no idea if either of them would be able to find their way out without being spotted, so they might very well be stuck here until the end of the event. But if he could get Hugh coherent again, they could go look around and find out more about this strange, creepy underworld.

Hugh sat up, squinting in the light. Jack was so handsome. The man who traveled across space and time to help him solve these mysterious murders, who was supposed to be his soulmate.

“Jack,” he said, nestling into his arms. Jack was surprisingly warm and soft. “I love you.”

Jack smiled and stroked his hand gently through Hugh’s hair, careful to not catch his curls with his claws. “Do you?”

“Mm-hmm,” Hugh said, looking up at him. Jack’s face was so white in the light, a halo being cast around his horns. “Do you love me?”

Jack laughed and pressed a kiss to his forehead. “I do,” he said softly. “I love you.”

Warmth flooded Hugh, and he held tighter to the man. “Kiss me.”

Jack shook his head. “No, darling. You’re not in your right mind.”

“But I want you to,” Hugh replied, sticking out his lower lip in a pout.

“And I want to,” Jack replied, brushing the pad of one finger over Hugh’s lip. “But only when you are in full charge of your faculties.”

“I’ll charge your faculties,” Hugh said with a giggle.

“You already do,” Jack said with a chuckle, just as the woman returned with a tray baring a pitcher of water and two glasses. Jack took them with a gracious nod at her, then poured a glass for himself before he poured one for Hugh like it was an afterthought, offering it to him. Hugh took the glass and sipped at the water. He was not in his right mind, but whatever the drugs in his system were, they had definitely loosened the young man’s tongue, and it was strangely adorable. But Jack wanted to get him some place they could talk privately. So, he scooped Hugh up from the pillows and made for the archway. He glanced at the black-masked woman to see if she would object, but she just stood with the same smile on her face, and Jack made

his way out of the large room.

One of the little rooms off the hallway was empty and held a plush bed. Jack set Hugh onto it. He glanced around to see that they were alone before he turned back to Hugh. “Are you all right?”

“Yes,” Hugh said, rubbing at his eyes. “I’m sorry.” His movements were still slow but a bit more coordinated as he swiped at his eyes and adjusted the fabric around him. He realized to his chagrin that he was still sporting an erection, and he tucked it down as best he could. Jack was kind enough to pretend he did not notice it.



### Chapter sixteen

Jack explored the room as Hugh rested on the bed, waiting for the drug to work its way out of his system. The room held a variety of oils and sexual toys that Jack had no idea what most of them were, and he guessed that might be a blessing.

Hugh finally stirred, sitting up on the bed and rubbing at his eyes again. “I think it’s mostly cleared,” he said, and Jack came over to sit next to him. “I have a feeling I missed a lot.”

“Quite a bit,” Jack said. He gave Hugh as quick a rundown as he could about his arrival at the designated place, the abandoned theatre, Adam, the secret passage down into the tunnels. He explained about the apples and what he had seen the guests transform into after eating them. And he did his best to explain what Adam had told him about what the apples did, what they brought out from inside of a person. Hugh’s eyes grew wider and wider as he listened, his breath hitching a little in his throat.

“Fuck,” he said, and Jack gave a slight smirk. Hugh so very rarely cursed, so it was always amusing when he did. “I guess that would explain Viscount Jardin’s appearance, and why he was eating that young man.”

Jack nodded. “Visceral pleasures often go hand in hand.”

Hugh rubbed at his eyes again before they went wide, and he sat up. “Oh! My sergeant was one of the assistants helping us into the wagon,” he said, turning to Jack. “Have you seen him around? Gray muttonchops, looks sort of like a ferret?”

Jack frowned thoughtfully. “No, I don’t believe so, though I have not been comparing anyone to rodents either. Did you know he was involved in Eden?”

Hugh shook his head. “No, not at all. I don’t think he saw me, but we need to be really careful.”

Jack nodded. “If you see him, let me know, and I will do my best to distract him.”

“Are any of the other people you’ve seen the one you saw running away from Christopher O’Malley?” Hugh asked curiously.

Jack shook his head. “No, I don’t believe so. If I encounter Adam again, I can ask him if there are other members who are not currently in attendance. Or if the apples have been taken by anyone not part of Eden.”

“Have you seen the Tree down here?” Hugh asked, glancing around the small space like the Tree would materialize in front of them.

“No, but I have not examined much yet,” Jack replied. A thought occurred to him, and he felt silly that he had not thought of it sooner. “When I went to the Duke’s estate, I heard him talking to someone about the Tree. Moving it to Eden. And someone else replied that they couldn’t just plant the Tree in the stone. The Duke called him Adam. Which would make sense, with Adam being his son.”

Hugh frowned thoughtfully. “That does seem likely. So, the Tree is probably still on the Duke’s property at his estate.”

Jack nodded. “I assume that as well. If we can make our way back there, we could destroy it.”

“We’d have to destroy the whole thing. Probably every apple and seed too,” Hugh

said.

Jack's bonfire eyes twinkled. "Oh, no fear of that." He patted his chest with his hand. "I can repeat what I did to the viscount in the alley."

Hugh nodded slowly. "Do you think we could slip out of here and do it tonight?"

Jack frowned. "I'm afraid I am uncertain about the way to get back. And my presence, or lack thereof, would surely be noticed. So, we should probably at least wait for a bit before trying to make an exit."

He had a point. It wasn't like Jack was inconspicuous amongst the group. "All right. We should probably try to find out what's happening and any evidence we can find. We might have to bring a case against the aristocrats here."

Jack nodded. "The only ones I know so far are the Duke, and that Adam is his son. The rest have withheld their names. But perhaps you can identify them better than I can."

Hugh was sure that was why they all wore masks. "We should go look around. Though, I don't know if I can just wander the hallways like this." He glanced down at his barely-clothed body. "I get the impression that I am not supposed to be alone. Especially if I am drugged."

Jack cast his eyes quickly around the room before they landed on a pile of red silk cord, coiled into a circle like a snake waiting in the grass. "Ah, here. I shall put this on you like a leash and parade you through the halls like a prize hound."

Hugh's cheeks flushed pink. "Oh. Um, yes, I suppose that would work."

"Only with your permission, of course," Jack added hastily.

Hugh's whole face went red now. "It would not be my first choice, but I do not see a lot of other great options."

Jack frowned. "I do not wish for you to be uncomfortable, Hugh."

Hugh snorted softly. "I'm wearing less clothing than an infant, in an underground dungeon full of monsters. A leash around my neck is the least of my concerns right now."

Jack laughed a little nervously. "I suppose. My deepest apologies for doing this then." He slid the red cord around Hugh's neck, leaving plenty of room, and tying it in such a way that it would not tighten. "Is that all right?"

Hugh nodded, giving the rope a little test pull. "Yes, that will do." He gave Jack a brave smile. "Lead on."

Jack gave him a reassuring smile back before heading out of the little alcove and back into the main hallway. Despite the area being fairly cavernous and made of mostly stone, sound was dampened pretty well, because Jack almost walked right past the first alcove that held one of the masked guests and two of the boys Hugh recognized from the champagne room. Both he and Jack stopped to watch in morbid fascination.

A few feet away, one of the masked guests sat upon a padded bench. His skin was a horrifying shade of burnt red, and Hugh realized that instead of arms and legs, his appendages had turned into some sort of squid-like tentacles, and more protruded from his back as well. Between his legs knelt one of the boys who was fellating him eagerly, his eyes half-lidded and drowsy. His ass cheeks were spread wide by two of the tentacles, and another boy knelt between them, devouring his hole with his tongue as he grunted. Hugh could see that one of the tentacles was lodged deep inside the boy's rectum, pulling back before thrusting so deep, it was a wonder that the boy was not screaming in pain. Whatever drugs had been in their drinks were obviously very

effective at blocking out any pain. At least, for now. Anthony had mentioned how badly he had hurt after the last party. Hugh wondered if he had had something like that happen to him. Would any of these people remember what happened to them the next morning? Or would they just wake up with bruises and pain and no idea what caused it? The thought made him sick to his stomach.

This was the first transformation he had seen other than the viscount, and it was fascinating and horrifying at the same time. A human body, warped into something vile. ‘God-like’ was how Adam had described it. Turning someone into their darkest desire, the cruel face they couldn’t show society. And, he suspected, this was probably one of the milder depravities Eden had to offer, if the viscount’s cannibalistic rage was any indicator of the grotesque tendencies the members exhibited.

The masked creature suddenly looked up, and Hugh could see that, instead of a mouth, the man had a nest of squiggly little tentacles that draped over his upper lip and chin like a living mustache. Somewhere beneath the tentacles, his mouth curved into a lipless smile. “Ah, Jack,” he said in a voice that sounded like gravel scraping over ocean rocks. “Would you care to join us?”

Hugh glanced over at Jack. Jack glanced back at him and gave him a pointed look, narrowing his eyes. Hugh quickly adopted a dreamy, half-lidded look. Jack glanced back to the man and smiled politely, letting the light from the gas lamps catch his pointed teeth. “No, but thank you!” he said, a bit more enthusiastically than Hugh felt was probably necessary. “Since I have not been here before, I am seeing what wonders this cavern holds.”

The tentacled man laughed, and the sound made Hugh’s bones feel like they were grinding together. “Of course, of course. Feel free to come back if you’d like. If your little pet there is any good, perhaps I’ll give him a try.” The man’s mustache tentacles quivered, and Hugh felt like he had been plunged into icy water. He knew Jack

wouldn't let anything happen to him, but even just the threat of being unable to stop someone from abusing him like that was horrifying, let alone by a creature who was transformed from human into vileness incarnate.

Jack let out a soft laugh, then nodded. "Well, I shall leave you to it," he said, waving his hand before starting off again, and Hugh hurried after him so as not to have the rope pull him.

They passed by another alcove that was empty, but the one after that was unfortunately not. One of the boys was locked into a strange contraption that held his legs bent and spread obscenely wide. There was the whirr and click of something mechanical, and Hugh realized that it came from some sort of clockwork device that was pistoning back and forth. There was a large phallus on one end of it, and the phallus was thrusting in and out of the boy's stretched hole as he moaned and sobbed softly. Hugh couldn't tell if he was enjoying it or not.

Another of the boys was on his knees sucking on a large prick. There was another next to his face, and he was stroking that one with his hand. The man that they were attached to was large and looked almost like a sort of bull, with horns protruding from his forehead not entirely unlike Jack's. He was watching the boy on the machine with rapt attention, stroking the hair of the boy between his legs. Hugh realized with a start that the boy between his knees was Anthony. At least he knew where the young man had ended up. He wanted to run over and pull Anthony away from the monster, but he couldn't. Perhaps once the other man was done with him, Jack could take Anthony with them to keep him out of the others' hands for the rest of the night.

Adam suddenly came around the corner. His teeth and his eyes under the gold mask had returned to normal now as he gave Jack a friendly smile. Hugh quickly turned his eyes away from Anthony and schooled his face into a dreamy blankness. "Ah, Jack. How are you enjoying yourself?" Adam asked.

“Quite a lot, Mr. Adam!” Jack declared. “Everything I have seen is quite intriguing.”

“The sorts of pleasure and chaos you are looking for?”

“Indeed,” Jack replied with a chuckle. “It is so nice to encounter peers of similar mindsets.”

Hugh had to admire Jack’s ability to lie about the horrors they were witnessing even as he felt sweat break out on his own bare skin and his stomach whirl like a hurricane inside of him. He felt Adam’s eyes on him, and he let his eyes blink heavily. He had heard that voice before. But where? The gold mask kept him from seeing Adam’s full face, and he was having trouble placing it. He felt the man’s eyes roam over him, and he wished he did not feel so exposed, literally or figuratively.

“And how is your toy for the evening? Doing what you wish?”

“Oh yes,” Jack replied. “I’m still getting my bearings, but I wanted to ensure I got this pretty one.”

Adam nodded, smiling a serpent’s smile under his mask. “If you need any suggestions, I am sure some of the others would be willing to help you. And please, do explore. There are so many vices to be had. You certainly do not have to limit yourself to one.”

“Most appreciated,” Jack said, nodding at him.

Adam smiled wider. “Well, I’ll not keep you from your fun.” He stepped aside, and Jack walked past him. Hugh kept his eyes half-lidded and lowered to the ground, feeling Adam’s gaze on him the entire time. He didn’t move or speak again until they were well away from that tunnel.

“That was Adam? The Duke’s son?”

“Yes,” Jack said.

“I know I’ve seen him somewhere before,” Hugh said with a frown.

“Really?” Jack asked in surprise. “Where?”

“I don’t know,” Hugh said, the feeling itching inside of his skull like a rat trying to get out. “I’m sure it will come to me.”

Jack kept moving, out into the main alcove where the table still sat with its discarded clothing around it, though the plates had been cleared. Jack frowned at the other tunnels branching off of it. “I have no idea which way to go or where anything is. What are we looking for?”

“I don’t know,” Hugh admitted. “Evidence of who these people are and what they’re doing?” Thus far, everything they had seen was disturbing, but it wasn’t necessarily illegal. The prostitutes had been given the option of leaving earlier. The drugged champagne was certainly dodgy, but there was no evidence to bring any sort of charge against anyone once it was gone from the drinker’s system. “We don’t know that these creatures are the ones attacking people in the street either. They might just be really fancy perverts, which isn’t a crime as far as the law is concerned. Even my sergeant being involved isn’t necessarily unlawful, unless there is actually something illegal happening.”

Jack nodded and started down a tunnel he thought he had seen the Duke enter into. “We’ll keep looking,” he said, then lifted his head in surprise. “I smell food.”

Hugh sniffed the air too. “So do I. And not apples either.”



“This way,” Jack prompted, and Hugh followed him down the tunnel until they reached another archway.

The largest table Hugh had ever seen was stretched across the room. It was covered with platters and dishes, some of which were already empty, but others were piled high with any and all manner of food. Hugh recognized various meats and fruits and cheeses, but there were a number of things he couldn’t even begin to identify. But that was hardly the most interesting or disturbing thing in the room.

Stretched out on the table, leaning over it was what looked like it might have been a man. But his skin had stretched and expanded until he looked like an oversized caterpillar, with rolls of fat, and spindly limbs that seemed only designed to grab the plates and lift them to his gaping maw. His mouth was so wide that Hugh could have easily put his head inside of it, and saliva dripped onto the table in great puddles. The creature picked up a nearby platter that held a whole roasted pig, surrounded by vegetables, and an apple in its mouth. It tipped the plate upward, and the entire contents, pig and all, slid whole into its mouth. It began to chew, and there was the most horrific sound of crunching bone that Hugh had ever heard. Then the creature swallowed, the bulge big enough to see it travel down his throat, though the blob of flesh had no discernable neck. Hugh thought he was about to be sick. Jack glanced at him, then quickly led him away from the room. “Come, boy,” he said, and Hugh was too grateful to move away from the fleshy mass of human gluttony to care.

Once they were out of earshot, Hugh gagged, sucking in deep breaths to try to settle his stomach and clear his head. Jack frowned. “Are you all right?”

Hugh nodded, spitting out a mouthful bile and swiping at his lips. “Yes. It is not even that terrible compared to what we have seen.”

“That doesn’t mean it is not disgusting,” Jack replied as they turned down another archway. “Such a brazen display of gluttonous excess. And especially when others

are starving.”

The scent of blood and viscera suddenly filled Hugh’s nose as they walked, and he gagged again, clapping his hand to mouth. Jack’s nose wrinkled in disgust as well. “Well, that doesn’t seem good.”

Hugh did not want to know. After what he had seen done to Christopher, Toby, and Joseph, he knew that whatever was down that next hallway was likely horrific. But he had to see. He had to know what sort of monsters they were dealing with, what they were capable of. They stepped into a dimly lit hallway.

It was as if they had sudden broken a bubble of some sort; for as soon as they passed beyond the stone archway, the screaming hit them. Not just one person, but several voices, babbling, pleading, screaming, wailing. Hugh wondered for a moment if he had passed into Hell. The smell of blood only got worse. Jack frowned. “Wait here.”

“No,” Hugh replied. “I’m coming with you.”

Jack looked like he wanted to argue, but he just nodded, starting down the hall to one of the lit offshoot archways. Hugh followed after him, then almost tripped over himself as his bare feet landed in something warm and sticky. He looked down to see that the stone floor was covered in puddles of blood. Fresh blood, bright and thick. And not only blood. Bits of flesh, bone, clumps of hair, other fluids. Hugh jerked back. Jack glanced down, then immediately swept Hugh up into his arms to hold him bride-style. “I’ve got you.”

Hugh wanted to protest that he could walk and did not need to be carried like a baby, but he realized that walking through all of the carnage with bare feet would be horrifying, so he just nodded and let Jack carry him. Jack at least had boots on.

Jack reached the archway, stepping into it. Inside, he recognized the couple he had

walked into the theatre with, though only by their masks. Their bodies had morphed into something entirely different. The man was bandy-legged and covered with a layer of dark hair, his head a cross between a wolf and a bear. The woman had metamorphosed into a sort of bird-like creature with a razor-sharp beak. Both of them were covered in blood and gore, though from what Jack could tell, it was not theirs.

Between them was a long, wooden table, similar to the ones in the morgue at the back of Scotland Yard. And while there was a body upon it, it was not yet a corpse. It was that of a nude woman, her wrists and ankles shackled to the table so she could not get off of it. Jack and Hugh both watched in horror as the woman turned her head toward them. Hugh almost screamed. The skin on the woman's face had been peeled off of her, leaving the nerves and muscles beneath the skin exposed, her dark eyeballs bulging, her lips pulled away to expose her teeth like a grinning skull.

Jack's hand landed on Hugh's cheek and suddenly turned his head, pressing Hugh's face into his chest. Hugh tried to turn his head out, but Jack held him there as he heard the wolf-faced man say, "Ah, Jack. Would you care to join us?"

Jack's voice was smooth and rumbled against Hugh's cheek as he replied, "Oh, not at the moment, just getting the line of the land, is that the correct phrase? It certainly seems like you two have been rather busy."

The woman let out a cackling sound that made Hugh's bones feel like they were being scraped together. "Indeed. We'll go through this whole lot before the end of the night."

Jack's eyes followed the direction the woman pointed. Against the back wall was a large cage that looked like it could hold about a dozen people, though now there were only five inside of it, of various ages and genders. All of them were staring in horror at the woman strapped to the table, no doubt wondering what their own fate would be at the hands of these monsters.

“Let me see,” Hugh whispered against Jack’s chest.

Jack hesitated, then carefully stepped to the side so his body blocked most of what was happening on the table. He let go of Hugh’s cheek for him to turn his head toward the cage.

Hugh didn’t recognize any of the faces from the champagne room. All of them were gaunt, nearly skeletal, most of them with long, stringy hair. Hugh had seen people like this before; he often came upon them in his nightly patrols. The bottom of the barrel poor of London. The orphans, the homeless, the addicts, the runaways. Those who had not found work in one of the many brothels and instead lived on the street, scrounging through trash bins and begging for the smallest scrap of food or warm clothing. The forgotten ones, the ones who had no one to protect them. Here they were, tied like sheep for slaughter. He recalled when several of the regulars he usually saw had disappeared from his route the last few months. Were they victims of this savage group, snatched up and brought here to be tortured and murdered? How many of them had there been? It was impossible to account for every homeless person on London’s streets.

He wanted to run to them, to open the cage doors and set them free. But Jack’s arms were tight around him, and he knew he couldn’t. If he acted out, there was nothing stopping the monsters from ripping him apart as well. He couldn’t ask Jack to defend him without knowing the capabilities of the monsters. If they caused a ruckus, perhaps the other monsters would come to investigate, and Hugh did not feel like facing down nearly a dozen transformed creatures who all had a penchant for violence.

Jack turned, and Hugh was met with another horrific sight; the bodies of what must have been the earlier victims of this couple. It was a mess of limbs and blood and intestines in a sort of pyramid-like shape in the corner, the odd arm or foot sticking out like a battlement. There were little pieces scattered around the pile too. Fingers

and toes, bits of scalp with hair still attached to them. Here and there, he could see a glassy, accusatory eye peeking at him from beneath the pile of gore. Why did you not stop them? How could you let them get away with doing this?

Jack grabbed Hugh's head and pressed it again into his chest, crooning soft noises and petting his head like he was a frightened dog. A wild scream came from the woman on the table, and Hugh didn't dare lift his head to look and see what was being done to her. "Jack, please," he pleaded softly, hoping that the spectre would hear and understand.

Jack started into motion, and Hugh felt the breeze move over him as Jack exited the area, slipping a little in the obstacle course of blood and other things that led back through the chamber of horrors. Jack moved quickly, and, only moments later, the screams of the dying were no longer audible.

Jack slumped against the wall of one of the arches as he held Hugh close. "These people are monsters, literally and figuratively. How long they have been doing this, do you think?"

"I have no idea. But I've seen enough to know that they need to be stopped," Hugh said firmly, though he could hear his voice shaking a little.

"I agree," Jack replied. "But how do we do it?"

Without knowing their identities, bringing charges against them would be difficult, and it would be slow. And if they were the upper echelon of society, it was possible that they could use their money and power to avoid charges and conviction anyway. Hugh didn't like the idea of resorting to vigilante justice, but people were being tortured and killed only yards away.

"Could you use your fire on them?" Hugh asked.

Jack frowned thoughtfully. “Perhaps. But I can exhaust its use very quickly. And if the fire spreads, there will doubtless be innocent people caught in the blaze.”

Hugh thought about little Morris, looking so terrified as he held Hugh’s hand, and Anthony, who had put so much faith in him. He didn’t want the boys to suffer at the hands of these vile creatures, but that didn’t mean he wanted to kill them to avoid it either. He had a sudden thought. “If both the Duke and his son are here, that means his estate might be unguarded. If we can destroy the Tree, these people won’t be able to transform again, right?” It wouldn’t stop the horrors currently going on, but it might prevent future ones from being committed.

Jack’s eyes lit up. “I have been seen by a number of guests recently, so I believe we could slip off without suspicion. If we go now, we might be able to destroy the Tree before they leave here for the night.”

Hugh frowned. “If we destroy the Tree now, we may not find out who the other members of Eden are.”

Jack was silent a moment before he slowly said, “I believe that is the risk we must take. Cutting the head off the serpent will be better than tipping them off that we are onto them.”

Hugh glanced down at his nearly naked form. “Of course, if I run through the streets like this, I may get myself arrested.”

“I think you look quite dashing,” Jack said with a teasing grin before he sobered again. “But the more pressing concern is, we still need to find a way out of here. I’m afraid I am quite turned around.”

Jack was right. It was a labyrinth down here. If they could find anything that led upward, they probably would make their way to an exit. But finding that would take

time; the longer they were down here, the more people would be hurt, and the less time they would have with the Tree unguarded. “Well, we need to look around for an exit either way,” Hugh said. Maybe if they went back to where Jack had found him, they could backtrack until they found the ramp that led them up from the underground?

Jack started down another hallway, eventually finding his way back to the main chamber where the discarded clothing still lay in piles around the table, shrouds to humanity. Hugh pointed to one of the other tunnels. “I think that is the one we came from originally.”

“I think so too,” Jack said with a nod, then paused as someone exited the arch. It took a moment to see them in the dim lighting, because they were dressed all in black, including a black domino mask over their eyes. One of the employees. But even with the mask over his eyes, Hugh knew exactly who it was, and his blood ran cold in his veins.

Reardon’s eyes landed on Hugh next to Jack, and his thin lips spread into a cold smile. “Well, well. Turns out I was seeing right after all,” he said. “Won’t His Grace be impressed that I outed a rat in our midst.”

Hugh glowered at the man. “How long have you been working for Eden, Sergeant?”

Reardon laughed, the sound like claws on stone. “Long enough to know that they’ll reward me for catching a spy. Oh, won’t they have fun with you.”

Reardon’s eyes hadn’t moved from Hugh’s, but now he lifted his head, addressing Jack. “My lord, I’m afraid your little playtoy there is a constable with the Metropolitan Police.”

Hugh realized that the one time he had mentioned Spring-Heeled Jack to Reardon, he

had not said anything about Jack knowing him or even speaking to him, only that he had encountered him at the site of one of the murders. Reardon thought that Jack was one of the participants of Eden.

“Carrots and compasses, are you sure?” Jack asked, turning to look at Hugh as if he had never seen him before. It might have been comical if Hugh was not absolutely petrified that they were about to be exposed.

“Quite sure,” Reardon said. “I know him myself. A little nancy of a constable and a piss-poor investigator.”

Hugh wanted to point out that he had found Eden, but Jack suddenly grabbed his wrist in a grip as strong as iron, though he did not squeeze. “Well, that certainly won’t do! We must report him to Mr. Adam at once! Will you be so kind as to lead the way, good sir?” Jack asked. “Last I saw, he went that way.” He bobbed his head toward one of the tunnels.

Reardon nodded and turned on his heel. “Of course. Follow me, sir.”

He had taken only two steps when Jack struck him from behind with a blow that sent Reardon spinning into the wall. His forehead connected with the stone with a sickening sound, and the man dropped to the ground, his black mask tumbling off his face. The front of his forehead had caved in where he had struck the stone, the front of his skull crushed into the matter behind it. His eyes stared dully at nothing.

Jack flinched and turned to Hugh apologetically. “Oops. I didn’t mean to hit him that hard.”

Hugh was finding it hard to find any sympathy for the sergeant. If he was involved with Eden, he got what he deserved. “That’s all right,” he said. He slid the silk rope off from around his neck. “We need to hide his body, so no one finds it before we’re



able to get out of here.”

Jack picked up Reardon by the back of the neck, holding him like a rag doll. “Oh! Let us have you take his clothing,” he said, stepping into one of the small enclaves attached to the tunnel.

Hugh quickly stripped off the black outfit from the man, sliding them on, including the shoes. They were a little big, but he could make them work. He glanced down at the red rope and purple fabric. “Let’s put him in this outfit, and then tie him up. If anyone sees him, maybe they won’t realize right away he’s dead.”

“Devious,” Jack said with a grin. He lifted Reardon’s limp form, wrapping the red rope around the man’s neck and wrists before leaning him against the wall in the corner.

Hugh draped the purple silk over the man’s groin, then placed the black mask back on his face to hide the bloody laceration on his forehead. Jack wrinkled his nose. “I’m sure he was someone’s slice of cake, but I wouldn’t eat it.”

“Jack!” Hugh replied, trying very hard not to laugh at the inappropriateness of the joke or the situation. He stepped back to look. From a distance, he could probably pass for being unconscious. As long as it bought them time. They still needed to find a way out of here. And then he had a thought. They had spent so much time looking up, they hadn’t really looked at the floor. “I just realized, there must be a sewer connection somewhere. The blood would need to be washed away.”

“Brilliant as always, my dear,” Jack said, giving Hugh a quick kiss on the lips. There had to be one near this area, with all of the blood and viscera from the couple torturing those people. Jack motioned down the hallway, and, sure enough, as they rounded a corner, there was a round grate on the floor.

Jack squatted down next to the grate. It was old and looked like it might be rusted in place. He wrapped his hands around the metal bars and yanked. The grate creaked ominously, the metal giving a little. In the quiet of the stone, it sounded louder than a scream. Jack glanced over at Hugh. "I think one more pull, and I'll have it free, but it will be loud. We need to be prepared to run."

Hugh nodded, glancing around, but no one was approaching them yet. Jack grabbed the grate and gave it a mighty yank. It pulled free with a rusty-sounding screech like a banshee. "Go," Jack said. Hugh quickly reached in, finding the old, iron handrails that created a ladder down into the sewers. He started down them, hoping that they were not so rusted as to fall apart. One of the rungs was missing, and he slipped, holding onto the slimy metal until he got his feet back under him. About a dozen rungs down, his oversized shoes landed in warm, wet, slippery water. He made a face. "I'm at the bottom," he called up to Jack.

"Move aside, I'm coming down," Jack said back. Hugh backed away from the hole. He heard another screech of metal, and then Jack dropped down the length of the hole to land in the muck.

"Is the grate back in place?" Hugh asked.

"Yes," Jack said, scooping him up in his arms and starting down the tunnel. "But we have to go, I saw someone coming just as I dropped."

Hugh nodded, holding tightly to Jack's coat. The foul air whistled past him as Jack hurried along with no fear of the dark. His feet splashed in the water, and he heard the scuttle of rats away from them. He didn't even want to know what else might lurk down in the sewers. His ears strained to catch any sound of someone following them, but he could hear nothing besides Jack's splashy boots.

They had gone on for some distance before Jack spotted another set of rungs leading

upward in the dark. “Here,” he said. “We should be far enough away from Eden to come out on the surface. I’m going to set you down.”

Hugh nodded, making a face as his feet once again found the disgusting muck that was the London sewers. Jack suddenly sprang upward, arms outstretched, and Hugh heard him hit something heavy and metallic above them before a spotlight of light shone from above, and Jack landed on ground next to him. He scooped Hugh off his feet, wrapping him up with his chest to Hugh’s back instead of like a baby. “Hold on,” he said before he leaped straight up. The tunnel rushed past them, and then they were suddenly out in the open air. Jack shifted and landed on the pavement, and Hugh sagged against him as Jack set him carefully on his feet.

There was a scream nearby, and Hugh turned to see a woman in a long dress and apron standing nearby, watching them with her hands thrown up to her mouth, her eyes wide. Hugh was sure that in the night’s darkness and the illumination from the streetlamps, Jack looked positively terrifying. Jack slid the manhole cover back in place, then turned to the woman. “I do beg your pardon,” he said with a magnificent bow. The woman turned and fled, still screaming.

Hugh frowned. “That’s going to draw attention really quickly. Can you get us to the rooftops?”

Jack laughed and scooped him up. He leaped, his foot catching a wrought iron railing to give him another boost, before he soared up and onto the roof of the nearest house, clambering up it to where the chimney was. Hugh glanced around, taking a moment to orient himself. The sun was not yet dawning, so it took him a little while to figure out their location. But eventually he spotted a few familiar buildings in the distance. “That’s Greyminster Church. Scotland Yard would be... that way,” he swung his hand around to point.

“The Duke’s estate is north,” Jack said, and Hugh pointed again.

“That way then.” When he glanced over at him, Jack was leaning against the chimney, studying the area. “Isn’t that hot?” he asked.

Jack glanced in surprise at it, as if just noticing what it was. “Oh, yes, quite.” Hugh chuckled in spite of himself.

Jack scooped up Hugh in his arms. “I’m going to run to the Duke’s estate, and I’m not going to stop unless we absolutely must, all right?”

Hugh nodded and held tightly to him. “Yes.”

Jack took a running leap, and suddenly they were sailing across London’s rooftops, the way they had on the night to Elysium. Hugh clung tightly to Jack, the wind whipping his hair and stinging his eyes. He would have to find some sort of goggles if this was going to keep happening. He hoped it would.

### Chapter seventeen

Jack only slowed when he ran out of roofs and had to take to the streets, but still he ran on, tireless, holding Hugh as gently as a baby in a crib. The city eventually gave way to less populated areas. The sky was just beginning to lighten into purple and blue when Jack slowed outside of what looked like an enormous estate. Jack set Hugh down and gave him a smile, but Hugh could see him breathing deeply. He did not know how many miles they had run, but it had been quite a few, with Jack carrying his weight the whole way. “Will you be able to use your fire?” Hugh asked worriedly as Jack put his hands on his knees to catch his breath.

Jack nodded. Somewhere along the run, he had lost his top hat, and his horns gleamed in the early morning light. “Yes. This way.” He swung his arm dramatically at the orchard a little way away.

Into the trees they plunged, down the neat rows, the scent of apples strong in the early morning air. Jack seemed to know exactly where he was going, and Hugh followed closely after him.

He saw the fence before he saw the Tree. The Tree had a vaguely golden glow around it, barely perceptible since most of the Tree was obscured by the large fence. Jack stepped up next to him. “I will get inside the fence and light it on fire that way. Hopefully the flames will be contained to the Tree then.”

“You won’t get burned?” Hugh asked.

Jack shook his head. “I am impervious to my own fire. Don’t worry, I shall be as

careful as a seahorse in a clam shell.”

Hugh hoped that was very careful, but he had no chance to think on it further, because two figures stepped out from around the fence.

One of them he recognized immediately, as the boy still wore the purple silk and nothing else. Anthony stared back at him, his eyes still a little glassy, his feet not quite steady under him, though he was being held upright by someone else who had a grip on the back of his neck. It took Hugh a moment to realize who it was, because his gold mask was gone from his handsome face. It was Adam. And he remembered now where he had seen him before. The gentleman who had been talking to Mr. Galloway on his first visit to The Bull and Parasol, who had given him the salacious look. The one Mr. Galloway had called ‘Your Grace.’

Adam’s hand that did not have a hold of Anthony held a double-barrel pistol pointed at the young man’s head. “My, you did make good time,” he said, giving Hugh and Jack a small smile.

Hugh frowned, realizing with consternation that he was unarmed, and Adam was slightly taller and more built than he was. He slowly held his hands up. “Let Anthony go,” he said.

Adam gave the boy a shake, and Anthony stumbled, his bare feet scrabbling for purchase in the dirt, his body slow to react from the drugs still in his system. “Oh, so you do care for this whore.”

Hugh gritted his teeth. “What do you want?”

“Unfortunately, what I want is you and your horned friend dead,” Adam said, smiling a bit. “But I doubt you are going to give that to me so easily.”

He had that right. Hugh and Jack were the only people outside of Eden that knew about the existence of the Tree and what it could do. Jack held up his hands wide. “Come now, do not be a coward and hide behind the innocent. Release the boy and face us like a gentleman.”

“I’m afraid not,” Adam said with a cold smile. “My father was a fool to trust you so readily, Jack. But I am not my father.”

“Certainly not. Your father at least is a man of his word,” Jack replied.

Adam chuckled. Jack started to take a step toward him, but Adam cocked back the hammer on the pistol and pressed it to Anthony’s temple. “I wouldn’t do that if I were you.”

Jack held up his hands. “It appears we are at an impasse, Mr. Adam.”

“It seems so,” Adam replied casually.

Hugh had no idea what he could do. He couldn’t move fast enough to get Anthony away from Adam, or to redirect the pistol elsewhere. Jack possibly could, if he could distract Adam enough. “Was Viscount Jardin a member of Eden?”

“A newer member,” Adam said. “He enjoyed the power of the Tree and was willing to pay generously for it outside of the monthly gatherings.”

“And he got apples from the Tree at Elysium, provided by John Henries, your gardener,” Hugh said.

“Oh, yes. Under my direction, of course. John was quite loyal to my family. Such a shame that I had to frame him so my father wouldn’t know that I was providing apples to clients outside of Eden.” Adam looked excessively smug.

Hugh felt his lips curl back in a disgusted snarl. “You killed the Wilcoxes and set the bakery on fire.”

“Right on both counts,” Adam said. “Reardon was wrong about you; you’re not half-bad at investigation. Though I suppose having Spring-Heeled Jack helping you gives you an advantage.”

The snarl that Jack let out next to him made Hugh’s hair stand on end. “You loathsome fiend! How dare you use such power to harm people this way!”

Adam laughed before he suddenly bent double as though his stomach had given him a sharp pain. Whatever it was caused him to let go of Anthony’s neck, and the dark-haired young man stumbled forward toward Hugh, his gait unsteady, though his eyes were slightly more focused now. Acting on instinct, Hugh stepped forward and caught Anthony in his arms as the boy stumbled into them. “He... ate... th’apple,” Anthony slurred.

Hugh didn’t know what that meant, but he didn’t have long to wait to find out. Adam’s body suddenly began to twist and elongate. His head expanded outward like a cape unfurling, his gray top hat tumbling to the ground, followed by the pistol. The visible skin on his face, hands, and neck began to bubble and morph into a pattern of overlapping scales, tinged a violet-red. His back bowed backward at a sharp angle like a strychnine victim. The flickering blue and white flames cast hideous shadows over him as his body jerked and spasmed before he dropped forward to his knees, his head down as his body finished its macabre dance. And then Adam rose to his feet to look directly at him.

What stood before them now was not a man, but a scaled creature with a diamond-shaped viper’s head and violet eyes with slitted, red pupils that seemed to radiate with fire like Jack’s did. The creature still had four limbs that were relatively in proportion to its body, though the ends of its fingertips had morphed into sharp, pointed claws.



Its mouth opened, wider than any human's should have, and fangs glistened within the creature's mouth as it let out a snarling hiss that made every hair on Hugh's body stand up in terror. A scaled appendage several feet long emerged from the back of Adam's gray trousers, tapering down to a pointed serpent's tail that lashed back and forth with a snap like a cracking whip.

Hugh stared in horror at the apparition before them, no longer human, but a strange homunculus of serpent and man. Adam had been biding his time, waiting for the apple to take effect. "Well, that's not good," Jack said next to him. "That's the one I saw running away from Christopher."

Hugh glanced desperately around for a fallen branch or anything he could use as a makeshift weapon, but he found none, and Anthony still clung to his arm, not fully under his own power yet. The pistol lay at the ground at Adam's feet, but damned if he was going to approach the creature to try to grab it.

The serpent lunged forward, claws extended, headed straight for Hugh. With Anthony in his arms, he couldn't move quickly enough to dodge, and his heart skipped a beat.

Arms closed around him, and Hugh found himself yanked off his feet and pressed close to Jack's chest, Anthony crushed against him too. The wind whipped as Jack ran with them both in his arms, a little slower than he did when only carrying Hugh, but his momentum carried them into the apple trees. Hugh clutched Jack's jacket, unable to do much else, lest he risk tripping Jack or losing his grip on Anthony.

Jack turned sharply several times until he came to a stop, setting Hugh on his feet. Anthony clung to Hugh's arm, his dark hair ruffled from the run, looking like he might be about to vomit. Hugh held him close, turning to Jack. "We need to stop Adam and burn that Tree. We may not get another chance."

Jack nodded. "I know," he said, glancing anxiously over his shoulder. "But I doubt

you're going to be strong enough to fight him, especially not if you're looking out for this young man." He nodded his head toward Anthony.

Anthony shook his head, looking up at Jack, his eyes focusing and unfocusing on Jack's horns. "Don' worry about me. I'll be al'ight."

"We're not going to leave you," Hugh said firmly, and Jack nodded in agreement. "Do you think you can fight him?" he asked Jack.

"Yes," Jack replied firmly. "I will."

"There's a fence around the Tree," Hugh said, keeping his eyes moving, watching the orchard for any sign of the vile creature. In the breeze, the tree branches all swayed like restless spirits. "If you can get me inside of it, I can burn the Tree while you take care of Adam. We'll burn the whole orchard if we have to."

Jack suddenly whipped off his cape and draped it around Hugh's shoulders. "Here. It's not completely fireproof, but it should protect you enough. I'll get you inside the fence."

"Look out!" Anthony shouted, pointing heavily off to the side. Hugh and Jack both turned just as the serpentine form of Adam came running on all fours at them down the tree row, fangs bared, violet eyes gleaming as he snarled and hissed.

Jack put himself between Hugh and Anthony and the charging creature, and Hugh had a strange sense of déjà vu as Jack let loose a burst of blue and white flames. The chimerical monster snarled and dove backward, plunging off the row into the trees. The flames rapidly began to creep up the two trees nearest it. Jack knelt down next to Hugh. "Get on my back so I can carry him."

Hugh didn't argue, just wrapped his arms around Jack's strong neck. Jack scooped up

Anthony in his arms as Hugh tightened his legs against Jack's sides. And then they were running through the orchard, must faster than a human could run, back through the trees, the blue and white flames casting their shadows over the trees in broken chiaroscuro. From not far enough away, he heard a dreadful howling, snarling noise and the thump of quadrupedal feet on the ground. Adam was chasing after them again.

The fence with its faint golden light behind it was just ahead. Jack put on a burst of speed to reach it, setting Anthony on his feet as Hugh hopped down. Jack slammed his foot onto one of the wooden slats of the fence. It cracked but did not move out of the way. Hugh moved to his side. "On three. One, two, three!" Both of their feet connected with the board, and the wood broke apart, opening a narrow gap in the fence.

Hugh gave Anthony a push. "Go!" Anthony was squeezing through the gap when Adam launched himself out of a nearby tree like a leopard leaping on a wounded gazelle. His tail lashed with the crack of a whip, and Hugh felt it snap only inches from his face. Jack had caught the creature with both hands and gave him a mighty throw. Adam went sailing into the branches of one of the nearby apple trees. Hugh snatched up a long, sharp piece of broken board, wrapping the edge of Jack's cape around his hands. "Light me."

Jack let loose another blast of blue and white flame from his mouth, and the wood ignited. Hugh turned back to the gap in the fence, starting to squeeze through. He heard something snap nearby, and then Jack was moving away from him. "Go!" he ordered Hugh.

Anthony grabbed Hugh's other hand to give him a tug, and Hugh stumbled through the small gap with only a few scrapes. "We need to burn this tree," he said. In front of them, the Tree glowed with a soft, golden aura. "And any apples on the ground too."

Anthony nodded and picked up a stick, holding it into the crackling, blue flames until it ignited. "I'll go this way," he said, pointing to the right. Hugh turned back to the tree. He could reach a few of the lower branches and leaves and a few of the fruit hanging there, looking so innocent and rosy. He lifted the wood, watching it catch some of the bright green leaves. He stepped to the side and lit another branch, then had to set down the wood against the trunk of the tree as the heat started to reach his hand even through Jack's cape. He picked up a long stick like Anthony, lighting it and moving around the Tree to try to ignite the leaves and branches.

Something slammed into the fence only a few feet away from him. "Biscuits and hellfire!" he heard Jack swear.

"Jack, are you all right?"

"Just fine!" came the call back. Hugh wished he could do more to help, but Jack was right. He could not fight the creature. He debated for only a moment picking up one of the apples on the ground and taking a bite, in the hopes that he might transform into something useful, but he quickly squashed that idea. He had no idea if he would be in control of himself, and the last thing he needed was to get in Jack's way, or, God forbid, hurt Anthony or Jack.

Anthony met him halfway around the Tree, his pale face smudged with soot, his eyes red. Hugh threw part of the cape over his head to block out further smoke. "Come on, let's get away from here."

Anthony nodded, coughing and holding tightly to him. Hugh ushered him quickly around the Tree, keeping Anthony further away from the Tree with his feet being bare. The Tree was taking longer to burn than Hugh had hoped. It was not dead, and green wood and leaves took longer to catch than dry firewood, even with Jack's superhuman flames. The air was thick with smoke. They couldn't stay inside the fence with the Tree combusting behind them. They reached the gap in the fence.

Hugh peered out, feeling an immediate temperature drop outside of it. Jack and Adam were nowhere to be seen, though there were several furrows in the ground that looked like someone had been thrown or slid in the dirt. He gave Anthony a nudge through the gap, then squeezed himself out after him.

Anthony moved quickly away, and Hugh followed him. “Here,” he said and pulled off Jack’s cape. He slid it around Anthony’s neck to give the young man more coverage. Anthony tucked it around himself with a grateful smile.

“Thanks. Are you doing all right?”

Hugh nodded. “About as well as can be expected.” He didn’t want to ask Anthony too many invasive questions about that night and how much he remembered from Eden, but he had to make sure the boy was all right. “Are you all right? Anything hurting?”

“I’m okay,” Anthony said, giving him a quavery smile, and Hugh returned it. A strange sound suddenly caught his ear, and it took Hugh a moment to place it over the roar of flames and the crackle of the Tree. Hoofbeats, and the creak of wheels. Horses running on the stone drive that led up to the Duke’s estate. He frowned and gave Anthony a nudge behind a tree.

“Stay out of sight. Don’t come out until Jack or I come for you.”

Anthony nodded and crouched down. In the darkness, with Jack’s cape around him, he looked like not much more than a shadow. Hopefully that would keep him safe. Hugh scanned the area, trying to discern if he could hear Jack and Adam, but the orchard was vast. The trees waved their branches in a strange, ghostly dance in the soft wind, casting hellish shadows over the ground from the flames that were consuming the Tree.

Out of the apple trees just a few yards away burst a large man that Hugh assumed was the Duke. His fancy clothing was in disarray, both because it looked like he had dressed in a hurry and because the trees had ripped at them. In his hands was a long machete. He stared at the flames rising from behind the fence as the Tree smoked. His eyes flickered around wildly until they landed on Hugh. The Duke lunged at him with a loud bellow, swinging the machete, but he was a very large man and did not move fast. Hugh dodged aside, and the machete thunked into the wood of a tree.

The Duke snarled and lunged at him again, but Hugh evaded him. He wanted to lure the Duke away from where Anthony was hidden. He ducked another swing of the machete, though he tripped over his too-large shoes, and he had to roll on the ground to avoid the next downward swing from the Duke. The large man was huffing and puffing like a steam engine, his face red in the light from the white flames that were slowly but steadily licking their way up the Tree of Knowledge.

There was a screech nearby, and Hugh turned to see two forms tackle each other in midair. One had horns, the other a long, pointed tail. In the dancing firelight, he could see Jack's wickedly sharp claws up and poised to attack, but Adam's were equally sharp. The two of them rolled across the ground. A smaller apple tree with spindly branches broke as they slammed into it, tipping over to scatter its leaves and fruit all over the ground. Not too far away, Hugh could see the glow of white and blue flames drawing closer and closer. The whole orchard was catching ablaze.

The Duke swung the machete at him again, and Hugh scrambled backward and up to his feet. Something went sailing past the Duke to hit the fence around the Tree with a loud bang; it was Adam. He slumped to the ground, seemingly stunned or unable to breathe for a moment.

Jack was suddenly next to Hugh and growled at the corpulent man. "I am not in any mood to deal with you, Mr. Duke."

The Duke snarled again. “You traitorous dog! I brought you into my club, and this is how you repay me?”

Jack shrugged. “I suppose those deadly sins I’ve heard about can overrule your judgement.”

The Duke growled, but the noise was answered by an even darker growl as Adam pushed himself to his feet, tail lashing, his violet eyes narrowed dangerously. He gazed at Jack for a moment before he turned his eyes toward Hugh and leaped. Hugh felt like the world stopped for a moment, and all he could see was Adam’s outstretched claws coming straight for him.

Jack sprang between them, catching Adam in his outstretched arms. Adam’s claws raked down Jack’s chest, rending the oilskin there, and several drops of red blood appeared on Jack’s skin beneath it. Jack and Adam rolled across the ground together, Jack’s claws sinking into Adam’s shoulders, and Adam screeched a high-pitched sound like a banshee.

The Duke turned back to Hugh, and Hugh almost didn’t have time to dodge before the man swung the machete again. He dove aside, backing up as the Duke lumbered toward him.

“Hugh!” came a shout from nearby. Hugh turned his head to see Anthony a few yards away, holding something in his hands. It was the double-barrel pistol Adam had dropped earlier that had disappeared in the scuffle between Jack and Adam. Anthony tossed it at him. Hugh watched it arc up, and he reached up and caught it as it descended down. He cocked back the hammer as he turned back to the Duke who was rushing at him like a bull at a matador, the machete upraised to split his skull.

Hugh raised the gun and pulled the trigger. The shot rang out, clear as bell even through the crackling fire. The Duke froze, a scarlet rose blooming on his chest. He

stumbled back a few steps. His great bulk hit the flaming fence. The boards fell inward, taking the man with them. His coat caught fire, and, within moments, his entire body was covered in flames, his body jerking only for a few moments before it went still. Fire spread around him, the broken fence feeding the blaze and giving the flames a path out of the enclosed area. A sizzling sound filled the air as the Duke's skin began to pop and blacken.

Jack came running through the trees. The slashes on his clothes were still there, with drops of blood staining the edges, but Hugh could see that the wounds themselves were nearly closed up and sealed over again. Well, that was a handy trick. "Where's Adam?" he asked.

Jack pointed behind where he had just come from. "He heard the shot and ran off that way."

"Coward," Hugh muttered. "Are you all right?"

"Yes," Jack replied. "You? And you?" he added, turning to Anthony.

"Fine," Anthony said quickly.

"Same," Hugh replied. He nodded toward the corpse that was completely alight with blue and white flames, reminiscent of the viscount only a short time ago. "The Duke is dead."

"Well done, old chap!" Jack said, giving Hugh a slap on the back, and Hugh laughed.

Flames were nearly all around them and lit up the early morning sky as bright as midday, the golden-glowing Tree now completely alight, the flames spreading outward from the broken fence to the rest of the orchard. "Where would Adam be headed, do you think?" Jack asked.



“I don’t know,” Hugh said.

Anthony glanced in the direction Jack had pointed earlier. “Isn’t the train station that way?”

Hugh groaned. Anthony was right, and there was always an early-morning train departure. “Dammit. If he’s able to get on that train, he’ll disappear.”

“Scarlet stardust. We need to go after him then,” Jack said with a dramatic sigh before his head cocked. “What is that noise?”

It took Hugh a moment to hear it, but after a moment he registered a distant clanging sound. He thought for a moment might be the train, but it was coming from the opposite direction. He realized with a bit of relief that it was the fire brigade bell. By this point, he wasn’t sure how much they could do to save the orchard, but hopefully they could stop the fire before it got too out of control and hurt the estate’s servants or other people who lived in the area. He handed the pistol to Anthony. “Take this just in case. The fire brigade is coming. Tell them you were being kept prisoner here, and you need to speak to Constable Rezal Depesh of the Metro Police.”

“Where are you going?” Anthony asked, his icy eyes wide.

“We need to catch Adam.” Hugh didn’t have time to explain, but he knew if Adam disappeared, he was going to spend the rest of his life looking over his shoulder. And the Duke was dead. Someone needed to be brought to justice for all of those murdered and mutilated people, including Christopher.

Anthony nodded, pulling the cape tighter around him. Hugh leaned in to give him a quick hug, which Anthony returned. Jack pointed in the direction of the depot. “You head that way, Hugh. I’ll make sure Anthony gets to safety and that all the apples are destroyed, and then I’ll join you.”

Hugh nodded and turned to run through the orchard in the direction of the train station. Dawn was approaching; the early-morning train would be leaving very soon. He burst out of the orchard to see the serpent-like form of Adam down on all fours, running down the hill toward the depot. If he at least made sure Adam got on the train, he would know where the man was headed next. He ran down the path after him, kicking up dirt that clung to his sweaty skin as he did.

He could see a cloud of smoke rising in the distance from the train station. He came over a ridge and slowed to a stop. The rest of the way to the train was downhill, but he could not run down the hill at the speed he was at; he would trip and break his neck. But he could see Adam approaching the train platform fast. The train whistled again before it gave a great shudder, its wheels beginning to move.

Adam raised himself back up to two legs, shoving several people out of his way. The departing train was just starting to pick up speed as it reached the end of the platform. Adam took a leap that Hugh was almost certain would fail, but he grabbed the railing of the train and hauled himself up and over the railing like a monkey. He turned to watch the estate recede as the train continued to chug relentlessly on, and Hugh could see his lipless mouth curl up in a smirk at him. Hugh let out a breath of frustration.

Jack suddenly appeared by his side. “Where is Adam?”

Hugh pointed to the train in the distance. “He jumped aboard there. We’re going to have to try to beat the train to the next station in order to get him.”

Jack raised a brow. “Oh, no, we do not,” he said. He held out his arms.

Hugh blinked, then grinned and wrapped his arms around Jack’s neck. Jack scooped him up, holding him to his chest. The wind was suddenly whipping by them. Hugh held tightly to him as Jack navigated the hill like it was nothing, then onto the train tracks, the world going by in a blur.

His stomach rose and fell as Jack leaped, and suddenly they were on the platform of the back of the train where Adam had pulled himself aboard. Jack set Hugh carefully on his feet. “All right?”

Hugh nodded. Adam was not on the platform anymore, which meant that he likely had ducked inside the carriage. “Yes. Wait here, I’ll try to chase him out toward you.”

Jack stuck out his lip in a pout. “You get to have all the fun.”

Hugh snorted softly. “Yes, that is exactly what it is,” he said before opening the door to the third-class passenger car and stepping inside.

The passengers were all seated, talking or reading or napping, though many of them looked up in surprise as Hugh entered the car. That made Hugh worry just a bit. Adam had still been in his vile form when he leaped aboard the platform, and Hugh had no idea how long it would take for the apple to wear off. Adam could be either in his human form or still in his strange chimerical form. He didn’t see him in his human form in any of the seats, and a half-serpent man crawling on the ground under them would certainly have drawn attention. But there was no door at the other end of the car for him to have gone through, and, even if he had, there was no way for him to easily pass between the third-class and second-class carriages. No one looked panicked either, like Hugh would expect people to be if a strange creature had come running through their midst. Had Adam not come into the car at all? Had he jumped off of the moving train somewhere along the way before he and Jack had been able to catch up to it?

A scrambling sound came from above his head, and Hugh looked up, but he saw nothing except the wooden ceiling of the carriage before realization dawned. Adam was on the roof. He nudged past several passengers, who made offended sounds, to stick his head out the open carriage windows to look up.

Adam suddenly swung down through the open window next to him, throwing himself in across the bodies of several passengers. Hugh turned to him, then was nearly trampled by a wave of people scrambling to the back of the car as passengers screamed and ran from the serpent-like monster crouched in the aisle at the front of the carriage. His tail lashed like a whip, catching Hugh across the waist and sending him spinning into a row of benches. He landed across the knees of several passengers. Adam dashed past him. "Move!" he snarled in a voice more animal than man. There was another massive scramble of bodies as people tried to get out of the way of the single door of the carriage.

Hugh pushed himself up, his torso throbbing from where Adam's tail had struck him. "I'm sorry," he mumbled to the couple whose laps he had just become familiar with before he tried to push his way back through the crowd toward the door. The door to the outer platform slammed closed. Hugh wondered if Adam had just run out of the carriage and straight into the arms of Spring-Heeled Jack. He could only hope.

Hugh threw open the door to the back platform of the train. The platform was empty. A scrambling noise above his head made him look up just in time to see a pair of well-tailored shoes and a thin tail disappear onto the roof of the car.

Hugh muttered a few unbecoming curses. There were shouts from above, and then Jack was suddenly perched on the railing, as he grinned at Hugh. "He's on the roof," Hugh gasped, startled but also relieved at Jack's sudden appearance.

"I know," Jack replied before grabbing Hugh and pulling him in against his chest. Hugh's feet left the ground before alighting a moment later on the roof of the third-class car. Hugh clutched Jack tightly. The spectre was a pillar of strength and sturdiness on the moving train as the wind whipped past them at what had to be fifty miles an hour. He turned in Jack's arms to see Adam at the other end of the carriage roof. His tail lashed back and forth, his violet and scarlet eyes full of murderous rage.

Hugh held up his hands. “Adam. There’s nowhere to run. You’re under arrest.”

Adam smirked at him, his lipless mouth curling back to expose his fangs. “Not today, Constable.” He turned and took a supernatural leap across the third-class carriage roof to the roof of the second, landing on it on all fours to steady himself.

Jack growled softly, enough for Hugh to feel it against his back where he was still pressed to Jack for balance. “I’ll get him. Hold on.”

Jack let go of Hugh and took a running leap across to the next car’s roof like Adam had. Hugh saw him land, but he realized in a moment of panic that Adam was gone, no longer on the roof of any of the train cars. Had he leaped off the train?

A diamond-shaped head with glowing, violet eyes popped up in the gap between the cars, focused on him. Adam smirked viciously, his fangs glinting in the early-morning sunlight. His tail lashed as he pulled himself back onto the third-class carriage roof, then lunged at Hugh. Claws came at him, and all Hugh could picture were the five deep gashes in Christopher’s body. He stumbled backward but lost his footing as the train rumbled along the tracks. He tried to steady himself, to grab for anything, but there was nothing but air around him. He pitched off the side of the roof with a yell, expecting the next moment to be an impact with the hard ground that would break every bone in his body, and he wondered for just a moment if there would be enough left of him to bury.

He hit something, but it was not the ground. His shoulder impacted what felt like a chest. There was a sudden jolt before the momentum of his body changed directions entirely, and he found himself flying upward again, Jack’s arms around him. They landed on the roof of the third-class carriage, and Hugh almost melted into the arms that held him. “Jack!” he gasped.

Jack gazed down at him with concern. “Hugh, you’re bleeding.” He pointed to

Hugh's neck.

That was when the pain hit him. Hugh realized that Adam's claws must have caught the side of his throat when he slashed at him. He clapped a hand to his neck, and it came away streaked with bright red blood. It didn't seem like it was that deep of a cut, but he remembered Dr. Ledbetter saying that the neck was such a fragile structure, considering it was used to balance the head and the brain. He realized too that his shirt collar was already soaked with blood.

Jack quickly whipped out a handkerchief from his coat pocket and pressed it to Hugh's neck. "Hold that," he said.

"I don't think he hit anything important," Hugh said, pressing the handkerchief firmly to the wound.

"If he did, you would have bled out by now. We shall get you to a hospital as soon as this blasted locomotive stops," Jack said firmly.

Hugh nodded, then let out a yelp as something landed only a few feet from them on the carriage roof. Adam sneered through his fangs. His tail lashed out and almost struck Hugh in the chest, but Jack blocked it with his own body, a vicious growl emanating from him. He grabbed the tail with his iron claws and yanked. The scaly flesh shredded beneath them, and Adam screamed. Jack grappled with Adam, trying to sink his claws into the serpent's flesh, and Adam was trying to do the same.

Something loomed in the distance, coming up fast, and it took Hugh a moment to realize what it was. A stone train tunnel. He didn't know much about the construction of tunnels, but he had to imagine that there was not nearly seven feet of clearance from the roof of the train to the underside of the tunnel. "Jack!" he yelled, not even sure if Jack could hear him over the rushing wind and Adam's snarling hisses.

“Get down!” Jack said sharply to Hugh. Hugh didn’t even think, just threw himself face-first down on the roof of the car, clinging to one of the metal pieces there. He glanced up through his eyebrows from his prone position just in time to see Adam in front of him. And then Adam was suddenly gone. Hugh felt something splatter over him like hot raindrops as he was plunged into darkness, feeling the closeness of the railroad tunnel over him. He felt panic rise in his chest. He wanted to lift his head to find Jack, but he didn’t dare move any further until they were out of the tunnel. Had Jack laid down prone like he had? Or had he too been standing when the train entered the tunnel and been struck by the overhang as Adam was? The thought made his stomach rise. Surely Jack couldn’t be dead.

It rapidly grew lighter, and then the train was out of the tunnel. Hugh lifted his head, then almost wept for joy when he saw Jack crouched two cars ahead of him on the roof. An instant later, Jack was by his side, helping him up. “Where did you come from?” Hugh asked.

Jack drew a half circle with his arm. “From one car, across the tunnel, to land on the other.”

Hugh blinked, then laughed. “You really are Spring-Heeled Jack.”

“Indeed,” Jack said with a grin. “Are you all right?”

Hugh nodded. “Yes. Though I would be very grateful to get off of this train roof.”

Jack wrapped his arms around him. “The station is coming up, looks like another mile or two, we’ll get there soon. And then we’ll get you to a hospital.”

“You’ll be seen,” Hugh said with a frown.

“I’m not worried about that,” Jack replied, holding him close. “With Dame Luck on

our side, all of England will know about the paranormal monsters that have been killing people.”

“Were all the apples from the Tree destroyed?” Hugh asked.

Jack nodded firmly. “Yes. I made sure to get everything in that area, before the fire brigade could get that deep into the orchard.”

Hugh felt the train suddenly begin to incrementally slow beneath them. “Adam and the Duke are gone. That still leaves the other members of Eden. But without the apples, they shouldn’t be able to transform.”

Jack looked relieved. “Indeed. If we can identify them, we can punish them for their dastardly misdeeds.”

Hugh frowned darkly. “Without evidence, we won’t be able to charge them. And I highly doubt a court of law will believe in magic apples that wake vileness inside of people.”

Jack looked thoughtful for a moment. “You have to work within the confines of the law you are sworn to uphold,” he said before an almost maniacal grin split his face. “But I do not.”

“What are you saying?” Hugh asked, already sure he knew where this was going.

“You do your job,” Jack replied. “But if they are able to circumvent justice, well... They just might receive a visit from Spring-Heeled Jack.”

Hugh thought about that for a moment. “But only people we know are guilty.”

“Yes,” Jack agreed firmly. “I do not relish killing. But I also do not wish to see



someone escape punishment due to technicalities, especially if they have harmed others and will do so again.”

Hugh smiled and nodded. “All right. However, I do not wish to know about it. The less I know, the better.”

“Ah. We shall have to find more hobbies for us to be interested in together,” Jack said with a grin that Hugh mirrored back. The sun was rising higher and higher as the train began its slow approach into the next station.

Jack gathered Hugh into his arms and leaped off the top of the car before he was running again, his feet barely touching the ground, carrying Hugh in his arms as gently as a newborn baby.

The hospital in the town the train had stopped in treated Hugh’s wound, which had closed by the time Jack had dropped him off near the hospital’s doors. Jack hid in a nearby alley until Hugh came out again with a large bandage around his neck, before Hugh went to the police station there. He identified himself to the man behind the desk and explained that there had been an accident with the train; a young man had climbed on the roof and had been struck by the tunnel. And then, Hugh knew he would have to return to London. The fire might have spread on the Duke’s estate, and there would likely be many questions that needed answering. He had no idea how he was going to explain the Garden of Eden and the Tree and Reardon and Spring-Heeled Jack to the other inspectors. Maybe he wouldn’t. He didn’t need to be a hero; he just needed the violence to be over.

They would travel back to London tonight, but for now, Hugh rented a room at one of the nearby hotels on the top floor. Jack leaped up to join him, sliding in the open window before shutting the curtain. And they just lay there, curled on the bed in each other’s arms.

“Jack,” Hugh said softly, sliding his hands up the side of Jack’s face, over the cheekbones that could have cut glass and up the back of Jack’s pointed ears. “Thank you. For being there for me through all of that.”

Jack gazed down at him, smiling just a bit so the light caught his sharp teeth. “Hugh. You are the reason I am here. I will always be here for you.”

“And you’re not leaving?” Hugh asked softly.

“No. I will never leave you,” Jack replied. “You are my soulmate, Hugh Danbury, and I will always be by your side. Though I do like the idea of continuing to search for those members of Eden.”

Hugh nodded. “We will do that. Together.”

“Together,” Jack agreed, and they held each other close, enjoying this moment in time and space where they could just be.

Later that day, in the northern countryside outside of London, police inspectors were picking up what remained of Adam along the area by the railroad tunnel. One constable picked up a gray, blood-spattered jacket and shook it out. As he did, a single tiny apple seed with a hint of a golden glow fell unnoticed from inside one of the pockets and buried itself in the soft, blood-stained earth.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:16 pm*

He hadn't taken that much money from the Duke's estate, only enough for Hugh to buy a private townhouse on a quiet street not far from the old East End Cemetery. It had once been the place where an undertaker had done his funerary services before transporting the coffins to the cemetery, but the rumors that the house was haunted were enough to keep most away from it. The fact that the caretaker's cottage at the cemetery, long abandoned, had an underground passage leading to the cellar of the townhouse had nothing to do with Hugh purchasing it for his new residence. None at all.

After they had returned to London, Hugh had gone to the Metropolitan Police station to find Anthony, who had been taken there by the fire brigade as well as examined by Dr. Ledbetter to ensure he was all right. Apart from a few cinder burns on his feet, he was given a clean bill of health. He had left the cape with Constable Depesh, who promised to return it to Hugh when the other constable reappeared.

Jack, after ensuring that Hugh was dropped off at Scotland Yard that night, had immediately gone to the abandoned theatre that had been the gathering point for the aristocrats of Eden, going down into the underground cavern. No one was left there, living or dead. The bodies of the missing and the slaughtered were gone, as was the body of Sergeant Reardon. The aristocrats had obviously redressed and left, for there was no sign of them that he could find except for one dropped mask under the round table in the main chamber. The mask the Duke had been wearing that he must have discarded when he rushed out to take his carriage to the orchard.

The rooms full of horrors were clear of blood and other things, though the tools of their evil games were still there. Jack smashed or burned everything he could find, going meticulously from alcove to alcove until he was sure he had been in every

single space. And then he left Eden, sealing it up like a sepulcher. He came back to check it each night for months on end, but no living thing ever breached its walls again.

Hugh met with Anthony a few weeks later, undercover once more so no one would know he was a police officer. Mr. Galloway seemed a little sullen, and Hugh wondered if it was because he had lost his biggest source of income from the monthly parties at Eden. Anthony confirmed that there were no ‘special events’ planned for the foreseeable future, which he and Morris and the other young men at The Bull and Parasol seemed grateful about.

“I wish I could do more to help you,” Hugh said, catching Anthony’s hand in his and giving it a squeeze.

Anthony gave him a sweet smile. “You found who killed Christopher, and you stopped the monsters. I’d say you did a-fucking-lot.”

“But you’re still stuck here,” Hugh said, gesturing to the dreary bedroom.

Anthony shrugged his petite shoulders. “You can’t save everyone from everything, Hugh. If you can make the streets a little safer, that’s doing a lot.”

Hugh smiled and embraced the dark-haired young man. “I’ll always do that for you.”

Anthony hugged him back tightly. “Say hi to Jack for me.”

“Of course, I will,” Hugh replied, pulling his hat on. “I’ll see you around.”

Jack

Jack ascended the incline to the door that led directly into the basement of the townhome. He paused at one of the sheets of paper tacked to the wall, picking up a

pen to cross off two of the names listed there. Lord Joseph Arthur and Lady Gwendolyn Arthur. He still had a few more to determine identities for, but Hugh was confident they would find the remaining Garden of Eden members who had escaped. Next to the list was a newspaper clipping, with a rather inaccurate depiction of him with his horns showing in front of the top hat on his head. How silly would he be to wear a top hat and not use them to cover his horns? **SPRING-HEELED JACK MURDERS SUSPECTED MUTILATOR OF WOMEN** declared the headline. Sometimes he was a hero, and sometimes he was a villain, depending how much evidence Hugh was able to find that could be presented to the public regarding the horrific activities of the aristocrats of Eden. But he was all right with that. It kept the evildoers of London on their toes, watching over their shoulders for Spring-Heeled Jack, the vigilante bringer of justice to those who deserved it.

Hugh was in the kitchen, humming tunelessly as he chopped vegetables to go into a large pot. He looked up as Jack climbed the cellar stairs and came into the kitchen. "I had a good night," Jack said with a grin.

That was Jack's way of saying that his hunt had been successful. The only thing Hugh knew about it beyond that was the list of names in the basement that he had provided Jack whenever he found another former member of Eden. He beamed at him. "I am sure you worked up an appetite. The soup will be ready in about an hour."

"Oh?" Jack said, coming up behind him and wrapping his arms around Hugh's waist. "What can we do in that hour?"

"I don't know," Hugh teased, swaying them lightly as he dumped the vegetables into the pot and placed the lid on it.

"I have a few ideas." Jack gave Hugh's ear a nibble, then ran his tongue lightly over the scar just below it where Adam had nearly taken Hugh from him. "Mmm, I love you, Hugh Danbury."

Hugh chuckled and leaned back into Jack's arms. "And I love you, Spring-Heeled Jack."

"That is still such a strange moniker," Jack said. "There are absolutely no springs in my heels."

"Well, Bat Man would be a rather silly name," Hugh replied, grabbing Jack's cape and wrapping it around them both.

Jack rolled his flame eyes and grinned. "Yes, I suppose it would. Well, no matter what my name is, I'm going to make you scream it." He scooped Hugh up in his arms to carry him upstairs.

Hugh laughed and rested his head against Jack's warm chest, his soulmate who had saved his life and countless others, assisted him in solving a series of violent crimes, and delivered justice to those who thought they were untouchable. He was a light amongst shadows. He had crossed time and space to be here, and they would always be together. Love was the strongest force in the universe, and they would always have love, through good times and bad, whatever was to come.