

THE IMMORALITY ENGINE

A NEWBURY & HOBBS
INVESTIGATION

GEORGE MANN



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A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK
TOR[®] NEW YORK

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For Fiona Jenny Mann. That completes the trilogy!

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Acknowledgments

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CHAPTER

1

The soft loam sucked at his boots, thick and oozing, as if trying to pull him down into its slick, waterlogged depths, down amongst the corpses and the coffins and the dead. Newbury shifted, looking for somewhere even remotely dry to stand. All around him the ground was clotted with mud, made worse by the incessant rain that pattered like a drumbeat upon the brim of his hat. Mist, rising from the warm earth, curled around the forest of listing headstones, clinging to the trees and shrubs and casting the entire scene in an eerie, ethereal shroud. Figures moved like shadows, all dressed in black, their pale faces hidden behind veils or hands.

Nearby, crows were picking at the stringy flesh of a dead fox beneath the shelter of an ancient oak tree. Newbury watched them with a grim fascination.

Around the huddled group of mourners, a perimeter of uniformed bobbies stood like ghostly sentries, half-visible in the vaporous morning, there to ward off roaming Revenants and other unsavoury things that loomed unseen in the shadows.

Graveyards such as this one had become the hunting ground of the soon-to-be-dead. Newbury wondered if perhaps the Revenants felt a kinship with the recently interred, or whether it was simply the lure of warm bodies that drew them in; people gathered in a quiet place, unsuspecting and too lost in their mourning to notice the shambling approach of the plague-ridden flesh eaters. He supposed it didn't really matter. Either way, he wasn't convinced a handful of bobbies would be able to stop the creatures if they decided to attack.

He looked around at the faces in the small crowd. There were six people attending the funeral. He couldn't help thinking there should have been more. He watched their unmoving shapes, hulking against the torrential rain. They were there to bury Amelia Hobbes.

Newbury tried to listen to the words of the vicar, who conducted his sermon in a solemn, monotonous voice at the side of the grave. Beside him, a small altar boy clutched an umbrella for shelter for the holy man, but was bearing the brunt of the weather himself, soaked to the bone, his once-white robes now splashed with mud and dirt. A large pile of earth was heaped neatly beside the coffin-shaped hole, ready to be replaced once the ceremony was over. The scent of it filled Newbury's nostrils, fresh and damp.

Across from Newbury stood Mr. and Mrs. Hobbes, the parents of both the dead girl and her older sister, Miss Veronica Hobbes, Newbury's assistant, who stood beside him, unwilling to lift her face to meet their judgemental glares. Currently, the faces of the two middle-aged socialites were obscured and wreathed in drifting mist, but Newbury had spoken to them earlier and had seen only relief in the

eyes. Relief to be free of the burden of their strange, tortured daughter: the girl who could see into the future.

Newbury had shaken their hands and offered his condolences, and had tried not to judge them too harshly. But having seen the manner in which they behaved towards Veronica, he had not been able to suppress a feeling of righteous indignation. It was clear to him that they were interested only in themselves, their fortune, and their reputation, and that their children were nothing but ornaments to be seen and admired. Amelia, broken, had been hidden away from prying society, moved from asylum to asylum, hospital to hospital, until only recently when Newbury himself had intervened, calling on the mercy of Her Majesty the Queen to have the unfortunate girl taken into the private care of Dr. Lucien Fabian, the Queen's personal physician.

Fabian's efforts had been an abject failure, but Newbury knew there was far more to it than that. The whole matter had been a terrible travesty, a betrayal of the worst kind. And of course Fabian wasn't here to see his charge put in the ground.

On the other hand, Dr. Mason, the man who had looked after Amelia during much of her decline, in the period preceding her transfer to Fabian's Grayling Institute, was in attendance. He seemed more concerned for Veronica than he did for himself, his eyes trained on her throughout the service. Newbury decided this was an admirable trait, although he couldn't help feeling a spark of annoyance at the other man's attention.

To Newbury's right was Sir Charles Bainbridge, Chief Inspector of Scotland Yard, fellow agent to the Queen, and his dear friend. Bainbridge was older than Newbury by a decade, approaching his late forties, and he walked with a cane, his left foot damaged during some long-ago adventure. He wore a bushy grey moustache and a stiff top hat and looked bedraggled by the weather, even huddled beneath a heavy winter overcoat. He was staring into the hazy distance, lost in his own thoughts.

Newbury glanced at Veronica, who stood to the left of him. She was clearly distraught, sobbing openly, her head bowed. Her dark hair was lank and wet, clinging to her pale cheeks, but she seemed oblivious to the weather. The rain could do little to disguise the tears that streamed freely down her face.

Newbury looked up at the sound of footsteps. The pallbearers were approaching with the coffin.

Newbury moved closer to Veronica as they watched the men lower the coffin into the slick, waterlogged hole in the ground. Veronica stifled a single sob. The vicar continued to drone on, talking now of birth and resurrection. Newbury sighed. *Birth and resurrection*. That was what this was all about, one way or another.

The six pallbearers retreated slowly from the sides of the grave, their boots squelching in the sticky mud. Veronica stepped forwards, grabbed a handful of soil from the muddy bank, and cast it into the hole. "Good-bye," she said solemnly, then turned her back on the grave to face Newbury, a defiant gleam in her eyes.

Newbury watched her parents over her shoulder as they mumbled disapprovingly to each other. He smiled at Veronica, trying not to let her see his disdain. "Come on. Let's get you out of this dreadful

rain, Miss Hobbes.”

Veronica nodded silently. Her eyes were rimmed with red, her face forlorn. Abandoning all sense of propriety, Newbury stepped forwards and wrapped his arms around her shoulders, pulling her close. “Veronica. Come now, before you catch a chill.” He whispered quietly in her ear. “This place will do you no good.”

She leaned in closer to him, resting her head on his shoulder. He felt her body shaking with tears. For a moment, it seemed to Newbury as if they were alone in that sad, misty place; the other figures, all dressed in black, became nothing but inky smudges, hazy and out of focus. At that moment, only Veronica mattered.

Newbury led Veronica gently away from the congregation and towards the row of waiting carriages, nodding once at Bainbridge, whose face was creased with concern and infinite sadness.

Newbury did not look back again as he helped Veronica step up into the carriage and climbed in after her, dripping rainwater over the seats. He sat beside her, taking her hand in his own. “Lead on, Driver.”

The drumming of the raindrops on the roof drowned out any response from the man hunched on the dickey box outside, but the horses juddered suddenly into motion, knocking Newbury and Veronica back into their seats. The wheels creaked as the carriage eased away into the foggy morning.

CHAPTER

2

SEVEN DAYS EARLIER

There was a definite aroma about the place.

Not unpleasant, Veronica thought, but distinctive, unusual. The mingling scents of herbal tea tinged with the sweet stink of opium. She peered in through the open door.

Chinese men lounged about, carousing and laughing, or engaging in serious conversations at the many scattered tables while drinking tea and smoking cigarettes. Amongst them, waiters dressed in white smocks hurtled about, slinging armfuls of crockery about them with a practised ease.

Veronica looked up at Bainbridge, who was regarding the place with a wary eye. "It looks innocuous enough," she said. "Are you sure this is the place?"

Bainbridge nodded. "Indeed so. This is the place."

"Then where is he?"

Bainbridge shrugged. "I suspect they have another room out the back. A ... lounge area."

Veronica smoothed the front of her dress. "I shall go inside and make enquiries."

Bainbridge puffed out his chest and turned towards Veronica with a stern expression. "You, Miss Hobbes, will kindly wait out here. This is no place for a lady."

"Poppycock!" she exclaimed loudly, causing one of the waiters to look round in surprise. "I'll have none of it." She led the way through the small doorway, not looking back at Bainbridge, in case he tried to stop her.

She looked incongruous in such tawdry surroundings. Dressed in an immaculate grey suit, her long skirt swishing about her ankles, her dark hair pinned back expertly from her pretty face, she was the very picture of a professional woman. Only the lively pink of her blouse and the set of her jaw betrayed her determination to be different from the other women of her age, who she thought spent their time sewing or mewling over men and had very little that was exciting in their lives.

Veronica had decided long ago that she would not embrace that life, and had subtly guided herself towards one that had her visiting unsavoury establishments such as the one in which she was now, or worse, indulging in adventurous undertakings that could in no way be considered proper pursuits for a woman of station. And that was exactly the way she liked it.

This particular establishment was known as Johnny Chang's Tearooms, renowned as a den of thieves, pickpockets, and newly arrived sailors from the East. The place had another reputation, too: a haven for fallen gentlemen, a place where one might go to dabble in the mystical arts or freely imbibe that dreadful oriental weed, opium. The drug had become known as the scourge of the East, but-

Veronica thought wryly—it had become the scourge of the British upper classes, too. So many good men had been lost to its poison. In its way, the opium curse was as foul a disease as cholera or the Revenant plague, only it affected the rich and poor alike, and was a thousand times more insidious.

Veronica stared at the blank faces all around her. She could barely believe that Newbury would choose to patronise a place such as this.

She stood motionless as a Chinese waiter shuffled past, his arms laden with teacups and dirty bowls. A hush had fallen over the patrons as they stared openly at her, a mix of puzzlement, lechery, and suspicion on their faces.

One of the waiters approached her. He was a small man with clipped black hair and a broad, toothy grin. “May I help you, madam, sir?” He gave a swift bow of his head to both Veronica and Bainbridge in turn, making sure to keep his eyes on them at all times.

Veronica was about to speak when Bainbridge bustled forwards and raised his cane in a threatening fashion. Veronica noticed the people around the edges of the room bristle in anticipation. “You can stop with all that *politeness* and smiling straightaway. I know what sort of place this is,” he barked, full of bluster and unnecessary confrontation. His moustache twitched, as if in disgust. “My name is Sir Charles Bainbridge of Scotland Yard and I’m making enquiries after a gentleman. I have reason to believe he ... frequents this establishment.”

The waiter smiled, then shrugged in a placatory fashion. “I am sorry, sir. I do not understand what you speak.” He motioned to the tables around them, to the vagabonds and thieves who were staring and eyeing the two interlopers warily. “As you can see, your friend is not here.” The waiter took a step back from Bainbridge and bowed his head again. “I am sorry I cannot be of service to you today.” It was clear this was intended as a dismissal.

Bainbridge practically snorted in fury. “Now, look here! This is wholly unsatisfactory. I demand to know where I may find Sir Maurice Newbury!”

The waiter’s face was impassive.

Veronica put her hand on Bainbridge’s arm. “Sir Charles. Please stop.”

Bainbridge gave her a scornful look, but seemed to visibly draw back from the smaller man, expelling a long sigh.

Taking matters into her own hands and refusing to let go of Bainbridge’s sleeve, Veronica pulled him on towards the rear of the premises, pushing past the waiter, and refusing to make eye contact with the three men who sat at a small table against the back wall, playing cards and smoking. One of them watched her with a wry smile, clearly enjoying the show. She saw him call off the two men beside him: larger, bulkier men—bodyguards, she presumed—who were both preparing to rise from their seats to challenge her. She wondered if this were the eponymous Johnny Chang. Whatever the case, he appeared to be granting her passage, but for what reason, she could only guess.

The waiter called out loudly behind them, but Veronica ignored him and stormed on. A heavy red curtain was draped over an open doorway in the rear wall. She supposed this was what separated the main tearoom from the less salubrious establishment in the back.

“Through here.” She led the Scotland Yard inspector through the curtain into the shadowy room beyond, still ignoring the effervescent protests of the waiter. The man seemed reluctant to give chase beyond the threshold of the tearoom, as if doing so would somehow take him from the safety of his own domain to somewhere much more dangerous and terrifying. A realm beyond the bustling world of teacups and cigarette smoke that he usually inhabited. A world filled with the ghosts of the living.

At least, that was how it seemed to Veronica as she passed beneath the velvet curtain and into the large, sumptuously decorated room beyond.

The lighting was dim, and it took her eyes a moment to adjust. Heavy fabric drapes hung on the walls in reds and greens, and the windows had been covered with thick curtains. Little clusters of divans and chaises longues, each piled with colourful silk cushions, were placed carefully to form discrete, distinct areas for the patrons. The supine forms of innumerable men lay draped upon the furniture, drowning amongst the puddles of soft fabric. The air was thick with the sickly sweet aroma of the opium, but aside from the sounds spilling through from the tearoom, the place was shrouded in silence.

A Chinese man in red silk drifted amongst his vacuous-looking clientele, tending to their needs, refilling their pipes, and rearranging their cushions. The skirts of his cheongsam whispered across the tiled floor, giving Veronica the strange impression he was floating, a spirit made flesh. The notion was exaggerated by the curls of oily smoke that hung in the air like wraiths, rising from the still bodies like souls evacuating the dead.

Veronica coughed and put a hand to her mouth, choking on the thick vapours.

Bainbridge was looking around, his eyes wide. “The excess!” he exclaimed. “The decadence!” He shifted his weight onto his cane, as if weighed down by the simple fact of being in such a hedonistic place. “Can you see him?”

Veronica shook her head. She moved slowly into the room, finally releasing her grip on Bainbridge’s arm, and wandering between the low divans and heaps of cushions in search of Newbury. She stepped over the splayed legs of a semiconscious Chinese man whose eyelids fluttered briefly but without interest as she passed by. She heard Bainbridge’s footsteps fall in behind her.

The attendant paid the two of them little heed as they went about their search, glancing up only once before continuing to drift between his patrons, unconcerned by their sudden appearance or the commotion they had caused at the front of the house. Veronica wondered absently whether he, too, was operating under the influence of the soporific drug.

They moved methodically from divan to divan, from chaise longue to chaise longue. The clientele formed a rich mix of cultures and classes. More than once Veronica thought she’d found Newbury, only to realise upon closer inspection that it was just another fallen gentleman, still trussed up in his formal attire, lounging decadently without a care in the world. She hated to think of Newbury in those terms, to identify him with these layabouts. She knew he was different, that he used the drug for other reasons, to open his mind, to allow himself to think. At least, that’s what he insisted, and what she wanted to believe. She knew Bainbridge was far less forgiving of Newbury’s vice, and suspected she

was deceiving herself. But it was a little lie, and it enabled her to carry on.

Veronica finally found him stretched out on the floor amongst a heap of cushions, near the back of the large room, apparently unconscious. He was wearing his usual dark suit, but the collar was open and his necktie loose around his throat. A spent pipe was discarded by his left hand, and his flesh had assumed a deathly pallor. He looked thin and uncared for, with pursed lips and bruised eyes. His raven-coloured hair was unkempt and plastered to his forehead with perspiration, and his breathing was short and shallow. His right hand lay limp upon his chest.

Veronica suddenly couldn't breathe. Her hands felt cold and clammy. She couldn't bear to see him this way. She wanted to rush to his side, but she knew it would do neither of them any good. He looked ill. He looked ... close to death.

Veronica took a moment to gather herself. Just as she was about to say something, Newbury licked his lips and spoke. "Go away, Charles." He hadn't opened his eyes, and his voice was a dry, rasping croak.

Bainbridge looked momentarily flustered. "How did you—?"

Newbury slowly peeled open his eyelids. His pupils were pinpricks in the semidarkness. "The cane, Charles. I knew it was you the moment you entered the room."

Bainbridge glanced down at his cane, perplexed.

Newbury turned his head to regard Veronica. "And Miss Hobbes, too." He closed his eyes again. "What the devil are you doing bringing a lady to a place like this?"

Bainbridge flushed. "Well, I..." He slammed the end of his cane down hard against the tiled floor. "Get up, you damn wastrel! Do you hear me? Get up! I have no time for your foolish games."

Newbury grinned. His fingers twitched, but otherwise he didn't move.

Veronica dropped to one knee beside him. She put her hand to his face. His cheek was damp and unshaven. "Maurice. We need your help."

Newbury sighed. He turned towards her and opened his eyes. There was a gleam there that had been missing before. "Then, I suppose, Miss Hobbes, that's a different matter altogether." He shifted, pushing himself up into a sitting position. He glanced warily at Bainbridge, who was peering down at him with a disdainful expression. "What is it that's so pressing, you had to come and find me here?"

Bainbridge reached down, cupped Newbury beneath the arm, and helped him to his feet. "If your brain's not too addled to understand me, Newbury, I'll tell you on the way."

Contrary to Bainbridge's assertion, the journey from Johnny Chang's passed in awkward, embarrassed silence.

Bainbridge stared out of the carriage window, his face creased in a deep frown, watching the city roll by as the steam-powered hansom clattered noisily over the cobbled roads. He refused to look at Newbury, who was slumped on the opposite seat, his eyes lost in shadow, his chin resting forlornly on his chest. His hair was lank and he looked haggard. He smelled of stale sweat and tobacco smoke.

Veronica tried not to stare, instead shooting furtive glances in his direction. She found herself wishing she could hear his thoughts. It pained her to see him in such a sorry state. She wanted nothing more than to grab him, shake him, and slap him hard across the face, then hold him and tell him that everything was going to be well. But she couldn't, for a thousand reasons. She could not promise him that. She did not know with any conviction that everything *was* going to be well.

Newbury's addiction to the oriental weed had grown steadily more acute over recent months. It had begun with the occasional absence from the office. This in itself was not unusual for Newbury, who was often called away at short notice by the Queen, or found himself tied up in a case with Sir Charles and unable to meet his more prosaic commitments.

But the absences had grown more frequent, more erratic, and more keenly felt by others further abroad than the museum. Veronica had even been hauled before Her Majesty to give account of herself, to explain why Newbury had not attended the Court's summons and why Veronica was failing in her duty to keep him from straying. The monarch had admonished her gravely and ordered her to bring the errant Newbury to heel.

Sir Charles, too, had called on her on more than one occasion, partly to express his concern for his absent friend and partly to solicit her input on certain cases, which was only too welcome a distraction. Veronica suspected that Sir Charles also felt some measure of responsibility for her friend Newbury's absence, as if she somehow needed protecting and it fell on him to take the place of her friend during this "temporary period of illness," as he had begun to call it.

She supposed it *was* a form of illness: a malaise of the spirit, perhaps, and a sickness of the body. Newbury had come to rely on a drug he once told her was a tool, the means by which he achieved the clarity of thought that helped him to solve his cases. But his need had become a physical one, and his body craved the weed. It became so integral to his process—to his daily life—that he now found it impossible to operate without it. And if he knew what a detrimental effect it was having on his health, he refused to acknowledge it.

Sir Charles was wrong: this wasn't a phase that was going to blow over. And no matter what she told herself, Newbury could not continue in such a fashion. She would have to intervene. But not for the reasons Her Majesty had impressed upon her: for Queen and country and the safety of the realm. She would do it for Newbury, because she loved him, and because she refused to stand by and watch him commit a slow and degrading suicide. He would have to learn to live without the drug. There was no other choice. The only problem, she admitted to herself, was the fact that she hadn't the slightest idea how to begin.

So instead she joined the two men in their silence, each of them avoiding the only subject that was playing on their minds.

* * *

Soon enough, the hansom sputtered to a stop outside the police morgue, and the driver rapped loudly on the roof to inform them that they had reached their destination.

Bainbridge was up and out of the cab before Veronica had even had a chance to gather her thoughts. She heard him barking commands at the driver, which did little to dispel the sense of tension between them. She looked over at Newbury, who was still slouched over in his rumpled suit. "Sir Maurice. We have arrived."

Slowly, groggily, Newbury raised his head. He glanced out of the window with bleary eyes. "Yes, indeed, Miss Hobbes." His voice was little more than a dry croak. Veronica was beginning to wonder whether dragging him out of the opium den hadn't been a huge mistake.

Then, as if digging deep into the reserves of his strength, Newbury pulled himself upright, groaning in protest, before beckoning for Veronica to exit the carriage ahead of him.

Outside, Charles was tapping his cane impatiently on the pavement. Veronica stepped down and took her place beside him, hoping that his simmering temper would soon abate. She didn't want to find herself in the middle of another row.

Newbury emerged into the searing daylight a moment later, squinting up at the austere building behind her. A smile played momentarily on his lips. "The morgue?"

"Well, of course it's the bloody morgue!" said Bainbridge, barely containing his frustration.

This appeared to pique Newbury's interest. He raised one eyebrow, and Veronica caught another glimpse of the old gleam in his eyes. "What brings us to this most dreadful of places, dear Charles?"

"A body. What else would it be?" snapped Bainbridge in a condescending tone.

Veronica rolled her eyes. "I'm not sure this is helping, Sir Charles..." It was clear to her that he was deeply concerned for his friend, but was far too reserved to be able to express it by any means other than frustration. Newbury would understand this, of course, but had always enjoyed baiting the older man. Recently, this combination had proved rather more explosive than was healthy for either of them.

Bainbridge sighed, relenting. "Yes. I need you to see this body, Newbury."

Newbury grinned. The colour seemed to be returning to his cheeks. "To establish a cause of death?"

“No. To identify the victim.”

Newbury ran a hand over his bristly chin. “Very well. Lead on, then!”

Veronica couldn't help feeling relieved at the enthusiasm evident in his voice—even if it was enthusiasm for a corpse.

* * *

The morgue was cold and unwelcoming. Veronica felt a chill pass down her spine as she stepped over the threshold and through the double doors. Or perhaps it was something more. Trepidation? Fear? Unease? She'd never felt comfortable around corpses and she hoped she never would. She'd seen plenty of them in her time—even taken a life in the course of duty—but something about seeing a human body laid out in such a way filled her with a terrible sense of dread. She hated how a person—living, breathing, intelligent person—could be reduced to this, to nothing but an unmoving mass of flesh; how all that potential could so easily be invalidated. It was as if everything they stood for, everything they'd experienced or seen or had yet to see were suddenly worth nothing. All their dreams and loves and foibles: all of them amounting to this. A slab of meat on a slab of stone, ready to be butchered. Sometimes, seeing a corpse like that made her wish she hadn't lost her faith in God. Living in a Godless universe could be bleak and dark, and the reality of death was a black cloud that scared her more than anything else in the world. Fear, however, could not distract her from what she saw and an ultimate truism: that God did not, and never had, existed.

Other times she wished she could be more like Newbury, able to disassociate himself from his emotions, to examine a corpse and see a puzzle there, to look past the dead person to the mystery beneath. But, truthfully, she was glad she was still shocked by such sights, and glad that she had not become so cynical or worn down by her experiences that they were now merely commonplace to her.

This, she mused, was one of those days. She wanted dearly to be anywhere but in the morgue, anywhere away from the stench of death and decay and the sight of bloated, festering corpses and the remains of people who had met untimely ends.

So when the tall, thin mortuary attendant ushered the three of them inside, giving Veronica the most disdainful of looks, she almost wished she could find an excuse to wait outside. But she knew that was out of the question and refused to bow to stereotypes. She would steel herself and press on. It was, after all, only flesh and blood. The dead people themselves had no further need of it.

The mortuary attendant—so pale himself that he could quite easily have passed for one of the corpses—looked down his nose at Newbury, then turned towards Bainbridge, raising a disapproving eyebrow. “Sir Charles. Another most irregular visit. How can I be of assistance to you and your associates?” His voice was reedy and nasal. He held his hands out before him, his fingertips pressed together to form a spire before his chest.

Bainbridge pursed his lips and Veronica saw his knuckles whiten on the handle of his cane. For a minute she thought the chief inspector might strike the insolent fellow, but he managed to restrain himself. “You can help, *my dear fellow*”—he exaggerated those last three words to indicate his

impatience with the man—"by taking me and my *associates* to see the unidentified body that was brought in by my men two nights ago." He twitched his moustache testily.

"The young man in the suit? The suspected criminal?" The mortuary attendant seemed incredulous as if he couldn't quite understand how the three people before him could want to sully themselves with such distasteful business.

Bainbridge glowered but did not respond.

After a moment, the mortuary attendant shrugged. "If you'd care to follow me." He turned, holding his head high, and strode off into the labyrinthine warren of corridors that sprang from the reception area, his footsteps echoing loudly off the tiled walls.

Bainbridge set out after the attendant, and Veronica followed with Newbury, sliding her arm under his, supporting him as they walked. It was as much for her own comfort as for his, of course—as they wound their way deeper into the building, beneath the acid glow of the lamps and the gleaming, tiled archways, she felt a knot tightening in her stomach.

The place was filled with the stink of blood and faeces, the tang of iron. As they walked, Veronica became aware of the atrocious sounds of the surgeon's art: the rasp of a bone saw, cutting through the voiceless dead. The sound of fluid splattering on tiles. A man coughing and spitting. The wet thump of an amputated limb dropping to the floor.

She clutched Newbury's arm a little tighter. For the first time that day, he turned towards her and she actually felt that he was seeing her. He patted her hand, took a deep breath, and seemed to grow in stature. It was as if being needed was somehow enough to rejuvenate him, to refresh him. As if it were the lifeblood that sustained him, imbued him with vigour. Was it neglect, then, that had driven him to such terrible depths? Was it loneliness?

It seemed Bainbridge had been right, whatever the reasons. What Newbury needed was a good mystery, some solid work. She wondered what he would make of the chief inspector's little puzzle.

The mortuary attendant led them to a quiet corner of the morgue, where the body they had come to examine was laid out on a marble slab and covered in a thin white shroud. It was cool in the morgue but the cadaver had already started to smell. Veronica wrinkled her nose in disgust. She hoped that Newbury wouldn't want to do anything more invasive or prolonged than take a quick look.

"If you have no further need of me...?" said the mortuary attendant in his snide, reedy voice. Bainbridge offered him a curt nod in reply, and, with a haughty expression, he turned about and left the room.

Newbury turned to smile at Veronica, then extracted his arm and approached the slab. He hovered for a few seconds by the side of the body. "So, Charles. What's the story?"

Bainbridge frowned, as if unsure where to begin. "He was found on Shaftesbury Avenue, the night before last. Lying in the gutter. No obvious cause of death." He shrugged. "There are some confusing circumstances. Take a look—see if you recognise the poor beggar."

Newbury wiped his brow with his shirtsleeve. He was sweating despite the chill. Veronica wondered if that had something to do with the opium he'd imbibed this morning, or if his body was already

beginning to crave more.

Gently, Newbury took hold of the shroud and peeled it back, slowly revealing the body beneath. Veronica blanched at the sight of the waxy, bloated face, its eyes still open and staring, but now milk and sunken. The corpse had been stripped by the police surgeons and looked pale in the harsh yellow glow of the lamplight.

Newbury walked slowly around the slab, poking and prodding the body, spending a minute or two examining the face, rolling the corpse onto its side so that he could take a look at the dead man's back. His expression gave very little away.

After a minute or two more, he stepped back from the slab and looked directly at Bainbridge. "Clearly, Charles, this is Edwin Sykes. I'm sure there are a hundred men who could have corroborated that for you. Why drag me halfway across London to see his corpse?"

Bainbridge smiled. "What do you suppose killed him?"

"Confound you, Charles, for dodging my question. I can't see any obvious cause of death. Probably a heart attack, but there'd need to be a full autopsy to be sure. He's clearly been dead for a couple of days." Newbury rubbed a hand thoughtfully over his chin. "I should have thought you'd be pleased, Charles, to know that one of the most notorious burglars in London is on a slab?"

Bainbridge chuckled. "And there's the rub, Newbury. There's the rub. You see—as you've confirmed—Sykes has been dead for at least a couple of days. We've had his corpse in the morgue for two nights, guarded and locked in this room. But last night a burglary was committed on Regent Street that has all the hallmarks—down to the very last detail—of Sykes's work. So either something very unusual is going on, or Sykes was never our burglar in the first place."

Newbury looked thoughtful for a moment, before his expression broke into a wide grin. He glanced at Veronica. "Very well. It seems the two of you have my attention. So what next? Regent Street and the scene of the burglary?"

Veronica shook her head. "No, Sir Maurice. Chelsea, and the scene of a bath."

Newbury looked down at his rumpled suit, clearly embarrassed. He smiled sheepishly. "As you command, my dear Miss Hobbes. But first, answer me this: What of Sykes's personal effects? Had he been robbed?"

Veronica gestured towards Bainbridge, who pulled a small rectangular object from his trouser pocket and held it out to Newbury. It was a crumpled address card. Newbury took it and turned it over in his palm. It was emblazoned with the legend, PACKWORTH HOUSE.

"That's all we found on him. No wallet, no jewellery, no papers. Just that card, stuck in the lining of his jacket pocket. Whoever stripped him of his personal effects must have missed it."

Veronica nodded. "It seems as if it was more than just an opportunistic robbery. I find it hard to believe that someone happening across his body in the street would take such care as to remove *all* the contents of his pockets. What purpose could it serve them? The valuable items, yes. But his papers. To do so, they must have spent some considerable time beside the body, risking being seen all the while. It seems somehow ... unlikely."

Newbury frowned and handed the card back to Bainbridge, who tucked it away in his pocket once more. “Packworth House. Isn’t that the home of the Bastion Society?”

“Yes,” Bainbridge said. “It seems he was a member of that illustrious set. No doubt bought his way in with all that plundered money.”

“Or not,” Newbury countered, “if, as you say, he wasn’t your burglar after all. The circumstantial evidence certainly suggests not. And you never *were* able to pin anything on him.”

“Hmmm,” was Bainbridge’s only response.

Veronica approached the slab and picked up a corner of the shroud. She tried not to look too close at the grisly, staring face of the dead man or breathe in his ghastly scent. “Sir Maurice?”

Newbury took the other side of the shroud. Together they covered the body once again—the body of Edwin Sykes, or someone who looked *very* much like him.

“For God’s sake, Newbury! Look at the state of this place.”

Bainbridge thumped into Newbury’s drawing room with a thunderous roar, like a bear with a proverbial sore head. He strode first towards the sideboard, which was heaped with dirty wineglasses and plates, then to the fireplace and Newbury’s favourite armchair, around which thirty or forty newspapers had been discarded haphazardly on the floor. He knocked a heap of tobacco ash off the arm of the chair with his cane.

Veronica sighed. Just when she thought he’d finally begun to calm down.

“Mrs. Bradshaw!” Bainbridge continued to bellow at the top of his lungs. He charged towards the door, flung it open, and shouted down the stairs, calling for Newbury’s housekeeper. “Mrs. Bradshaw! Get up here at once!” He turned to Newbury. His voice lowered a fraction, but his tone was still harsh and critical. “I know you’re no disciplinarian, Newbury, but this really is unforgivable. What happened here?”

Veronica tried to take in the situation. Bainbridge was right: The place was in a miserable state. The curtains were still drawn, even though it was now midafternoon, and the room smelled of stale tobacco smoke and sweat. It clearly hadn’t been aired for days. Worse were the stacks of dirty plates and unwashed glasses and the smaller piles of tobacco ash from Newbury’s pipe, left spotted around the room in various bizarre locations: the windowsill, the coffee table, the arm of his chesterfield. It was as if Mrs. Bradshaw had given up trying.

“Mrs. Bradshaw!” Bainbridge was beginning to grow red in the face.

Newbury crossed the room and put a placating hand on his friend’s shoulder. “She’s gone, Charles.”

Bainbridge looked flustered and confused. “Gone? Where? Have you granted her leave?”

Newbury shook his head, and Veronica felt a pang of sadness as the gravity of his situation sank in. She really had gone. He’d chased her away. “She gave up on me, Charles,” Newbury continued, “and I can’t say I blame her. I kept unsociable hours. I had the most irregular habits....” He trailed off. Veronica knew that he wouldn’t be able to give voice to the real reason Mrs. Bradshaw had left his service, but they were all very much aware of it. She could not watch his descent into addiction, what it had made of him.

Something seemed to break, then, inside Bainbridge. His expression softened. All the rage, all the disdain seemed to pass out of him, and all that was left was the deepest concern for his dear old friend. Veronica watched as he placed his arm around Newbury’s shoulders. “Buck up, old chap. We’ll put things right. We’ll get things back on track.”

Newbury sighed. "Pop the kettle on, Charles. I haven't had a good pot of Earl Grey for some time."

Bainbridge gave him a hearty slap on the back. "I'll get to it, Newbury. Right away. I'm sure Miss

Hobbes here will run you a bath in the meanwhile."

Newbury smiled thankfully. "And Charles?"

"Yes, Newbury?"

"I fear you may have to wash a few cups and saucers."

Bainbridge chuckled, but Veronica could hear the undercurrent of sadness in the laughter. "Good

God, it's a few years since I've had the pleasure." He set off in the direction of the kitchen.

Veronica stared at Newbury, and he looked back, his eyes filled with the apology he couldn't offer.

"He'll be alright, you know," she said. "He just doesn't understand."

"Do you?" Newbury looked away, staring into the cold, open grate of the fireplace.

"No. But I'm trying to." She became aware that she was bunching her hands into fists by her side.

She inhaled deeply to steady herself. "Right. A bath. And then Regent Street."

Newbury nodded. "Quite so, Miss Hobbes. Quite so."

* * *

Veronica eyed the object on the table and tried unsuccessfully to suppress a shudder. She wished she hadn't seen it, and now that she had, she wished she could simply ignore it. But things were never that simple where Newbury was concerned.

She hadn't known where to start. The drawing room was an intolerable mess, but she didn't have the time—or, if she were truly honest with herself, the will—to clean it up. Instead, she had resolved to discuss the matter with Bainbridge and plot a means by which to recover Mrs. Bradshaw—or, if that proved too difficult—to make alternative arrangements on Newbury's behalf. But then she had realised that there wasn't even a place to sit, her sense of duty got the better of her, and she began to tidy up regardless. She'd started with the landslide of discarded newspapers beside Newbury's favourite armchair, collecting them up into a tidy stack. And that's when she saw it: the *thing* resting on the coffee table, as if it had always been there. A human hand, dismembered at the wrist, fingers splayed in the air like the legs of a dead spider. It had been carefully dressed and arranged, the pale flesh inked and tattooed with a variety of arcane symbols.

Now Veronica was perched on the edge of the chair, staring at the object with a growing sense of unease. What was Newbury up to? Where had he gotten such a thing? She knew she shouldn't be surprised: Newbury had a study full of bizarre objects, the trophies of many years. But this was different. Strange words had been written on the fingertips in Newbury's own handwriting.

Veronica reached over and tentatively picked it up. The flesh was cold and pliable; the hand had been treated with some sort of chemical preservative. A pentagram had been neatly drawn on the palm in black ink. Various objects had been wedged between the fingers: a penny, a holly leaf, a sprig of parsley, a rolled-up fragment of parchment. She was careful not to dislodge any of them. Where the wrist had once been, the stump was carefully wrapped in waxed paper and bound with rough string.

She was thankful for that.

Veronica carefully turned the hand over. More strange symbols had been drawn on the back of it and again she recognised Newbury's handwriting. The symbols meant nothing to her; she had no way of discerning meaning from what she saw, no frame of reference against which to judge them. But they worried her nonetheless. They signified that Newbury was once again dabbling in the occult, and the implications of that were too dreadful to even contemplate. Her duty to the Queen was to keep a discreet eye on Newbury, to ensure he didn't stray too far from what Her Majesty deemed to be an acceptable path. Veronica had already failed in that duty by neglecting to report Newbury's recent escalation of opium abuse. Discovering this grotesque, dismembered hand meant that she now either had to report to the Queen or pretend that she hadn't seen it. She knew that she should tell the monarch, but also that she wasn't very likely to. Nevertheless, that still left her with a question. Should she tackle Newbury on the issue and try to put a stop to it herself?

In the end, the decision was made for her when she heard a polite cough. She looked up to see Newbury framed in the doorway, grinning and dressed in a smart black suit, hair swept back from his face. "I see you've found Angus," he said, his voice now filled with the confidence it had been lacking since they'd pulled him out of Johnny Chang's earlier that morning.

"Don't be so morbid," she scolded in reply.

"You're the one holding the body part," he reminded her, laughing.

She placed it hastily back on the table. "What is it? What's it for?"

Newbury crossed the room, coming to perch on the arm of the chair beside her. He looked suddenly serious, all sign of his recent levity gone. He searched her face as if looking for a sign in the way she returned his gaze. "I have the notion that something dreadful is going to come to pass, Veronica. That's all —" He gestured towards the mummified hand on the occasional table. "—this *experiment* was an attempt to divine some meaning from all that, to give substance to my instincts."

Veronica frowned. She measured her next words very carefully, in a level tone. "Forgive me, Sir Maurice, if I speak frankly ... but couldn't this simply be the effects of the Chinese weed? Lucid dreams, hallucinations, that sort of thing? You have to admit, you've not exactly been yourself of late. Couldn't the drug have inspired a kind of paranoid delusion?"

Newbury looked pained. "On the contrary, my dear Veronica. I believe the weed has helped me to obtain a certain measure of clarity in the matter. The skein between this world and the supernatural world is thin, and sometimes, under the influence of the drug, I feel that veil lifting. I see ... other things, glimpses of the spirit world, of the future and the past. It's beguiling, like a siren song. The weed is a medium for that. Nothing more."

"And did it work, this experiment of yours? Did you come to any conclusions?" Veronica didn't know what to make of his words. She couldn't easily discount them. She, who had a clairvoyant sister locked away in an institution, channelling visions of the future through her seizures. She, who had fought Newbury's predecessor, Aubrey Knox, the rogue agent who had lost himself to the mysteries of the occult and become obsessed with the pursuit of power through ancient pathways.

The Queen would not have appointed her to monitor Newbury's interest in the dark arts if she were not concerned that there was real power to be gained from its exploitation. A siren song, as Newbury had called it, luring him towards the rocks, full of promises of enlightenment. That was exactly what the Queen feared.

But this? It sounded more like the delusions of a man who had given himself over to the vagaries of the poppy than anything rational.

As if hearing her thoughts, Newbury put his hand on her arm. "The only conclusion I could draw was that we need to pay a visit to your sister at the Grayling Institute. She is perhaps the one person who could shed some light on the matter—the only one who can tell me if I'm going mad, or if we really are on the precipice of something disastrous." He smiled. "Assuming you have no objections, of course."

Veronica tensed. She hadn't expected this. And of course, she trusted Newbury implicitly. But Amelia was ill, terribly, terribly ill, and Dr. Fabian had insisted that she stay away. More than that, in fact: he had insisted on her complete and total isolation from Amelia while she underwent her treatment. The notion did not sit easily with Veronica, but she had observed the doctor's wishes, hoping to do the right thing for her sister's recovery. And now Newbury, the man who had done so much for Amelia, needed something from her in return.

Veronica didn't know how to respond. She would do anything for Newbury, of course. But was he thinking straight? To jeopardise her sister's treatment on a whim, a simple search for validation ...

"I—" She turned at the sound of clinking china, thankful for the interruption. Sir Charles shouldered open the door, carrying a silver tray filled with teacups, saucers, milk jugs, and sugar bowls. His cane was dangling from the crook of his arm. He glanced over at the two of them and saw Newbury sitting on the arm of her chair, freshly dressed and shaved. "Ah, Newbury. Much better, old chap. Come and give me a hand."

Newbury smiled at her, a twinkle in his eye, and went to rescue his old friend from the embarrassment of having anything more to do with making the tea.

Veronica gave a sigh of relief. She would consider her next move carefully. If Newbury was right—if something awful was going to happen—surely Amelia would be able to help, to offer them an insight of some kind. But she feared that any instincts of Newbury's might be compromised by his growing addiction to the opium poppy. And that left her with a horrible quandary. For if she couldn't trust Newbury, whom on earth could she trust?

She watched the two men bustling around each other as they poured the tea, just like old times. It was a case of taking things a day at a time. That was all she could do. Newbury was there, and he was more like himself than she had seen him in months. They had a mystery to solve. That was enough for now. The rest could wait.

At least until after tea.

The garden was alive with activity. A red squirrel scrambled up the side of a nearby bush that had been elaborately shaped to represent an ancient god: Poseidon, thrusting his trident triumphant towards the sky. Other gods surrounded him, looking on with austere, unwavering gazes: Ares, Zeus, Hades, Aphrodite. The entire pantheon was there, silent in their evergreen vigil.

Elsewhere, birds described wide, concentric circles in the sky, or dived elegantly towards the lake, skimming the surface of the water as they attempted to plunder its murky depths for small silvery fish.

Amelia Hobbes pressed her fingertips against the cold glass of the windowpane, as if trying, unconsciously, to touch the world outside. She'd been locked in her room for days, cooped up like a caged bird, wings clipped and useless. She longed to inhale the fresh spring air, to walk about on her own two feet—anything but being perpetually confined to this uncomfortable wheelchair.

She sighed, pushing herself away from the window. The wheels of the chair creaked and groaned in protest. She was only torturing herself. Soon she would be able to walk outside again, to see other people. That's what she had to focus on. *Soon*. At least, that's what Dr. Fabian had told her.

Amelia turned the wheels of her chair, rolling slowly back into the gloom of her small room. She felt better than she had in months—years, even—and Dr. Fabian finally appeared to have found a means of suppressing her episodic fits, those brief, harrowing spasms in which she was able to see, momentarily, into the future. The last episode had been over two weeks ago, the end of a horrendous period of almost constant seizing, from which she recalled only the briefest moments of lucidity. That was when the doctor was experimenting with the dosage of the new drug he had prescribed for her—an anticonvulsant, he had explained, to put an end to her nightmares.

While his methods were clearly extreme—keeping her locked in her room with no visitors, for to start—Amelia had no real reason to fault the doctor's regime. She was showing signs of improvement. She felt her strength returning. She'd gained weight. She'd taken a few tentative steps on her own when she knew she wasn't being observed. And most important, the seizures had stopped.

All of this, she knew, should have left her feeling revitalised, uplifted. But she couldn't shake the persistent sense of melancholy that had stolen over her. Melancholy and ... fear. Fear of the future, of the things she had borne witness to in her dreams. Fear of the unknown, too: the things she hadn't seen. And more acutely, more urgently, fear of Mr. Calverton, that deranged, frightful assistant of Dr. Fabian's, that *thing* with all the qualities about him of a creature from a nightmare and none of anything right and sane.

From what she had managed to glean from snatches of conversation with the doctor, Mr. Calverton

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