



A
TASTE
FOR
MONSTERS

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CHAPTER 1

I woke up next to a dead woman. A black fly rested on her open left eye, straddling her lashes, and in my fear and disgust I leapt from the bed without first making certain the straps of my carpet-bag were still entwined in my arms. The bag fell to the floor as I reached my feet, and I snatched it up with the brief, daily moment of relief that it hadn't been stolen in the night.

"Who was she?" asked a dollymop from the bed next to me, the paint on her cheek a smeared bruise, crudely applied to hide how young she was.

"I never asked her name," I said, though I had been forced to share the bed with her when the doss-house filled to overflowing the night before.

"Best notify the manager," the girl said, and flopped onto her back.

I stared at the dead woman and wondered when in the night she had passed away. Her body lay on its side, utterly still, facing the empty half of the soiled bed I had just fled, her gray hair filled with grease and dirt, the toil of her life in evidence. She was of dizzy age, her face rutted with deep lines, her nails chipped away and fingertips blunted by hard labor. I had no idea what color her dress had been before the back slums got to it, but it was ratty enough now that it wasn't worth taking.

I turned away from her and opened my bag, then pulled out the nicer of my own two dresses, the one I kept away from the fleas and grime. My skin turned to gooseflesh as I undressed to my corset and pulled on the dress, and afterward I placed around my neck the silver locket bearing twin portraits of my parents, painted when they were still happy.

“Ain’t you fine and large,” said the prostitute. “Off to the palace today, are we?”

I ignored her. This clean dress had been my mother’s, one of the few pieces of finery my father hadn’t sold off. It was ten years old, its fuller shape now out of fashion, but still lovely and respectable, and clean, which were all I required.

“You’re enough to make a stuffed bird laugh,” the girl said. “You can change your dress but not your face, now can you.” She chuckled.

I held myself still against the familiar pain, for I could not show a whit of weakness. To do so invited the cannibals to descend upon me. They waited for any opportunity to plunder the living and the dead, and if I tarried here, I would see it again. There would be someone who would take the dead woman’s dress.

It helped if I allowed the pain to become anger, to let it scorch the backs of my eyes for several moments, and then unleash it like the phosphor I once handled so carefully. To survive, I had to always be a savage fire-in-waiting.

I put that flame into my voice. “I can’t change my looks, and you can’t change the number of times you’ve spread your legs. Can you even count that high?”

That stunned her eyes and mouth open wide. “Who you think you are?” she said, but I could see that my appearance and my tone had unsteadied her.

I pulled my shawl out of the bag, draped it over the top of my head, and wrapped it around the lower half of my face. “Keep to your own business, church-bell.”

She didn’t utter another word as I snatched up my bag and left her in the cramped room. My anger burned out and left me shaking as I bumped down the narrow corridor. I did not relish having said that to her, nor any of the far worse things I’d had to do in the last few years. That was not me. I hadn’t yet let the streets change me deep down, though they had surely tried.

In the kitchen, several women sat along the benches against the wall, sipping weak tea and eating their breakfast. When the manager saw me come in, she left her stove and offered me bread, but I could see that mold had got into it and declined. She shrugged.

“The woman who shared my bed last night is dead,” I said.

She put her red hands on her hips, her arms huge. “Another one, eh?”

I nodded. She shrugged once more and went back to stirring whatever she had in the pot that would be served as supper that night. But I would not be coming back for it. Even if my plan today failed, I didn’t have the coin for another night’s lodging.

I checked the placement of my shawl and stepped outside, where I found it had rained the night before, turning the streets into a foul mire. I kept carefully to the sidewalk as horse hooves and carriages slipped in the muck, and set off down Wentworth

Street toward Osborn. Before I reached Whitechapel High Street, mud had caked my boots above the soles and clung to the hems of my skirts, while rough, gray clouds shouldered the city, threatening to rain again. It was early enough and the weather dour enough that the streets weren't yet swarming, but were coming to life with oystermen, milk boys, organ grinders, and tinkers.

I made my way eastward a half mile on foot, wishing I had but one more farthing to make the two required to ride the omnibus down the street. I passed storefronts as they opened, the lurid signs for Thomas Barry's Live Entertainments, the Red Lion pub, and the Star and Garter, until I stood opposite the black gates and porters' lodges of the London Hospital.

Behind me, an aproned greengrocer stood next to his bushels and crates, muttering curses at the sky in Irish, and next to his shop, a boarded-up waxworks suggested former horrors. The smell of souring fruit cut through the odors of manure and soot.

Beyond the iron fence, set back from the commotion of the street, the hospital's high arches and columns presented a severe and imposing edifice. It seemed almost scornful of me, daring me in my impudence to attempt what I was about to do. But I could not be dissuaded or intimidated, for I had no choice.

"Pardon me, miss?"

I turned to my left.

A costermonger with a door-knocker beard had his wheelbarrow of eels and herring up on the sidewalk, out of the mud, chancing the ire of a passing copper. He flinched when he saw my face, his revulsion apparent, and I realized my shawl had slipped.