Silent Waltzes
by Szcay

Summary

Victor has been spiralling for a long time. Whether it's narcotics, his work, or unrequited love, at every turn the abyss draws nearer. But an afternoon out with Ms Ives brings a curiosity to the surface. Will it serve as an unlikely lifeline?

The crossdressing Frankenstein fic that demanded to be written.

Notes

I started writing this in 2017, which is a bit insane. I think it's the single most edited thing I've ever written (self-edited, mind you). Thank you, Cosmo, for giving me the inspiration to finally finish it. <3

I'm trying not to get too bogged down in retelling the canon, but couldn't avoid it entirely in the first chapter. I've kept it as light touch as I could, and there's plenty of non-canon scenes intermixed to keep it from getting dull.
At first he didn’t see it. The blouse. The coffer.

Vague memories floated back: wanting to look at it, wear it, burn it. Apparently he’d done none of those things.

The blouse lay on the bed. The coffer stood open beside.

“What’s this, Victor?”

It begun with Lily. Victor needed to get her some proper clothes, not just his cast-offs. Knowing he’d need help to get all she’d need, he asked Ms Ives to accompany him. The world of women’s clothing was a fascinating mystery, entirely opaque to him.

Once outside the shop he almost regretted the decision to come. Stepping inside felt akin to taking a peek beneath a lady’s skirt – disrespectful, despite Victor having done the latter at several occasions in his profession.

“Honestly, doctor,” Ms Ives said. “This is the last thing I expected.”

Victor might have been a bit vague on the nature of the help he required.

“Yes, well…” The modiste’s door loomed above them. “What’s life without surprises?”

They stepped inside.

It wasn’t an instant thing. At first, he felt only deep uneasiness in the unfamiliar setting, stammering his way through explanations of what he had in mind. Then came mortification, as they were presumed to be husband and wife. Victor almost turned and left, wondering how he ever could have believed this to be a good idea.

But Ms Ives took him by the arm and led him further inside, teasing, prodding him with questions about the dresses displayed. And, despite himself, Victor began to take an interest in the alien world of lace and silk that surrounded them. Quite unlike a men’s tailor, every inch of the rooms seemed designed to invite touch. Victor found himself running his fingers over the shoulder of a deep brown day dress, tracing the texture of the brocade pattern while his eyes traced the lace at the neck.

Much later, he would wonder, had part of him always noticed these stores? Always been curious at what lay inside?

There was so much more work expended on a dress than on a jacket or waistcoat, much more flourish and artistic freedom. Ms Ives pulled out dress after dress, and most seemed too immodest, too brash for his delicate Lily, but all were beautiful. Ms Ives smiled and Victor blushed, trying to explain what he had in mind for his ‘cousin’.

Several such soft, lace-edged stores later, Victor had his arms full of parcels of soft skirts and blouses, stockings, shoes, undergarments and even a magazine of the latest fashions from the first
store. He’d tried to choose the less expensive options, but it had still cost him more than he’d thought. But when Ms Ives bade him goodbye, he did not feel poorer.

He was spellbound by the sight of Lily in the dress he’d chosen. Had he been asked a month ago to describe the perfect woman, he could not have described one more beautiful than she. The love he felt was the purest, most transcendent feeling Victor had known.

He hemmed Lily’s skirts himself; he’d always been good with a needle. As a child, he’d enjoyed sitting in his mother’s lap, watching her create needlework. Once or twice, when his father wasn’t around, she’d let him put a few uneven stitches on her embroideries. She never took them out, but kept them, nestled among flowers and birds.

Then he’d learnt to suture skin and flesh, as well as live without his father’s money, mending and making do. So it seemed only natural to save a small sum and do the work himself, and he did it gladly. And if he enjoyed the work for its own sake, was that wrong?

Their life together was perfect until it was not. Something changed her. No, not something. Victor knew very well who had changed her: Dorian Gray. Turning her head and seeking to steal her heart with wealth Victor could never match.

He told himself that Lily wouldn’t fall for something as mundane as that. He spent hours waiting for her, and when the wait became unbearable he went to her small, curtained-off bedroom and picked up a blouse or a dress, just to have the scent of her for company.

It became a habit much like the morphine. He’d tell himself he was looking for holes to mend, but in fact he just sat there, running his fingers over the fabric. It took his mind off his heartache more efficiently than the needle ever could. The billowing skirts fell across his lap, covering his legs, leaving his feet to poke out from under it.

The idea came fully fledged into his mind, stilling him with its horrible, seductive clarity.

He couldn’t.

Could he?

He remembered picking out this skirt with Vanessa. It was one that Lily didn’t often wear, fine cotton, patterned in vertical stripes of light brown on white and meant for everyday use. It was its delicate pattern of small, pink roses which had caught his fancy.

Victor had seen it and had yearned to see Lily in it.

Hadn’t he?

The thought wouldn’t release him, his hands measuring now, judging the circumference of the skirt’s waist. Lily was so slender. But a skirt…

Maybe he never made a conscious decision. Perhaps he’d made it long before, and hidden it to himself beneath lies and evasions. Before he lost his nerve he rose, stepped into the skirt and pulled it up around his waist.

It wouldn’t quite close; the waist was too narrow, but he held it with one hand. The fabric fell
heavily around his legs, feeling strange as he slowly walked to his narrow, not-quite-full length mirror.

He didn’t look like a woman. He looked like a man in a skirt, his shirt and braces ill-matched to the width of it. But if he squinted…

There was a slight tremor in his muscles as he let the skirt go to hang low on his hips. He very carefully didn’t think about what he was doing as he slid the braces off his shoulders. Pulling the skirt up again and watching himself through eyes narrowed almost to closing, he saw the shape of a woman in a skirt and blouse, though her hair was mannishly short.


Undeniable.

Excitement perhaps. Or fascination. The sorrow of something lost. Something not unlike the consuming drive that fuelled his work.

But softer. More fragile. A feeling like spun glass, threatening to break into a thousand bleeding shards.

Victor moved, just a little, just to feel the fabric brush against his legs. There was a tremble in his heart, overflowing, infecting his limbs, making his teeth want to chatter.

The shiver stayed with him until long after he’d put the skirt back where he found it, until finally he silenced it with the prick of the needle.

The feeling didn’t leave him; it remained a burning itch in his bones. The memory of the mirror-image taunted him, revealing ugly truths about his own nature. Truths he wasn’t ready to face.

He took it out on Lily. Argued with her, berated her for her neglect of him.

She grew colder in return.

To add to Victor’s troubles, his creation, his demon, seemed to finally have grown tired of waiting for his bride. Now, when Victor was already losing her, the monster came after him, threatening his life and putting him in an impossible situation. How could he make Lily love ‘Mr Clare’, when he could barely make her love Victor himself?

Victor did the only thing he could, driven by the memory of the monster’s boot against his sternum. He fled. Left Lily behind. He tried to persuade her to go with him, but she wouldn’t listen. He told himself she would remember her love for him in his absence, that the distance would make her grow fonder. That she would wait for him, ready to forgive and be forgiven. And he had no choice, lest he prefer her to find him dead on the floor.

Sir Malcolm opened his house to Victor and Ms Ives greeted him like family, letting him in from the madness that had become his life. He was appreciated there, and at least some of his weakness was known and accepted.

Did it matter if his heart was too broken to let him fully engross himself in the mysteries they pursued? That it tore a little further with each crisis? That every day he cared a little less?
He sought Ms Ives’ company, her presence like a balm. His comforts were her and the needle and, late at night, the dog-eared magazine with the beautiful prints of fashionable ladies. Victor hated himself more every time he turned to the latter.

It was early morning and Victor had driven himself mad trying to fall back to sleep. He’d woken from a dream where Lily held him to her bosom and could not bear the silence of his own company any further. It was early, but he knew Ms Ives would be awake and likely not to mind his company. He knocked on her door, waiting for her call to enter.

What met him took him aback. Ms Ives was sat at her dressing table, hair down, and apparently just about to start her morning toilette, jars of cosmetics all around her.

“I’m sorry,” Victor muttered, flushing. “I’ll come back later.”

Her voice stopped him. “Nonsense. Come in, doctor.” Her eyes said she understood what drove him to seek company.

He took a chair next to her, watching her apply pale powder to her cheeks with something unnameable bubbling in his gut. He found himself committing the motions to memory with the same studiousness he’d applied to his anatomy classes.

“Did you never watch your mother do this?” There was humour in Vanessa’s voice.

Victor started. “No… She… I was too young.” He didn’t know if she even had worn makeup, having never entertained the thought that she could be anything but beautiful.

“No sisters?”

“No.”

Vanessa smiled at him though the mirror, one eye closed so that she could apply shadow to it. “Do you paint?”

“I draw. Or I used to.” It had become difficult recently, his hands no longer as steady as they’d been.

“This is very similar; you add colours and shadows, to emphasise or hide.” There was no humour in her demeanour now; she was simply explaining the procedure as if it was something he could reasonably have an interest in.

Victor was glad. Had there been any trace of mocking, he wouldn’t have been able to take in the sight of the small brush darkening her lashes. He was so absorbed that he almost missed her next question.

“I’m sorry?”

She turned fully around then, a mischievous glint in her eye. “When I was young, we used to do it with Peter.”

There was a hint of sorrow clinging to that name, and Victor remembered hearing of her close friendship with Sir Malcolm’s late son.

“He objected vehemently of course, but indulged us. And since you’ve never had sisters, I thought perhaps a bit of silliness might cheer you up.”
“I can’t…” It was too weak a protest and, to Victor’s horror, the mere suggestion made his heart flutter with desire to accept Ms Ives’ offer.

Perhaps she saw that. Perhaps her second-sight had given her a window into that darkest corner of Victor’s soul. She leaned closer, smile both mischievous and kind. “It’s just you and I here. And it will wash off without a trace.”

He protested a bit more, for prudence’s sake, but let himself be persuaded. Vanessa picked up a brush, whispering that he had lovely eyes and making him blush until his skin burned. Then she begun.

What Victor saw happen in the mirror could only be described as magic. She turned his skin white and smooth, softened his hollowed features and put health into his cheeks. She painted his eyelids, making his eyes larger and somehow bluer. Brushed his eyelashes into long, dark lace. Lastly, she ran her finger over his lips, making his stomach squirm and tinging his lips a pale pink.

Then she leaned back, leaving him frozen.

It wasn’t him. Though he had seen the transformation, the vision in the mirror couldn’t be him. That face was far too lovely, far too soft and feminine. It couldn’t be.

“Take it off,” Victor whispered, lowering his gaze as from the sun.

The sight hurt. It couldn’t be him. He could never be that.

“Victor?”

“Take it off!”

His heart cracked and bled. He stared at empty nothing as Vanessa cleaned the cosmetics from his face, leaving his skin raw beneath.

The horrors never ended. The witches, the sorcerous vision of his creations, Sembene’s death.

Victor needed to go home. Needed to see Lily. The true Lily, and not some twisted conjuration.

She was gone.

She had left him.

Victor cursed himself. Deep down he’d truly believed she would wait for him. He still believed she loved him, in truth. That Gray had only turned her head. There was no doubt in Victor’s mind where she was. With him. And Victor had no power to bring her back.

The only thing that remained to him was the needle.

Victor never remembered writing Henry, but suddenly there he was, stood outside Victor’s door as if just stepped out of memory. Beneath the crushing shame, Victor felt a small tendril of relief. Henry looked suspicious and bitter, but he would help Victor with what needed to be done. Neither Victor nor his flat was in any condition to entertain, but he did his best, showing Henry to the table, preparing tea.
“Is it love, or work?” Henry asked, his voice impassive as if he still withheld judgement.

“Both,” Victor murmured. His hands shook; his last injection was too long ago, and it took all his focus to put Henry’s cup on the table without spilling.

Henry caught his wrist, his grip like iron and his skin warmer than the cups. Shame flooded Victor as he realised Henry’s eyes were on the needle-marks, ugly, inflamed and marching up Victor’s arms. Henry’s fingers felt like brands as he lightly turned Victor’s hand over, examining the smaller pricks between his digits.

Victor pulled his hand away, and Henry let him go. He would have seen enough. He’d seen how far Victor had fallen, how little right he had to his former grand proclamations. How foolish he’d been to turn his back on Henry in the first place.

Oh, yes, Henry must feel very vindicated indeed.

But it changed nothing. Victor still needed him. He swallowed his pride and bared his soul. And, miraculously, Henry’s demeanour softened and he offered Victor salvation. A way to get Lily back.

Only one thing did Victor not share with Henry. He had seen the evidence of Victor’s addiction, and must be told of Lily, but he didn’t need to know of Victor’s deeper depravity. Ironically, Henry’s return to his life merely made that depravity grow.

Henry was too keen-eyed, and too averse to the morphine. Victor had no choice but to try to limit his usage. And with his mind clear in the empty hours, it turned to other things.

Lily had left some of her plainer clothes behind. A nightgown that still smelled like her, regretfully small. A blouse with a high collar that perhaps didn’t suit her new suitor’s taste. The light brown skirt with the roses. And Victor was weak.

It had started out as simply moving a button, simply seeing if the skirt could fit. Before he knew it, he was altering the shape of the blouse and taking detours home after seeing Henry, buying clothes for his ‘sisters’.

It was perhaps less strenuous on the body than narcotics, but twice as shameful and equally addictive.

At least it was easier to hide.

Before long he’d amassed a set of clothes for himself, including an ill-fitting corset and a pair of petticoats that turned his silhouette into something delicate. At last, with money he could ill-afford to waste, he bought powder and paint for his face. It was of far poorer quality than Vanessa’s but it did the job.

Victor felt a stab of guilt for having been a poor friend to her lately; he’d not visited in the weeks since Lily had left.

He had to take it slow, allow for his trembling hands and stop to carefully wipe away any pigment that went astray. He tried to disregard the creeping fear that the tremor might never get better, that his hands would never be steady enough for the scalpel again. He had only himself to blame. He focused on turning his lips faintly red, not too bright, just a little. The last touch.

When finally he was done it had taken a good portion of the evening, but the change was stunning.
When he stepped in front of the mirror he felt… complete. As if he’d found a piece of himself that he’d never known was missing. Carefully, painstakingly dressed and painted like this he felt like a porcelain doll. The ridiculousness of the thought made him blush in embarrassment, but pleased him all the same. He felt precious. Delicate. And fragile. As if the illusion would shatter into a thousand pieces if he moved.

But he did. Turned and twisted in front of the glass, distantly aware of how ridiculous he looked, but completely absorbed by his own mirror-image.

Whenever Henry was busy and his door closed, Victor was as likely to turn to the coffer beneath his bed as the case that held his narcotics. The sleeves of the blouse were long and tight at the wrists, decorated with a row of white buttons. It felt somehow wrong to undo them and bare his marred and distinctly masculine arms, not to mention add more blemishes. It didn’t belong to this part of him.

So instead he’d turn to chores long neglected, restoring his apartment to something at least bordering on respectability. After all, if – when – Henry’s plan succeeded, Lily would be back and Victor didn’t want her to return to the chaos that had sprung up in her absence.

He resolutely didn’t think about what her return would mean for his new habit.

But he couldn’t dress up more than twice a week at most. Not when the price for getting caught would be so high. There would be no way of making himself respectable in a hurry, and he couldn’t risk Henry stopping by unexpectedly.

In the in-between days, it was harder to stay away from the needle.

And then: disaster.

It had been time. The serum that would return Lily to herself was ready. The sedative that would bring her to the lab had been in Victor’s hand. Lily had been in the room with him.

But the plan had failed, and Victor been near to losing his life in the process. As soon as he’d entered Gray’s manor, three garishly dressed women had sprung upon him with knives. Before he could properly recognise the threat, one of them had the blade to his throat.

And Lily had considered letting them kill him.

It had been Gray that had spoken up on Victor’s behalf.

Henry had been furious, his words sharp and stinging, his voice booming in his cavernous lab. Victor had already been hollow, already lost himself in the coldness of Lily’s voice. He left with Henry’s reproach ringing in his ears and his heart full of deep failure.

This had been his chance. He might not get another, now that Lily knew of his plans.

The morphine called to him, offering forgiveness and forgetfulness. It was what Victor deserved; the poison in his veins, rendering him useless. Erasing him, if only for a moment. He gave himself to it, fully.
He wasn’t quite sure of what time it was, or even where he was, just that there was a lot of noise and pain. With an effort he lifted his head.

It was bright. The bed was hard. No, the floor.

The floor was hard, sending dull pain through his ribcage. It was his floor. He was in the downstairs room; he recognised the underside of the table, the door.

Someone was pounding on it. Calling his name.

Finally, Victor recognised Henry’s voice.

With vague, panicky guilt he pushed himself off the floor. He nearly fell, muscles screaming and nausea roiling in his stomach. Somehow he got the door open.

Henry looked frustrated, but perhaps there was relief there too. Victor would have liked to think so.

“You didn’t come.” Henry pushed past Victor.

“You said not to come today.” Victor’s voice cracked. His tongue stuck to his gums.

Henry’s actual words had been ‘don’t bother showing up tomorrow, or for that matter at all if this is the best you can manage.’ And they’d not been so much spoken as shouted.

“I said not to come yesterday.” Henry looked at Victor, irritation beginning to turn into concern. “What have you been doing, Victor?”

His eyes flickered to Victor’s rolled-up sleeves and it was Victor’s turn to be annoyed.

“What else?” He turned away, not willing to see if Henry’s eyes filled with pity, or worse, disgust. He needed the wall for support as he shuffled over to the sink to get a glass of water. It did nothing for the headache developing behind his eyes.

Nor did Henry’s careful hand on his shoulder. “Do you often lose days?”

Victor swallowed his harsh reply, letting Henry draw his own conclusions. Besides, he had no defence. Apparently, a day had turned into two without his notice. Who knew how many others had?

Henry sighed, a sound that dripped with pity and resignation. “Come, old man. You’re going to bed.”

Victor was too weary to protest. The points of his body that had been pressed to the floorboards while he’d lain unconscious ached. His thoughts felt slow and distant. He let Henry lead him by the arm to his small bedroom, trying not to lean on him too much.

At first he didn’t see it. It was only when Henry stopped that Victor noticed.

The blouse. The coffer.

Vague memories floated back: wanting to look at it, wear it, burn it. Apparently he’d done none of those things.

The blouse lay on the bed. The coffer stood open beside.

“What’s this, Victor?”
Henry entered the room, leaving Victor at the threshold and picking the blouse up between thumb and forefinger. He turned, demeanour speaking of weariness, and again, pity. Then he saw Victor’s face and stilled, taking a second look at the coffer’s contents.

Victor must have looked guilty. Guilty, ashamed and terrified.

Only later did he realise that if he’d acted normal, Henry might have mistaken the clothes for Lily’s.

What he did was flee. He couldn’t bear it. Couldn’t stomach the thought of someone knowing, the panic of it drowning out anything else. He could think only of getting away, illogical as it was. He felt light-headed. Dread crawled down his throat, meeting the nausea of dawning withdrawal, with Victor as the loser in the clash.

He hit the floor hard, vomiting up a thin stream of water-mixed bile. His stomach wouldn’t stop convulsing, wouldn’t stop trying to expel the wrongness and sickness and addiction. Victor wished it could succeed.

Finally it seemed to accept that it was empty, and Victor became aware of Henry’s presence. He stood like a dark statue, face unreadable apart from his wide and startled eyes.

“Don’t say anything,” Victor mumbled, lowering his gaze and fumbling though his pockets for his handkerchief. “Please, Henry, I can’t hear it, just don’t say anything.” His face was covered in sick and tears and mucus. He folded his chin to his chest, hiding in the only way that remained to him. “Just go, please go.” This time Henry would not return, not ever, and Victor still couldn’t find his handkerchief. Couldn’t keep track of even that. “Please, Henry.”

A square of fabric landed next to Victor’s hand, white and immaculate.

“I take it it’s yours.” Henry’s voice was as reserved as the first time he’d walked into this room. It was clear he wasn’t talking about the handkerchief.

Victor took it with shaking hands. “Please, don’t.” If he could have run he would, but he felt weak and feverish.

Broken.

Small.

A pause. Then Henry’s footsteps across the floor. The door opening.

Closing.

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Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed! I've done some research on women's clothing in the 1890s, but I'm far from an expert and I would love to be corrected on the subject. (Or any subject, really.)

Or you could just leave a comment and say hi - I can't tell you how happy it makes me to just know that people are reading!
Thank you everyone who's commented, left kudos or just READ! It makes me so happy that there are still a few of us clinging to this gorgeous fandom!

Chapter specific warnings: transphobia, self-loathing, drugs.

Victor stayed on the floor a long time. His joints ached, his muscles joined in. His eyes watered, more from shame than withdrawal.

Henry had seen it. Henry knew. And he'd found Victor repulsive.

As well he should.

That thought finally propelled Victor back to his feet. Unsteadily he made his way to the bedroom. The blouse hung corpse-like halfway off the bed. In a fit of disgust, Victor grabbed it, fisting his hands in the delicate fabric with the full intention of tearing it to shreds.

His resolve faltered. His grip lost its strength.

The linen and lace was soft under his fingertips.

He let the blouse fall to the floor. Slumped against the bed, and let the spinning darkness take him.

What had he done?

He woke in pain. Where was his case and why on earth had he-?

Then he remembered.

The realisation fell on him like a physical blow. Henry knew. He was gone. Forever.

And it didn’t matter, not while Victor hurt like this. He stumbled out of the bedroom, almost tripping over the open coffer on his way. His eyes sought and found the small wooden case, lying on the floor not far from where he’d awoken this... morning? Time escaped him and the distance seemed impossible for his trembling limbs but he let go of the doorframe and set out across the room.

“Victor.” Cold.

Victor’s heart stopped.

Henry was in a chair by the window, watching him impassively.

Victor opened his mouth but found nothing to say. Nothing that could remedy the coldness in Henry’s demeanour. Nothing that mattered as much as getting to his medicine.

Henry didn’t move as Victor staggered past, fell to his knees and began to prepare his injection.
“Is that all you can think of?” The distaste was loud in Henry’s voice.

Victor shrunk a little but didn’t stop. Twilight was creeping in and his veins were thin and so easy to miss.

He heard Henry get up and redoubled his efforts, afraid of Henry’s intentions, afraid that he would have to face them sober. It only served to make his aim worse.

Henry kneeled next to him and plucked the syringe from his hand. Victor reached for it, stifling a sob, but Henry avoided him easily.

“I need you to be able to keep a conversation.” Henry grabbed Victor’s wrist and started tracing his veins with his own fingers. He wasn’t gentle, nor was he unduly forceful. “I trust you’ll consider this a fair trade?”

“Yes,” Victor agreed breathlessly, eyes on Henry’s hands.

Once he’d felt out a vein, it took Henry only moments to deftly administer the narcotic. The pain and malaise began to retreat. Victor allowed himself a moment to savour the dimming of thought and sensation. A moment of not thinking of what was to come.

Perhaps Henry felt similarly lost for what to do. As soon as he was done he dropped the syringe and began to pace.

“Those things, in that chest… They’re yours, you… dress up in them.” No more frustration in his voice, just agitation.

It wasn’t a question, and besides Henry had already asked, but Victor had nothing to gain by seeming as if he was hiding. The chance to hide was gone.

“Yes,” he whispered.

“Do it, then.”

“I…” Unable to quite grasp what he’d heard, Victor looked up. “What?”

Henry’s expression was not angry. He was frowning as if faced with a most difficult and troubling patient. His eyes focused on Victor but did not see him, just another madman.

He couldn’t mean what Victor thought.

“Wear them.”

He did.

Victor didn’t see how he could refuse, not if he wanted to have any hope of turning this situation around. And he had hope, he realised. Hope that he at least could keep Henry quiet on this. Hope that he at least could keep himself out of the madhouse.

Hope that Henry would be satisfied by Victor’s ridicule.

Henry sat back down at the table, demeanour like stone, while Victor washed his face. He felt Henry’s heavy, judgemental gaze on him until he escaped to the bedroom.

Victor didn’t want to touch them. The blouse on the floor, the skirt hanging out of the coffer, the garments inside. For the first time his fingers didn’t long to run over the delicate fabrics. But he
turned to his task.

He tried to feel nothing as he undressed. He put on the chemise that would protect the corset from his skin, the knickerbockers, a petticoat. He picked up the corset.

What was he doing? He rubbed his thumb over the corset’s bones. This was not normal. That was what Henry would see when Victor left this room: not his friend, but a deviant. Victor could stop. Could go out there and tell Henry that…

That what? That he’d just admitted to wearing women’s clothing as a joke? That he regretted his actions and would stop?

Knowing Henry, which Victor had once done, that wouldn’t suffice.

He put on his corset, squeezing the breath from his lungs. Its ill fit meant it compressed his chest as much as his waist. Shaping him. Trapping him. A cage with bars made from his own choices. After that came the corset cover, his poor, corpse-like blouse, the bustle that widened his hips and finally the last petticoat and the skirt.

Normally he would feel a sense of calm elation at this point, but now he just felt miserable as he smoothened his dress. Ridiculous. A spectacle.

The jars of cosmetics glinted at him from the bottom of the coffer. It wouldn’t make him less of a spectacle. Might make Henry more disgusted still. But part of Victor, cushioned by the soft hum of morphine, wanted Henry to understand. Without the makeup, the illusion wasn’t complete.

It couldn’t make it worse.

It took almost as long as it had the first time he applied it. It needed to be perfect. Dark lashes, red mouth, the illusory shadows that made his eyes bright and blue. Finally, he combed his hair, fretting, wishing it didn’t make him look so boyish. Anything to delay the moment that was coming.

Stepping out of the bedroom felt like the walk to the gallows.

He’d heard Henry move around, but not until he saw the hidden door ajar did he realise that Henry had left the room and slipped up to Victor’s laboratory. Victor swallowed, struck by the crazed impulse to run out the door.

He followed.

The wooden floor was cold beneath his bare feet; he didn’t have stockings to match, not to mention shoes. It made his footsteps silent and as he came to the top of the stairs, Henry had yet to see him.

He stood with his back to Victor, fingers trailing over the controls of Victor’s resurrection machine. There was something forlorn about his figure, something wistful in the way he touched the wires and levers.

His head began to turn. Victor looked down, heart thudding.

Silence.

Henry’s footsteps, approaching. His polished shoes, circling Victor where he stood frozen. They stopped in front of him.

“I don’t understand this, Victor.” Henry sounded vexed.
“I can’t explain it,” Victor whispered, his larynx threatening to close at any moment.

A hand, too sudden and unexpected, touched his chest and Victor shied away.

“Are you…?” Henry reached out to touch again and Victor held still. Henry’s fingers felt out the hard bones beneath the fabric. “Are you wearing a corset?”

Victor’s cheeks were hot, but he nodded, still staring fixedly at the floor.

As if burnt, Henry withdrew his hand. A pause. A sigh. “I don’t know what to say. This is eccentric even for you.” But his voice had softened into resignation. “Look at me.”

It took an effort. The outrage that had lingered in Henry’s eyes was gone. He looked tired. Out of his depth. But not disgusted. His eyes mapped Victor’s face as if it was a stranger’s.

Victor blinked quickly, eyes watering in a way that had nothing to do with withdrawal and everything to do with the fear in the pit of his belly.

“Why?” Henry finally asked.

“It…” Victor let his gaze fall. His fingers tangled in the fabric of his skirt, like his thoughts tangled in his mind. “It’s… an escape.”

Henry waited.

“It makes me feel…” Whole. True. As if he finally fit. But Henry wouldn’t understand that. “It’s better. When I do this I feel better.” A thought occurred, something that might sway Henry. “And it… helps… with the injections. I don’t… require as much.”

“It helps,” Henry echoed, sounding as if he was trying out a foreign concept. “You’ve been doing this for some time.”

Victor nodded glumly.

“I can’t pretend I understand the pathology behind this.” Henry’s voice was weary. “But if you think this does you good…” He put his finger under Victor’s chin, lifting it. His eyes were troubled but not cold. “…I’m willing to give you the benefit of the doubt.”

Victor let out a shaky breath, searching Henry’s face for falsehood or ridicule. “Truly?” He could hear the hope and heartbreak in his own voice.

“Truly.” Henry made as if to put his hand on Victor’s shoulder, but let it fall. “I will be observing you. To see if this is something more pernicious.”

Things almost returned to normal. They continued to work on the serum, biding their time until they could make a new attempt at capturing Lily. They took lunch together, Henry pushing Victor to eat. And, more and more often, Henry followed Victor home and waited patiently while he changed. Sometimes Henry had questions, most of which were hard to answer and some of which Victor outright refused. But sometimes they just had tea, quiet moments which Victor came to cherish.

When Victor changed, Henry changed too. Nothing overt, but gradually Victor realised that Henry’s manners underwent a subtle shift, to those of a gentleman in the company of a lady. A habit born of
the rigorous upbringing as a Lord’s heir, perhaps, but it made Victor’s chest bubble with delight. He felt precious. Like something fragile and cared for.

“Do you never wish to go out like this?” At lulls in conversation, Henry tended to spring these questions on Victor.

“No,” Victor answered immediately. “I wouldn’t want to be seen.”

He thought back to Dorian Gray’s mysterious companion, who he’d rejected for Lily. Dressed like that in a room full of strangers. Victor couldn’t think of anything more humiliating.

“Even by me?” Henry affected lightness, but it rang false.

“It wasn’t my initiative to reveal this.”

“No? Did you not leave your secrets out in the open out of a subconscious desire to be discovered?”

Henry was teasing, Victor realised. That they’d come far enough to be able to do so was a small miracle.

Victor drew a deep breath. “I’m happy you know, Henry.”

He couldn’t quite meet Henry’s gaze as he said it.

When he looked up again, there was satisfaction in Henry’s expression. “If you could go out, and no one would notice or care, what would you do?”

“You ask too many questions,” Victor grumbled. Henry never paid his protests much mind, but Victor still complained. It was… difficult to subject this to such scrutiny.

“Answer, and I shall ask no more.”

Victor doubted that very much. But he also didn’t have a reason to keep secrets from Henry any longer.

“I suppose…” It wasn’t something he’d considered. “I might have liked to go dancing.” It held appeal, the further polarisation of masculinity and femininity. Distancing himself further from what nature had laid out for him.

Henry looked, if anything, surprised by the answer. He sat silent, mulling it over while Victor picked at the folds of his skirt, wondering if that had been such a strange thing to say.

“Do you want to be a woman, Victor?”

The question was so innocuously asked that it took a moment for Victor to fully grasp it. When he did, he gave Henry a sharp look. “No.”

“Are you certain?”

“I’m not delusional.” Except what else would you call this? Victor would have rubbed his face if he hadn’t been wearing makeup. He started over. “I realise how this looks, but I don’t wish to be a woman, I just…”

What? At the core of it, what was it he wanted?

Henry waited, face unreadable; the same expression he must turn on his patients.
“I just want to feel…” He couldn’t say it. It was too shameful. But Henry waited and Victor needed to give him something. He lowered his head and whispered “…delicate.”

Another long pause. “And you feel that now?”

Victor didn’t reply. He hid his hands in the fabric of his skirt. They weren’t delicate. He’d thought them soft once, when comparing himself to men like Ethan, or his brothers. Now all he saw was how coarse they looked next to the thin lace trim at his wrists.

The silence stretched.

Finally Henry rose. “I have to get going. You’ll meet me at Bedlam tomorrow?” Ever since Victor had lost a whole day to the narcotics, Henry had been fastidious about reminding him.

Victor’s gaze was drawn by the movement. “Of course.”

Henry’s expression had thawed, again familiar to Victor. Victor saw him to the door, hiding himself behind it while Henry left and then locking it securely behind him.

It had been peaceful, despite everything. Victor should have known it couldn’t last.

A knock on the door.

Victor, dressed in normal clothes, went to open it, expecting Henry.

On the other side stood Dorian Gray.

“Victor,” the dandy said with an empty smile, pushing past Victor where he stood stunned. “I’ve come to collect on a debt.”

He offered everything Victor had wanted. A way to get to Lily that was certain to work. Gray claimed he saw Victor’s side of it, that she had grown too headstrong, too ‘disappointing’. He even claimed he didn’t mind it if she lived with Victor “…for the rest of your short, miserable life,” whatever that meant.

And yet, Victor did not feel happy. Felt only hollowness and a sinking unease, deep in the pit of his stomach. What on earth was wrong with him? This was what he wanted. But in his mind, all he saw was the terrible coldness in Lily’s eyes, all he felt was the razor biting into his neck.

She’d said she hadn’t been happy with him. She’d only been waiting. He had refused to believe it, too enamoured by the brief happiness they’d shared.

Now those days seemed impossibly distant.

Gray was silent, waiting impatiently for his answer.

Victor opened his mouth, ready to agree, to regain what he’d lost, but what came out was “No.”

Gray raised an eyebrow, surprise and disgruntlement failing to turn his face unpleasant.

“That’s it. Done with her.”

It was true, Victor realised. He hadn’t thought of her more than in passing for a long time. Hadn’t thought of her at all for days. Her name was merely a dull ache now, rather than a smothering agony.
When had this happened, he wondered.

“I think you misheard me, dear.” Gray’s voice was mild but his expression was ice as he took a step closer. “I’m collecting on a debt you owe me for interceding on your behalf, when I could have let them kill you. The fact that I’m asking is mere politeness.”

“It’s a monstrous thing you ask of me, sir.” Victor heard the tremor in his own voice.

“Oh, no, Victor. You have already attempted it. Don’t tell me you don’t have the stomach to go through with it.” His gaze was hard, his face suddenly seeming barely human.

Victor took a step back.

Gray followed.

“Gather your supplies, doctor.” His voice was emotionless, his eyes flat like a snake’s and Victor was the mouse, hypnotised. “Be ready at this place, tomorrow evening.”

He tucked a slip of paper into Victor’s breast pocket, hand flattening over Victor’s chest, sliding upwards, a finger tracing the path of the razor over his neck.

Victor couldn’t move, paralysed by the casual danger that radiated from the other man.

“Do as I say, or I will show you misery you cannot imagine.” Gray cupped Victor’s face in a mockery of intimacy. “Do you understand?”

Victor nodded, not daring to disagree in the face of this apparent inhumanness.

Gray patted his cheek and stepped back with a small, crooked smile, turning back into the harmless dandy. “Until tomorrow then, doctor.”

Alone, Victor sagged against the wall. What was he to do? Second guess himself and go through with it? Say no and face Gray’s revenge?

Could he be happy with Lily? Could she fit here, in this strange place that had sprung from Victor’s aberrance and Henry’s forbearance?

With the serum, maybe. Maybe she would be a mild-eyed doll, watching adoringly as Victor dressed in skirts, never raising a word in protest, never questioning the unnaturalness of it. It seemed wrong.

Yet Victor’s heart longed for her to look at him like that again.

He didn’t know. Couldn’t say what to do. Couldn’t think, couldn’t bear it.

There was always one escape. Victor had taken only a small dose of morphine, expecting Henry’s arrival. Now he returned, desperate to chase away the anxiety, to expel Lily’s ghost and calm his spinning thoughts.

Henry found him gazing at the ceiling, tourniquet still wrapped loosely around his arm and syringe on the bed beside him. Victor saw the disappointment in his eyes, but felt only numbness.

“Mr Gray came to visit,” he said, voice slurring. He’d perhaps taken a bit more than intended. But it made it easier to recall the events for Henry.

Henry listened, then reached into Victor’s pocket, examining the note before pocketing it himself. “Is this not what you wanted?”
He wore a troubled frown, and it occurred to Victor that without this to work towards, what was there? Henry’s scientific curiosity wouldn’t be enough to keep him here. Certainly not the way Victor was now, too drugged to even stand. A small tendril of fear wormed its way through the chemical apathy.

“It was.” Victor swallowed, his throat feeling distantly dry. “I’ve reconsidered.”

Henry gave him a look, half incredulity, half amusement. “I can’t believe you sometimes.” But there was fondness there too, Victor thought.

“Will you think less of me?” he murmured.

“I don’t know that I can.” Henry rubbed his thumb over the bruise left by a ruptured vein on Victor’s arm. “We will find other subjects. What we need to consider is what to do about your Mr Gray.”
Escape

Chapter Notes

I'm really sorry, this update took a lot longer than I intended.

The scene at Bedlam would not have been what it is without my friend Cosmo's incredible knowledge of the history of mental institutions. <3 Mistakes are my own.

Some context: At the time the show is set, homosexuality was not only taboo, but illegal (though no longer carrying the death sentence, so... progress?) Although to be found guilty of 'buggery', proof of anal intercourse was needed (let's just not think more about that), a law had been recently passed to outlaw 'gross indecency' as well, which would encompass what Victor is doing.

Chapter specific warnings: addiction, vomiting, homophobia, the historical treatment of the mentally ill. For more details, see the spoilery warnings in the last paragraph of the end note.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Vague threats held the problem that you weren’t sure from whence the danger came. Gray had promised suffering, but whether that be physical, financial, social, or something else entirely they couldn’t know.

“You shouldn’t stay here.” Henry’s voice was grave, his expression set; he was ready for an argument, though the effect was diminished while he still sat on Victor’s bed.

“I think you’re right.” It wasn’t only the morphine haze that made Victor agree. The encounter with Gray had chilled him. And these rooms, in which he had once broken through the doors of death and dreamt of glory, now seemed a gloomy cage.

Henry seemed surprised, but quickly recovered. “He doesn’t know me, and I doubt there’s more than a handful of people alive who’d remember our association.” His voice turned solemn. “My apartment should be safe enough for you.”

Victor blinked slowly, needing a moment to absorb the offer. Henry’s apartment. Victor hadn’t sat foot there once. Hadn’t asked to either, and Henry hadn’t offered. He did now. And Victor would like that.

“I have a man that can look into Mr Gray,” Henry continued. “Judge the seriousness of the situation.”

Victor nodded, too sedated for worry. He was comfortable right now. Henry talked, his quiet words soothing Victor into relaxation, eyes slipping shut. He might be embarrassed about being seen in this state later, but right now the world was perfect.

Too soon, Henry shook him awake. Victor stumbled out of bed, digging out an old suitcase and emptying it of the miscellany that had gathered there. He packed his books, his notes, the equipment and clothes he needed and, avoiding Henry’s eye, the case of narcotics.
Only one matter remained, and Victor wasn’t sure what to do about it. It seemed an unnecessary indulgence. He wasn’t sure Henry would want it in his home. Perhaps this was the time to rid himself of it.

Henry’s hand on his shoulder. “Should Mr Gray enter your home and find them it will give him all the ammunition he needs against you.”

Victor agreed, relieved and ashamed for it.

Henry watched with interest as Victor removed the garments from the unwieldy coffer, carefully folding them at the bottom of the suitcase. The corset especially drew comment, its many alterations making it less than easy on the eyes.

“It’s difficult to alter it neatly, with all the bones,” Victor mumbled defensively. “And I can hardly find one that fits me without changes.” It had been very pretty when he’d bought it.

“Why not do without?”

“No- I- It’s not proper.” And he liked how it felt, despite the poor fit.

There was a smile in Henry’s voice. “Well, that won’t do, since you’re a proper lady.”

Victor blushed and gave Henry a glare. But he couldn’t deny, not to himself, that most of his embarrassment stemmed from the small thrill of pleasure Henry’s words brought.

Henry’s apartment was smaller than Victor’s, since he had no need to keep a laboratory where he lived. It was better cared for and cleaner as well, kept so by the same tidy Henry that Victor remembered from Cambridge. He felt out of place here, in a way he wouldn’t have then.

He took the sofa in the kitchen; he couldn’t take Henry’s bed, and here it would be less likely he’d disturb Henry when he inevitably woke in the night. Henry made space for Victor’s ordinary clothes in the wardrobe and slid the suitcase with Victor’s secret ones under the bed.

Then he went to make tea, and as easy as that they were living together again.

It was disconcerting, after years of living completely alone – save the few weeks he’d had Lily – to share accommodations again. And in a way it was also reassuring, not just because of the reprieve from silent solitude, but because it showed all the ways that Henry hadn’t changed. He was still quiet and irritable in the morning, still prone to annoyance at Victor’s lack of tidiness, despite Victor’s attempts to make less mess than was his habit.

In other ways it was terribly disconcerting. Victor was now forced to take his injections in Henry’s presence more often than not. Sometimes Henry retreated to the bedroom. More often he watched, radiating disapproval like a fire radiating heat while Victor struggled to find a vessel to carry the narcotics to his brain.

The day after he’d moved in, Mr Lynch came for the first time. He was a swarthy Irishman, completely nondescript apart from his pale, green eyes. Henry opened the door immediately, letting him in.

“Got something for me then, sir?” Lynch’s face held as much expression as a slab of granite. He only
afforded Victor with a nod before focusing entirely on Henry.

“Victor, this is Mr Lynch.” Lynch made no move to sit down and Henry didn’t suggest it. “He’s been a reliable associate of mine for some years now.”

And one that Victor hadn’t heard of, meaning it was someone Henry had met after they’d went separate ways. Lynch didn’t express any interest in Victor’s person; after a weighted glance he paid full attention to Henry’s summary of Gray’s visit. And Henry was surprisingly candid, though he made no mention of what it was that Gray actually wanted from Victor.

Nor did Lynch seem curious, he just listened and, once Henry was finished, asked, “How’s he look?”

Henry looked to Victor, having never actually met the man.

Lynch’s pale eyes followed.

Victor cleared his throat. “He’s a bit taller than me. Slim build. Brown hair.” He gestured in imitation of Gray’s foppish hair. “Whenever I’ve seen him he’s been quite ostentatiously dressed.”

“Handsome?” Lynch’s voice was nonchalant, his gaze piercing.

“I suppose he might be considered such.” Victor’s voice came out a little sharper than he’d meant. There seemed to be some sort of insinuation beneath the Irishman’s words, and Victor didn’t care for it.

“Lynch…” Henry’s voice held a warning note.

Lynch didn’t apologise, didn’t look contrite. “I’ve heard some gossip but never seen the man. Has more money than the devil, apparently. Won’t deny I’m curious about him. And I’ve nothing better going on so I don’t mind doing a bit of digging for you, sir.”

“You’d better not ‘mind’ it,” Henry said darkly. “Considering…” He let the word hang.

“Yes, yes,” Lynch said dismissively. “But we ain’t quite there yet, are we?” Then, unexpectedly, he broke out in a warm smile which changed his whole demeanour to friendly and open. “Won’t be long now, though.”

Victor, surprised, saw the corners of Henry’s mouth turn upwards before his expression shuttered again.

“Let’s hope. For now, give this matter your full attention, Mr Lynch.”

Lynch nodded solemnly, leaving without another word.

“What exactly is the nature of your association?” Victor asked slowly.

“Lynch is useful.” Henry seemed to attach no great importance to the matter. When he noticed Victor’s doubtful expression, he continued. “He is trustworthy, believe me. I pay him, of course, but he’s proven he’s dependable.” He smiled, a crooked, bitter expression. “After all, my father could easily outbid me.”

“And you are certain he hasn’t?” Victor had to ask. Lynch sent shivers down his spine.

“Absolutely.”
More troubling than Henry’s old acquaintance was Victor’s own urges. A week after Gray’s visit and Victor’s relocation there had been no news from Mr Lynch and nothing else for distraction. The urge to get the suitcase out was a constant itch in the back of Victor’s mind. But doing it here, in Henry’s tidy, proper rooms, felt wrong. As if it was something that didn’t belong. As if the act would contaminate the place, and its host along it. Never mind that Henry had already been exposed.

Those were the thoughts that bothered Victor that evening when they returned from Bedlam, along with a yearning almost akin to withdrawal.

Henry’s hands on his shoulders startled him out of his preoccupation. “I’ll get dinner started,” Henry said, taking Victor’s coat. “And you can go get changed.”

Victor almost gaped. “What makes you think I want to?”

There was a strange look in Henry’s eyes. Something akin to melancholy. “I’ve been watching you.”

Before Victor could open his mouth, Henry spoke again. “Go, Victor. It’s fine.”

Victor went. He closed Henry’s bedroom door behind him, pulling out his suitcase and undressed. It felt uncomfortable. Even with the curtains drawn, he couldn’t help but glance nervously at the windows. But the feeling faded as he built himself up, layer by layer. By the time he was sitting down to apply his makeup, it was almost gone, replaced with the familiar calm excitement.

Henry turned away from the stove when Victor entered. Victor thought he looked pleased, judging by the way his eyes made a quick pass over Victor’s figure.

“You don’t have to hide from me, Victor.”

“I know.” Victor did, however hard it was to believe.

Something calculating entered Henry’s expression. “You may not be able to go out like this-”

“Which I’ve said I don’t want,” Victor interjected.

“-but there is something we can do here,” Henry continued, undeterred.

He held out his hand.

Victor looked at it, sceptical. “What?”

Henry looked almost to be enjoying Victor’s confusion. “You said you would like to dance.”

“No.” Victor narrowed his eyes.

“Why not?”

Because it was improper. Because Henry was probably testing him somehow. And because it was Henry, and the very thought of dancing with him, of submitting to him in that way made Victor’s stomach squirm with discomfort.

Henry didn’t lower his hand.

“Why?” Victor whispered, looking at it.
Henry smiled a sad smile. “You’ve seemed weary. I thought it might cheer you up.”

Victor couldn’t.

“There’s no music.”

“We’ll make do.”

He couldn’t.

“I’m not wearing shoes.”

“I’ll be careful.”

Could he?

Henry waited. Victor lifted a trembling hand, his right for Henry’s left. Henry took it as if it was a lady’s, leading Victor two steps away from the stove, to the centre of the small room.

“May I?” Henry murmured, taking a step closer.

Victor swallowed, before lifting his free hand to rest on Henry’s shoulder. Henry’s arm went around Victor’s waist, his palm against Victor’s back, against the firmness of the corset.

It felt strange. Henry never touched him when he was like this, affording him the same regard as he would any woman. Not that he overstepped now – he was still terribly proper, hand high on Victor’s back, their distance measured. And they certainly had been physically closer than this in the past. But there was a horrible intimacy to this, and one that only grew.

Victor made himself meet Henry’s eyes. “Well, then…”

He’d never been quite as aware of the difference in height between them as now. Henry didn’t look discomfited. He looked calm, inscrutable, though the curve of his mouth spoke of amusement.

Victor didn’t appreciate that, but he’d gone too far to back away now.

Henry stepped forward and Victor stepped back, stumbling a bit. Then he got the measure, and his steps came smoother.

The waltz wasn’t very different from this perspective. Strange and a little halting, yes, but it worked.

“You have to let me lead.” Henry squeezed Victor’s hand for emphasis. “Relax.”

His arm tightened a fraction and Victor felt a spark of annoyance. He was letting Henry lead, and this had been Henry’s idea in the first place. Victor knew very well how to dance, knew to apply subtle pressure to direct his partner where she should go.

And then he realised that he felt Henry doing the same thing. That when Victor stopped trying to think his way through the steps, their halting rhythm became fluid. The dance became something entirely different, something that made the room and the smell of cooking fall away, leaving only the silent waltz.

Victor let himself be led. When he met Henry’s gaze again, he saw to his surprise the same, quiet pleasure reflected there. He wondered…

Then Henry’s steps slowed, stopped and he took a step back, releasing Victor.
“Not so difficult, was it?” he said, before making a small, formal bow.

“No,” Victor conceded. He didn’t attempt a curtsy, wouldn’t know how.

And Henry would laugh.

No doubt Henry, always the student of the human mind, had been keenly observing Victor’s reactions. Had already drawn a dozen conclusions as to the nature of Victor’s condition.

And Victor still wouldn’t have the last minutes undone. He’d enjoyed it. Was it a progression? Or simply something Henry had unearthed? Victor shivered, cold suddenly.

“Come,” Henry said. “I think dinner’s almost ready.”

Despite his misgivings, when Henry next extended his hand Victor didn’t hesitate to take it.

Mr Lynch’s return was exceptionally ill-timed.

Victor and Henry had spent the day at Bedlam, refining the serum, testing it on a wider variety of subjects. The day had been long, the inmates frustrating and the results left much to desire. And Victor had needed his soft, beautiful clothes, had needed them to contrast the darkness and irritation that still clung to him. Sometimes he didn’t understand why Henry had chosen this field. Victor preferred working with the dead; they were far more pleasant.

Henry never seemed affected by it. He smiled as Victor exited the bedroom, extending his hand in what had become a familiar gesture. “Do you never wish for anything different to wear?”

Victor lowered his gaze as he took Henry’s hand. He did. Though he adored the roses on his skirt and the lace of his blouse, he did. But with Sir Malcolm away and no new work coming, he needed his money for food and drugs.

“I can ill afford it.”

Henry paused, gently turning Victor’s hand over, no doubt looking for new needle-marks around the wrist. “Don’t you get…?”

A knock on the door.

They froze, Victor’s heart starting up an uneasy pace. Irrationally, his first thought was of the police. It didn’t matter why they were here, if they saw him he was ruined. It would mean prison. For Henry too, no doubt.

Henry didn’t quite manage to hide the note of strain in his voice as he raised it. “Who is it?”

“It’s me, sir.” A flat voice with a faint Irish accent.


“Are you mad? You can’t let him in!” Victor hissed. He didn’t like the idea of only an unlocked door between Lynch and his own great secret.

“Trust me.” Henry’s expression was sincere, urgent. “The delay will make him suspicious enough as it is.”
Victor didn’t like it, but he hid in Henry’s bedroom. He could hear Henry open the door, make out what he said to Lynch.

“What have you found?”

“Surprisingly little.” Footsteps. “I’ll need more time; he’s a sneaky bugger.”

“Lynch…” Henry’s voice held warning.

“Were you having company?”

Victor froze where he stood just on the other side of the bedroom door. He barely dared to breathe for worry that Lynch would come through it. He might defer to Henry, but seemed to do so only when it suited him. Now his voice certainly was more familiar than deferential.

Henry’s reply was too quiet for Victor to catch, but no footsteps followed.

“Never mind, then. Whatever you do you do, I always say, sir.”

Victor exhaled deeply. His bare feet made little sound as he went to the bed, sitting down. His hands trembled. The tension made his muscles ache.

They were speaking in quieter tones now. Victor could just make out Henry asking Lynch for a report of what he had found out.

His eyes fell on the medical bag in the corner. It was his own, not Henry’s. Funny, he couldn’t remember having left it here.

He’d not had an injection since noon. Had thought he’d wait until after he’d eaten before having another one. But he needed it now.

Lynch was still talking while Victor padded over to his bag.

“…engaged in some sinister things.”

The case was there. Victor brought it back to the bed. The nausea he felt wasn’t just the morphine-craving.

He’d not done this in his dress. Not once. He should change. If he was really quiet he could do it, and be done with it all before Lynch left. He wondered if Henry would be disappointed. He’d reached for Victor’s hand, promising another waltz. Did Henry want…?

No, he wouldn’t want. But, he didn’t mind. And Victor wanted.

There wasn’t anything inherently wrong with injecting morphine while wearing a dress.

His arms were inaccessible, and over-used by far. Victor bent his knee, put his foot on the bed and began to feel out the veins on the back of it.

He barely noticed the sounds of Lynch leaving, so focused was he. The veins rolled away as he tried to pierce them, reminding him of why he so often resorted to his arms instead. The sound of the door opening made him miss his target once again.

Henry looked almost wounded.

“I need this,” Victor said, forestalling whatever was coming. He expected accusations, arguments
and disgust.

He didn’t expect the honest sadness in Henry’s voice.

“This is what you choose?”

“I’m past choosing,” Victor said darkly. He was so tired. All he wanted was for Henry to turn his back and leave him to what he needed to do.

Henry’s eyes were deep and dark, his words plain. “I don’t believe that.”

“Do you think I want to be like this?” The shout was past his lips before Victor realised he’d harboured the thought.

The words tasted bitter, terrifying him with how true they felt.

He ran, leaving his syringe and pushing past Henry as if he could escape the truth as well.

Henry caught his wrist. Victor tugged at it, trying to tear free. That only gained him Henry’s arm around his waist, holding him tight in a parody of their silent dance.

“Why don’t you stop, if you feel that way?” Henry’s quiet voice contrasted the firmness of his grip.

Victor bent his head further, hiding. “I need it.”

“You didn’t always.”

“But I do now!”

Henry sighed, his grip softening.

Victor didn’t move. A peculiar numbness spread through him.

“Wouldn’t you like to be free of it?” Henry’s voice was like a caress.

Victor felt suddenly cold. “I’m not going to take the serum.”

“I wouldn’t suggest it,” Henry hurriedly said.

Victor couldn’t decide if he believed that or not. Didn’t know if it would work or not. He knew he didn’t want it. The mere thought was horrific.

“I merely think you should try to decrease your dosage. Some days you take only very little, do you not?”

*Some* days… Victor nodded.

“Why not keep to that?” Henry continued softly. “Every day?”

Victor shivered. He supposed that maybe… maybe it *could* work. It was less terrifying than the serum.

“I could try.” He addressed Henry’s chest, hearing the lack of conviction in his own voice.

“It’s all I ask.” Henry squeezed Victor’s hand, leading him away from the bedroom. “I will help you.”
They worked out an agreement. Moderation was part of it, and another was candidness; Victor was to show Henry how much he used, and the shame of it was crushing. He hadn’t been aware how quickly a vial had gone, but now, although they’d last longer, he could guess at how many he must have used when he was at his worst. It was chilling.

But worse than the shame was the craving.

It was late morning and Victor was lying on the sofa. He’d taken the small dose agreed upon, but even as the ache in his muscles and joints subsided, he knew it was too little. His thoughts kept circling back to it, his skin felt too tight.

“Come, Victor.” Henry must have noticed; his gaze was too sharp. “Work will keep your mind busy.”

Victor wanted nothing less than return to Bedlam with his aching head but he couldn’t refuse Henry. Besides, he might be right.

They took a cab, a small indulgence. As they stopped at a crossing, Victor’s eyes caught on a lady wearing a lavender dress, with a hat and parasol to match.

“Would you like something like that?”

Victor turned his head to find Henry watching over his shoulder. “Like what? I’ve got what I need.”

Henry didn’t seem discouraged by Victor’s short tone, looking at him as the lady disappeared from sight. “I know you bought something only yesterday.”

Victor flushed. He’d bought a pair of stockings for himself, seeking distraction from the not-quite-enoughness of the morphine. “And now I have what I need.” And his pocketbook suffered for it. He would have to start looking for new work before he ended up living off Henry’s charity.

“Do you?” Henry raised an eyebrow.

Victor sighed, longing for a subject other than his own weakness. “What do you think awaits us at the hospital?” This week they’d treated three new patients, and with every patient treated the results proved more disparate. Some stayed sane, some relapsed and some began to exhibit completely different symptoms of dementia.

Henry’s expression darkened. “It should work. It is simply a matter of finding the optimal formula, the precise voltage.” He’d said that a dozen times. “We have time, and subjects.”

They rode past a pharmacy and Victor quickly lost his train of thought. He wanted to get off, his hand twitching for the door handle.

Henry touched Victor’s arm, in what could be comfort or confinement. “You’re terribly transparent.” His eyes were full of pity.

There was no more conversation after that. Victor silently followed Henry once the cab stopped before Bethlem Royal Hospital, trailing him through the corridors of the asylum, more focused on his own misery than the work before him. It would get easier, Henry had promised. It had to. Or Victor would lose his mind as surely as their patients had.

Mere moments after they’d entered the lab, the door opened behind them again.
“You are here, Jekyll!” A thin man in his thirties swept in, setting his sights on Henry. “Those blasted orderlies said you weren’t.”

“What can I do for you, Dr Hyslop?” Henry’s tone, though not uncivil, made it clear that he preferred the answer to be ‘nothing’.

“Your job; assist me.”

Victor raised his eyebrows, taken aback by the man’s rudeness.

Henry met his eyes and discreetly shook his head. His expression held resigned annoyance. “In what?” he asked Hyslop.

“In sedating an unruly patient.” Hyslop tapped his foot, clearly impatient go get going. “Isn’t that what you are hired to do?”

“By chemical means.”

“Don’t start,” Hyslop huffed. “It won’t be long before you’ll be back to your beakers.” He turned, seeming to notice Victor for the first time. “And who the devil are you?”


“Another chemist?” Hyslop frowned.

“An anatomist.” Victor repaid Hyslop’s haughty attitude in the same coin. “I’m engaged strictly in research.”

“Anatomical research? What are you hoping to find – a second liver? Well, it’s something.” He headed for the door. “Come on, I don’t have all day.”

Henry was retrieving his bag and Victor gave him an incredulous look. Henry eyed Hyslop as they began to follow him, far enough behind that a quiet voice would go unheard.

“Strictly speaking,” Henry murmured, “our positions are of the same rank. However...”

However, ‘strictly speaking’ didn’t tend to apply to Henry. Victor had learnt that long ago.

“Why do you let him talk to you like that?”

Henry made a small grimace. “It’s complicated. The medical superintendent isn’t fond of me and all the fonder of him. I’m here because I left him no choice but to hire me.”

“We’re here,” Hyslop loudly interrupted. “She’s in this cell; get your needle out – but don’t give her too much, you hear? If she’s insensate it will interfere with the therapy.”

Henry rolled his eyes but put his bag down. When he began to withdraw the morphine which would sedate the patient Victor looked away.

It was hours until the next dose they’d agreed upon.

“So, how are you and he acquainted, Dr...?”

“Frankenstein,” Victor reiterated, almost grateful to Hyslop for the distraction. “Dr Jekyll and I were at Cambridge together.”
“I studied at Edinburgh myself,” Hyslop said, amicably enough, but there was a sharpness in his eyes. “I can’t say I’ve maintained any particularly close friendships from that time. But you’ve been here a lot, I hear.”

“Whose gossip have you been listening to?” Henry straightened, syringe in hand.

Victor was accosted by the vivid memory of a syringe like that and Henry’s sure hand emptying it into Victor’s veins.

“The orderlies talk about you quite a bit.” Hyslop gave Henry a smug look. “They’re not overly fond.”

“Perhaps you should pay less attention,” Henry said coldly. “Now, the patient?”

“Yes,” Hyslop eagerly opened the door to the cell. “Pay attention, Dr Frankenstein. You might learn something.”

Inside was a woman, sat in the corner on the floor. She looked up as they entered, eyes wide and frightened.

“She doesn’t look like much.” Hyslop took a step closer. “But this one’s special. The injection, please.”

“Hold her, then.” Henry sounded bored and annoyed. “Since you didn’t bring any orderlies.”

“Oh, those brutes…” Hyslop muttered. “I avoid them when I can.”

Victor stayed back, feeling uneasy for no reason he could discern. He’d seen Henry sedate patients before, had done it himself. But the air seemed fouler today somehow; the fear in the woman’s eye cut closer.

“Don’t, don’t, please…” she whispered, pressing herself farther into the corner.

“This is for your own good. We’re doctors. We’re helping you.” Hyslop grabbed her arms with remarkable gentleness.

As soon as he touched her, she began to trash. “No! Let me go you goddamned monster! You’ve no right! No!”

Hyslop cursed, but held her still. Henry knelt down, forcing her head to the side and deftly injecting the narcotic into the superficial jugular vein.

Victor watched as her eyelids grew heavier, feeling sick with envy of the morphine in her veins. She still struggled, still spat and threw insults, even tried to bite Hyslop, but with less venom behind it.

“Good,” Hyslop said, pulling the patient upright. “Just enough. Too much chemical sedation would ruin the effect of the therapy.”

He caught her by her matted hair as she tried again to bite.

“Then why involve me at all?” Henry asked dryly. “Considering you have such disdain for my craft.”

The patient squirmed in Hyslop’s grip. Her free hand worked at the fingers in her hair. Barely looking, Henry grabbed her wrist, holding her fast.
“Please, Dr Jekyll; I consider myself an educator. And with a fascinating case like hers, I’d be amiss if I didn’t involve my younger colleagues.”

She sagged, trying to shrink away from both doctors at once while they dragged her from the cell. Her eyes met Victor’s. Wide, dark, pleading.

Victor looked away. “Why is her case fascinating?” Her eyes reminded him of so many things he wanted to forget.

“Ah, for a number of reasons. I’ll tell you once the therapy is underway.”

“Will you bring my bag, Victor?”

Henry slipped the empty syringe into the bag himself, didn’t let Victor take it. Though only a few hours earlier he’d happily (well, maybe not quite) watched Victor take his injection.

Victor didn’t offer to help with the patient while Henry put the syringe away. Hyslop didn’t ask him to, just waited until Henry was again free.

Victor followed them, keenly aware of the bag he was carrying, of its contents. Would Henry abandon his duties, were Victor to turn around and leave?

“Here we are, gentlemen.”

Hyslop’s voice echoed off the white-tiled walls and floors of a large room. In the centre was a row of bathtubs, some with patients in them. By the wall was a number of stalls, one where an orderly was spraying a strapped-in and screaming patient with a hard jet of water. In a corner stood a low box with a suspiciously head-sized hole. Most bizarre of all was the contraption that seemed to be Hyslop’s destination: a chair not unlike the one Henry had in his laboratory, but mounted on a pole from floor to ceiling and connected to a rather elegant hand-driven machine, obviously intended to make the chair spin.

Victor couldn’t believe his eyes. “Is this what you intend?” He’d read about rotational therapy but couldn’t have imagined that anyone was still using it in the 1890s. The concept held no scientific merit what so ever.

“Indeed,” Hyslop replied merrily.

A pair of orderlies came over, took the patient and roughly began to strap her in. Her eyes were glazed but she fought them as best she could.

Victor gave Henry a disbelieving look, but received only a resigned twist of the mouth in return.

“I know what you’re thinking.” Hyslop straightened his clothes. “It is an out-dated method, archaic – maybe even barbaric.” He smiled. “I’ve heard it all, believe me. I know it’s the fashion at the moment, to take to the drill to try to cure lunacy. And perhaps it will become fashionable, as Jekyll hopes, to seek sanity in a syringe. Whichever method you choose you end up with a patient not sane, but deadened. I call the surgeons butchers, and the chemists – naïve.”

“How very kind of you,” Henry muttered, expression sour.

“It’s the truth, doctor. A chemical can only have effect as long as it remains in the blood. After it passes, so does the effect. Or is that not your experience?”

His words struck far too close to the result of their experiments so far; though the first patient they’d
treated with the electrified serum still was coherent, the ones following him had relapsed after only
days.

Victor saw the same thought behind the darkening of Henry’s expression.

“However…” Hyslop gestured to the chair which the patient was now firmly strapped into. “This is
aimed at the source, at curing the underlying imbalance and not merely the symptoms. A method
more refined than digging through the brain matter, or marinating it in morphine.”

Victor wished he would stop talking about morphine.

“You're mad…”

It was the patient. She was bound with straps across the chest, the legs, the wrists, the forehead, but
unlike Henry’s patients, her mouth was free.

“You’re the ones who are mad,” she whispered. “Not me.”

Hyslop smiled at her. “I know it seems that way now, dear. It will get better.”

“Do you need us here for this?” Henry’s voice was clipped.

“Most certainly,” Hyslop said firmly. “I’ll make a convert of you yet, Dr Jekyll. Begin!”

With those words the orderlies, finished with the patient, began to turn the great cranks of the
machine. Victor watched as the cogs began to spin, transmitting the force to the drive shaft that the
chair was suspended from. Slowly, the chair gathered speed.

Henry leaned close to Victor. “This is the sixth or seventh time I’ve seen this particular procedure. It
never works. Yet every time he’s convinced it will.”

Victor didn’t have a reply, his attention taken by the woman in the chair. It was still accelerating,
turning faster with every passing moment. Her face scrunched up, her body tensed against the straps.
She began to moan, a low, continuous sound, oscillating as she turned.

Victor didn’t want to see this. He should feel some matter of scientific interest, even if only historical,
but all he felt was deep, visceral unease. What was the matter with him?

“Step back,” Hyslop said. “Not so close.”

The woman’s moan rose steadily in volume, until it abruptly seized, turning into choked retching.
Victor barely managed to step back quickly enough to avoid getting splattered.

He turned his back, struggling with his own stomach. “Why would anyone do this?” he whispered.

Henry’s eyes were on Hyslop. “Madness? I’ve no better answer.” His gaze was steady, his voice
almost bored.

The sound of more retching, more fluid hitting the floor. Victor covered his own mouth, closing his
eyes and trying to think of anything else but this.

“A bit longer!”

The patient had fallen silent but the room reverberated with the sound of the cranks, of the hoses, of
the screams and shouts that Victor had almost stopped hearing after visiting this place for weeks.
“That’s enough!”

The machine began to wind down. Victor turned, hazarding a glance.

The woman hung slack in her restraints, unconscious. Hardly surprising considering the forces at work. Her clothes were soiled, and so was the floor in an uneven circle around her.

Victor quickly looked away.

Hyslop sounded only gleeful. “You get used to it, Dr Frankenstein. Some prisoners are nothing more than animals, revelling in their own filth.”

“Remember the Act of Parliament?” Henry murmured dryly. “They’re ‘patients’ now.”

Hyslop shot him an annoyed look. “Not this one.” He turned back to Victor, lowering his voice conspiratorially. “This one is a murderer. They found her neighbour’s wife dead, knife sticking out of her chest – but that’s not all, oh no.” He paused theatrically. “This young, lovely wife and mother of two was rumoured to be her lover. Killed in jealousy.”

The nausea in Victor’s stomach solidified into heavy ice. Hyslop spoke of an unnatural act, an unnatural way of living. And it hit too close to home.

Apparently, so felt Henry. “Again, gossip,” he spat. “Do you care for nothing more than fanciful stories for your dining club?”

Hyslop, at last, raised his voice in turn. “I will remind you, sir, that I am a lecturer at the School of Medicine for Women, and highly respected in this field. Which is more than you can say for yourself.”

Henry’s expression darkened dangerously.

“Furthermore, what you call gossip I call vital information. We must understand the underlying pathology of dementia if we are to have any hope of treating it. If there is a component of perversion to her insanity, it must be treated. If nothing else, she must be prevented from spreading her genes, for the good of future generations. What you think of as archaic is part of a carefully tailored treatment, certain to cure her in the long run. Today, rotational therapy, tomorrow, hydrotherapy…”

Victor couldn’t hear anymore, couldn’t stay in this room with the noise and the screams and the smell. The orderlies was removing the unconscious woman from the chair, handling her with little more care than a sack of potatoes.

Victor turned and began to walk, slowly first, then faster.

“Of a delicate disposition, is he?” Hyslop’s voice came from behind.

There was no air in the room, only madness. Victor fled through corridors full of people in chains. From the open cells of this upper floor more reached for him, gibbering, pleading. One man was chained to the wall by his neck and arms, his skin covered in filth and sores.

Victor had seen it all, seen it every time he’d come here, but he’d never looked. Never allowed himself to think of these people as human, only as the mad.

In his distraction, a man caught of his ankle, dirty fingers digging into the muscle. Victor tore his leg free, picking up his pace, carrying on in his escape to the darkness below.
Places like this were necessary; there needed to be somewhere to keep those who were dangers to themselves and society. But what Hyslop was doing, treatments like that, completely unscientific…

Victor reached a stairwell, rushing down it, reaching the lower level where the dangerous nature of the patients meant they were kept securely behind solid doors.

They still screamed.

The serum would change things; with a cure for madness Bedlam could close. Wasn’t that why Henry had developed it in the first place?

But the look on that woman’s face as the orderlies had strapped her down was horribly familiar. Victor had seen it on every patient of theirs, every subject that was strapped to Henry’s chair.

The difference was the science. The difference was that their method worked. And if it required a moment’s terror, as Victor guided the needle into their eye socket and administered the medicine, was that not worth it?

He reached the lab, shoving open the heavy door. The chair, the barber’s chair, Henry’s chair, stood in the middle of the room, accusing him.

He’d somehow held on to Henry’s bag, and now he tore it open, quickly finding what he needed. His hands did not shake; desperation lent them enough steadiness for their task, and Victor had a small vein left on the radial side of the fourth digit of his right hand.

Henry’s hands closed around his wrists, stilling them.

“What are you doing?” His voice was cool, his hands warm.

“I’m going mad,” Victor whispered, sagging against Henry at his back.

“Why?” Henry plucked the syringe from his grip, dropping it on the floor.

Victor gasped, trying to catch it.

“Don’t; the patients carry disease.”

It didn’t seem like a terrible risk right now but Henry led him to the barber’s chair, sitting him down and kneeling in front of him. His face was a display of concern.

Victor pressed the heels of his hands to his eyes. “It’s torment. Like a mere drop of water to a man dying of thirst. I need more.”

Henry was quiet. Victor’s head ached, his eyes watered and his stomach roiled. With just a push of his hands, Henry could have him on his back, strap him in, give him the needle and the silence.

“It’s not working, then.” Henry’s voice was toneless.

Despite how much he wanted Henry to stop interfering and let him have his drugs, Victor’s heart fell with the thought of Henry giving up on him.

Henry’s hand on his knee. “Would you stop? Entirely?”

Victor choked back a whimper, hunching in on himself further. The mere thought made him break out in cold sweat.
“If I asked you?” Henry whispered. His grip tightened, thumb tracing the edge of the patella.

“I can’t.” The words were painful, more so than ever before. “I’m not able.”

“If I begged you?”

Victor couldn’t remember what it was like, to spend a day without narcotics in one form or another. “I want to.” He did.

Henry leant closer, intent in his entire form. “Then do it.”

One second hung between them, as eternal as if suspended in crystal. Victor stood at a terrible crossroads and he didn’t have the strength to turn from the path before him.

But maybe Henry did.

Victor lowered his hands and looked deep into his friend’s eyes.

“Help me.”

Chapter End Notes

Rotational therapy was a real thing and Hyslop was a real person, although I take some artistic liberties with him. Cosmo, my font of knowledge and inspiration, asked me to point out that this is T.B Hyslop, not James Hyslop, who was an American in the same field at the same time. I'm telling you here 'cause I couldn't find a natural way for Henry to call him 'Theo' without entirely ruining the mood...

I will also point out here that I don't always agree with the way Henry is treating Victor right in this fic (not to mention how he treats his patients). But I also believe a flawed relationship makes reading more interesting. Questions, concerns, thoughts? I'd be more than happy to discuss them, either in the comments or by email at nthalmicus (at) hotmail.com.

Spoilery warnings:
In this chapter Victor tries to decrease his morphine dosage and suffers withdrawal. There is a scene in which a colleague of Henry's binds a woman to a chair and spins her until she vomits and passes out. Beforehand, Henry is involved in forcibly sedating the woman. This is done to 'treat' her for alleged mental illness and homosexuality. Victor observes the procedure and reacts badly.
I am sorry for how long this took! But don't worry - I've got the whole thing on my hard drive and it *will* be finished. Assuming people are still reading. -_-’ Or actually, regardless of whether people are reading or not. ;D

In case you don't already know, laudanum is opium dissolved in alcohol. It contains a whole bunch of active substances, one of which is morphine. You could buy it over the counter to treat coughing, sleeplessness, diarrhoea, and of course pain. Equally addictive as today's opioid painkillers and with more side effects. It's not a super plot point or anything, just I remember when I finally realised that 'oooooh, it's *drugs*'.

Chapter specific warnings: drug withdrawal, (mentions of) forced medical treatment, misgendering, and this being a generally slow chapter before things pick up.

The next days were beyond what Victor could have imagined. He forgot all about the asylum and the demented inside, doctors and patients alike. Never before had he made a true attempt of freeing himself from the narcotics, and the illness he’d felt after missing a dose or two was nothing compared to this.

Alone, he wouldn’t have lasted a day.

But Henry was there, a constant presence with cool cloths and cups of weak, lukewarm tea. Victor drove him away with spiteful, feverish words, but Henry kept returning, until at long last the acute illness subsided.

It was the first day Victor had been able to spend out of bed. Out of Henry’s bed, as Henry had surrendered it out of pity. He sat at the table, still cold and weak. A piece of toasted bread with butter sat before him, looking completely insurmountable.

“'I'll be as quick as I can.” Henry sat opposite, dressed to go out. “But I’ll be gone a few hours at least. Eat.”

Victor picked up the toast, taking a minute bite. It was crispy, softening in his mouth and salty with butter. He was hungry.

Henry did not try to hide his doubtfulness. He’d been to Bedlam only once since Victor had ‘taken ill’, a similarly short visit. But now Victor was on his feet, if only barely.

He was grateful Henry hadn’t asked him to come. In his current state, he’d not be able to stomach the sight. He could still picture the eyes of the woman Hyslop had tormented. Still hear her warbling scream.

“Are you certain you will manage?” Henry fixed Victor with a piercing gaze, no doubt trying to spot a lie.

It wasn’t whether Victor would manage to eat, drink and rest that Henry was asking.
And Victor wasn’t certain. But Henry couldn’t neglect his work and still keep his employment.

“I will.”

Henry remained hesitant.

Victor looked down at the half-eaten toast. He already felt full. “Honestly, I don’t know that I could make it down the stairs.” He took another bite, fending off the pity that he knew must be on Henry’s face.

“I’ll be back as soon as I can,” Henry repeated.

Victor shivered, putting the bread down to the sound of the closing door.

He’d been alone for so long. Before even leaving the house where he grew up he’d been alone. But he’d rarely felt the solitude so keenly. Never had the seconds seemed to hang quite so long in the air.

Morphine had been more than just something to combat pain. More than something to escape troubling thoughts or dismal circumstances. It had been a way to pass time. A break from boredom.

The door was there. Nothing prevented Victor from leaving. There were no opiates in the apartment, but Victor wouldn’t have to go far to acquire them. With that as his destination, his legs would carry him any distance. Even a vial of laudanum would more than suffice right now.

Very determinedly, Victor rose. With eyes fixed straight ahead, he crossed the threshold, entered the bedroom and lay on the bed. He’d make an attempt to sleep the hours away.

A sleepless, endless amount of time later he heard the door. He was curled on his side, face to the wall. Too cold and stiff and aching to move. He thought he heard Henry speak, caught the tail-end of conversation before the door closed.

Footsteps, perhaps a little hurried. Pausing by the bedroom doorway. Then entering.

Victor still didn’t move.

The bed dipped. Soft, warm fabric settled over his shoulders.

Victor glanced up. He had expected relief on Henry’s face, and it was there, but so was something else. Warmth. Sympathy. Maybe even hope.

“Who were you talking to?” Victor asked, wanting to break the horrible stillness of the moment.

Was that guilt in Henry’s expression? “Lynch.”

Somehow Victor didn’t think Henry had met Lynch on the way. More likely Lynch had been posted outside the door to dissuade any attempts Victor might make to leave.

Victor was too tired to be offended by the lack of trust. “Did he have anything new?”

“Gray’s involved in illegal betting rings, but that hardly helps us.” Henry put his hand on Victor’s shoulder, rubbing it though the blanket. “Lynch is investigating a person who used to live with him, recently disappeared. Nothing tangible.”

Victor could have slept like this. His head was heavy enough. But he’d spent enough time in this bed, and if he fell asleep Henry would leave. Victor would much rather have a cup of tea and listen to him speak. He pushed himself upright.
A shawl slid off his shoulder, pooling in his lap.

It was the colour of ivory, with a broad border of bright blue vines and flowers. It was square, made of thin, fine wool but the long, deep sapphire fringe had a fall that said it was silk.

“Henry…” Victor whispered, brushing his fingers over the finely woven pattern. “This is…” Too much. “You shouldn’t…” Too strange, for Henry to gift him something like this. “Why?”

Henry’s voice was far too soft when he replied. “You’ve seemed cold.”

That was hardly a reason.

Henry took the shawl, shook it out and folded it on the diagonal before draping it over Victor’s shoulders.

And Victor was cold. A dreadful, terrible cold had settled in his bones and seemed as if it would never leave.

He was also unshaven, dressed in rumpled clothing and his skin was tacky with old sweat.

“I can’t wear this…” His fingers betrayed him, finding the silk fringe, stroking it. “Not like this…”

Henry smiled, his hand returned to Victor’s shoulder, smoothing the fabric. “Here you can.”

Victor was too weak to refuse.

Two days later he was still wearing it, sitting at the table and sipping tea with Henry. It was the first day he could have honestly said he felt better. There was a clarity in his mind, a sharpness to his senses that felt entirely foreign.

The air of easiness that surrounded Henry said he noticed Victor’s lightened mood as well. “Do you feel up to coming with me today?”

Victor saw the woman’s face before him, remembered the crowded misery of the asylum and Hyslop’s mad conviction that his torture would work. He tried not to think of the way Henry had watched it with detached boredom. Henry’s reaction was the normal one; it was Victor that was acting strange. Despite knowing that, despite feeling more himself, he didn’t want to go back to the darkness and grime. Didn’t want to find out if the patients’ plight still turned his stomach.

But he wanted to be alone even less.

“I think so,” he said, twining the fringe of his shawl around his fingers. He could do this.

“Afterwards, do you think-”

A knock on the door interrupted them.

Victor’s first thought was of Lynch. His second, Gray.

Henry gave him a wary look as Victor quickly pulled his shawl off, hiding it behind his back.

“Stay here,” Henry said, opening the door.

From his position at the table, Victor could see the visitor. It was neither Lynch nor Gray, but a well-dressed gentleman of perhaps forty years of age. However gentlemanly his appearance, the look he
gave Henry was cold bordering on uncivil.

He offered no introduction, merely said, “It’s time.” There was distaste in his voice.

“Just a moment,” Henry said before closing the door in the man’s face. He leaned back against it, expression empty, gaze lost somewhere far away.

“Henry?”

Henry took a deep breath, looking at Victor as if only now remembering his presence. “You’ll have to come too.”

Henry paid meticulous attention to his appearance, though his motions were rushed. His urgency left no room for questions. Victor struggled to keep up, being barely dressed and only just remembering to stuff the shawl into the back of Henry’s closet.

The gentleman led the way to a waiting cab with the same air of sombre dissatisfaction. Henry on the other hand seemed to vibrate with suppressed energy. Victor was beginning to have an inkling of what might be happening.

They stopped at a solicitor’s, a distinguished one at that. Victor felt distinctly out of his element with his worn clothes and the cold sweat still on his brow. If Henry felt anything of the like he didn’t let it show, striding confidently ahead.

They were shown to an office where they met two gentlemen, one old and the other older still. The introductions were short and Henry offered no explanation for Victor’s presence, nor did the solicitors request it, despite their sideways looks. The plush chairs before the desk would have cost as much as Victor’s flat.

The senior gentleman cleared his throat, before announcing in a flat, nasal tone, “I regret to inform you that your father passed, last night.”

Henry’s eyes shone, his whole being fixed on the solicitor. “And the inheritance?”

“He’s left it all to you.” The gentleman looked as if the words left a foul taste in his mouth. “Lord Hyde.”

Henry’s face split in a grin, sharp and predatory. Triumphant at last, and Victor couldn’t help but feel awed. It had seemed a distant dream, a mirage, after listening to Henry talk of it for so many years. And now it was becoming reality. It was almost unimaginable.

“When will you take possession of the house?”

“Immediately.” Henry was still smiling. “I will gather my belongings. Notify the staff.”

“Very well, my lord.” The solicitor hid his distaste better the second time.

It was only them on the ride back and Victor felt as if the Earth had tilted a few degrees beneath him. Henry was absorbed with his own thoughts, now and then breaking the silence to share a stray musing or fragment of a plan.

Victor let most of it wash over him without comment. He wanted to share in Henry’s jubilation, but he felt uneasier and uneasier. With Henry’s changed circumstances, and the fact that he seemed set on moving immediately, where did that leave Victor?
Henry made no mention of it.

Back again, their interrupted tea stood like relics from a gone era on the table.

Victor hesitated just inside the door. “Henry?”

“Yes?” Henry didn’t look up, entirely focused on gathering up notes and correspondence from his modest desk.

Victor’s throat seemed too narrow for the words. “When you leave…” He was too tired for this, too out of balance still. “Where…?” The craving, the visceral need for morphine was a physical entity, choking him.

Seemingly without having moved Henry was in front of him, hands on Victor’s shoulders. “You can’t be alone, Victor.” The barely-suppressed excitement was gone from his voice, replaced with firmness. “Not yet. Come with me.”

Victor accepted gratefully.

They packed the most important things themselves, including Victor’s suitcase, leaving the rest for the liveried servants that appeared at the door. A grand carriage was waiting for them, taking them to a house that made Grandage Place pale in comparison. The door was opened by a man in a butler’s uniform who seemed to know Henry, though not be glad to see him.

“My lord.” His tone was that of a funeral announcement.

“Branby.” Henry’s voice was no warmer, filled with distaste.

Victor’s head ached.

Henry seemed to have his heart set on inspecting the house from top to bottom, as if his father would have sought his final victory by hiding things away. Victor had to sit down before they were halfway through the first floor, gripped by sudden weakness.

“Victor?” Henry turned and returned, the butler waiting impatiently in the doorway behind him.

“You go on,” Victor murmured. “I’ll just wait here.” ‘Here’ was a small drawing room in pale green. It was pleasant. Victor wouldn’t mind it.

Henry’s fingers closed around his wrist, taking his pulse. Victor was well aware it would be fast if not thready.

“Branby, is Dr Frankenstein’s room made up yet?” Henry asked, eyes not leaving Victor.

“I imagine not quite yet, my lord.” The butler’s tone was light, his face blank, but his lips still twisted around the title.

Henry turned to the man then, voice hard. “Then make sure it is, and have someone show him there.”

Victor swore the butler’s nose wrinkled. “Yes, my lord.”
Then Victor was alone, unmoored. Two maids hastily finished making up the bed and a footman brought his suitcase. Victor quickly fended off his offer of unpacking, sequestering the bag under the bed. He was too tired for more than that. The bed was soft, the room pleasant, furnished in forget-me-not blue, and utterly foreign.

Henry owned this house now. Henry was a *lord*.

And what was Victor?

He’d not found an answer to that question yet when Henry appeared an hour later. He was full of plans and Victor was content to listen to them, forget himself and his misery in Henry’s enthusiasm. It carried them through dinner in the downstairs dining room. They ate a grand meal on fine china, waited upon by sharply dressed footmen. Victor had certainly eaten many such dinners in his youth but now it felt alien. Like dining on a theatre stage.

He was glad to escape back to his room. Less glad to spend the night in utter solitude. He’d not lived a fortnight with Henry, and already it felt strange not to have him at the other side of an open door.

The morphine threatened just out of conscious thought, whispering that the servants wouldn’t stop Victor if he left, that he could be back before morning and Henry would be none the wiser. Victor tried to shut the whisper out and only brought it to the forefront. He tried to hold on to his conviction, but it had never been *his*, just a weak reflection of Henry’s faith in him.

A knock startled him. He looked up to see Henry already entering without reply. He was dressed for bed and his eyes seemed to see into Victor’s soul.

“There’s a settee here.” Henry plucked a spare blanket from Victor’s bed.

Victor watched, still baffled, as Henry placed it on the furniture in question.

“I don’t think you should be alone.” He gave Victor a meaningful look. “Do you?”

Victor shook his head, relief overshadowing the resentment for being denied his chance to escape. “You should take the bed.”

“You’re still recovering.”

The settee looked terribly uncomfortable and the bed was wide enough. “We can share it.”

Henry stilled. Hesitated. “I don’t…”

And Victor realised that Henry would not share the bed. Not now, considering what he knew of Victor. Sharing a room was one thing. A bed, another.

“I meant…” he mumbled, wishing he could take the words back. “You wouldn’t want that. Of course not. I only meant it doesn’t look comfortable.”


“Then what?”

Again, a brief hesitation before Henry spoke. “Nothing. I don’t mind sharing a bed with you, Victor.” He tugged Victor’s hand away from where it’d subconsciously been feeling for veins on his forearm. “Come.”
The bed was wide enough that they could lay comfortably without touching. Victor still lay near the edge. Henry didn’t give any outward sign of discomfort, simply pulled the cover to his chin and closed his eyes. It didn’t take too long for Victor to follow suit.

That night he dreamt.

He was wearing a dress. Soft, white, the skirt long enough that it pooled on the floor in a circle around him. And there was something else about it. Victor reached up, with hands covered in endlessly long sleeves. He touched his chest.

He wasn’t just wearing a woman’s dress. He was a woman.

“Hold her still!”

Hands, taking his arms, holding him down. It was Hyslop. He watched with a mad grin as Victor was strapped into the rotating chair. Victor couldn’t breathe; the bonds squeezed the air from his chest. He wanted to speak but his voice turned to gasps.

“We are doctors. We will make you well,” Hyslop said. “Dr Jekyll?”

Henry’s eyes were cold as they fell on Victor. He pushed Victor’s head back, lowering a metal band over his forehead, stealing his last bit of movement.

He raised the bit he used for his patients. “Open your mouth.” He didn’t wait for Victor to obey, but forced it into his mouth, silencing him entirely.

The chair tilted backwards; it wasn’t Hyslop’s but Henry’s.

“Don’t struggle.” Henry’s expression was still hard, as if Victor was not his friend, not ever a person.

Henry, with the electrified syringe in hand. The sight of it made Victor panic; he knew where it went – deep into his brain, destroying everything he was.

“It will be better. You will be calm.”

Henry climbed up into the chair, kneeling over Victor’s lap to reach his eye. The needle shone and dripped the colour of lightning.

“I’ll help you,” Henry whispered as he brought it close.

Victor woke with a gasp. His heart pounded and his chest struggled for the breath it was convinced would be denied it.

Why would he dream like that? Why would his subconscious cast Henry as a villain when he had been nothing but kind and helpful?

Right next to him, Henry slept peacefully. The true Henry, not the monster of the subconscious. Victor was glad for his presence, making the dream more distant.

Henry didn’t think of him like that, a patient needing to be cured. He would not think Victor’s small madness merited such drastic treatment. And he would not treat him like he treated his patients. Would not be forceful or cruel if it came to that.

Yet Victor had to admit that even though Hyslop’s callousness had unsettled him, it was nothing he
hadn’t seen Henry exhibit. Perhaps it was something one needed to develop to work with the mad. Victor didn’t know how he could manage it without the morphine, had never been without.

Henry had.

Victor squeezed his eyes shut, trying to silence his thoughts. He knew why Henry indulged him in his unnaturalness; Victor was an interesting case. A contained and specified mania that merited study.

And, if Victor was honest with himself, the logical end goal of such a study would be to determine whether the serum could cure such relatively subtle madness.

He turned, trying to will the evil thought away.

The morning sun did its best to dismiss Victor’s dark musings. He spent breakfast watching Henry, trying to spot any sign of ill intent. But Henry was his normal self, if distracted, and as soon as they were finished eating he excused himself, leaving Victor alone.

It didn’t seem like the actions of a man that was contemplating experimentation on his closest friend.

Nor did Victor find a moment to discuss it with him.

Henry was never there. There seemed to be a silent flurry behind the scenes of their existence. After being confined to bed by his own ill health, Victor was now confined by the complete lack of anything to do. All Henry’s time was taken up with taking over the estate, and though Victor didn’t long to return to Bedlam, at least there he’d been useful.

Whenever he left his room, there seemed to be a dozen people around, scurrying through the corridors with harried looks. And without the cloak of drugs draped around him, Victor found himself too raw, too exposed. He took to staying in his room for the better part of the day. The hours were endless without chemicals to shorten them.

In the evening of that second day, he unpacked his suitcase, scattering the few belongings he’d brought around the room. They looked as misplaced as he felt.

His other clothes he left where they were, folded into the suitcase to be hidden under the bed. He couldn’t wear them here. The servants made it impossible. The most he could do was to take out the shawl Henry had given him, reminding himself of sweeter times than those his mind kept circling back to.

It wasn’t there.

Victor frantically rifled through the case, searching for a flash of blue between the folds of his petticoats. He remembered wearing it when the solicitor came. Remembered hiding it away. He didn’t remember packing it. Was not certain that he hadn’t left it behind.

And then the servants had come to pack up the rest of Henry’s things.

Closing the bag and shoving it back under the bed, Victor rushed from the room. Maybe Henry had it.

He didn’t know where Henry was, but enlisted the help of a passing maid. Together they found him in a large, empty room upstairs in animated, not to say frustrated, conversation with Branby.
Henry silenced the butler with an abrupt gesture, turning to Victor. “Do you need anything?”

Some of the sharpness with which he’d addressed the butler lingered in his tone. It didn’t bode well.

“We need to talk,” Victor said with a sideways look at the butler.

“Fine. Leave us.”

Branby’s face was pointedly blank but his footsteps were a bit too loud as he left.

“What’s the matter?” Henry’s voice had softened, his expression becoming serious.

“I…” Victor touched his wrist. “I can’t find the shawl.”

He’d hoped for Henry to announce that he had it and berate Victor for his carelessness. Instead Henry’s brow creased, his eyes flickering towards the door the butler had left through.

“Are you certain you don’t have it?” His voice was quiet and serious.

“I am.” Victor tried to tell himself that it wasn’t so incriminating, that there could be a natural explanation if it had been found. There were worse garments he could be missing.

“All right.” Henry’s eyes flashed to the doorway again. “It doesn’t have to be a problem.” He strode over to the door, opening it, and addressing who Victor assumed was the butler waiting outside. “You said a Mr Lynch was waiting downstairs. Bring him here.” He didn’t wait for a reply before closing the door again.

He stayed there for a moment, one hand on the doorknob.

Victor watched him, a dreadful feeling of having done wrong pulling at his stomach. He could picture a servant finding it amongst Henry’s shirts, hastily stuffed there as if to hide it. What would they think? How would Henry explain it? And would the explanation itself make the episode all the more suspicious?

Henry turned. There was tension in his expression, but no anger. At least that was something. “If you don’t have it, and it’s not amongst my things, there’s only two places it can be. Either still where you left it, or in the possession of one of the staff. Either way, Lynch will find it.”

“He’s here?” Victor asked, not quite able to conciliate the image of the rough Irishman with their gilded surroundings.

Henry sighed. “I suspect he’s come to collect on a debt.” Despite the ominous statement, despite the dire circumstances, the corner of his mouth turned up.

A quick knock before the door swung open. Mr Branby the butler entered, and on his heels: Lynch.

Victor almost didn’t recognise him. His clothes were new, his hair cut, his face freshly shaven. Taken apart, the changes were not so drastic, but the difference was complete. He looked respectable. The only thing that was the same was his unnerving, pale eyes.

“My lord,” he said with a servile bow. Even his accent had changed, the rolling syllables nearly unnoticeable, and he enunciated the title with relish. “What a pleasure it is to finally see you here.”

Henry’s impatience was poorly hidden. “Good morning, Mr Lynch. Branby, if you would step out for a moment.”
Lynch watched the man go with an air of satisfaction.

Henry spoke before he had a chance, as soon as the door closed. “There is a pressing matter to deal with. After that is done, we will discuss the future.”

“Aye.” Lynch’s refined accent slipped away. “The matter of Mr Gray, no doubt. Well, I have some good news on that front.”

Victor had never been less interested in hearing about Mr Gray, and by his face, Henry felt the same. Lynch seemed to catch as much, adding, “Or is it another matter, maybe? It wouldn’t happen to involve this?”

Victor hadn’t noticed the newspaper-wrapped parcel under Lynch’s arm, now extended. Henry took it, frowning, but as soon as he’d opened a corner, peeking inside, his face smoothened.

“Well done,” Henry said, handing the parcel to Victor.

It was his shawl. Victor felt his tension drain away, only to return a second later in force. Lynch had retrieved it. How much would he puzzle out?

“Your footmen really are too trusting.” Lynch’s modesty rang false. “It was no matter for your ‘old valet’ to insinuate himself into their work, and once they’d found that,” he indicated the parcel, “let them pry out a story of your secret sweetheart. You should have heard it. It’s a tragic tale, truly.” He sounded quite amused by the whole thing.

“Is it now?” The irritation Lynch so often summoned returned to Henry’s demeanour. “I hope you’ll not make it a habit to invent gossip.”

Lynch’s expression hardened. “I will, as long as it serves to hide the truth. Neither of us wants that out, do we?”

Henry’s lips narrowed, but he didn’t disagree.

Lynch had something on him, Victor was increasingly sure. Something more than a shawl, something more than a debt owed.

He made his voice cold, spoke up. “I suggest you say what you came to say, Mr Lynch. And then leave.”

Lynch looked at Victor as if he was a chair that had suddenly started talking. Then he grinned. “My apologies, Dr Frankenstein. You mustn’t mistake words in jest between two old friends for something more sinister. I assure you, I’ll take Lord Hyde’s secrets to my grave.”

Victor held his gaze, taken aback but not convinced.

“Lynch…” Henry ran his hand through his hair. “Just tell us what you found out about Gray.”

“Something’s not right about him, that’s for certain.” Lynch stuck his hands in his pockets, rocking gently on his feet. “Been following him when he’s out at night. He frequents some shady places, but you already knew that, my lord.”

Henry nodded. Victor didn’t remember Henry passing that on to him. Granted, he’d been distracted by the morphine – or lack of it – since Lynch had last visited, but Henry should have told him.

Perhaps Lynch saw something on his face, because he looked at Victor as he added “And he seems
to live alone now. All those women there left.”

“Where did they go?” Victor asked, the echoes of heartache flashing through his chest.

“I can’t say I’ve looked for them.” Lynch’s voice was perfectly nonchalant, but his pale eyes narrowed. “I could find out…?” He glanced at Henry.

“Maybe later,” Henry muttered.

Victor, despite having decided to give up on Lily, felt a prick of disappointment tinged with resentment.

Lynch’s eyes flickered between them, analysing. “Anyhow, they aren’t the first ‘ladies’ to reside there, and not the most interesting. A few months ago, Mr Gray was apparently quite taken with a ‘Ms Angelique’. Held a ball for her and all.”

Victor recognised the name, focused very hard on not letting his face betray it. The paper-wrapped shawl he still held burned his hands.

“Except…” Lynch drew the word out. “She wasn’t really a lady after all. Or even a woman. His name was Jack Thatcher.”

Henry’s eyebrows rose, the surprise genuine. “That’s certainly… interesting. Did you manage to track her—him down? That testimony would be very useful against Gray.”

“I’m not convinced he ever left,” Lynch said. “Gray might have sent him away in secret. Or he might have resumed living as a man, under a different name. But from what I’ve heard, from those who knew him, I’d bet a fair shilling that our old friend Gray made him disappear. Definitively. Not many would miss someone like that, and no one who mattered.”

Victor remembered seeing Angelique at Gray’s ball. He’d spoken to her. Felt nothing towards her, other than resentment that she couldn’t hold Gray’s attention away from Lily. He wondered now if some of that resentment had been born of envy, even then.

Now, he could sympathise. Could envy her even more, for being treated like a lady by an entire room. Could pity her, for falling victim to the snake in silk that Gray was. He wished he hadn’t been so curt towards her.

Henry let out a deep breath. “Can you prove it?”

Lynch shook his head. “Sadly.”

“Then how does it help?”

“It’s interesting.” Lynch’s nonchalance was studied, almost theatrical. “Mr Gray has a reputation in society for being a bit unconventional, a bit dangerous. But if I told you the things I have fair ground to believe he’d engaged in, even you would balk. Not to mention the whispered rumours.”

Victor was tired of Lynch cryptic speech. He’d been worn thin by the strain of the morning and underneath it all was still raw from not having his narcotics to numb him. “I don’t see why you listen to this,” he said to Henry. “If all he has is rumours and drunken fantasies, he has nothing.”

He turned, intending to leave, but Henry gently caught his wrist.

“He wouldn’t be here if he had nothing.” The vexation was gone, his demeanour now held only
“Indeed not, my lord,” Lynch replied solemnly. “Though I’ve had a hard time proving anything sordid, it’s not so when it comes to the mundane. That fancy mansion of his? Turns out that he doesn’t own it. It belongs to an Oliver Graeme, who bought it in 1814 and left the country for Italy in ‘36. For whatever reason, he’s still listed as the owner, though he’d need be well over a hundred now and almost certainly dead.”

“There might be a completely reasonable explanation.” But Henry was interested now.

His fingers were still around Victor’s wrist, forgotten.

“Maybe so, my lord.” Lynch smiled like a cat. “But not one for conducting business in Graeme’s name. That happens to be a wee bit illegal, and the business such that it’ll cost him dearly if one was to bring it to the attention of the proper authorities.”

Victor wasn’t certain what to make of that. Wasn’t certain what to make of anything he’d heard. He found the discussion increasingly hard to follow. He wanted to return to his room. Wanted to hide the shawl that seemed to burn his skin. Wanted back to Henry’s quiet apartment where it had just been the two of them and not dozens of strangers.

“Even if forewarned, he won’t be able to cover his tracks. Just say the word and I’ll have him on the street.”

Henry shook his head. “Not now. Preferably never.”

“Of course.” Lynch clasped his hands in front of him. “Would you prefer I sent a carefully worded letter, then? Leaving out your name, and mine, but making certain that he understands that going after Dr Frankenstein will mean his ruin?”

“Don’t keep my name out.” Henry’s expression turned dark. “I want him to know who holds his fate in his hands.”

“Is that wise? Considering…” Lynch didn’t look at the shawl. “After all, he might turn the same scrutiny on you.”

He looked at Henry’s loose grip on Victor’s wrist then, Victor wasn’t imagining it.

Henry quickly let him go.

“Henry, let’s please just be careful.” Victor wouldn’t be able to bear to be the cause of Henry’s disgrace. “I want it over with.”

Henry’s mouth turned down, but he acquiesced. “Fine. Leave my name out of it, Lynch. Make it clear that he’ll be left alone as long as he does Dr Frankenstein the same courtesy.”

“Very good, my lord.” Lynch added a curt bow. “As for the other matter…”

Victor had heard more than enough of this and the tension between Henry and Lynch was wearying. “I’m returning to my room.”

Henry caught his hand, again. “Just a moment.” His grip didn’t linger this time and his gaze stayed on Lynch. “You realise there will have to be a transition period?”

Victor had the distinct feeling that Lynch had made note of Henry’s brief touch, but the Irishman
Henry simply said, “Aye, I’ll have to learn the house, suss out which of the staff that’s worth keeping.”

Henry was having Lynch work on something else? Something to do with the staff? But by the look on Lynch’s face, Victor had to wonder if this didn’t have to do with Henry’s debt to him.

“Preferably none of them.” Henry’s voice was close to a grumble. “Ask Mr Branby to come here.” As Lynch went for the door, Victor whispered to Henry. “What is it you owe him? And why?”

Henry smirked. “Make sure Branby doesn’t see what’s in that parcel.”

And Victor’s attention was consumed by quickly and discreetly making sure that not a single deep blue thread was visible through the hole in the newspaper. When he’d done so, the butler was approaching.

“My lord.”

“Branby.” There was a distinct coldness to Henry’s voice. “Mr Lynch will be working here as the new under-butler. Please, make certain he’s well looked after.”

Victor forgot all about the parcel he was holding. Lynch, as a servant? Here? He must have heard Henry wrong.

“My lord, if I may…” Branby sounded displeased. “This house has no need for an under-butler. I am more than adequate for the tasks required.”

“I did not ask for your opinion, Branby.” Henry’s voice cooled another few degrees. “I am informing you that I have employed Mr Lynch and instructing you to acquaint him with the house and how it’s run. Is that understood?”

The butler’s back stiffened. “Yes, my lord.”

Lynch, on the other hand, looked like the cat who got the cream, and failing to hide it. “I’m certain I will enjoy working under you, Mr Branby. I’ll have a lot to learn from you.” His brogue was once again softened until it was almost gone.

“Get going then,” Henry said, dismissing them.

Victor watched them leave, disbelieving. “You want Lynch to work here?” Considering how the man spoke to Henry, it was the last thing Victor would have expected.

“As long as I’ve known him, he’s always wanted to be a butler in a grand house, for whatever reason.” Henry gestured to the empty room they stood in. “I was his ticket.” Despite the words, he didn’t sound displeased, rather the opposite.

“And you’re happy with that?” Victor was protesting perhaps more than he ought but Lynch unsettled him. He knew far more than he should already. “You don’t think having a man like that so close might be a mistake?”

Henry’s expression sobered. “I trust him as I trust very few people. You can too.”

Victor wasn’t sure he ever would, and let his face show his misgivings.

Henry sighed. “I need a butler. God knows I can’t have old Branby; he’s far too much my father’s creature. Give Lynch a chance, Victor.”
“Why do you trust him?” Henry wasn’t a trusting person. When they’d first met it’d taken a long time for him to let Victor close.

Henry turned his back on the door through which the butlers had left, his gaze going to the large windows. “He’s proven that I can. He’s done what I asked him for little or no pay beyond the promise of an uncertain reward. When he’s come across information that might damage me, he’s kept it quiet. And he’s been immensely useful to me.” Henry met Victor’s gaze again. “Without the information he’s sought out, I wouldn’t have secured my position at Bedlam. And possibly not even this house, now.”

Victor couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “Not blackmail, Henry…?”

Henry made a grimace: dislike of the word. He didn’t deny it. “I had to offset my disadvantages.”

On second thought, Victor could believe it. Henry had a core of steel, and none of the illusions of the state of the world Victor clung to.

“Still…” He didn’t know what else to say. Part of him rebelled against the thought that his Henry would stoop so low. Be so callous.

Henry’s gaze was on the sky outside, tension in his shoulders. Victor was still tired, still wanting to retreat but not as much as he wanted to keep Henry’s attention for a moment longer.

“It could have been you,” Henry said.

“What could?” Victor tried to think of what Henry was referring to.

“That… woman Gray had killed.” Henry was frowning now, still staring out the window. “Or that man, I don’t know. It could have been you.”

The comparison didn’t sit right with Victor. “I was hardly in the same position.” Angelique and Gray had been intimate friends. Victor might like to dress as a woman, but he had no inclination to go further than that.

Henry faced him, eyes full of heat. “If I hadn’t asked you to come with me, if he had found out, then it could have been you, dead.”

Victor felt so tired. “If I hadn’t come with you…”

Henry would still be busy with his grand house. Victor would have had his narcotics and the solitude to indulge in them. And maybe their increasing differences would have driven a wedge between them. It still could.

“…you’d still have this,” he finished weakly, gesturing around the room.

Henry crushed him to his chest. “You absolute fool!” he hissed.

Victor barely had time to react before Henry released him just as suddenly. He took a stumbling step back, readjusting.

Henry had already turned for the door. “Go lay down; you look dead on your feet.”
What, no dresses? I hope there's still people reading, and I haven't scared everyone off with long updating times and slooooow storytelling. I'll be quicker with the next chapter! Thank you all who got this far!
Falling

Chapter Notes

Let there be dresses...
There's an actual waltz in this chapter. I spent some time on youtube trying to find some music that fit and Chopin's Waltz in A minor, Op. 34, No. 2 captures the mood I'm going for, if you'd like to listen while you read.

Chapter specific warnings: some drug cravings, internalised transphobia, arguing and distrust.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After that frankly quite confusing episode, Henry vanished and was absent for a while. Victor recognised the behaviour: Henry’s response to agitation. Victor was used to it and didn’t mind it that much. Except he did. But what he truly minded was the boredom.

Two more days passed like that. Another pair of long and lonely days, because although Henry wasn’t gone more than hours, he was constantly absorbed by other things. Victor saw him at meals, but surrounded by servants as they were, it was hardly seeing him at all. The only time they were alone were the nights, when Henry still slept in Victor’s room.

Victor kept expecting him not to come. But every night so far, after the house had gone to sleep, the door would open and Henry appear. Victor was glad for it. He’d slept lightly and dreamt vividly since he’d stopped taking the morphine. The dream of the asylum hadn’t returned, but every night he feared it.

The days were too long. Endless, ceaseless, unrelenting. He tried to read, tried to write, tried to draw and quickly abandoned the attempt. He felt a mad wish for a needle, not the one of his profession, but the embroiderer’s. Half an hour’s brisk pacing silenced that thought. He missed having work to occupy him. His own work, his peaceful dead.

Which always brought his mind to the same place.

Lily.

Lynch had said she’d left Gray. Part of Victor felt vindicated, pleased that Gray too had failed to keep her interest. And part of him – a small, pitiful part – wanted to chase after her. It had been good for a while. Perhaps it could have been good again.

But then he remembered the terrible coldness in Lily’s eyes and his heart broke anew.

Remembered the coldness in Henry’s eyes in the dream.

Remembered all his own sins, his failures, fears and grief and shame. Felt it all so keenly. At times it was as if his heart was seizing in his chest, the physicality of it frightening. All he wanted was to flee back into the mist of narcotics, and only the thought of Henry’s disappointment stopped him.

He wanted to be angry with Henry for abandoning him here, but his self-disgust choked him.
There was one escape that remained to him.

An expensive chair under the door handle would buy him time, if nothing else. He drew the curtains – though there was a thick fog outside and no one would see in.

Finally, Victor pulled out his suitcase and hurriedly undressed.

He hadn’t done this since he’d stopped taking the morphine. Part of him wondered if this habit might release his grip on him as well; if it might be repulsive to him in sobriety. And if so, what would he do to soothe his inner turmoil?

But even with a clear head, with every item of clothing the clouds lifted and his heart filled. Finally dressed, complete, his troubles seemed distant. Manageable maybe. Kept at bay by a shield of fabric now, not chemicals.

He turned to the mirror, much larger than any he could have afforded. He still looked out of place, his dress too plain against the gilded frame, but he could finally see himself from top to stocking-clad toe. (He didn’t need his plain, dull shoes on these smooth floors.) He liked the way he looked.

Without the morphine he felt the fabric against his skin more keenly, felt more grounded in his body than before. He thought back to the dream, resolutely focusing only on the beginning of it. He let his fingers trace his bosom, shaped by the corset and padded to fill it the slightest bit, giving the suggestion of a woman’s chest.

Would he want that, even if it was possible? He couldn’t say. On one hand, the thought was frighteningly seductive, on the other, it would mean giving something up. And it wasn’t possible.

The thought brought sadness.

He pushed it away, turning from the mirror. The house’s library was undergoing some kind of inventory and never unoccupied; Victor stayed away from it. What remained was Henry’s own books, though he was more interested in dry prose than poetry. The one coming closest to Shakespeare was a regrettably thin thing entitled *A Portrait of Mr W. H.*

Victor lay on the bed, arranged his skirts around him and began to read.

He startled awake from vague, uneasy dreams by the scrape of the chair. He was up on his elbows, heart in his throat, before he heard Henry call out in bewilderment. Victor fell back against the bed, pulse hammering, chest heaving against the corset – not against leather straps. Letting Henry work the door open on his own seemed only fitting payment for startling Victor.

Henry’s expression softened as he saw Victor’s dress. He sat down on the bed, taking the book from Victor’s lap and gently putting it to the side. “Have I been remiss in my duties as a host?”

Victor felt a prick of bitterness. “I know you’re busy.” Better than actually answering. He fluffed up his pillows, pushing himself upright against the headboard.

He’d forgotten the skirts. They slid up to reveal his legs to the knees along with his pale yellow garters. Victor saw Henry’s eyes catch on them and hurried to cover up, blushing. He shouldn’t be embarrassed; Henry had seen his legs without even stockings to cover them. But that was the issue; what did Henry think? How did he interpret the stockings and garters, Victor’s attention to every detail?
“I will make time for you.” Henry raised his gaze. He tested Victor’s temperature with a light touch to the forehead. “Tomorrow. I’ll have the servants stay downstairs and you and I can have this floor to ourselves.”

“Do it today.” Victor didn’t want to stay in his room any longer, didn’t want to wait and think and feel and crave the morphine he’d given up.

Henry shook his head. “There’s something important I need to oversee.”

Something scathing was on the tip of Victor’s tongue, anything to relieve the pressure inside, postpone his solitude.

Henry reached out and rubbed his thumb over Victor’s cheek, just below the corner of his eye.

“It’s a bit smudged; were you sleeping?” Henry’s fingers brushed Victor’s skin as he let his hand fall, taking Victor’s own.

The touch was soft and unexpected enough to keep Victor from voicing the sharp words. “Just resting,” he muttered.

“How are you feeling?” A shadow of the doctor crept into Henry’s voice. He turned Victor’s wrist over, examining the fading needle-marks, before tugging down the lace-trimmed sleeve to cover them.

“Better.” And tired of the question. Victor pulled his hand free, getting off the bed and taking better care not to bare his legs. It was an art form, moving in a skirt.

He sat at the dressing table. His makeup wasn’t really smudged, just a bit softened around the eyes.

Henry’s reflection appeared right behind Victor’s. “You are doing well.”

Was he, though?

The Victor in the mirror looked pale and worn, despite his best efforts with the cosmetics. The sight, which just moments ago had brought joy to his heart, now brought only self-disgust.

What did Henry see? An addict? A patient?

A subject?

A flash of the dream, the horrible feeling of being unable to move, to speak.

It had been unreal. But it wasn’t outside the realm of possibility. Rather the logical conclusion; once Henry was finished with his observations, what else was there?

“I need to get back,” Henry said with a sigh.

His manner was warm now, but Victor remembered the detachment he’d display towards the patients; a darker flavour of the same detachment every doctor developed over time.

“Wait.”

Henry paused, half turned away. Frowning at Victor’s grim tone of voice.

“There’s something I need to know.” Victor turned around, unwilling to have this conversation through the mirror. “And be truthful.”
Henry nodded, still looking nonplussed.

Victor took a deep breath. “Do you intend to use the serum on me?”

No taking it back.

“No,” Henry replied, still frowning. “I don’t know that it would work against an overdependence, and besides, I don’t think such drastic measures are-”

Victor slammed his hand on the table. “Not because of the morphine!” He had to close his eyes against the yearning for it. “Because of this!” He gestured to his dress.

Henry maintained his confused expression and Victor’s frustration grew. Henry would at least do him the courtesy of acknowledging that he’d harboured the thought.

“Don’t deny it! This was scientific curiosity to you from the start.” He rose, drawing himself as tall as he could. “Another foray into the dark corners of the human psyche. And once you’ve completed your observations? Then what?”

Alarm and horror crept into Henry’s demeanour as he listened, a better act than Victor would have thought him capable of. “You think I…? No! I would never-”

He reached for Victor’s hands, but Victor pulled them away. “Why not? You’ve been happy enough to study my condition thus far.”

“Is that what you’ve thought all this time?” The sadness in Henry’s voice sounded genuine, giving Victor pause. “It was never that, Victor.”

Victor scoffed. “Of course it was; you even said as much.”


Victor watched him pace, the anger and frustration cooling into heavy gloom in his chest. He sank back down on his chair. Henry was just going to keep denying it, not even letting Victor have the peace of mind that knowing would bring.

Oh, how he wanted the needle.

Henry took a deep breath, turning to Victor again. “I think this is good for you.”

Victor opened his mouth to retort, but Henry held up his hand, stepping close.

“I have studied you, but only ever out of concern.” He knelt down, right there on the floor. The gesture was bizarre enough that Victor didn’t think to resist when Henry again took his hands. “I never saw you as a subject.”

“Why all the questions then?” Victor immediately shot back, but his conviction was shaken.

“Why…” Why have you acted so strangely?

“Because you’re my friend, Victor.” Henry shook his head. “And I didn’t understand. But I think I do now.”

Victor pulled a hand free, stopping himself just before he rubbed his face and ruined his makeup.

“Tomorrow,” Henry repeated insistently. “There’s something I need to do first, but then my time is
That evening, Victor almost didn’t expect Henry to come. But he did, though later than was his wont. Victor lay still and quiet. The air between them felt oddly charged. Henry must have suspected he was awake, but didn’t speak.

When Victor woke, Henry was already up and gone. How he’d gotten up without waking Victor was anyone’s guess. Perhaps it was just as well, because Victor’s face was pressed to Henry’s pillow, a variation of the dream ringing through his mind: Henry on top of him and the syringe in his hand. Victor wasn’t sure whether it held numbness or erasure.

He threw the duvet off and left the bed.

It was evening before Henry made his intentions known. By then Victor was a strange mix of bored and anxious. He’d eaten dinner alone, feeling ridiculous at the large table. His mind kept circling back to yesterday’s conversation. The more he thought about it, the more he felt like Henry hadn’t said anything at all. If this wasn’t a scientific observation – and Victor found himself beginning to believe this – then what was it? Support? Loyalty? A way for Henry to reknit the bonds of friendship, tighter than before? To make certain Victor wouldn’t disappear again?

Henry had said he understood, but Victor wasn’t sure he understood this himself.

And then there was the way Henry acted. Kneeling. Taking Victor’s hands. Henry had always favoured the physical to command attention. But usually by a friendly touch to the arm or shoulders, not… this. It was so much in character for him and so completely alien at the same time.

Could it be…?

Could it be that Henry really thought of Victor as a woman when he dressed like that?

It was shamefully absurd. Of course not. Victor was a fool for even thinking it.

He rose from the wing-backed chair that had been his refuge, pacing and finally stopping at the window, hoping the relentless dark fog would part and offer him anything to take his mind from this room. He could go insane here, like this. Would do so, unless Henry appeared soon.

As if summoned by that thought, a knock sounded.

“Come in,” Victor immediately replied.

The door opened an inch. “It’s Lynch, sir. May I enter?”

Lynch, not Henry. Victor’s spirits sank.

“Go ahead.” And to make matters worse: the way Lynch had waited before entering.

Considering he’d been the one to retrieve the shawl, Victor didn’t want to think about why the man was so hesitant.

The new under-butler stepped inside the door, closed it behind him and straightened to his full length. “Lord Hyde requests your presence.”

Stranger and stranger. Had Victor been in a different mind, he might have said that Lord Hyde could
very well come and get him himself. But he wanted to end this anxious hypothesising and ask Henry what it was he wasn’t saying. So he simply let Lynch lead the way.

Henry was in his own rooms, the ones he hadn’t slept in since they’d moved here. Lynch knocked on the door, waiting for reply and entering, all with his punctilious manners. “Dr Frankenstein, my lord.”

There was a small dressing room before the bedroom proper, though ‘small’ was a relative term. Henry turned from the fire in the hearth. He looked as if he was going somewhere, or just come from outside, his clothes new and clearly expensive.

“Victor.” He smiled.

“My lord,” Victor muttered as Lynch made a quiet exit.

Henry’s smile turned rueful. “Forgive me; I wanted to get changed.”

“Are we going somewhere?” Victor asked, taking a second look at Henry’s new waistcoat and dinner jacket, both black. Maybe he should have changed, though he still wouldn’t be dressed to match Henry’s class. On the other hand, Henry was very lucky Victor hadn’t, considering he’d sent Lynch rather than go himself.

“In a way,” Henry replied, his expression strangely intense. He took a few steps to the bedroom door, holding it open. “I have something for you.”

Victor hesitated, wondering what on earth Henry had in mind. He crossed the threshold, entering a room that surprisingly wasn’t much grander than his own.

There was a significant number of boxes and parcels stacked on the bed. Such as those one might get at a modiste’s.

Henry’s footsteps followed him. “It’s not just the estate that’s taken up my time.” His voice grew quieter, unsure even, perhaps. “I said I’d buy you a dress.”

“Henry…” Victor’s chest grew tight. He didn’t want to be on the receiving end of charity. Didn’t want to think this was nothing more than an apology, or pity. “I don’t…”

“Let me give you this. Please.” Henry put his hands on Victor’s shoulders and steered him towards the bed. “It does you good,” he whispered, and Victor didn’t have the words to protest. “And it makes me happy to do something for you.”

“You already do too much.” Victor reached out and touched the lid of a box.

“Not enough.”

Victor lifted the lid just enough to see pale blue fabric inside.

“Just have a look and then do as you wish. I’ll wait outside.”

The lid slid off. Inside lay a dress, silk by the sheen of it, the bodice discreetly embroidered with flowers and vines in blue. Victor’s fingers itched to touch it.

The door clicked closed behind him; he lifted the dress free. The skirt rustled expensively as he shook it out. It was beautiful. Too beautiful, if anything. Stylish in cut, the neckline was wider than that of his blouse, but still modest, he thought. But the sleeves – hugging the shoulders and then
flaring – ended far above the elbow, and Victor wasn’t too sure about that. His arms were covered in scars and still-fading bruises that would make a violent contrast to a dress like this.

The fabric shimmered in the light, making his heart ache. He didn’t have to wear anything. He could just look.

The next parcel contained several white petticoats. It felt unnecessary when he already had a few, though in flannel and linen rather than silk. When he continued searching he found more underwear, all similarly expensive in material and design. Especially surprising was a corset in a slightly darker shade of blue than the dress. It was clearly made for a shape more similar to his than a woman’s.

He couldn’t quite imagine Henry buying these, but here they were.

There were ordinary men’s clothes as well, but Victor dismissed them as uninteresting, though he would still have a word with Henry about them later. He similarly put a dark day dress and a white gown to the side. One box contained cosmetics and a bottle of perfume with the scent of roses and orange blossoms. And then, astonishingly, shoes in his size, one pair with high heels and one with more modest.

The last box he opened held a wig, sitting on a round pillow, already arranged.

Victor almost didn’t dare to touch that. He’d never once considered one, though he lamented his short hair often enough. Come to think of it, it wasn’t that short anymore; he was overdue for a haircut.

He was procrastinating, postponing a decision he really needed to come to. The items on the bed would have cost a fair sum; though Henry’s finances could weather it, Victor couldn’t have afforded half of it in a year. This was more than a shawl, however fine. More than friendly indulgence.

He sat down, wondering if he in good conscience could accept Henry’s gift, and if not: how he could refuse it without giving offence.

Something gave way beneath him, a small, rectangular box, hidden by discarded paper wrapping. Inside were a pair of cream gloves, long enough to reach well above the elbow.

Victor’s resistance broke.

There was a distinct difference to having silk next to your skin compared to linen, one Victor hadn’t known. After wearing just the undergarments he was committed. A large part was the corset; it fit him, requiring only the slightest padding at the bosom. He almost wondered if Henry had secretly taken his measurements.

It also presented a problem.

Victor’s old corset was misshapen enough that he laced it first and then put it on using the hook-and-eyes down the front without thinking of it. It was made to be worn that way and its fit was bad either way. This one, being far better quality, really demanded being laced while worn.

And there was only one person to do so.

Victor looked himself over. He was nowhere near presentable. The white petticoat he wore revealed the outline of his legs every time he moved and the chemise under the corset was without sleeves, leaving his shoulders entirely bare. He wished he had his shawl, but that was in his room.

He poked his head out. Henry was sat in a chair by the hearth, illuminated by a small fire, as well as
a brighter lamp. He’d been reading, but looked up as Victor tapped a knock against the wood.

“I need help with the corset.” He took a step out from behind the door.

Henry’s eyebrows rose and his mouth opened and closed before he found words. “You don’t, usually.”

The awkwardness on Henry’s face was enough that Victor had to suppress his sudden amusement; it wouldn’t earn him any help. “It’s a different corset,” he replied instead, watching as Henry’s eyes flickered to the garment in question and then quickly back to Victor’s face.

“Fine.”

Considering they’d shared accommodations since their days at Cambridge and seen each other dressed down to almost nothing, not to mention that Henry would have seen his share of corsets as a doctor, he really was too flustered. Over Victor, on the other hand, a strange calm settled. This was nothing compared to the first time he’d stepped out of his bedroom in skirt and makeup under Henry’s eyes.

“A bit tighter.” He tried not to sound out of breath.

Henry grumbled, but pulled the laces tighter. “Will you not be happy until I crack your ribs?”

Victor would have replied, had he had the air to do so.

Finally, he was satisfied. The figure in the mirror had been given a waist, and the hint of hips, and he was forced to breathe with his upper chest like any noble lady. He almost couldn’t believe what he saw; it seemed too good.

The mirror also caught Henry, his eyes on Victor’s reflected form.

Victor turned, misgivings forgotten and mischief taking their place. “You really shouldn’t be here, my lord; I’m not decent.”

To his surprise and delight, Henry abruptly averted his gaze, and Victor could have sworn he blushed. “You just…” he begun. “Try not to faint in that corset, and don’t say I haven’t warned you.” Then he left, still not looking at Victor.

Victor waited until the door closed to chuckle. The he turned back to the bed and its treasures.

The dress fit him perfectly. But the neckline, which had looked modest before, seemed both deeper and wider now. It followed the curvature of his clavicles from acromion to sternum and wasn’t flattered by the hair that lamentably grew there. Victor stared at it for a moment, before deciding his colour was fair enough that it wouldn’t be all that noticeable, and that it shouldn’t matter either way. Only Henry would see him. He could always shave it later.

The cosmetics were of very fine quality. Victor remembered the time Vanessa had done this for him, not without guilt; it had been weeks since he’d called on her. He should really take a moment to write. Against his better judgement – it would linger – he put a drop of perfume on his neck, filling the air with the fragrance of flowers.

At the very last, he carefully removed the wig from its box. It was a shade lighter than his own hair, curled and held in place with glittering ornaments. Victor had no skill in hairdressing, couldn’t quite see how it was done.
He looked in the mirror. He already adored what he saw; his hair so familiar now that it didn’t bother him much. But…

It took a little while to make the wig sit securely and not reveal any of his own hair. He wondered who the wigmaker had had in mind when making it. An older lady looking to conceal her thinning hair? A younger one seeking something different for a night? Or perhaps a spy, trying to make herself unrecognisable?

That imagined lady could not have felt more beautiful than Victor did. With the wig, he suddenly had the silhouette of a woman. The wide skirts, the thin waist and the hair gathered at the crown of his head. A few ringlets had been left free to frame his face. It almost felt too real to look at.

Victor tugged his gloves a bit further up, making sure his elbows were fully covered, and turned to the door.

Funny, he’d been comfortable while wearing only undergarments, but now, when fully dressed and looking as much the part of a woman as he ever would, his heart pounded.

Henry was in the other chair, no longer facing the bedroom door. It took him a moment to turn around, a moment in which Victor had time to consider and reconsider his course. His mind kept returning to the fear that this time, Henry would turn around and laugh.

Henry turned around and stilled, eyes running up and down Victor’s form. Victor shivered. Henry was almost motionless, his gaze almost physical as it took Victor in. For a long moment, there was silence.

“What do you think?” Victor finally whispered.

“You look beautiful,” Henry said solemnly, rising. He, on the other hand, seemed far more collected now. “How do you feel?”

Victor flushed, smoothening his skirts. “Far more complete than I could have ever hoped.”

“I wasn’t sure you’d like this.” Henry lifted his hand and touched a lock at Victor’s temple.

“Do you like it?” Victor asked before he could check himself, and immediately regretted it.

Henry seemed to give the question serious consideration, studying the wig. Then he smiled and said, likely repaying Victor for his earlier teasing, “You are just as beautiful without it.”

“Henry,” Victor admonished, though it lacked the forcefulness he wanted. He didn’t want Henry to say such things; it wasn’t needed and more than a little inappropriate, if not more so than the rest of this. But the words wouldn’t come.

“There’s something else I want to show you.” Henry extended his elbow for Victor to take.

Victor needed the support in the high-heeled shoes he’d chosen. They weren’t as easy to walk in as he’d thought, but didn’t subtract from the quiet delight he felt. His skirts made a silky rustle and the corset kept his back rigidly straight; when permitted to walk slowly he felt like he was gliding across the floor.

Henry stayed on the upper floor, from which he’d banished the servants. Victor realised he was leading the way to the large, empty room where Lynch had made his appearance before.

Candles shone from the chandeliers and the curtains were drawn against the fog outside. Along the
walls were chairs and settees, tables and flowers, but the floor was kept clear. Victor had an idea of where this was going.

Then Henry directed his attention to an item standing by the centre of a wall.

“A phonograph?” And a brand new one; it wasn’t something that had been in the house, but something Henry had bought. Victor couldn’t guess how much it cost but would have dearly liked to examine it closer to see just how it worked.

Henry opened the doors of a small cabinet next to it and withdrew a wax cylinder. “Yes,” he simply said, before bringing the machine to life in a soft waltz.

“It’s excessive.” Victor didn’t manage to inject any conviction into his voice.

“Can you dance in those shoes?” Henry extended his hand and Victor took it without thought.

Henry led them to the centre of the room. Victor wanted to ask him to wait – it was too much too quickly – but at the same time he wanted so badly to follow him in this fantasy and see where it would lead.

Henry turned to face him, and his arm was a little firmer around Victor’s waist this time, not trusting Victor not to fall. Victor met his eyes and nodded.

Henry moved and now Victor had to follow both him and the music. For a few steps, he struggled with the habitual urge to lead as the music bid, but then he fell into step with Henry. The skirts swirled around him and he found he could dance in these shoes, and what more, they made him almost Henry’s height.

Henry met his eyes steadily, his expression warm and pleased. Victor’s lips wanted to stretch into a smile and he tried to suppress it; he really looked more ladylike if he didn’t smile. But the more they found how to move with each other and the music, the more fluent and satisfying the dance became, the harder the smile became to hold back.

Henry smiled back and Victor’s head spun. They were close, too close, although not much closer than before. It was Victor who had changed, outside and in. Henry as well, perhaps: finally possessing all the power and wealth he’d desired. And Victor wondered: would it change things between them?

The music ended, leaving the thought reverberating through Victor’s mind.

“It’s better like this, isn’t it?” Henry’s voice was just above a whisper, and Victor wasn’t sure it was the music he referred to.

“Yes,” he replied, nonetheless.

Henry hadn’t stepped back, hadn’t let him go and Victor was beginning to wonder if he’d be able to stand on his own once Henry did. His heart was beating far heavier than was justified by the light exercise.

“Henry, why are you doing this?” He’d resolved to get an answer out of Henry tonight.

“It helps keep you away from the morphine.” His tone was far too soft for such clinical words.

“No, I mean…” Victor felt far more intoxicated now than the morphine ever had managed. “What does it give you?”
“What makes you think I want anything else?” Henry’s grip slid from Victor’s hand; he trailed his fingers along the ridge of the radius, up the humerus, breaking eye contact to follow it as it touched the bare skin between glove and sleeve. “Can’t I just wish to see my true friend healthy?”

His fingers slid over Victor’s shoulder, along the edge of the trapezius, leaving the skin tingling. His other hand was still on Victor’s back, Victor’s hand still on Henry’s shoulder and tightening in the fabric of his jacket.

They were very close now, dangerously close to something new, and Victor’s brain told him to step back, out of reach and break the contact between them. His body swayed a little closer, drawn in as Henry traced his fingers downwards, following the sternocleidomastoid and stopping at his clavicle and the edge of his neckline. Victor’s heart was hammering. Their noses nearly brushed as Victor tilted his head a little further up. He could feel Henry’s breath against his face, but Henry’s eyes were still on Victor’s skin.

“Henry…” It took every ounce of strength not to lean in.

Henry looked up and met Victor’s gaze for the smallest fraction of a second.

He startled back, eyes wide and frightened. “I didn’t mean to do that.”

Suddenly released, Victor swayed. His muscles felt weak, and he couldn’t catch enough air against the constraint of the corset. He would have fallen, had Henry’s arms not returned and caught him. Victor heard him curse, felt himself being lifted.

The next thing he knew, he was on a settee and Henry had his feet up to let the blood flow back to his head. Victor felt him withdraw and caught his hand, tugging him down to sit awkwardly half on top of Victor’s skirts.

“I told you the corset was too tight,” Henry said stiffly, pulling his hand out of Victor’s grasp. His face was still averted.

Victor wondered if the illusion had become too real for them both for a moment.

“Henry…” He reached again for Henry’s hand. “Did you…?” It couldn’t have been only Victor who felt that.

As soon as he touched Henry’s skin, Henry jerked his hand away. He rose, back firmly turned on Victor. “I’ll have your things brought to your room. Goodnight.” Then he as good as fled, his strides too long for Victor to keep up, even if he could have managed to get to his feet in time.

Chapter End Notes

I’m only now realising how many chapters I’ve ended with Henry walking away... Well, only one chapter left now - let's hope I don't end it the same way!
Victor made his way back to his room alone, the events of that evening repeating in his mind. The dance, the silence, Henry’s lingering touch.

He lowered his own hand from where it’d been covering his upper arm.

He saw why Henry had left. When he lost control of a situation, Henry’s way to regain it had most often been violence. When Victor was the catalyst, Henry turned the violence elsewhere, or left to let his head cool off.

Henry’s reaction was understandable. He could be forgiven for letting himself be drawn in by the illusion. It was Victor who had acted unseemly. He was the corrupting agent.

He had, in that moment, wanted everything Henry had seemed to offer. Propriety be damned. A simmering heat had filled him, a soft feeling that had been there in his dreams. The dreams in which he was a woman. And, in which Henry was always present.

In his own room, Victor was faced with undressing. It felt akin to peeling away layers of his own skin. He didn’t want to change back. For the first time he found nothing that drew him to do so. Not his work, not social commitments, not even the need to leave the house for more narcotics. He wanted to stay in the fantasy. For tonight at least.

In the end, he dressed down to nothing. The dress wouldn’t fit in his suitcase, so he hung it in the back of his closet. The few items of clothing he owned offered paltry cover. Then he put on his old chemise, the linen worn soft. Finally he turned down the lights and crept under the covers.

He wasn’t surprised, but still disappointed, when Henry didn’t appear that night.

Henry didn’t usually stay upset for this long.

It was nearly noon, Victor was dressed in his better pair of trousers – his everyday ones left in Henry’s room – and no waistcoat – for the same reason. He’d written and scrapped several letters to Vanessa, shamefully more out of guilt and a need for diversion than out of friendship. Had he been a true friend to her he would have called on her; all he did was pass the time until Henry reappeared.

At noon Victor finally went looking for him and found that he had vanished entirely. The servants didn’t seem to know where their master was and Lynch, who might know something more, seemed to have disappeared as well. When Victor finally cornered Branby, the butler reluctantly divulged
that ‘his lordship’ was not expected to return until evening.

Victor ate a lonely lunch, leaving most of his meal uneaten before returning to his room. There, he found the missing Lynch.

“Dr Frankenstein,” Lynch said with a small bow. “I am just bringing the last of them.” He gestured to the very same boxes that had been on Henry’s bed last night. “You will have to unpack them yourself, I’m afraid. The staff is told to leave your wardrobe alone.”

“Lynch, where is Lord Hyde?” Victor kept his voice hard to hide the disappointment that sank in his stomach. He would have answers out of this man.

“He didn’t say,” Lynch replied, his accent returning to its old cadence and his stance relaxing. “Said he’d be late, though, so I’d say not to wait up for him.”

“How late?”

“It’s a dreadful fog out. Making people sick, I hear.” Lynch smiled sympathetically. “I’d not dare guess; with these conditions it may be well into the night, or even tomorrow.”

Lynch was, plainly, obfuscating – and casually edging towards the door as he did so. Victor took a step to the side, preventing a discreet retreat. “You know where he is. Tell me.”

“I don’t, sir.” Lynch’s manner didn’t betray any sign of his foiled escape. “Don’t worry with that one. He’ll cool down soon enough and come crawling back to you. I’ve never seen him as smitten.”

Victor’s heart stopped. Lynch believed… Must have believed, all this time. He’d found the shawl. He’d brought the parcels.

Whatever was written on Victor’s face made Lynch’s smile fade.

“What do you mean?” Victor’s voice was inflectionless with shock.

“Don’t listen to me, sir.” Lynch’s accent thickened into nigh incomprehensibility. As if he realised he’d said too much. “Lets me tongue run away with me. I’ll best be off.”

Victor slammed his palm against the door, just as the under-butler reached for it. “You will tell me what you know. Now.”

Lynch turned, the smile back and more insincere than ever. “I apologise if it sounded as if I implied something, I merely meant-”

“You think I’m some effete milksop,” Victor interrupted, voice cold. “But my hands are not free from blood, Mr Lynch. I’ve seen horrors that would freeze yours in your veins. And I will use every scrap of influence I have in this house to ensure you end up in the streets if not in prison, unless you tell me what you know of Henry Jekyll.”

Lynch’s face was an expressionless mask. His eyes, flat as a corpse’s, darted across Victor’s face. Judging. Calculating.

“He’ll not like it,” he said, at long last.

“That will be my problem, not yours.”

Lynch straightened, taking a step back from the door. “I’ve kept out of it, mostly. Not that I judge him for it; what he does is between him and whatever God he chooses to pray to. I just don’t share
his taste.”

“Lynch…” Victor made a passable impression of Henry’s warning tone.

Lynch sighed. “The lad moves in circles with gentlemen of a certain… predilection. They form a loose society, a gentlemen’s club if you will – though nothing as formal – of individuals with this particular interest. Very hush-hush. Afraid of the scandal as much as the law, I suspect.”

“These… gentlemen…” Victor must be misunderstanding. What Lynch seemed to imply did not agree with Victor’s image of Henry. “You don’t mean they…? That he…?”

“Prefers the company of other gentlemen?” Lynch said soberly. “I caught him in the act of preferring once myself.”

“God…” Victor turned, not caring if Lynch slunk away – wishing it actually. If he’d just let Lynch leave Victor wouldn’t have to try to come to terms with Henry as… as…

As someone like himself.

“You can go,” he mumbled. He needed to be alone. Lurched towards the window and its endless fog.

“You must keep it secret.” Lynch’s voice drew nearer rather than further away. “I know you care for him. Even rumours can be devastating, should they reach the wrong ear.”

“Go away!” Victor leaned his forehead against the cold glass.

“You really didn’t know?” Lynch sounded thoughtful, if not amazed. “I was convinced you two…”

“Be quiet,” Victor whispered, pleading with the cold-eyed demon at his back.

“He’s hiding up in the western tower.” Lynch’s voice turned sympathetic. “Not that it’s much of a tower to speak of, just an extra floor. The nobility has their affectations.” He patted Victor’s shoulder. “Talk to him, lady lad. Before you do anything else.”

Then he finally went away, leaving Victor to stare at the dark nothing outside.

How could he have believed – even for a second – that Henry saw him as a woman?

He really was delusional.

Victor wished he could have believed Lynch was lying, but this simply explained too much. Even disregarding what had happened yesterday, Henry had been far too accepting, far too indulging. No, Henry was the liar, keeping this from Victor while asking him to bare his soul.

The anger washed over Victor in a wave, sweeping away the self-loathing that threatened to crush him. He embraced it. Henry had caused this situation. Had encouraged Victor down this path.

Victor knew where he was, and he was going to make Henry hurt.
As he left his room, Victor caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror. Undeniably masculine in shirt and braces. Bitterly, he undid a few shirt buttons.

Let Henry’s traitorous eyes feast on that.

The western tower really was just an extra floor – an architectural feature seemingly in disuse. The curtains were drawn, the landing dark. On one side of it seemed to be a miniscule sitting room, its furniture draped in white sheets. On the other side, a closed door.

It swung open to a touch. Victor saw a bed, long unused; a desk, unshrouded and covered in books; and finally: Henry, stooping to pick up books that looked suspiciously like they’d been swept off the shelf in front of him.

Victor leaned against the doorframe and crossed his arms. “Lynch isn’t as loyal as you thought.”

He was treated to the sight of Henry dropping the books as he startled upright.

“Are you still worrying about him?” Henry wore a mask of unconcern but Victor saw the tension clearly in everything from his face to his voice to his motions when he turned to the desk. “I thought we were past that.”

“He told me about the company you keep. The men.”

Henry stilled. Though turned away, his profile was still visible, his expression blank.

“I will admit I’m surprised.” Victor’s voice was even, his every word aimed to hurt. “Not that you’ve kept it from me for so long, though you could have told me now. But that you’d lower yourself like that.” He scoffed. “Really, Henry; how careless must you have been that Lynch could catch you in the act? Have you no morals? Are you no more than a slave to your baser urges?”

Henry turned with a glare. “You’re one to speak of urges; you and Lily hardly lived as the Church intended.”

Henry was wrong-footed, caught off guard; it was a weak blow.

“At first I thought you wanted me to be your woman because you couldn’t get a real one,” Victor struck back with cold disdain. “After all; who would settle for your company?” Words were his weapon of choice, his way of getting to Henry. “Or should I ask what you must offer the men who do so?”

He saw the blow land. Henry lowered his chin. His grip on the desk whitened and the muscles of his jaw worked to hold in his rage. Victor knew all the signs well.

“After all I’ve done for you…” Henry began, voice quivering with anger.

“What you’ve done!?” Victor exclaimed. “You’ve dragged me down this path of depravity you’re on!”

“I did that? You were in a dress and lipstick before I even got involved!” Henry kept his white-knuckled grip on the desk as if that was all that kept him still. “All I did was buy you what you couldn’t afford. I would expect gratitude from anyone but you.”

“You want gratitude?” Victor couldn’t believe his ears. “Is that what that was – an attempted
Henry closed his eyes, his voice low and dangerous. “Why would I want you, you miserable, malignant excuse for a-”

“Because I’m the only friend you’ve ever made that wasn’t bought or bullied!” Victor’s voice rose without his volition. He quickly brought it back under control and armoured his demeanour with scorn. “And I know you think things will be different now, but they won’t. Even with your title, you’re still just a novelty, an uppity half-breed who-”


“Without me you’d be a corpse, cooling with a needle in its arm.” He seemed at the very limits of control, stepping closer, hands fisted. “I have pushed you into nothing. I’ve done nothing to you. And still you come here, spewing your anger and venom. Why?”

“You lied!” Victor shouted. “After I laid myself bare for you!” Something broke, a deep well of hurt flooded out and the anger gutted like a candle.

If Henry would ever strike him, let it be now. Victor barely cared; let Henry beat him bloody and choke on the guilt. And if Henry felt nothing for doing it, Victor would at least know where they stood.

Henry didn’t move. He looked down on Victor, eyes narrowing. Scrutinising. Analysing. As if Victor had turned into something alien before him.

Victor couldn’t be in the same room as him any longer. He suppressed the quiver in his voice, and spat, with all the venom he could muster “I’d be better off never having known you.”

He turned before he could see his words register on Henry’s face, but Henry’s gaze burned his back as he fled the room.

Victor regretted it.

His accusations. The insults. The entire argument.

He rarely did. He’d stay stiff-necked, maintain his position and wait. Let the matter be forgotten if not forgiven. He and Henry had fought many times, vicious, ugly arguments that ended in cold silences that could sometimes stretch for days.

But this had felt different. More malicious. Like it would fester and turn gangrenous.

Victor had left Henry with the full intention to pack his bag and leave. But pack what? And go where? The thought of returning to his grubby rooms seemed cold and distant in his mind. No more attractive was the thought of begging for board at Grandage Place. The only thought appealing was of Henry’s old apartment, and Victor knew well enough that it wasn’t a place he wanted to return to, but a time.

Lynch had put most of the boxes in a tidy stack on the settee, but the some were on the bed. Victor curled up beside them.
Had he had any access to narcotics he would have had the needle in his vein without second thought. If not for the peasoup outside he might have left for the pharmacist’s. For a brief moment he considered searching Henry’s room, but the risk of facing him so soon made him sick.

Victor still wondered why Henry hadn’t told him. Still hurt. But the destructive urge had passed. He wanted to stay.

But he didn’t know how to make that happen.

Darkness fell and Victor was unmoving. He’d concluded one thing: he would have to talk to Henry. Possibly apologise. But this time, he’d let Henry come to him when he was ready.

Victor told himself it wasn’t cowardice.

The clock in the hallway chimed six, eight, ten.

Midnight.

Henry didn’t come.

Victor rose stiffly. At least Henry hadn’t sent Branby or Lynch to throw him out. He tried to take heart from that. Henry would come tomorrow. Or Victor would seek him out. And to do so he would need sleep, though he feared his dreams.

Henry would come.

Victor removed the clothing from the bed, putting it in the wardrobe without unpacking. What would be the point, when the future was so uncertain? A box fell open as he pushed it in, the garment inside sliding out and pooling on the floor.

What Victor had yesterday taken for a white dress was, in fact, a nightgown.

Fate’s bitter irony.

He should have felt guilty, wearing this after what he’d said to Henry, but instead it was a comfort. The nightgown was thin silk, with silk lace overlying the entire skirt and making up the long, loose sleeves. The neckline was wide like that of the blue dress.

Was that something Henry liked?

Victor turned from the mirror, blinking. The room was cold. He retrieved another treasured keepsake: his silk-fringed shawl, sweeping it around his shoulders before retreating to the bathroom for his evening toilette.

The door was almost soundless.

Victor froze in the act of putting away his toothbrush. It was the door outside; one door remained between him and the intruder. Despite all his hopes that Henry would come, the only thought in Victor’s mind was what if it isn’t him? The fear was irrational; if it wasn’t Henry it would be Lynch, and it seemed increasingly unlikely he’d be surprised at what he saw. But if it wasn’t, if it was any of the other staff…

All of this went through Victor’s mind as he reached for the bathroom door and slowly opened it.
It was Henry. Victor’s stomach flipped with relief even as it tightened in anxiety. Henry didn’t look up. He was sat on the bed, head in his hands and hair obscuring his face. An image of… regret? Victor didn’t dare to hope it.

“Henry…?” he whispered, not knowing what came after.

Henry’s head jerked up, eyes snapping to Victor. “I thought you were gone.”

The sheer relief in his demeanour was echoed in Victor’s chest.

Victor shook his head, needing more, needing to know Henry’s state of mind before speaking.

He saw the moment Henry noticed the nightgown. His gaze swept Victor’s figure, lingering briefly on the shawl around Victor’s shoulders and the hand that held it closed. The sleeve had slipped down to bare his forearm. The shawl was loose enough to show Victor’s neck down to his clavicles. Even odds whether Henry watched needle-marks or skin.

Victor expected a comment about gratitude, waited for Henry’s gaze to turn hard. Henry only looked away.

“It suits you.” A painful admission, not a compliment.

“I shouldn’t have acted as I did.” There, he’d said it. “If…” Victor couldn’t look at him, had to close his eyes to continue. “If you wanted to keep that from me, you had every right.”

It was an utter lie. Victor didn’t mean a word of it. He still felt gravely hurt that Henry would keep his own immorality from Victor. But Victor was willing to let it lie if it meant salvaging their friendship.

“I didn’t tell you...” Henry mumbled into his hands, sounding as if the words were painful to speak. “...because I was afraid. Because I didn’t want to expose you to it. And because I didn’t know how. I thought you’d believe I was propositioning you.” He sighed, letting his hands fall and staring blankly ahead. “Which is exactly what you believed.”

Victor had spent too much time staring at Henry’s profile. He took a few, hesitant steps into the room, putting himself in Henry’s field of vision.

“Henry… What happened yesterday?” It seemed to be at the core of what weighed on Henry. And Victor wanted to know.

Henry let out a deep breath, meeting Victor’s gaze with sorrow in his eyes. “I didn’t mean to do that. It was a momentary lapse. Can you believe that? Can you accept it, and let things be as they were?”

Victor’s heart skipped a beat. Everything he’d hoped to hear, Henry was giving him. Henry’s expression was bleak, clearly expecting Victor to refuse. And Victor felt so light inside, even though the ground they threaded was still so very dangerous.

“Yes,” he said, stepping closer. “And no.”

Henry’s face fell.

Victor sat down next to him. “I won’t leave. Not unless you cast me out. But…”

Henry was watching him, the same hope and despair in his eyes that tore at Victor’s heart.

Victor steeled himself. “I want to know. What you were thinking.” *What you were feeling.*
Henry groaned, turning his face away. “I wasn’t thinking,” he said with bitter self-rebuke. “I have not been leering over you, Victor. I didn’t even— I never even thought about things like… that until I came to London; I’ve not been harbouring some secret obsession over you.”

“I didn’t think you were,” Victor said, though he barely dared to interrupt now that Henry finally seemed willing to talk.

The faint look of gratitude on Henry’s face was worth it. “I met some people here. Made some friends. And yes.” He looked down. “I have been… close with some of them. They are, for the most part, ordinary, decent people. But I’ve never met anyone like you.”

He looked at Victor, really looked, and his eyes were warm. “You are a different person like this. I don’t know if you are aware, but your entire manner changes. I’ve never seen you this… content. And considering how I found you, after all these years, I thought it good. That was all.”

“Until yesterday?” Victor prompted.

“I don’t know what came over me,” Henry mumbled. “It was as if I saw you in a different light.”

“As a man.” Because that was apparently what Henry liked now. Victor carefully suppressed the bitterness he felt.

Henry smiled sadly. “No, not as a man. I think you were the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen.”

Victor hadn’t expected that. He felt as if he’d been dunked into a tub of hot water, a blush starting on his face and spreading down his neck, filling his chest and settling in his stomach. He wanted to tell Henry not to say that, but that would undermine this entire attempt to get him to talk.

Henry’s lips twitched, before the smile faded, leaving only sadness. “Before I realised it I’d reached out and touched.”

He took a deep breath. By the laboured expression on his face, Victor knew what he would say; Henry found apologies as onerous as Victor did.

“Forgive me.”

“There’s nothing to forgive,” Victor quickly replied.

Henry exhaled slowly, nodding. It was clear he didn’t agree, but the important part was that he believed Victor when he said the matter could be put behind them.

Apologies and confessions done with, an uneasy silence settled. Victor wanted to say something to break it and return to the easy atmosphere of yesterday. He could think of nothing. This day had been only tension from the moment he woke and now that things were resolved, if still brittle between them, the weariness was taking its toll.

“I should leave,” Henry said suddenly. “It’s late.”

Victor had his hand on Henry’s arm before he’d thought about it. “Stay,” he said, meeting Henry’s surprised, sad eyes. “I’d rather you stayed.”

Henry searched his expression for a long moment before replying. “If you’re certain.”

It took him only moments to return from his room, changed and washed. Victor was already under the duvet, waiting and wondering if Henry would come back at all. The silence between them was
heavy; Victor still didn’t have the words to dispel it. Henry extinguished the light and quietly slipped under the cover. The only sound in the room was him moving. Then nothing.

Victor turned, aiming his gaze at Henry’s outline. “I dream of you sometimes,” he whispered.

He heard more than saw Henry turn his head. No reply came. Perhaps he hadn’t heard. Perhaps it was for the best.

Victor closed his eyes.

He couldn’t move even a finger, barely breathe; the straps were iron bands around his chest. Henry was above him, lightning dripping from his needle like tears.

“Why do you make me do this?” he whispered, face twisted with sorrow.

A single word from Victor would make him lower the needle and undo the straps, but he was gagged, producing only keening noises and the needle kept advancing.

If he could just move.

He woke with a loud gasp, finally free and still seeking to escape.

He stopped just before rolled into Henry. For a sleep-drunk moment he didn’t understand, then the relief washed over him.

Just a dream.

Henry hadn’t woken from Victor’s sudden movements. He was curled up, breathing softly, expression peaceful.

Victor tried to match his own gasping breaths to that calm rhythm, gradually slowing his frantic pulse.

Henry kept appearing in Victor’s dreams. But this time he’d not been cold and distant. Victor wasn’t one to put stock in dreams, but he couldn’t help but wonder. The Henry-of-the-dream had displayed a more human face. And Henry himself had revealed to Victor a deeply personal secret.

And Victor wasn’t entirely certain what to do with what he’d learnt. He wanted to ask… Just more. Just try to understand. That was what Henry had done, these past weeks. Shouldn’t Victor be afforded the same opportunity?

When he woke again it was because Henry was getting out of bed. Victor blinked at him, eyes grainy with poor sleep.

Henry didn’t look much better rested. There was a wrinkle between his eyebrows and his hair was mussed and tangled. He took great care to be silent, but didn’t as much as glance at Victor.

Victor could feign sleep. His eyes lingered on Henry’s untidy hair, incongruous with his usual groomed appearance. Hair having been on his own mind quite a bit lately, he found himself wondering if Henry might let Victor comb it. It was a lot longer than Victor’s own.

Having gathered his robe around him, Henry turned to the door and Victor couldn’t let him slip away
and be gone again.

“Good morning,” he said, dumbly.

Henry stilled, smoothing his expression and turning with false nonchalance. “I was trying not to
wake you. Yesterday was…” He made a small grimace. “…late.”

Victor didn’t have a better word for it. “Quite.”

He sat up, remembering the nightdress he was wearing only when he saw Henry’s gaze. Just as
quickly, Henry looked away.

“I will see you at breakfast?” There was a slight strain to Henry’s voice. “I’m going to change
and…”

“Yes. Of course.”

Victor wondered what Henry said to the servants if they passed him in the corridor. He couldn’t stop
looking at a tangle behind Henry’s ear, struggling with the impulse to loosen it.

“Good.” Henry quickly made his exit.

Victor sighed. Yesterday hadn’t felt like this.

Victor had never been on good terms with breakfast. Before moving in with Henry it had been years
since he’d observed the custom. Now he settled for a cup of tea, watching as Henry ate egg and toast
with great focus.

At least this was the one meal they were spared the hovering staff.

“There’s a man coming here at nine.” Henry sounded apologetic, and finally met Victor’s gaze
across the table. “He’s travelled from the estate in Sussex; I’d rather not put him off.”

Victor nodded, wondering if returning to normal was this easy and why he’d wanted this normal in
the first place.

“You’ll have to have lunch alone, but afterwards…” Henry said slowly, “I thought we might go to
the hospital. Follow up on the subjects.” His tone of voice was very much that of a question.

Victor’s immediate reaction was strong aversion, the memory of the woman and the chair returning
in force. Hardly constructive. Sooner or later he would need to return to Bedlam.

He looked to the tall windows. “Do you think the fog will let up?”

He thought he saw relief in Henry’s demeanour. “I certainly hope so. It’s lasted longer than usual.”

They’d gotten to the stage where talk about the weather felt like comfortable, safe ground. “I hear
people are getting sick.” They, to whom no subject had been too taboo, who’d discussed life and
death, disease and dementia, the very existence of gods and objective morality.

“Yes.” Henry’s gaze was on his plate. “Apparently one of the footmen took ill yesterday.” He
frowned, lowering his cutlery and gazing out the darkened windows. “And one I was eager to be rid
of as well. Now I’ll have to keep him until he’s better.”
There was something a bit too close to the cold Henry of past dreams in the way he said that.

Victor looked down at his teacup. The dark, tepid liquid offered no help. “I’d rather we not go today.” He watched Henry’s hands, avoided his gaze.

A small pause. Henry’s fingers impassive. “If you wish.”

His voice was mercifully free of disappointment. Victor wondered if he suspected the reason Victor wanted to avoid the asylum. His new aversion for Henry’s work shamed him, when Henry had been had been so enthusiastic about Victor’s own.

In his solitude, Victor turned to arranging his wardrobe. It at least turned out to be a pleasant diversion, doing its part in dispelling the darkness from his mind. He put the women’s clothing in the back and underneath, his shirts, waistcoats and trousers in front and on top. Lynch and Henry might keep the other staff out of here, but best to prepare for at least a casual glance.

When had he started trusting Lynch? Victor wasn’t certain he did trust him, but he didn’t doubt that the man would protect his secrets as well as Henry’s. After all, he had, in Henry’s words, proven his worth.

Which meant Victor had a small sanctum here. He let his fingers touch the fabric of the day dress, the last garment he’d yet to wear, bar the ordinary boring clothing Henry had gifted him (and he really needed to talk to Henry about overspending). It was russet brown, a discreet pattern woven into the thick silk. High-collared, as was proper for its purpose, and long sleeved.

The shame he’d once felt for dressing up was gone. Then, he’d tried to limit it. Now, he brought out the russet dress just because he had a few free moments before Henry appeared.

It was clearly inspired by men’s wear, not having so much a bodice as a jacket, though with narrower sleeves than a man’s. And the blouse meant to be worn with it was one of the few garments not in silk but starched cotton, giving the impression of a shirt collar.

The effect was… fitting.

He didn’t look like a man, to his relief. Not with the skirt, not with the flare of the jacket over his hips, the light makeup. It was distinctly feminine, but lent an air of masculinity unlike his ordinary looks. A masculine woman, an in-between-thing, on whom the short hair was no longer out of place, but as it should be.

In between. Both, and neither. And still, miraculously, having found this small space in existence.

He harnessed that feeling of permissiveness, serenity, to finally sit down and finish the letter he’d intended to send for so long. He did away with the apologies and explanations, and instead wrote that he was well, that things were better now than in a long time and that he hoped Vanessa was well too. He couldn’t write precisely why things were well, but he wrote that he hoped to hear from her soon, and enclosed the address to the house.

He was sat at the dressing table, tucking the letter into an envelope. Completely unaware that he was no longer alone.

“Hello there.”

Victor dropped the letter.
Just inside the door stood Dorian Gray, his eyebrows slowly rising as Victor’s stomach sank.

“Oh, dear… This is far beyond what I imagined, doctor.” He closed the door behind him, smiling

Victor rose, stepping backwards. He wanted to protest – the man was clearly trespassing; no one
would have let him in the house – but his own dress made that impossible.

Gray followed, eyes travelling Victor’s shape in a far too familiar way. “Look at you. Quite a
thorough job you’ve done.”

Victor felt the hard windowsill behind him, the chill of the window radiating against his neck.

Gray stepped close, smile disappearing and an almost regretful expression taking its place. “I thought
we had an agreement.” His voice was quiet, his eyes piercing. “Was I unclear?” He raised an
eyebrow.

“Mr Gray…” Victor’s voice cracked. He hated that. Hated the tremble in his limbs, that he needed to
be afraid, to hide. Hated Gray for coming here, for ruining this sanctuary. The anger burnt uselessly
in his chest, but at least it leant his voice steadiness. “I meant what I said. I don’t think it was right.”

“So you said.”

Gray reached out. Victor made a disgusted grimace but didn’t flinch. Gray had him against a wall.
Even if Victor had wanted to run he couldn’t. The risk of the servants seeing was too high and
besides, in these shoes Gray would catch him up in an instant.

Gray’s hand cupped his face, thumb pressing against the dimple of his chin. “You really have quite
remarkable eyes.” Gray tilted Victor’s head to the side. “And a lovely figure.”

Victor jerked free from Gray’s grip, humiliation heating his cheeks. “What do you want?”

“Want? Oh no, Victor. I’m keeping a promise.” Gray came a little closer, just enough that his legs
brushed Victor’s skirts. “I promised I would show you misery, and you’ve just given me more than I
need to do so.”

He was right. This knowledge could ruin Victor entirely. Gray knew it and knew that Victor did too.

A knock on the door. Gray moved to keep both it and Victor in his sight.

It was Henry.

He stopped, eyes widening as his eyes fell on the trespasser, but the surprise quickly turned to anger.
Victor’s legs felt weak with the combination of relief and despair, because it didn’t matter.

“Who are you and what are you doing in this house?” Henry demanded.

“Lord Hyde, I assume.” Gray’s voice was light, as polite as if this was a social gathering. “I’m
Dorian Gray.”

Victor saw the realisation land. Saw Henry’s expression stiffen, his stance shifting as if absorbing a
blow, his eyes darkening with animosity.

“As to why I’m here…” Gray smiled. “Did you think you’re the only one with the money to hire an
investigator?”

They should have thought of that.
Gray’s voice lowered, a threat under the words. “I know it’s your hand behind that letter.”

“Then know I’m perfectly serious in my threat.” Henry had regained his equilibrium, his eyes hard. “And I’ll go further than that if you do not leave Dr Frankenstein alone.”

“I can’t do that; a gentleman doesn’t go back on his word.” Twisted humour in Gray’s voice.

Victor saw Henry’s fingers twitch in a familiar gesture, heralding violence. Not that it would matter. Victor remembered another moment of impotent anger and humiliation. The gun in his hand, fired into Gray’s chest at a foot’s distance to no avail. Even if Henry would have abided murder, it wasn’t an option. Gray wasn’t a mere man.

“I see no gentleman before me,” Henry said through clenched teeth. “Or do you forget I know about your misuse of Mr Graeme’s name and person?” It sounded so flimsy to Victor’s ears now.

Gray’s smile showed just a few too many teeth to be truly nostalgic. “Oliver Graeme. I quite liked that; I was sad to let him go.” He advanced on Henry, all predatory grace. “I could name a few names that you’ve held dear as well, my lord doctor.”

Victor couldn’t see his expression, but he saw Henry’s eyes widen a fraction, before he recovered. “Then it appears we are at an impasse, neither of us able to use our information without risking retaliation.”

Victor wanted to hear those names, even if from the enemy’s lips. Wanted to know just how dear they had been.

“I’ve left this country before; I’m no more attached to it than others. Nor do I particularly fear what’s coming for me.” Gray touched Henry’s lapel, receiving no more than a narrow-eyed glower. “Whereas you have your newly inherited estate.” He took a step aside, his inhuman eyes landing on Victor. “And our fair Lady Hyde stands to lose everything.”

Heat bloomed on Victor’s face and forced his eyes down. Humiliation. Anger. Something else too, something he didn’t want to examine. When he looked up again Gray had taken another step closer to Henry. Henry didn’t let himself be intimidated, held his ground. Gray was a very handsome man. Victor didn’t want to examine that thought either.

“What would it take for you to leave us alone?” he whispered. Anything to keep Henry from being dragged down too.

Gray turned to him, watching, considering. “Perhaps… I could be persuaded not to give you away.”

Victor met Henry’s gaze, saw in it the same wariness he felt. Heard the same powerless anger as Henry spoke. “I can give you money.”

Gray looked almost absently over his shoulder at him, before taking a step towards Victor. “Oh, I have enough money, although I could always use a friend in the aristocracy.” His eyes were again running up and down Victor’s form, lingering on his waist. “But I can let you pay me off if you so desire. The pair of you certainly do not seem boring.”

Victor was too tense for relief, the way Gray’s eyes weighed on him.

Gray held out his hand. “Agreed?” he asked, his whole demeanour radiating danger.

Victor didn’t want to agree, but this was *his* problem. Without his disagreement, this serpent
wouldn’t have sought them out.

He put his hand in Gray’s, expecting a handshake. Instead Gray bowed low, touching his lips to the back of Victor’s hand.

“You still owe me, dear,” he murmured as he straightened. “And him as well.” He turned to Henry, and Victor nauseously watched as Gray’s eyes travelled Henry’s body as they had his own. “Be sure to thank him properly. I’ll be in touch.” With those words he left the room, as confidently as if it was his own home.

Except, when he opened the door Lynch was on the other side, hand raised for a knock.

The Irishman stilled. A second’s surprise was visible on his face before it hardened. He planted his feet, blocking the way. “My lord?”

“Escort Mr Gray out,” Henry said. A sharpness entered his voice. “And it might be prudent to oversee that no entrances are left unlocked and unguarded, considering the city we live in.”

The reprimand made Lynch’s expression darken. Gray made an expression of mock innocence.

Lynch’s gaze didn’t linger on Victor, didn’t betray that he saw anything out of the ordinary. Victor still wanted to sink through the floor.

“Yes, my lord.” The under-butler’s voice lost some politeness as he turned to Gray. “If you’ll follow me, sir.”

Finally, Gray was gone.

Victor’s legs nearly gave out. He sagged against the windowsill, its marble cold under his hands. Henry was there in a flash, hand on his elbow. Likely remembering Victor’s fainting spell.

Victor didn’t feel lightheaded now though, only sick.

Henry squeezed his elbow though the sleeve. “Lynch won’t mention what he saw.”

“I know.” How did Henry sound so calm? When Victor’s heart was pounding, his stomach roiling, his brow damp with sweat. Gray scared him. He was a different and unknown kind of monster, no matter how human he looked.

But Henry’s gaze was even as Victor met it. Confident.

Victor shook his head and went to retrieve his fallen letter. He put it on the desk, safe. “What will we do about Gray?”

“We will think of something,” Henry said. “I’ll talk to Lynch. But not now.”

Victor took a deep breath, telling himself that the immediate danger had passed.

It occurred to him that Lily hadn’t entered his mind once during the confrontation. Even thinking of her now brought no emotion. He smoothed his skirts, finding equilibrium.

“It suits you,” Henry said, voice softening.

Victor turned around, giving him a look meant to relay that he wasn’t going to forget about Gray, even if he agreed to change the subject. “It certainly is something different to the other dresses you picked.”
Henry cocked his head, seeming almost embarrassed. “I thought you might like something more familiar. Lynch agreed.”

“You discu-” Victor snapped his mouth shut. Of course. He had, after all, been unable to imagine Henry going out to buy clothes like these. And Lynch had seemed so very unsurprised.

Henry had the decency to look chastised.

Victor sighed. It didn’t matter now what Lynch knew. “I’m glad you have his approval,” he said, keeping his voice light enough not to cut.

Henry shook his head, but didn’t seem offended.

Satisfied, Victor went over to the tall mirror, leaning in to ensure that his makeup was still good.

Over his shoulder, he saw Henry’s eyes linger on the swish of the skirt. “I wasn’t certain you’d like it. Any of it.”

The way he said it, that quiet, considering tone, brought Victor right back to the small apartment they’d so recently shared.

“I did,” he murmured. “All of it.”

Henry smiled as if it was mere politeness. “It’s a shame it’s only afternoon; I could have-” A brief expression of – Shame? Regret? Embarrassment? – passed across his face, before he seemed to reconcile it. “I could have sent the staff downstairs otherwise.”

A fluttering spark in Victor’s chest. “We don’t need music.” He couldn’t quite look Henry in the eye as he said it, not after yesterday.

Instead he saw the reflection of Henry’s fingers twitch, as if stopped from reaching out.

“Would you… like to?” Henry asked quietly.

Victor turned. Lifted his hand; his right for Henry’s left. Henry took it, guiding Victor two slow steps backwards. Victor stepped close, raising his left hand to Henry’s shoulder and met Henry’s eyes.

Henry was achingly correct, his hand settling high on Victor’s back, his expression carefully neutral. But his eyes were warm. His grip was strong enough to lead as he took their first, silent step.

The dance was as fluid as it ever had been. Victor wore the lower shoes, had to look up at Henry. He barely needed two hands to count the times they’d done this, and yet, it felt as old as their friendship. As natural. And no less satisfying for the silence.

“I think you used to have a waistcoat of this colour,” Henry murmured, eyes on the collar of the dress. “Back at Cambridge?”

Victor remembered it suddenly; he’d worn it often. He made a small face. “I lost it.” When he’d abandoned his old lab after the resurrection of his first creation.

“I’ve found myself thinking of that time often.” Henry’s gaze rose into the distant past. “I’ve wondered: if things hadn’t ended as they did, would we be where we are now?”

“Does it matter? We are here, now.”

A turn and the gas lights cast Henry’s eyes aglow. His voice was melancholy. “But by fate, or
coincidence? And were the signs there, before?"

Victor considered it. “As close as we were then; as much as we shared – don’t you think that…?” He was thinking of Henry. Of what Henry had discovered in coming to London. What Victor had found out only a day ago. Wouldn’t it have come to light? If it had been there always? “I don’t know,” he had to settle for. “I hope so.”

A small smile came to Henry’s face. “As do I.”

He stopped, then. Victor took another swaying step before realising it, bumping gently into him.

“Sit?” Henry asked, turning to the settee, still holding Victor’s hand. “It was good, then.” He released it as he sat down. “Despite everything, our classmates, the ridiculous old dons. I’ve spent a long time missing it.”

An old guilt ached in Victor’s chest. If he had stayed in touch… “I would have thought your work would have kept you diverted.” He crossed his ankles, busied his hands with arranging his skirt.

“As yours did?” Henry’s tone was devoid of accusation, but Victor felt it, nonetheless. “But that was where it started.”

“With rats and frogs.” Victor smiled, remembering the dark laboratory they’d used. “And so many late nights.”

“Not just at the lab,” Henry filled in, voice warm with remembrance. “I recall staying up debating until dawn. Psychology, physiology, ethics, philosophy…”

A sucking hollowness in Victor’s gut. “And our most spirited discussions, always over alcohol or hashish.”

Henry’s eyes snapped away from the past, to Victor. “Perhaps it wasn’t better then.”

Victor pushed away his weakness. It went a little easier. “Most certainly not,” he said firmly. “I also remember stitching that big gash in your scalp. If you’re nostalgic, you must have forgotten just how much you loathed our fellow students.”

Henry’s hand went to his left temple, hidden from Victor. “I still have the scar.” His smile returned, rueful.

“Show me?” Victor seized onto the lighter mood.

Henry turned so he could show Victor his other side. He needed to put his leg up between them, his fingers feeling out and parting the hair over his ear. “I haven’t forgotten. I’ve been reading though some old diaries.”

“You weren’t thorough in keeping them, if I recall correctly.” Victor leaned in to see, raising his hand.

“Thorough enough to…”

Henry trailed off as Victor touched the faint scar. It was almost white against his black hair. The skin was smooth. The strands of hair silky.

Henry slowly lowered his hands, watching Victor warily. Victor abandoned the scar, running his fingers through Henry’s long locks, admiring.
“I could practice hairdressing on you.” His heart felt so light, his mind so clear.

“I’m not sure I’d like that,” Henry said slowly.

Victor was certain. He slid his hand to the back of Henry’s head, bringing their foreheads together. Henry’s eyes grew wider the closer they got, crossing in his effort to keep watching Victor.

Victor scratched his thumb against Henry’s scalp. “What would you like?” he whispered, closing his eyes.

Henry’s breath left him in a small, startled puff, nearer a groan than a gasp. Victor sought his hand, found it. Henry squeezed his fingers almost painfully hard.

“What do you want?” Victor breathed.

The answer to that question could destroy him.

“What do you want?” Henry countered, his voice uneven.

“Everything.” Victor angled his head, brushing their nose tips together. His heart hammered. “This.” He felt the tension in Henry’s neck. “You.” This small, contact between them was electric, sending his skin tingling.

A brief look showed Henry had closed his eyes. He began to lean in and Victor moved with him.

Henry’s lips were warm and sure despite Henry’s apparent uncertainty. Victor’s breath caught; his stomach flipped, his lips burned from just a moment’s contact. He held Henry still, not able to bear the thought of separation. Henry seemed to be of the same mind, pressing closer, lips parting, tongue begging entrance. Victor responded, realising with a jolt of jealousy that Henry seemed quite experienced at this. But it didn’t matter; Henry led and he followed. He would follow Henry anywhere. The way his heart pounded he thought it must soon seize, the way his chest swelled he thought it must soon burst.

Henry broke the kiss with a bend of his neck, panting. Victor let him pull away but wasn’t able to make himself remove his hand from Henry’s soft hair.

Henry’s face was flushed, his lips red, but he seemed to make an effort towards a sombre expression. “Are you certain of this, Victor?”

Victor led his hand slide down the side of Henry’s neck. “I’ve given it thought.”

Henry visibly shivered, leaning in to the touch. “I thought you didn’t want to be a woman.”

Victor wasn’t certain anymore. He raised an eyebrow; deflect and riposte. “Do you want to be a woman when you lay with other men?”

Henry groaned, squeezing Victor’s hand. “I don’t want to talk of other men. And no; I never have.”

“Do you think…?” Victor hesitated, fingers carding through Henry’s hair. He wanted to kiss him again, but he wanted this conversation more. “You wondered if this was something that had existed in us, always. But I wonder, if matters like these can change?”

Henry sucked his bottom lip between his teeth. “I think the seed is always there. Perhaps merely undiscovered.” His eyes were bright, meeting Victor’s gaze, then wandering his face before returning.
“I disagree; there must be a fluidity. Victor shifted on the settee, facing Henry more directly. “My view of myself, no, my self has changed so much. I’m so far from who I was at Cambridge.”

“And yet you are still so hungry for debate,” Henry said mildly. He raised his hand, the left, and gently put it under Victor’s chin, finally returning the touch. “I think, at some level, I’ve been drawn to you since the very beginning.”

Victor realised he’d spent years looking into Henry’s eyes without truly seeing their colour, so deep, so warm, so vivid. “I suppose it doesn’t matter much.”

“I’m glad the fog kept us inside,” Henry whispered.

He tilted Victor’s chin up at the same moment as Victor tugged him closer for another silent joining. This time they didn’t break apart until they were both breathing heavy and Victor’s hair was significantly less put together. He let his forehead fall to Henry’s shoulder, catching his breath. Henry stroked his hair.

A year ago, Victor could have never even imagined this. If he would scrutinise it too closely, he’d still find it absurd. And yet, every step felt like the only one possible. Perhaps it was fate. They were meant to end up here, like this. Henry would call him a romantic, but Victor wanted to believe that. After all, so much had stood between them.

If Victor hadn’t failed so deeply with his first creation. If he hadn’t happened to find Lily. If he hadn’t gone with Vanessa to that shop. And most significantly: if he hadn’t turned down Gray’s offer; if he’d chosen Lily over Henry. Then things might have taken an entirely different turn.

“I think the fog is lifting,” Henry murmured against Victor’s hair. “But I don’t feel much like returning to the dark dungeons of Bedlam.”

Victor raised his head, letting his nose brush Henry’s neck as he did. The light had indeed changed, though the view was still non-existent. “Perhaps we should put that aside for the moment.” A thought had grown in the back of his mind.

Though Henry frowned, he looked much less displeased at this moment than Victor could have hoped, and Victor capitalised on it. The dead called to him for the first time in a long time.

“I’ve been thinking. Maybe it is time to resume the old work…”

That chased the frown from Henry’s brow, replacing it with the gleam of interest.

Chapter End Notes

I was honestly nervous about posting this final chapter. I’ve come to realise that there might be quite a few of you who were expecting this to be the story of Victor becoming Victoria. It isn't quite. Part of the reason is the pronoun-switch - it would have been hard to make it pretty in third person POV. Part is because - if I'm completely honest - I'm not sure I can write heterosexual romantic fiction. The main reason is because it would have become a much longer journey - I doubt I could write a convincing story where Victor goes from cis and never having questioned it to being a woman convinced of her
identity in this short time span. I also quite like the idea of Victor's identity slowly evolving. Though you could read this as a realisation/acceptance of identity rather than an evolution. It's no less valid than my headcanon.

All that said, I hope you forgive me if you feel I haven't lived up to your hopes for this story. If you would like to write your own ending, expand on the existing one, or reuse any of the themes in this fic for yourself, please do, no need to ask permission. (Although I would delight in reading your stories, *hint, hint*.) And if you have any comments, concerns, thoughts or questions I'm always happy to chat (if sometimes slow to answer), here or at nphaltmicus (at) hotmail.com.

Thank you endlessly for reading!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!