

the Murder at Mansfield Manor

an Inspector Ambrose story



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By I H Laking

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The train chugged on through the frosty forest, its black engine charging along the tracks, hauling a dozen red carriages behind it. All around, snow lay on the thickly packed pine trees, shining bright in the early morning sun. Inside the train's carriages, the occupants of the Traville to Mansfield Express were slowly waking up from their overnight journey.

Each of the carriages was an ornate spectacle, for this was a train reserved for dignitaries from The Order, designed to provide them with every luxury imaginable while they travelled the twelve hour journey from the capital of the Empire to Mansfield, the most popular destination for weekend getaways, holidays, and high society scandals. The carriages were made out of hardwood, with solid steel reinforcing. Carpet inlaid with gold thread and precious materials ran the length of the train, except for the servant and Mech quarters (of course), while each and every piece of plumbing was plated with gold. The dining cart featured twenty tables, each giving a spectacular view of the passing countryside, except when the train passed through wooded areas (naturally).

It was in this very dining car that a tall man dressed in a red Civilian Protection Force jacket sat reading a small notebook. He was well groomed; clean shaven with his dark hair combed back in a neat quaff, along with a newly pressed pair of black pants to complement his uniform. He looked like he would prefer not to be disturbed as he squinted at a small notebook and muttered to himself. In the middle of his table sat a cup of herbal tea, extra hot, alongside a small plate featuring a strip of fried bacon, two soft-boiled eggs, and a piece of wholemeal toast.

As the man sat there, muttering continuously to himself, he absent-mindedly reached out with his left hand to take a sip of his tea. Unfortunately it was at this exact moment that the train hit a bump on the track, causing the man's hand to spill some of the tea into its saucer. The man was so engrossed in his task that he seemed not to notice, withdrawing his hand and continuing to puzzle over the contents of the notebook. Thankfully for him, a waiter appeared, mopped up the spilt tea, and cleared his throat to get the man's attention.

No response was forthcoming, except for a grunt and a gentle mutter.

The waiter, fearing the wrath of the man, who was clearly of a senior rank in the C. P. F., cleared his throat a little louder. Still no response, except for the gentle rumbling of the train as it sped on to its destination. The waiter, now beginning to sweat somewhat (and feeling quite sure his next actions would likely cost him his job), cleared his throat as loudly as he dared, with a booming “AHM!”

The man jolted in his seat, finally breaking his concentration. He looked up at the waiter in surprise, as if he hadn’t noticed him.

“Yes?” he enquired

“I’m sorry to interrupt you, sir,” the waiter began nervously, “But we’re nearing the station, would you like me to fetch you another cup of tea to replace the one you spilled?”

The man looked down at the tea, and the small stains on the tablecloth. “Oh!” he exclaimed, clearly confused as to what had happened, and why such a small spill should cause him to be interrupted. “No, no – thank you just the same. This tea hasn’t cooled down too much yet,” he took a sip and gave a satisfied smile. “Very good. Is that all you wanted?”

The waiter turned slightly paler. “No sir, I don’t mean to break protocol, but I was instructed to pass an urgent message to you. You’re Inspector Ambrose, correct?”

Inspector Ambrose nodded. “Yes, that’s me. What’s the message?”

“We’ve been signalled that there’s a Messenger Mech waiting for you at the station up ahead.”

Ambrose acknowledged the message and dismissed the boy with a polite wave and a smile. With the departure of the relieved waiter, the dining cart fell silent except for the rhythmic motion of the train bouncing along the tracks as it broke free of the forest and began to cut through a wide expanse of snowy fields. Ambrose found himself lost in his thoughts once more. He was on his way to Mansfield Manor at the request of his sister, where he would be the guest of honour at a charity auction, and he was deeply concerned. It was not the public speaking or the thought of spending a week

with his intolerably free-spirited sister that bothered him; it was the fact that she was overtly trying to pair him up with one of her society friends. Whenever he saw his sister these days it felt like her sole aim was to find him a suitable partner, and the whole experience made him deeply uncomfortable. He took a sip of tea and glanced out the window. What he wouldn't give for the train to be travelling in the opposite direction, away from any romantic entanglements.

Ambrose found his thoughts turning to his partner, Detective Percy Portland. Ambrose hated travelling without him, even though Percy's constant note-taking and eternal optimism could be grating. Percy was the balance to everything Ambrose struggled with, but on this trip he was travelling alone, as a sudden case of stomach flu had stricken the rotund detective at the last minute. Thankfully, Percy had given Ambrose his notebook (with strict instructions not to lose it). Ambrose now found himself puzzling over the notes scrawled throughout it – the detectives had been investigating a series of cases related to organised crime in Traville's slums over the past week, and Percy's notes were hard to follow at best. Ambrose hoped the message at the next station wasn't from him.

A whistle screamed out from the engine and the train began slowing to a halt. Soon the white fields were interrupted by a small town, and a long train platform. Ambrose made his way to the end of the carriage and slid the outer door open, feeling the bracing cold outside biting at his cheeks. The train slid to a halt, and he stepped off onto the wind-swept platform.

Looking around, Ambrose realised the area was completely abandoned, except for a lanky Mech that stood waiting in the centre of the platform. Snow covered the ground, apart from where the Messenger Mech was standing, staring at Ambrose with its huge black eyes. Its polished bronze gleamed in the morning sunlight, and the numbers 343 were burnt across its chest. Ambrose pulled his collar up around his neck, and walked over to see what was so important that this Mech had to stop the entire train.

“Hello, I believe you have a message for me?”

The Mech nodded, and a loud click followed by a whirring sound arose from its head. “Please exercise caution. Assassins Guild in Mansfield. Intentions

unclear, Percy.” The whirring stopped, and the Mech looked expectantly at Ambrose. “Would you like. To return a message. Response is free.”

Ambrose felt a lump in his throat. *What on earth is the Assassins Guild doing in Mansfield?* he thought to himself, as he looked up at the messenger.

“Yes, that’s fine. Respond as follows: Will exercise caution. Please provide more information. Any details appreciated.”

The Mech turned and ran off in the direction of the Capital. Ambrose watched as the Mech sprinted into the distance, then turned and walked back to the waiting train. He was suddenly acutely aware of the other passengers who had gathered to watch him from their cabins.

The trip to Mansfield Manor had barely begun, and trouble was already on the horizon.

Clip-a-de-clop clip-a-de-clop clip-a-de-clop.

The sound of hooves rang out in the darkness as two horses charged through the light dusting of snow that covered the road outside Mansfield. Inside the carriage, Ambrose rocked from side to side as the horses sped along the cobblestones. The driver was doing his best to make up time, as the train from Traville had pulled in late, and he knew better than to keep the host of Mansfield Manor waiting. The clacking of the horses' hooves dulled as they left the cobblestone streets of the township and turned onto a dirt road that slowly wound its way up the side of a rolling hill.

Ambrose looked out the window and caught a glimpse of the Manor in the distance. Bright gaslights could be seen through the gloom, occasionally disappearing behind the trees that covered the hillside. Ambrose looked up at the sky: clouds heavy with snow were hovering overhead, and a large moon occasionally peeked out, illuminating the forest in dim white light. Some in Traville were predicting a heavy fall of snow tomorrow, though Ambrose hoped this wouldn't transpire.

The carriage finally reached a loping turn in the road and crested the hill. Ahead was Mansfield Manor, visible through the large iron gates that were drawn back to welcome new arrivals. The carriage passed under the gate, and the forest disappeared. On both sides of the wide cobblestone pathway, huge lawns covered in thick snow ran off until they collided with the towering hedges that surrounded the property. When the snow melted, sweeping green lawns and magnificent gardens would be revealed, but for now, all was white and still. Up ahead, Mansfield Manor loomed tall and foreboding against the night sky.

The Manor was constructed of Brown Sandstone and was well over a century old. Its three stories gave it an imposing stature, as did the wide wings that stretched out to either side of the main entrance. Inside, gaslights burned bright, casting long shadows onto the brick pathways that skirted the perimeter of the Manor. In front of the entrance, a large fountain stood, shooting icicles into the air as it had been when The Freeze arrived. Ambrose looked closely at the fountain; seeing it always stirred a strong sense of nostalgia in him whenever he returned to the Manor – his family had been guests here several times in his youth, and the Mansfields were always

welcoming when he or his sister chose to return.

Felicity.

For a moment, Ambrose had let his mind wander from why he was here – now he was brought back to the reality of delivering a speech and trying to deal with Molly, his sister’s friend, who he had not seen in over five years. The carriage gave a jolt and came to a halt in front of the sweeping steps that led to the main doors of Mansfield Manor. Ambrose stepped out onto the bricks and made his way up to the entrance. As a child, he had always felt intimidated approaching the hardwood frames, and even now they towered above him, despite his considerable height. Ambrose pushed aside the sudden flurry of butterflies in his stomach, adjusted his coat and collar, and proceeded to rap three times on the large doorknocker that was positioned to the right of the door.

Ambrose thought back to his last visit to Mansfield Manor. Even though little had changed, he felt as if he was an entirely different person. The regular family visits to the Manor had slowed as he had become a teenager, until the family had stopped coming altogether; they had grown apart from the charm of Mansfield, separated by time and interests. It had taken Molly’s tenacious pursuit of Mrs Mansfield to secure the Manor for the auction this weekend, and it was that same tenacity that had brought Ambrose back as well - he would never make time to travel this far for a holiday normally.

But perhaps I should.

A noise carried Ambrose back to the present moment. The door creaked open to reveal a tall, broad shouldered Mech whose long face appeared to be set in a permanent grimace. His body was inlaid with straight vertical lines, and he sported two huge bulbous black eyes that stared at Ambrose patiently. The Mech tried to feign a smile, but gave up and simply said, “Master Ambrose, it is good to see you again,” his voice was formal and rich, and Ambrose couldn’t help but smile. It was nice that some things never changed.

“Hello, Clank. How are you this evening?” he enquired.

“Very well, Master Ambrose. I’m afraid, however, that the cold of The Freeze still affects my functions as always, so please do come in quickly.

Shall I have the others gather your suitcases?” The old Mech looked past Ambrose expectantly to the carriage.

“Yes please. I’m travelling light this time, Clank – just the one case,” Ambrose said as he stepped into the entrance hall. He was immediately enveloped by warmth as he surveyed the impressive hall that welcomed guests to Mansfield Manor. Wood panelling ran along the tall walls, as it did throughout the house. Immediately ahead, two staircases swept up the side of the room to the second storey landing. Huge double doors underneath the stairs marked the entrance to the formal lounge, and in various parts of the room, hallways could be seen running off in many differing directions. Paintings of inestimable value crowded the walls, and a great crystal chandelier hung from the ceiling.

Clank signalled with his right hand and two nearly identical Mechs stepped forward to join him. The first Mech stood perfectly to attention and bowed to greet Ambrose, but the second failed entirely in his attempt to bow neatly, bumping into the other two before regaining his posture and bending low to the ground.

“Clink and Clunk! So lovely to see you,” said Ambrose. “Is the cold affecting you as well, Clink?”

“Yes, Master Ambrose. As always, I find the cold stiffens my back in peculiar ways,” the Mech also spoke with a deep, rich tone. He moved out to gather Ambrose’s bag before snow began to cover it.

Ambrose turned to the final Mech. “And Clunk, are you still struggling with your depth perception?”

The third Mech nodded. “I am, Master Ambrose. We really should have my eyesight seen to sometime.”

Ambrose smiled. In all his visits to Mansfield Manor, never once had the Mansfields bothered to fix poor Clunk’s vision – he somehow managed to remain in service to the household, no doubt because of the family’s loyalty. Popular rumour held that the serving Mechs were older than Mansfield Manor itself, and had been a gift to Lord Mansfield before the rule of The Order began.

“Shall I show you to your room, Master Ambrose?” enquired Clank.

Ambrose was about to say a hearty yes to the Mech’s offer when a voice pierced the relative quiet of the foyer.

“Shorty! You’re here!”

Ambrose froze. Only one person would ever dare to call him shorty (a reference to his unfortunately small stature as a boy). Before he could react, a blur of blue exploded from the hallway to his right, and he found himself enveloped in a huge hug. Ambrose never understood why his sister always insisted on such major shows of public affection when she knew they made him so uncomfortable. He awkwardly hugged her, then stepped back to look at her.

Felicity was wearing a long, turquoise dress which hung loosely from her shoulders in the modern style (she always insisted on being on trend with her clothing choices). Her brown hair dropped in wide ringlets across her shoulders and she smiled broadly at Ambrose, revealing the dimples that endeared her to so many suitors from around the Empire. She looked Ambrose up and down and gave a giggle.

“Why do you insist on wearing that silly uniform whenever you travel?” she asked him, putted her hands on her hips. “It won’t do to have you meeting Molly like this, not at all.”

Ambrose couldn’t believe it. He had only stepped foot in the Manor, and already his sister was into matchmaking mode. “Are you not even going to ask me how my journey was?” he asked.

Felicity let out a giggle. “Oh, silly. I’m sure it was fine – you’re here in one piece, although you are very late. We’ve already had dinner, but I’m sure we can get you something from the kitchen if we’re quick and quiet,” she turned to Clink, who was carrying Ambrose’s suitcase. “Clink, be a dear and put that up in Amby’s room, would you?” Clink nodded and proceeded to slowly climb the stairs.

“Now let’s get you to the kitchen for a bite to eat before Molly sees you.” Felicity motioned for Ambrose to follow her, and they headed down a

corridor under the left staircase, with Felicity chatting all the way about how excited she was to be back at the Manor, and how amazing the auction was going to be. She was particularly excited that the Mansfields had agreed to let a visiting performer do an act before the event.

As Felicity chattered away (often mentioning Molly's enthusiasm for meeting him), Ambrose could feel his stress levels rising – no one had the effect on him that his sister did; stripping away his will to get on with work and making him want to run and hide. She never wanted to settle down, had little time for hard work, and was constantly trying to interfere with his life. Still, it was good to see her, even if it meant putting up with her meddling for a few days.

Halfway along the corridor, Felicity turned into an alcove that led down to the basement. She motioned for Ambrose to be quiet, but he already knew the drill. They had been to the kitchen many times as children, snatching apples and puddings while the kitchen staff slept.

They entered the wide cookhouse, which was clean and ready for breakfast preparation. Pots and pans hung from the ceiling, surrounding the large preparation bench that took up the bulk of the room. In the cupboards that lined the walls, tarts and jams, cured meats and leftovers were waiting.

By force of habit, Ambrose started looking around to make sure no one was present. Felicity let out a sudden "Oh!" and they both froze. There in the shadows, a figure was leaning against a bench. Ambrose was about to turn and run when the sweetest laugh he had heard sailed out across the room.

"Felicity dear, why on earth are you sneaking around down here?"

Out of the shadows stepped a young lady equal in height to Ambrose. He found himself staring at her, feeling a rush of emotion that he hadn't experienced in a long time. The young lady had her blonde hair tied up in a ponytail, which drew attention to her striking green eyes. Her tall cheekbones were the mark of perfection, and her blue dress flowed from her shoulders to the floor. In one hand she carried an umbrella, and in the other hand there was an apple, which she proceeded to take a bite out of.

"Molly! Oh, I never meant for you to see Ambrose like this!" Felicity

protested, clearly knowing that she had missed her chance to make her brother look presentable. She cleared her throat and turned to him, saying, “Ambrose, do you remember Molly? She was last with us when we were still at school together.” Molly smiled and walked towards them, chewing the apple slowly.

“Y-yes, I do recall you,” said Ambrose, struggling to regain his composure. *This is the most stunning woman I’ve seen in my life*, he thought to himself, before finding some more words to stumble over. “I... believe you were planning to study, yes?”

Molly smiled. “Yes, that’s correct my dear – I’ve almost completed my course now, too – modern architecture, it’s such a bore.” She threw her hand up to her forehead in a dramatic gesture.

Ambrose smiled as he felt his cheeks flushing. He tried to find something more to say, and found himself loosely grasping at the first thing he could think of. “I see you have your umbrella with you! It’s barely snowing now – were you keen on taking a night stroll?”

She looked at him and smiled gently. “No, not a stroll, but I love to step outside and catch a glimpse of the moon on nights like these,” she pointed to a door that led outside, “Would you care to come and have a look with me?”

Ambrose felt his heart drop. What on earth was wrong with him? He never felt emotions like these, especially not with any of his sister’s attempted matches. He found himself stammering again, but managed to force out, “No, I’m afraid I can’t – we just came for some food, and now we’ve got that, it’s time to be on our way.”

Ambrose turned and bounded up the stairs, heading for the hallway and the second floor. His heart was pounding as he heard Molly’s voice rising from the kitchen in the distance: “But you didn’t get anything to eat, love!”

What have I got myself into? Ambrose thought as he sped towards the relative safety of his room.

The next morning, Ambrose rose early to the sound of Clunk clumsily knocking into a table in the hallway. The sun had yet to rise, and the embers in the room's fireplace had burned down low. Ambrose got up and began his morning exercises – wide jumps and skipping to maintain peak fitness, and stretches to ensure he didn't pull any muscles during the day. After he completed his routine, he headed over to the window. Even as he approached it, Ambrose could feel the chill from outside. He peeked out between the curtains and was greeted by a land blanketed in white.

Looking down, Ambrose could see the path that led to the Guest House, a separate lodging that was only open to important dignitaries when they came to stay. The Guest House was simple compared to the Manor, with only a single storey and three rooms. It was the one place Ambrose and Felicity were never allowed to visit as children, and Ambrose remembered how they would speculate about what was inside. He wondered whether he might finally get a chance to step inside the Guest House this trip to satisfy his childhood curiosity.

As he returned his attention to the white expanse of the main lawn, Ambrose caught a flash of movement out of the corner of his eye. A mound of snow exploded, and a strange looking man with wild red hair and a wide moustache jumped out and started running towards the Manor in an ungainly fashion. His face had turned somewhat blue from the cold, and flakes of snow trailed behind him. *He must be freezing*, Ambrose thought as the man passed from view. Why would he be hiding in the snow like that?

Setting the strange occurrence aside, Ambrose turned from the window and began his morning grooming ritual. Wherever he went, he began each day with a shower, a shave and a meticulous styling of his hair. As he combed his thick black hair into place, he thought about meeting Molly the previous night. He hadn't expected the wave of emotion that had swept over him when he saw her. All his work as a detective required clear thinking and calm thoughts; and if Percy's note had been correct, he needed to avoid all distractions during his time at the Manor. Ambrose buttoned up his white shirt, tied and adjusted his red bowtie, and pulled on his grey waistcoat and jacket.

It was time for breakfast.

Ambrose opened the heavy hardwood door that led out to the second floor hallway. Like so many parts of the Empire, Mansfield Manor was built to reflect status. The basement housed the servants and Mechs' quarters, alongside the kitchen, laundry, and service areas. On the first floor were the living and entertaining areas, including the Great Ballroom, which was the pride of the Manor. Each wing of the second floor had ten large bedrooms, including the nursery, whilst the third floor was reserved for the Mansfield family, or at least it had been.

Over the years, the Mansfield family had moved away or passed on, until only Mrs Macy Mansfield remained. Ambrose had not seen her in a long time, and wondered how the years might have taken their toll on her. He would always remember her as the towering matriarch of the powerful family, fiery and single-minded, with a stare that could freeze you in your steps.

As Ambrose strode down the hallway, he heard creaking floorboards and the sound of water splashing. The other guests were stirring, preparing for the day to come. Not everyone was acting normally however, and a strange humming sound could be heard coming from the first doorway on the left. Ambrose slowed his pace and listened as the drone rose and fell in uneven spaces, sounding like a herd of angry wasps had mated with a choir of tree frogs. Never in any of his visits to the Manor had Ambrose heard such a racket. He straightened his jacket and continued towards the main staircase. He hoped whoever was making the noise was keeping an eye on the time; any guest who had visited Mansfield Manor before was aware that breakfast was served at half past seven sharp on Mrs Mansfield's orders, and it was a treasonous offence to be late.

Trotting down the stairs and past the artworks that lined the entrance hall, Ambrose was greeted by Clank, who was on door duty again. He looked his usual unimpressed self, and greeted Ambrose with a solemn vow.

"Good morning Master Ambrose. I trust you slept well last night?" he enquired.

"Very well, thank you Clank," Ambrose said, with a wave of his hand. "Anything to report?"

The Mech nodded solemnly. “Indeed there is. A Messenger Mech arrived for you just a moment ago. It is awaiting your presence outside the main entrance.” He swept his hand towards the towering doors for emphasis.

“Oh,” said Ambrose. “Is there any reason why it didn’t come inside?”

Clink shrugged. “It said that he was given strict instructions to deliver its message to you in private, and asked for a place that no one else was likely to go near. I told it that only a fool would be outdoors in this weather, and so it now waits outside.”

Well, he’s nothing if not logical, Ambrose thought as he opened the front door and stepped out onto the entrance steps. The chill wind coming in off the Great Front Lawn was incredible, and he pulled his jacket tight around his body, doing his best to ignore the threat of the approaching storm clouds. Standing just a few metres away was a different Messenger Mech from the one that had been waiting at the station yesterday. It was tall and silver, with the numbers 545 written cursively across its chest. It bowed low to the steps as Ambrose approached.

“Hello, I believe you have a message for me?” said Ambrose, between chattering teeth.

The Mech stared at Ambrose for a second, then delivered its message: “Guest list for auction suspicious. Be vigilant of strangers. Still sick but investigating, Percy.” The Mech finished the message and stared at Ambrose with its black eyes. “Would you care to Respond. Message return is free. Delivery timeframe is <seven> hours.

Ambrose was frustrated. This message revealed hardly any new information, except that there *might* be a chance that someone was trying to infiltrate the house. He considered the things he had witnessed so far, and decided he would try and sit next to the man he had seen running across the lawn a little while earlier – that was certainly an unusual scene. Ambrose looked at the 545 model Mech – where was Percy finding these old Messenger Mechs anyway? Their limited message length was extremely inconvenient. He sighed loudly. “Yes, yes. Respond as follows: “About to meet guests shortly. Will follow your Advice. Some strange activity noted, Ambrose.”

The Mech whirled and clicked, said a curt, “Good day, sir,” and ran off down the steps of Mansfield Manor towards the gate. The paths had not yet been cleared, and the Mech made deep impressions in the powder as it ran; there were no other footprints in the snow.

Clank was right, Ambrose thought as he quickly made for the door. Only a fool would be out in this cold weather.

As he closed the door and moved through the entrance hall, Ambrose quickly checked the clock. It was almost time for breakfast, and he daren’t be late. To rouse the ire of Mrs Mansfield would be an extremely poor move. He also would hate to make a bad impression in front of a beautiful young lady like Molly.

Good heavens! Where did that thought come from?

Ambrose shook the thought off as he walked down the corridor to the dining room. Now was no time for emotions; he had to remain alert. Unless Percy was just paranoid from the fever he was running. Yes, maybe it was all in his mind. What would the Assassins Guild want in sleepy little Mansfield anyway?

Ambrose could hear the hum of voices as he arrived at the double doors to the dining room, which stood open to his right. He adjusted his bowtie, smoothed down his shirt and stepped inside to meet the other guests.

“Shorty!”

Felicity made sure that Ambrose couldn’t make a quiet entrance. She was sitting at the long table, which was positioned in the middle of the opulently furnished room, along with the other guests. A few people stopped their conversations to regard the newcomer, but most continued chatting amongst themselves. Ambrose smiled weakly at his sister, acknowledged the nickname he hated so much, and proceeded to the end of the table.

Sitting in her usual place, looking refined in her emerald green dress with elbow-length sleeves and white lace trim, was Mrs Mansfield herself. She had aged very little, Ambrose noted, since the last time he had seen her. But even back then, when Ambrose had been a boy, Mrs Mansfield had seemed

more ancient than the seas themselves. Her grey hair was tied up neatly behind her head in a tight bun, and her face was as shrivelled as an old prune. Very rarely did a grin pass her withered lips, and her deep blue eyes had very few smile lines to show for her many years of living.

Ambrose walked up to Mrs Mansfield, and took her gloved hand to give it a gentle peck, as he had done since he was a boy. She regarded him with a cool gaze.

“Are you in the habit of cutting your timing so fine these days, Ambrose?” she asked.

With that question, Ambrose found himself transported. It was as if time had melted away and he was once again a young boy, standing with Felicity in front of Mrs Mansfield as his father introduced them and thanked her for hosting the family. Memories rushed into Ambrose’s mind; the hours playing games in the Manor’s halls, keeping up with his studies in the library, and playing near the abandoned well. And of course, the terror of turning up late for a meal and receiving a lecture on punctuality from Mrs Mansfield.

Ambrose returned to the present day and stole a glance at the clock before apologising profusely to the lady of the house. He took a seat by his sister, giving a nervous nod and smile to Molly, who was sitting to Felicity’s left by Mrs Mansfield.

“Amby, I simply *must* introduce you to our guests for the auction,” said Felicity, with a huge grin. As always, her carefree demeanour oozed charm and calm.

Felicity introduced Ambrose to those sitting around the table, clockwise from Mrs Mansfield. Mr and Mrs Durant were old friends of the Mansfields, visiting from out of town. To their right sat Lucas Lamarre and Sam Silcox, young business partners from Traville. They were attempting to hold a conversation with the blustering Colonel Chambers, who was dressed in the formal regalia of The Order, and was lecturing them on government rank and process. At the end of the table sat Mr Bijonne, a portly man with little hair and a grey moustache, who was occasionally attempting to interject.

One seat separated Ambrose from the final guest, who he recognised

immediately – the man’s wild orange hair flew out from his face in every direction, as did his stringy beard and long moustache. Felicity introduced him as Michael Morant, at which point he held up a hand in protest.

“My dear lady, I must insist that you address me by my stage name. Inspector, I am The Great Mystico,” he said, before he whirled his head in a circle and leaned across the empty chair, whispering, “And I am the greatest thief in the world.” Mystico’s wild eyes seemed to be trying to pop out of his head as he waited for Ambrose to respond.

Ambrose was about to comment on the ridiculous nature of the claim, but remembered Percy’s warning – this could be someone to watch. “Was it you that I saw jumping out of the snow this morning and dashing towards the Manor?” he enquired.

Mystico nodded slowly. “Yes, yes! I spent the night sheltering in a snow cave. I’ve learned to build my endurance over the years, in order to pull off feats that are out of the reach of ordinary men.”

Ambrose turned to Felicity, who was quietly giggling to herself. “Am I to assume you’ve invited a magician as entertainment this weekend?” he asked, seeing through the strange man’s claims.

Felicity broke out in a raucous laugh. “Yes! Isn’t he the greatest? Mystico, you simply must tell Amby about how you made the House of Lyonne disappear during The Freeze last year.”

“All in good time, my dear.” Mystico dismissed Felicity with a wave of his hand and returned his attention to Mr Bijonne.

Ambrose pushed away his irritation with both his sister and Mystico, and looked at the empty chair beside him. Whoever this final guest was, they were late. “Will there be a chance to introduce me to our missing guest at some stage as well?” he asked his sister.

“Ali-Zhan Hazi needs no introduction!” thundered a voice from the doorway. All eyes darted to the entrance to see a man with a huge beard dressed in the simple clothing of the Eastern people standing there. He wore a long, undyed tunic that hung from his shoulders and nearly touched his ankles, and his only

other clothing was a black cap that rose like a wave to form a peak above his forehead. The man stood almost as tall as the doors, and was so broad across the shoulders that Ambrose believed he was the most muscular person he had ever seen. The man laughed heartily, his white teeth contrasted against the black of his beard.

“You may need no introduction, young man,” the cold voice of Mrs Mansfield cut across his laughter, “But if you ever dare to show up late to a meal in my house again, you’ll be finding yourself another place to sleep in the snow.” She stared the man down as he excused himself and took his place beside Ambrose at the table, offering a hand to the stunned detective as he sat down.

Ambrose shook the outstretched hand. “A pleasure to meet you,” he intoned, still in awe at the size of the big man. “Since you are from the Eastern Lands, may I assume you wish you be addressed as Zhan?”

Zhan smiled broadly and slapped Ambrose on the back. “Yes! Ah, the great Inspector Ambrose. Meeting you is fortuitous indeed. The Powers smile on us this day.”

Ambrose smiled weakly, recovering his breath from the slap he had just received. Breakfast was now served, with Clink, Clank, and Clunk assisting with the service. Conversation soon turned to The Freeze and its effect on local commerce. Sam and Lucas had been planning to earn more before The Freeze set in, and spent quite some time describing how poor it would be for their business dealings if the snow lay on the land for very long.

“And what is your particular line of business?” enquired Molly, who had been silently studying the table. Ambrose realised this was the first he heard her speak since he arrived at breakfast. Her voice was honey smooth, breaking his train of thought.

Sam looked at his partner. “Our business,” he said, pausing “...is business. We’re not at liberty to disclose much of what we do I’m afraid, but it involves trades and exchanges between mutually acceptable parties.”

“I see. What a shame we can’t learn more,” said Molly, returning to her breakfast.

Sam, perhaps seeing an opportunity, offered to discuss it further with Molly during a walk in the gardens. She politely refused. Ambrose felt relief passing through his mind, but pushed it aside.

Conversation around the table then fractured, and Ambrose found himself speaking with Zhan, Mystico and Mr Bijonne about the upcoming auction. A series of treasures were to be displayed before the auction, with the main attraction being one of the famous Mansfield gems – the Eye of Gothmore. Mystico was particularly interested in this item, as he had been brought in to make it disappear as part of the night's entertainment.

“No locks, nor any other mechanism shall stop me from stealing the gem this weekend,” he declared, wagging a bony finger in the air.

Mr Bijonne clearly had little time for the theatrics, and began expounding on the gem's history. He was a jeweller with an incredible knowledge of metals, gems and precious stones. His round spectacles waggled atop his nose as he spoke, mimicking the movement of his neatly cropped moustache. “The Eye of Gothmore has been in the Mansfield family for generations,” he said. “Legend says that the gem was the eye of the feared Gothmore the Destroyer.”

Ambrose chuckled quietly to himself. He had never had much time for legends like the Tale of Gothmore, who it was claimed had wreaked havoc across the land before disappearing into the sea one day, leaving the Empire behind. Unfortunately for Ambrose, his mirth did not go unnoticed by Zhan, whose normal joviality faded.

“You do not believe in Gothmore, Inspector?” he quizzed.

“Well, it's more that I believe in logic and reason,” said Ambrose. “Any tale of a giant Mech wandering the land with evil intent is fine for children, but where is the proof of his existence? No one has ever found a trace of Gothmore. Show me evidence, and you'll find me a willing believer.”

Zhan stroked his beard. “Then what do you make of the stone, Inspector? You question its origin?”

Ambrose shrugged. “I don't know if the origin really matters in this case,” he

said, looking at the other guests, who were involved in what he assumed were far more pleasant and light-hearted discussions. “It’s a valuable gem that will be displayed as part of a charitable event. That’s what I make of it.”

“You deny its power then?” Zhan asked, looking intently into Ambrose’s eyes. “There are many who believe that the Eye of Gothmore can stop the passage of time itself.”

“Ah, yes. Well in terms of time-stopping, I’ll have to join the sceptics in not believing,” said Ambrose. He could hear Felicity giggling behind him, clearing enjoying his discomfort.

Zhan leaned in, beckoned Ambrose closer and said quietly “My friend, I understand your hesitance. To you who follow The Order, the power of Gothmore is little more than a myth, but my people know better: the Eye of Gothmore is not a toy to be trifled with.”

Ambrose frowned as Zhan continued, with his voice dropping to a near whisper. “There are those in the East who still believe in the old ways. They still believe in Energy.”

Ambrose felt his face go pale. In all the years of his life, few people had dared to utter that word. It was forbidden to speak openly of it, and it was banned from every book of The Order; Energy was nothing more than an evil myth, used to coerce people into submission, or so the teachings of The Order said. Ambrose looked Zhan in the eye and spoke quietly and deliberately.

“Zhan, you may feel you can trust me, but you know who I work for. I am honour-bound to report anyone spreading rumours that could affect the civic mood. For all our sakes, I will pretend that I didn’t hear what you just said. Do you understand?” He leaned back from the Easterner and took a bite of his breakfast, while Zhan stared quietly at him.

“I understand, Inspector,” Zhan said, “But I wonder, do you?”

Ambrose wasn’t sure what to make of that comment, and thankfully Mrs Mansfield interrupted his thinking – she was standing behind him.

“If you gentlemen are so interested in the Eye of Gothmore, perhaps you

would care to join Mr Bijonne for his inspection of the gem this afternoon,” she said, eyeing Ambrose and Zhan.

Ambrose wondered how long Mrs Mansfield had been listening to their conversation. Knowing her conservative views, he hoped she had not heard much of it. Felicity cut in with an excited squeak.

“Oh that sounds wonderful, Mrs Mansfield! Of course Amby will join you. May Molly and I come along also?” She clasped her hands together and bounced in her seat.

Mrs Mansfield had always had a soft spot for Felicity – Ambrose put it down to never having a granddaughter of her own. He watched as Mrs Mansfield actually *smiled* at Felicity and agreed to let her join the party during afternoon tea time. Felicity thanked her profusely, and with that Mrs Mansfield departed, leaving the room to its debates and discussions.

The morning passed quickly, with Felicity and Molly taking Ambrose through the plans for the auction. After a short lesson regarding the ins and outs of charity auctions, they marched him down to the Great Ballroom to lend a hand with decorating. As they passed into the room through its vast entranceway, Ambrose was once again taken aback by its grandeur.

The Great Ballroom was large enough to comfortably hold over two hundred people, including musicians and service people. Its square shape was complimented by four tall pillars that were set back into the walls and curved across its roof to join in the centre of the high ceiling, which rose a full three stories above the ground. The floor was made of polished marble, inlaid with streaks of black and grey, so that it seemed to move like fog as you watched it – Ambrose recalled hours spent quietly observing shadows and feet moving across the floor when he was a child.

Ambrose snapped out of his nostalgia as Felicity and Molly set up a table in the middle of the Great Ballroom. Soon he found himself up a ladder hanging streamers from the pillars, with Molly's help. Ambrose normally didn't enjoy manual labour, but Molly's calm manner and gentle conversation kept him engaged with the work. She detailed to him her study of architecture over the past year, including the various basic forms and rules she had learnt in her first classes. Ambrose noted it all with great interest. He also appreciated her quick thinking when the ladder almost overbalanced – as it fell, she propped it up, causing him to almost fall over and end up with his face close to hers.

How can she smell so good as well? Ambrose thought as he regained his footing.

The decorating continued at a smart pace, with Colonel Chambers and Zhan lending their muscle as required. The Colonel had lost little of his strength despite his age, and was soon involved in an intense arm-wrestle with Zhan after they couldn't solve a debate over who had the stronger forearm. Ambrose reflected on his last message to Percy; perhaps he should have said he was looking out for *normal* behaviour with this group.

After a light lunch of sandwiches and soup, the party retired to the music room to hear Felicity and Molly recite an a Capella song they were to perform during the auction. Though Felicity was at times pitchy, Molly hit

every note with precision. Ambrose continued to be impressed by the girl's abilities; he wondered if she would ever consider a career in detection. He didn't wonder for long, because he was soon involved in a deep conversation with Molly regarding some of his recent cases. She seemed to hang off every word he said as he described the cases of Mrs Milliard's malfunctioning Mech and Francis Finney's vanishing villa, though he omitted the details of his run-in with the Assassins Guild from the second storey.

"I do hope I'm not boring you," Ambrose said, even though he was sure he wasn't.

"Oh Ambrose, your stories are like water in the desert! I'm so sick of talking politics and structural integrity with these old ones," Molly said, dismissively waving her hand towards some of the other guests, who had gathered around the grand piano as Felicity showed off her skills. "Do you ever tire of solving such complex cases so simply?"

Ambrose blushed. Compliments were a rare thing in his line of work. "No, it's an honour to be serving the Empire," was the best he could muster.

Molly smiled and the conversation moved on to matters of politics and state. Ambrose hadn't expected Molly to be so well versed in policy and social issues. Normally his sister's friends kept their interests to fashion and local gossip; Molly had learnt the complex system of Guilds and Societies that kept the Empire turning, on top of a deep understanding of the history of the Empire, including the Outer Regions. Needless to say, it had been a long time since Ambrose had held a meaningful conversation about the geopolitical implications of wheat farming in the arid Empire Highlands. He and Molly talked for what felt like hours, until Ambrose felt a hand on his shoulder.

It was Zhan. He had come back to the music room (which was now quite empty) to gather Ambrose and Molly for Mr Bijonne's assessment of the Eye of Gothmore. He was highly apologetic to Molly, but she simply laughed it off, and took him by the arm as they headed down the hallway towards the Guest House, where the gem was stored. As they passed through the Great Ballroom, Felicity joined them, throwing a cheeky smile at Ambrose, who felt his face warming, even as they stepped out into the cold air.

The path to the Guest House had been cleared by the House Mechs earlier in

the day, and its red bricks gleamed in the sunlight. The double doors of the Guest House stood open for the first time that Ambrose could remember. He felt excitement rising as he thought about how long he had waited to get a good glimpse inside, beyond his fleeting peeks through the window when he had been a child.

Ambrose couldn't help but feel somewhat deflated as he stepped into the Guest House. The double doors opened directly into a small entrance alcove, which was nothing to speak of, containing just a sparse table and hat rack stationed beside the door. A lounge area stood beyond this, with four gaslights burning low off the ceiling. The lounge was tastefully decorated with an ornate couch and two seats, one of which was occupied by the unamused Mrs Mansfield, who sat talking quietly with Mr Bijonne while Clink and Clank waited nearby. Wood panelling lined the walls, and it could have passed for any room in the Manor, except for one striking feature: a giant painting that almost reached the room's ceiling.

Blacks, reds, and deep oranges filled the top of the painting; a sky full of rage that fell down upon the land beneath. Hills rolled in from the left of the canvas, rising to a cliff upon which stood a burning temple, doused in white-hot flames. Men were jumping into the ocean that roiled below, a montage of blue and black that spat forth white foam against the cliff face. The main focus of the painting was a large Mech, standing in the centre of the image. Its body was made up of thin twists of dirty metal, like silver vines formed together in a humanoid shape. The Mech's face was jagged, frozen in a scream. Where its eyes once sat, only hollow sockets looked out as it leaned forwards. Ambrose felt like it was staring directly at him as he made his way up to join the others, who were clearly as taken by the image as he was. As he approached, Ambrose could make out a small engraving in the centre of the painting's wooden frame. It read:

Gothmore the Destroyer: Legacy

Ambrose couldn't help but feel that this was the most terrifying piece of art he had even laid eyes on. Savagery and mourning were all that could be found within its frame. He suddenly felt relieved that he had never witnessed its horror as a child. Zhan leaned over to him and whispered in his ear, "A fascinating record of the great myth, don't you think, Inspector?" He smiled a

toothy grin as Mr Bijonne cleared his throat.

“I trust everyone is enjoying this cherry scene; however the time has come to inspect the Eye of Gothmore. Clink, may I have the gem please?”

The Mech nodded, and approached the painting. He turned to the guests and recited what was clearly a well-rehearsed speech.

“Dear guests, you are about to lay eyes on one of the rarest treasures in the Mansfield collection. Its security in this place is entrusted to me, and I ask that you treat it with the respect you would give any living thing.”

Living thing? Ambrose had to stop himself from rolling his eyes. The gem’s legend had grown beyond the realm of what he would consider reasonable. Still, he found himself nodding and agreeing along with the others.

Clink looked over to Mrs Mansfield, who gave a tired nod; he then proceeded to push in on the side of the painting’s frame. It swung open with a satisfying *click*, revealing a small safe behind it. Clink moved forward and inserted a key into the heavy iron lock on the left hand side of the safe. He turned it swiftly and the safe opened to reveal a black stone the size of a man’s fist within.

All those present in the room fell silent. The Eye of Gothmore was more stunning than Ambrose had expected. It was a dense black, and seemed to swallow light rather than reflect it. Clink pulled it out and set it upon a white cushion, which he laid on a small table in the middle of the room. Mr Bijonne licked his lips as it was set down. “My, my,” he said, pulling out a loupe in order to inspect the gem. “It’s certainly denser than I had imagined.” He paused for a minute before beginning a detailed inspection of the gem’s surface.

Of all the people in the room, Molly and Felicity were most interested in the Eye. Molly asked several insightful questions about the texture and composition of the Eye, but received only cursory responses from Mr Bijonne, who was writing a valuation and quality report to be displayed beside the gem. Ambrose looked over at Zhan, who had fallen silent, and was brooding in the corner.

“Is everything alright, Zhan?” enquired Ambrose. “I thought you were looking forward to seeing the legendary gem in person.”

Zhan stared at the Eye, but his mind appeared to be a million miles away. “Yes Inspector, I was indeed excited. But where I expected light, I sense nothing. It is as if...” his voice trailed off and he resumed his brooding.

Mr Bijonne was nearing the end of his inspection. Mrs Mansfield stood and joined him as he walked the stone back to the safe. As he stepped onto the carpet that lay beneath the safe, the jeweller stumbled for a minute, and he and Mrs Mansfield grabbed at thin air as the Eye flew through the air towards the wall. The gem was about to make contact with the painting when a delicate hand intercepted its flight and placed it back in its correct position.

It was Molly. She smiled at Mr Bijonne and cheerily declared, “Well, that was close wasn’t it?” Ambrose watched as she smugly closed the safe door and turned to leave.

Is there anything she can’t do?

The remaining party left the Guest House, leaving Clink and Clank to tidy up – dinner was only an hour away, and preparations had to be made.

As he climbed the grand staircase to the first floor, Ambrose noted Mrs Mansfield walking off with Mr Bijonne. Zhan was also following them at a distance, and whilst he appeared to be merely inspecting portraits, he betrayed the look of a man who was set on eavesdropping.

Who are you, Zhan? And why are you suddenly so distracted? Ambrose pondered the afternoon’s events as he returned to his room to freshen up.

During dinner that evening, Ambrose found himself seated beside Lucas Lamarre and Sam Silcox, who proceeded to try and convince him of the benefits of a business scheme they were promoting. Whilst Lucas came across as genuinely naïve, Sam was truly slimy in Ambrose’s opinion. He carried all the hallmarks of a pan-handler from the slums, and if Ambrose had been in Traville, he might even have checked at headquarters for any criminal history. He politely declined Sam’s insistent offer, and proceeded to discuss more pleasant things with Mr and Mrs Durant, who were explaining their

long history with the Mansfields to him.

As the evening progressed, Ambrose noticed that Colonel Chambers was having quite an intense conversation with Mrs Mansfield. He had positioned himself beside her, and had been leaning in close, speaking gently with her. Now they appeared to be having sharp words in hushed tones. Then, without so much as a word, Mrs Mansfield stood and walked out swiftly. The Colonel started to call after her, but thought better of it and returned to his food.

Silence descended over the dining hall, with Mystico attempting to lighten the mood with a terrible joke about Mechs and weddings. For the next half an hour, the room was a mix of polite conversations as the guests finished their dinner and waited for their host to return. People came and went, but there was an undeniable air of apprehension about why Mrs Mansfield had left so rapidly. The Colonel was silent in his chair, sullen as he ate the remains of his dinner. Time dragged on, and dessert was being served when Felicity excused herself from the room. As she left, Ambrose beckoned Clink over.

“I trust Mrs Mansfield is feeling well?” he asked, to which the Mech gave a knowing nod. The Mechs never gave out information about the Mansfield family, but Ambrose felt it was worth a try anyway. Clink did at least mention that he was sure Mrs Mansfield would return shortly. He returned to his post by the door, and Ambrose took a bite of the butter pudding that had just been served. The other guests were now mostly chewing away quietly, as often happens when a good dessert appears on the table.

Then a scream cut through the quiet.

Ambrose whipped around in the direction of the noise, immediately recognising Felicity’s voice as he leapt up from the table. He was outside in a flash, charging through the snow towards the Guest House. He could see two sets of footprints leading along the path to the doors, one of which hung open, swinging in the breeze. Light spilled out of the doorway, where Felicity stood screaming at the top of her lungs.

Ambrose slowed as he approached, and Felicity collapsed into his arms, sobbing.

“What’s wrong?” Ambrose demanded, but he didn’t have to wait for a

response. Behind him he could hear the sound of the other guests arriving, along with Clink and Clank, who marched past them into the Guest House. Ambrose followed, passing Felicity over to Molly, just in time to hear Clink mutter, “Oh no.”

The wall safe was open, empty of its contents, and there on the carpet lay the lifeless body of Mrs Mansfield.

The entire party had made their way out to the Guest House by now, and stood around the entrance in a state of shock. Most of the party said little, except Sam Silcox, who stepped forward towards the body.

“Let me have a look at her. She may still be alive,” he said to Ambrose, who had put out a hand to stop him.

“And how would you know that?” Ambrose asked.

“I used to be a doctor,” said Sam, as if the admission pained him. “In a former life, at least.”

Ambrose dropped his arm, and Sam knelt down beside the body, taking off his jacket and placing his ear near Mrs Mansfield’s mouth. Her body was pale, and she showed no signs of breathing. Sam muttered to himself and felt for a pulse. Ambrose made his way over to Sam – he was certainly full of surprises, but there didn’t seem to be much of a reason to trust him.

As Sam continued his examination of the body, Ambrose found himself taking in the scene. The safe was just a gaping hole in the wall now, and Mrs Mansfield’s body lay only a few metres away from it. The scene had the look of a theft gone wrong.

Or is this the slick work of an assassin trying to conceal their real motive – to murder of the matriarch of the Mansfield family?

Ambrose looked up at the crowd of shocked guests that stood by the door. All of them would have a part to play in the coming events. Did one of them do this, or was it an outsider? He glanced at the scene outside, where the snow was starting to form on the ground again.

Sam stood up from the body. “She’s definitely dead, Inspector. Not long gone

– maybe half an hour, but dead is dead.” He smiled slightly, seemingly forgetting the seriousness of the situation, and Ambrose shot him a withering look.

“Very well, thank you for your assessment, doctor,” Ambrose said, to which Sam shook his head. “I’m not a doctor anymore, Inspector. They strip people of that title if they break enough laws.” He smiled again, and proceeded back to the crowd.

Time to clear the area, or I’ll never get any work done.

“This is now a crime scene.” Ambrose addressed the others, who looked as shocked as he felt. “I’d like everyone to return to the Manor and stay in the dining room. We don’t know who did this, and they may still be in the grounds.” He turned to Clink and said, “Make sure Clunk attends to the other guests. Get Clank to fetch me a clean sheet and my black bag, and I want you to make a full sweep of the grounds looking for anything suspicious, especially footprints.”

Clink nodded, and ushered the guests out. Molly, however, slipped past him and ran up to Ambrose. Her eyes were red from crying, but she was clearly back in control of her emotions.

“I want to help,” she said. Ambrose wasn’t surprised – he knew how his detective work had intrigued her. He thought about the offer for a moment. Without Percy here, he would need all the help he could get – but to have a civilian running around a crime scene wouldn’t do at all; it could even cost him his career. It pained him to say no to Molly, and he could feel a strong emotion stirring within himself.

Turmoil.

Ambrose shook the feeling off as best he could, and put his hand on Molly’s shoulder – something he wouldn’t normally do, but this was an exceptional circumstance, he assured himself.

“I appreciate the offer,” he said, “But I have to follow protocol, or I could compromise this entire situation. I’m happy to give you whatever details I can later. In the meantime, please think over anything suspicious that you’ve

noticed these past few days – especially amongst the guests.”

Molly nodded and headed out into the chill. Ambrose watched her tall figure crossing the snow covered bricks back to the Manor as the heavier drifts began to fall. A strange feeling was tugging at his heart – he tried to push it aside, but he knew that there was something different about this girl; she wasn't like any woman he'd ever met. He shrugged off his thoughts and looked up to the mass of snowflakes that were now falling from the heavens. If the killer was nearby, he wouldn't be able to escape anytime soon; it looked like a blizzard was about to settle in.

Moving away from the cold, Ambrose returned to Mrs Mansfield's body. Above it, the safe hung open like a wide mouth. Inside, the cushion that had held the Eye of Gothmore sat empty of its usual possession. Ambrose inspected the safe's lock – it showed no signs of tampering, and was missing the thick iron key that was used to secure it; he would have to check if anyone aside from Mrs Mansfield had a spare key to open it.

Finally, Ambrose looked down at the body. Mrs Mansfield might have been a forthright, opinionated lady, but she didn't deserve to die like this. A heaviness fell on Ambrose as he stood there alone.

There was a rattling at the door and Clank entered, carrying the requested items and a light dusting of snow. Ambrose took the sheet from Clank and set it aside, before proceeding to open his bag. Without Percy here furiously scribbling notes, he would need to capture his own thoughts effectively. He wrote down a few observations about the room in Percy's notebook: the lack of any signs of struggle, the securely locked doors, and the absence of blood around the body. *Whoever did this is a professional*, he wrote, underlining 'professional'.

Returning to the body, Ambrose knelt down and scanned Mrs Mansfield for any bruises or signs of violence. She was lying sideways, and if she had been breathing, it would have been easy to assume she had simply fainted. Ambrose looked around her head; there was a bruise appearing from where she had hit the floor. Two things about the body did stand out as strange, however.

Firstly, the veins in Mrs Mansfield's left arm had turned a light black colour;

Ambrose hadn't seen such a thing before, but he figured it could be related to diet or the like. The other thing that caught his eye was a small trickle of dark red blood from Mrs Mansfield's left ear. It hadn't been there when he had arrived on the scene, so he rushed to grab a small glass vial from his bag. As the blood slowly poured into it, Ambrose couldn't help but feel a deep sense of sorrow again – here was a lady he had known all his life, who had been alive just an hour ago. Now, he was poring over a crime scene around her body.

Who would do this?

As Ambrose swept the room to look for any other objects of interest, Clank covered Mrs Mansfield's body with the sheet. Ambrose shook every window, but all were locked and bolted from the inside. No furniture had moved from earlier in the day, and the room appeared spotless. Clink returned just as Ambrose completed his search of the room. He shut the door quietly as the snow swirled in thick flurries outside.

Clink reported no unusual signs around the grounds. The staff had been informed of Mrs Mansfield's passing, and were in shock. The guests were not much better, and were still in the dining room awaiting Ambrose's instruction.

"There were no footprints outside that you could see?" Ambrose quizzed.

"No, Master Ambrose, I'm afraid not. The Gate Guards and Perimeter Watchers also reported no signs of anyone coming or going this afternoon or evening. But with the snow falling so heavily, someone may have found a way past, and it is not difficult to conceive that any tracks would be covered by now."

Ambrose crossed over to the door and peered out into the snow. "Did you secure the Guest House this afternoon, Clink?"

"Yes, in the usual fashion. Both the safe and the front door were securely fastened shut."

Ambrose nodded and scribbled more notes in his book.

How on earth does Percy write so fast when he does this?

Ambrose looked up at the Mechs, who were standing near the safe, looking rather forlorn. He posed the question that mattered most.

“Who would want to do this?” Ambrose asked them.

Both Mechs looked at Ambrose as if he was being ridiculous. Clink pointed to the empty safe and said, “Anyone with half a mind would know the value of the Eye of Gothmore. Beyond its monetary worth, it holds significant historical value, being hundreds of years old. Some even believe it holds great power; any of these things would be motive enough.”

“I understand that,” Ambrose shot back, not appreciating the Mech’s tone, “But to kill Mrs Mansfield as well? I don’t see why you would. Was she killed to get to the gem, or was someone stealing the gem, and she merely interrupted them?” Ambrose could feel his head starting to swim with the problems of the situation. He was alone, without his usual tools and support, and cut off from local authorities by this dreadful snow.

Clank responded to his earlier question. “We have never had any cause for concern regarding the safety of the gem or the security of the Manor. Both this safe and the house’s locks were designed by one of the top locksmiths in Traville, so I fail to see how anyone could have broken in. Mrs Mansfield often went to visit the gem for comfort, as she loved its beauty. I believe that the thief saw an opportune moment and struck whilst the safe was open.”

A fine theory, Ambrose thought.

“But what about the lack of blood or bruising?” he asked. “We only heard a single cry from this area; it seems hard to believe that there was no violence whatsoever if Mrs Mansfield didn’t have time to scream.” Ambrose wasn’t really asking the Mechs for an answer; he already knew why it was unlikely.

“See that no one disturbs this room,” he said, “Turn off all the gaslamps and don’t light any fires; the cold from the snow will preserve the body and the scene.”

Clink seemed confused. “Are you finished with the crime scene so soon,

Master Ambrose? I thought it was customary to check for fingerprints?”

“You’re right, but there’s no rush,” said Ambrose. “I need to ask our guests some questions whilst this is fresh in their minds.”

Ambrose walked to the doors, as the Mechs stood there looking bemused. “It seems we’re hosting a visitor that’s unlikely to leave clumsy fingerprints,” he said as he turned the handle. He looked back at the Mechs.

“One of our guests is an assassin.”

With that, Ambrose walked out into the snow, retracing his steps back to the Dining Hall and the distraught guests inside, all the while shivering as the snow cascaded down around him.

The room went silent as Ambrose entered. It was a sad sight, with the guests standing around the dining room, red-eyed and distraught. They looked exhausted, none more so than Felicity, who was still crying as she sat on a couch beside Molly. Ambrose adjusted his jacket, and beckoned everyone over to the table. This was usually the kind of situation that Percy would have helped him with, as emotions often boiled over in the midst of tragedy, and Ambrose struggled to deal with them at the best of times anyway.

As the guests took their seats, Ambrose felt a pang of fear in his stomach. It was likely that one of these guests had just stolen a valuable artefact and murdered a defenceless old lady. It took a special kind of evil to be prepared to kill a generous host in the middle of The Freeze – and that kind of evil was often very good at disguising itself. Tears, expressions of grief, wailing, and gnashing of teeth; these were the tools the killer would now employ until they could get away. There was, of course, the possibility that more than one person was in on the theft. Suspicion and diplomacy were now Ambrose's main weapons. He cleared his throat and addressed all those assembled.

“Friends, I understand your sorrow.” Ambrose found himself interrupted by a scream of agony from Mrs Durant, who was beside herself with grief. He adjusted his shirt and continued, “And it is understandable that you would wish to grieve at this time,” another wail interrupted his speech, “But we must move swiftly.”

As Mrs Durant launched into her third moan, Ambrose politely asked Mr Durant if his wife would be better served retiring to another room. He agreed, and led her from the dining room, her screams of “Why, oh why?” slowly fading into the distance.

Ambrose cleared his throat yet again, grateful for an end to the outpouring of emotion. He resumed his speech.

“Mrs Mansfield is dead, and the Eye of Gothmore has been taken. I do not wish to alarm anyone here, but the person who perpetrated this crime may still be nearby. We must all be vigilant.”

A chorus of mutters and concerned glances came from the assembled guests. Ambrose knew it would create panic if he mentioned that an assassin was likely standing amongst them.

Felicity was the first to speak, whimpering through her tears. “I can’t believe... that someone would do this to... poor Mrs Mansfield. And to think... not only is she dead, but the party will be cancelled and my... social reputation will be dragged through the mud.” Ambrose couldn’t believe what he was hearing, but the other guests hushed her quickly. Zhan spoke up next.

“Do you have any idea who would do such a heinous thing, Inspector?” he asked. “To kill your host – such a crime is punishable by death in the East. None would dare to try it.” Zhan gritted his teeth as spoke.

In reply, Ambrose simply said, “I’m unsure as to who would do this, but each of you can help me to find the culprit by cooperating with questioning tomorrow.” He looked at the snow gathering on the window. “No one will be leaving with this heavy snow falling anyway, so I suggest you all retire for the evening. I will remain awake to ensure the house is secure.”

The Colonel stepped forward. “If it please you my boy, I would like to volunteer my services in helping you secure the property.”

Zhan stepped out, too. “As would I,” he echoed.

Ambrose shook his head. “I don’t need both of you patrolling. Colonel, you come with me. Zhan, we can talk about security tomorrow.”

The Easterner looked disappointed, but nodded and began to make his way upstairs, along with the rest of the group. Ambrose shared brief words and a quick hug with Felicity, before locking eyes with Molly, who assured him that Felicity would be alright.

Before they parted ways, Ambrose put his hand on Molly’s arm.

“I need to chat with you before you sleep tonight. I know Felicity isn’t in the right frame of mind to help, but her insight into the crime scene is invaluable. Find out what you can from her.”

Molly nodded and gave him a meaningful gaze. “Meet me by my room in an hour, inspector. I’ll do my best to find out what I can.”

Turmoil.

Ambrose again felt his emotions rising. He quickly turned away and beckoned The Colonel to follow him. He was grateful for some time alone with The Colonel – he had been the last person to speak with Mrs Mansfield before she left the dining room. As they walked around the house checking doors and windows, Ambrose began searching for some answers.

“Mrs Mansfield certainly left the dining room in a hurry tonight. I’ve not seen her so upset before,” he said, as he rattled the doors in the music room.

The Colonel dipped his head. “Yes, I feel... well, just awful. Like this whole situation is my fault actually.” Ambrose raised an eyebrow as he led the way to the Great Ballroom.

“I have a confession,” said The Colonel, “I have known Macy for decades, and during that time I have always held feelings for her. This weekend, I had planned to rekindle a romance that I thought was still there despite many years apart. Tonight, when I attempted to bring up the topic, I was rebuffed.” He looked at the floor as they made their way down the hall. “To my great shame, I continued to push Macy for some time alone with her, to speak in private about how I felt. She was upset, but still I kept insisting. Oh, I’m such a fool!” The Colonel smacked his fist against a wood panel, his eyes welling up with tears. “If only I hadn’t pressed her tonight, she wouldn’t have left the dining hall. Curse my stupidity!”

Ambrose felt a wave of sorrow for The Colonel. He must be lonely, to be pursuing Mrs Mansfield – a retired soldier would surely never stand a chance with an aristocrat. He had come to the Manor on a fool’s errand, and was now reaping a terrible harvest. There was little motive for him to kill Mrs Mansfield, but jilted lovers had done worse.

Ambrose and The Colonel crossed the floor of the Great Ballroom, where the gaslights burnt low. Ambrose checked the doors and was stepping away when he spotted something a little out of place. There on the ground was a piece of red clay about the size of his thumb. He bent down and picked it up, running it between his fingers. The Colonel leaned in, his breath smelling of brandy and cigars.

“I say, red clay. That doesn’t belong around here.” He grabbed it off Ambrose, who stifled an objection. “That’s rare, yes quite rare,” The Colonel

mumbled as he looked at it closely. “I’ve been all around the Empire, my boy, and during my time I’ve fought on all types of soil. I’ve learned to watch the ground wherever I go – many good people fall on unstable ground.” He threw the clay back at Ambrose. “This clay is only found in two places – the lowlands around Traville, and the Eastern hills.”

Ambrose appreciated The Colonel’s help, even though he already knew the likely origin of the clay.

The real question is, why is there such a large lump of it here?

Ambrose kept his thoughts to himself, but decided to return for another look in the morning. “Let’s finish our rounds,” he said to The Colonel, “Then we’ll get some rest. There’s plenty to do tomorrow.”

The Colonel agreed, and soon they were making their way to the entrance hall. As they set foot there, Clunk pulled Ambrose aside, nearly falling over in the process.

“Sorry, Master Ambrose, but there’s an urgent messenger outside for you,” said the Mech, adjusting his eye, which was almost rolling out of its socket.

“In this weather?” Ambrose couldn’t believe it.

“Yes, Master Ambrose. I took the liberty of getting your coat and bag.” Clunk thrust them into Ambrose’s stomach, almost winding him. “Awfully sorry,” he said quickly, knowing that his depth perception had failed him again.

“Not a problem,” wheezed Ambrose, as he pulled on his coat.

Outside, bursts of snow whipped the side of the Manor. A small Mech stood waiting quietly by the steps, its black eyes dotted with snowflakes. Ambrose could just make out the numbers on its chest; it was the same 5-4-5 Messenger Mech from earlier, having made the fourteen hour round trip. It greeted him and whirred to life with its message.

“Believe assassin intends Gothmore theft. Slums rife with rumours. Warn Mrs Mansfield quickly, Percy.” The Mech stopped whirring and awaited a response.

Too little, too late.

Ambrose shook his head. “I have samples I need you to carry,” he said to the Mech, which dutifully held out its hand. Ambrose pulled the vial of blood from his bag and looked around for any prying eyes. If the assassin saw him handing anything to the messenger, the Mech might not finish its return journey. “Take this to Detective Percy, with the following message: ‘Mrs Mansfield dead, Gothmore stolen. Enclosed blood from Mansfield. Check for any abnormalities, Ambrose.’”

The Mech whirred and clicked as it placed the vial into a hole in its side. It turned towards the front lawn, and seemed to hesitate slightly. As it was about to take off, Ambrose caught it by the arm and looked it square in the eyes. “That blood *must* survive the journey. People’s lives depend on it,” he said.

The Mech nodded, then jetted down the stairs and through the snow, which was now up past its knee joints. Ambrose watched it disappear. A Mech was the only thing that could get a message through in this weather. He turned and headed inside, to the hollow warmth of Mansfield Manor.

Taking the stairs two at a time, Ambrose headed towards Molly’s room. It was positioned next to Felicity’s, just down the hall from Ambrose’s own room. He found her door slightly ajar, and knocked quietly on it three times.

“Just a minute,” Molly’s light voice rose from inside.

Ambrose looked up and down the hallway. Gaslamps flickered occasionally in the gloom, but otherwise Mansfield Manor was still. The guests were all away in their beds trying to sleep. Except Molly, who now appeared before him. She was still dressed from dinner, and as she stepped out into the hallway, Ambrose once again found his heart beating slightly faster.

“How can I help you, Inspector?” Molly flashed a small smile, but Ambrose could see from her eyes that she had been shedding tears recently.

“I wanted to see if you were alright first before I asked any questions.”

What am I doing? I never ask people that. Ambrose was mentally kicking

himself.

“I’m fine, Inspector. I just didn’t expect to see a dead body this weekend.”

Ambrose made a sympathetic noise and pushed past his urge to delve into more emotional lines of questioning. “Did you have a chance to talk with my sister about how she came to be in the Guest House tonight?” he said, pulling out his notebook.

“Yes, she was emotional, poor dear, but it seems that she simply excused herself in order to use the washroom,” Molly began, “But then she decided to check on the decorations in the Great Ballroom.” She leaned in closer to Ambrose and dropped her voice. “I don’t blame her for feeling nervous about the decorations and preparations. There are just so many *strange* people here this weekend. The way that Zhan was acting this afternoon – you noticed it, didn’t you?”

Ambrose mumbled that he did as he scratched notes quickly. It was hard to keep up with all the information flowing in.

Molly continued. “Felicity saw that the door leading to the Guest House was ajar, and that there was a set of footprints leading to the Guest House door. I don’t know why she bothered to go and investigate - only a fool would be out in this weather. Anyway, from what I gathered, she was curious to see if it was Mrs Mansfield out there, or if someone had simply left the door open.”

“And what did she find when she went out there?” Ambrose didn’t look up as he continued writing.

Molly’s tone changed. “She found Mrs Mansfield’s body lying dead on the floor, and the Eye of Gothmore gone,” she snapped. “What else did you think she found, Inspector? Imagine her terror finding that poor old lady lying on the floor, not breathing. I just... I just...” Molly’s voice began to quiver with emotion.

“I’m so sorry – I didn’t mean to suggest anything. I know Felicity will take a long time to recover from the shock. I just...” Ambrose found himself stumbling over his words.

Come on, pull yourself together.

Ambrose reached out a hand to console Molly, and this time she grabbed it and held it tight. Ambrose was suddenly feeling very hot, confused and distracted.

“It’s alright, I understand, Inspector,” said Molly as she pulled herself together. “It’s just hard to be calm in the middle of all this pain.” Seeing half an opportunity to get his hand (and his heart) back, Ambrose patted Molly on the shoulder and jotted down a note quickly.

“I think I have enough for now.” Ambrose smiled weakly and put his notebook away. “It’s time for all of us to get some rest, Molly. You’ll feel much more stable in the morning. Thank you for being so strong for Felicity. It means the world to me.”

Molly seemed to appreciate Ambrose’s words. She smiled, bid him goodnight, and returned to her room.

As the door shut with a quiet *click*, Ambrose breathed out deeply. He was going to have to keep a tight watch on his emotions until this case was solved. He had never felt so close to being out of control of the way he felt.

Turmoil.

Yes, turmoil.

The house had fallen quiet as Ambrose shut the door to his room. He wanted to rest – it had been such a long day, but there was still work to be done. He sat down at his desk and pulled out his notebook.

Flicking through his notes, Ambrose considered who could have had the opportunity to kill Mrs Mansfield. She had been away from the dining room for nearly an hour before Felicity discovered her body. Ambrose concentrated as hard as he could, trying desperately to remember the movements of people in the dining room. Mr Bijonne, Sam Silcox, Lucas Lamarre, Mystico, and Zhan had all excused themselves at some stage. The Colonel had gone to “Check when that darned dessert was arriving” at one stage, and of course, Felicity had found the body. The only people who had remained were the

Durants, Molly and Ambrose. It seemed like a list of suspects was starting to emerge.

Ambrose took off his jacket and lay down on his bed, staring at the ceiling, trying to get his mind around the case at hand. He awoke hours later as the embers in the open fireplace burnt low, and the snow continued to fall silently outside.

Breakfast was a silent affair, broken only by the occasional sniffing of Mrs Durant, who had barely calmed down from the previous evening. Cutlery clinked and every so often someone would mutter about the weather and the thick coating of snow that covered the outside world. Few people arrived on time, either, and Mrs Mansfield's chair sat conspicuously empty. Molly and Felicity were the last pair to arrive, and were soon holding glum conversation whilst eating their toast and sipping hot tea.

Ambrose watched the interactions of the guests with interest. Who had something to hide today? Most people simply looked like they wanted to go home, but there would be no way out until the snow cleared, which would certainly not be today. Once the path to Mansfield was clear, however, Ambrose wouldn't be able to stop the guests departing.

There were two options: try and establish who committed the murder, or figure out who stole the gem. Since the two crimes were most likely connected, only one needed to be solved. As he surveyed the emotional faces of all involved, Ambrose made his decision: he would search for the thief, whilst hunting for the gem itself. It was hard to hide something like the Eye of Gothmore easily, and everyone who left the room the previous evening had a motive to steal it. He looked around the table:

Sam and Lucas likely needed money for whatever questionable business deals they were pursuing.

Mr Bijonne knew the value of the gem, and had admired it for years.

Mystico had specifically *said* he was going to steal the gem – had his prank gone horribly wrong?

And then there was Zhan. He was by far the most out of place in his plain tunic. Ambrose wasn't even sure how he had been invited to the Manor. Khan valued the Eye more than anyone else because he *revered* it. And he had the strength of body and will to physically harm someone if he chose to. Yes, Zhan seemed to stand out from the rest.

Ambrose's thinking was interrupted by Clink, who had just arrived to clear the table. He wanted to know the order of business for the day, considering the circumstances. Ambrose instructed him to serve lunch and dinner as

usual, and to carry on with the day's other affairs. Clank was to stay stationed by the Guest House at all times in order to ensure the body wasn't tampered with.

Soon the breakfast party dispersed, and Ambrose found himself alone with Molly and Felicity. He enquired about their plans for the day.

"I suppose we'll start clearing the decorations from the Great Ballroom," Felicity said, sighing loudly.

Molly looked equally unenthused. "Isn't there anything we can do to help you?" she asked Ambrose, clearly trying to avoid a second day working with decorations.

Ambrose looked at Molly's eyes, deep with sorrow, and found feelings once again tugging at his logical mind. "No," he forced himself to say, "But thank you. I'll be going about my investigation quickly, and I do my best work alone I'm afraid."

Turmoil.

Molly smiled a little. "I thought you always worked with a partner?" she asked.

"I do, but in this case protocol dictates that I don't include any civilians unless it's for questioning," Ambrose said. Molly gave a little pout, but still got up and walked out, taking Felicity with her. As the ladies left, Zhan popped his shaggy head around the corner.

"Inspector, if you don't mind, The Colonel and I have decided to search for the gem this morning," he said, before he pulled out a wicked-looking scimitar. "If we happen upon this murderer wandering around the Manor, we'll escort him back to you! In one piece, obviously." He smiled broadly, then disappeared from the doorway before Ambrose could reply.

Well, if he's the thief, they won't be finding the gem anytime soon, Ambrose reflected, before deciding to have a chat with Sam and Lucas about their business dealings.

It wasn't hard to find Sam. He spent much of his time in the Billiards Room,

so Ambrose headed straight there. Sure enough, Sam's voice was coming from the room as Ambrose approached. He sounded irritated, saying, "I brought you here to help me, and someone else steals the gem! With all this attention, what if people find out about our plan? It's in tatters now."

The voice of Mystico responded, "Well I didn't know someone was after the gem; how could I?"

Sam snorted in disgust. "You just should. What kind of a magician are you anyway?"

As Mystico started to reply, Ambrose knocked on the door. "Am I interrupting?" he asked as he stepped into the room.

Mystico glared at Sam. "No, not at all. I was just leaving to practice my magic skills anyway." He charged past Ambrose in a huff, shutting the door firmly behind him.

Sam upheld his usual nonchalant appearance. "So, Inspector, come to ask me if I did it?" he quipped.

"Well, if you're expecting me to, I shouldn't let you down – where did you go when you left the dining room last night?" Ambrose asked. Sam smiled – it was a washroom break, he explained; nothing sinister whatsoever had occurred.

"And what about your business needs? Surely the gem would have set you up for the long run?" Ambrose asked.

"Ah, whilst that may be true, I had no plan to take the gem for myself. I'm not at liberty to explain my business dealings to you, though. I know the law." Sam stared at Ambrose as if to challenge him.

"Can anyone vouch for your whereabouts in the afternoon yesterday?" Ambrose asked.

"Lucas and I were here most of the time. Go ahead; ask him," Sam said.

Sam clearly wasn't looking to talk, so Ambrose decided to call an end to the tense conversation, excusing himself from the room. But as he stepped out

into the hallway, he caught a flash of motion from the corner of his eye – someone was moving towards the Great Ballroom at pace. Ambrose moved quickly down the corridor and out into the entrance area.

No one was there.

“*Psst.*”

Ambrose looked around. Nothing moved, except for the gently swaying streamers hanging from the Great Ballroom’s pillars.

“*Psst. In the coats.*”

Over to the side of the room stood the Coat Room counter, and from amongst the coats hanging behind it, the face of Mr Bijonne was sticking out. He beckoned Ambrose to join him, which he did.

As they stood there surrounded by fur coats and winter jackets, Mr Bijonne dropped his voice. “Sorry for all the secrecy, but I have important information for you,” he said, looking around quickly. “There was something wrong with the gem when I looked at it yesterday.”

Ambrose’s eyes grew wide. “Something wrong? Why on earth didn’t you say anything?” he shot back, as the jeweller motioned for him to keep his voice down.

“I’ve studied the Eye of Gothmore for many years,” said Mr Bijonne, “I know how it *should* look and feel. All the books of history and gemstone knowledge speak of a great weight and a... *presence* to the Eye. I was honoured to be asked to study it in person, but when I saw it and handled it myself, I was confused: had I been misled all these years? There was nothing special about the Eye of Gothmore at all. It was merely another pretty stone.” He looked forlornly at the ground.

“I see,” said Ambrose, considering what this all meant. He didn’t believe in the myth surrounding the gem, but if this expert felt something wasn’t right with the Eye, it was important information. Ambrose thanked the Jeweller, and was about to leave when he felt Mr Bijonne’s hand on his arm.

“I beg of you, Inspector. Find this thief quickly. I have a terrible feeling that

they will simply kill again unless they are stopped,” he pleaded.

Ambrose squeezed Mr Bijonne’s hand as he removed it from his arm. “I assure you, I’ll do everything I can to find the thief quickly,” he said, and exited the Coat Room swiftly, deciding that it was time to pay a second visit to the crime scene.

There was a loud graunch as Clink opened the door to the Guest House and ushered Ambrose in. It was freezing inside without the fire burning, and the room held only gloom in Ambrose's eyes. Mrs Mansfield's body was still where it had been the previous night, covered by the white sheet. Ambrose was sure there had to be some kind of clue as to how the thief had got in – something that he might have missed earlier. After half an hour of searching, however, he was still no closer to understanding how someone had managed to break into both the room and the safe.

A sound caught Ambrose by surprise, and he looked up to see Zhan and The Colonel standing at the main western window gesturing to him excitedly. Even though he wasn't in the mood for company, Ambrose made his way outside to see what they were worked up about.

"I say, you'll never guess what we found!" The Colonel exclaimed, holding up some red clay, similar to the piece he had seen last night.

Ambrose shrugged. "Yes, more of the clay – I'm not sure it's going to be much use in the investigation, I'm afraid."

This really is wasting my time.

The Colonel and Zhan looked disappointed, but they moved on all the same, leaving Ambrose to his search. As he entered the Guest House again, he spotted something that surprised him, however. There was a small piece of red clay lying to the side of the door once again.

I wonder if...

Picking up the clay, Ambrose opened the door and looked at the place where the lock secured the door to the frame. Sure enough, a thin outline of red clay sat there, conspicuous against the wood.

Well that explains how the thief got in.

Ambrose looked at the door. With enough clay in the door frame, the lock wouldn't have slid entirely closed; a well-trained thief or warrior would know that trick. Or a magician. Further investigation of the safe revealed the same traces of red clay around the lock.

They really should have brought a better safe. Complacency is so often lamented in hindsight, thought Ambrose as he thumbbed the lump of clay in his hand.

“Was the safe opened at any stage this weekend aside from when Mr Bijonne performed his evaluation?” Ambrose asked Clink, who informed him that it had not been opened to the best of his knowledge, and only he and Mrs Mansfield held a key to open it.

“I see,” said Ambrose, as he absent-mindedly paced the room, considering the timing required to steal the gem. The key time was between the inspection and Mrs Mansfield’s death, when the gem was discovered missing. That didn’t exactly reduce the suspect list, as everyone dispersed before dinner. There was at least a two-hour period in which someone could have snuck back to the Guest House and removed the gem.

When Mrs Mansfield arrived in the Guest House during dinner, had she interrupted someone, or had she simply discovered that The Eye of Gothmore had been stolen and died of shock? Ambrose scuffed the carpet in frustration: what was he missing? So many suspects stood out, each with motive and opportunity to steal the gem. He made up his mind to continue watching Zhan’s actions closely throughout the day.

Ambrose looked up from his musings and was surprised to see the figure of a Messenger Mech arriving outside the Guest House. He made his way out to receive Percy’s latest response. The Mech was an upgraded 7-9-7 model, which would allow for a much clearer message. It greeted him curtly and whirled into life.

“Awful to hear of Mrs Mansfield’s passing. Blood sample provided shows strong traces of Delphine poison. Will organise backup promptly as possible, Percy.” The Mech awaited Ambrose’s response, but he simply stood there thinking.

Poison!

That explained the lack of bruising on Mrs Mansfield’s body. Delphine poison had a delayed onset, showing no signs of its presence in the body until the victim suffered a massive heart attack. Given that it usually worked

within half a day, it was likely that something Mrs Mansfield had eaten during the day had accounted for her death, which was now beyond question a professional murder. But the question remained; if the aim was to steal the Eye of Gothmore, why bother murdering Mrs Mansfield?

Curious.

The Mech shifted impatiently. Ambrose shook himself out of his thinking and delivered his reply. “Multiple suspects identified, all have strong motives. Will organise search of property for Gothmore, likely hidden. Backup appreciated, assassin still present somewhere, Ambrose.”

The Mech strode off through the snow in a flash. Ambrose looked up at the back of the Manor. He could feel eyes looking down on him – was it the thief? Was there more than one person behind this crime?

Clink was standing nearby, and Ambrose broached a final question with him. “Was anyone at all seen moving between the Guest House and the Manor in the evening?”

The Mech shook his head firmly. “None of the guests had access to the Guest House, and no one collected their coat to venture outside after Mr Bijonne’s appraisal, I’m afraid.”

Suddenly Ambrose remembered a rumour from his boyhood days around the Manor. “Clink, I know you are honour-bound to keep the Manor’s secrets, but I must know: Is there any other way someone could move between the Manor and the Guest House unseen?”

Ambrose looked at the Mech, who seemed to hesitate for a second. He then responded: “No, Master Ambrose. I don’t believe there is.” As he finished, Clink’s gaze shifted for a moment to the Western Wing of the Manor, then returned to Ambrose before he proceeded to head back into the Guest House.

With that look, Ambrose knew his course of action. He reflected on the news he had just received from Percy. Delphine was a complex poison, and hard to come by. It was only identifiable to a well-trained eye. The poison was made from the seeds of the *Delphinus Elongis*, better known as Yellow Wildlillies – a flower that grew exclusively in the Eastern Empire.

Ambrose could feel an idea pulling at the corner of his mind, like a thread tugging way. He had to find Ali-Zhan Hazi; the Easterner would need to stay by his side until he gathered the evidence he needed. After making a last sweep of the Guest House for anything out of the ordinary, Ambrose headed back to the Manor to find Zhan.

His next move could prove decisive in solving this case.

Ambrose stood in the middle of the library, scanning the shelves from a distance. The library was a sprawling room that stood three stories tall, taking up a sizeable part of the Western Wing of the Manor. It held countless historic manuscripts and volumes, including family histories, plays and compositions. Each floor had its own landing that ran around the perimeter of the room and held multiple categories of writing stacked high on its shelves, sometimes two or three layers deep. The collection continued to grow with each generation that lived in the house, and it was always one of Ambrose's favourite places to come as a boy.

Two features about the library stood out in the middle of its grandeur: The first was its enormous ladders that moved on railings around the room and allowed access to every nook and cranny of the space. The second feature was the grand dome that stood atop the room. During the daytime it allowed the sun to shine into the centre of the room, providing a comfortable atmosphere in which to read, while at night it allowed incredible views of the heavens above. Just the smell of the room brought Ambrose back to the hours he spent reading histories and tragedies in the library. But today, he was watching as Zhan paced the second floor landing, pushing and prodding at books as he went, muttering all the while.

Zhan seemed less than happy with the situation. All morning he had been jaunting around the Manor with The Colonel, looking for the murderer, the Eye of Gothmore, or any other clues and evidence. Now he found himself in the middle of a wider search for the gem with Ambrose. Each time he pushed at a book, he seemed more frustrated. Eventually he found his way to the floor and joined Ambrose.

"So how exactly do you know this hidden passageway exists?" he asked as he squinted at the books all around him. "I'm getting a crick in my neck from all this searching."

Ambrose barely paid him any attention. Mostly he wanted Zhan around so he could keep an eye on him. He and The Colonel had turned parts of the house upside down, and Zhan needed something to direct his substantial tracking skills towards.

"Inspector?"

Ambrose kept looking at the bookshelves. “When I was a boy, we always heard a rumour – it was just a whisper, never more – that there was a tunnel that ran between this room and the Guest House.” He walked towards the back wall. “We used to spend hours trying to find the passage, imagining how we could explore the off-limits areas uninterrupted. But we never found the answer. It was lost to us, and so we simply gave up.” Ambrose paced the shelves; titles popped off spines at him as he passed, but nothing that indicated there was a passage nearby.

After a while of searching, Ambrose found frustration creeping in. Dejected, he sat down on a chair in the middle of the room. Zhan joined him, and patted him on the shoulder.

“It’s alright my friend, perhaps the passage doesn’t exist. Perhaps you only *thought* the Mech was giving you a message to search here.” The big man leaned back in his chair and stretched out his legs with a sigh.

Ambrose frowned. He *hadn’t* just imagined it. Clink had been trying to tell him something, but *what*? “I know it’s here. Why can’t I find where the entrance is hidden?” he exclaimed, jumping to his feet.

Zhan had closed his eyes as he lay back in his chair. “In my experience, the best place to hide something is often in plain sight,” he said, letting out a yawn.

That’s it! Ambrose felt his heart leap. He ran over to the ladder and climbed as fast as he could. Zhan snapped out of his tired state and bounded after him. Up the rungs Ambrose clambered, until he reached the second floor, where he ran to the building section. He ran his fingers over the titles as he closely scanned the cluttered shelves.

Zhan puffed up behind him. “What is it?” he asked, “Why on earth did you run off like that?”

Ambrose stopped searching and turned to Zhan. “Because you’re right – the best place to hide something is in plain sight.” He pointed to the wall above him. “Structurally, we’re now by the outer wall. This would be the perfect place to hide a tunnel. And if I’m not mistaken...” he reached down to a thick book with the title *Concealment and Confinement: Hidden Passages Around*

the Empire. With a pull, Ambrose tilted the book towards himself. There was a satisfying grinding noise, and the bookcase popped backwards, revealing a hidden passage behind it.

Ambrose turned back to Zhan, who was standing with a giant grin plastered across his face. “After you,” he said.

Feeling a huge sense of satisfaction, Ambrose stuck his head around the corner of the passage. The narrow corridor ran to the left, following the wall along until it reached a staircase. Gaslights burned along its walls, leaving it well lit and inviting. It felt like a cocoon to Ambrose as he stepped inside and began following the passage towards the stairs. Zhan followed closely behind.

The stairs led down in a steep spiral, eventually coming out next to a gloomy passage that led away from the house, indicating they were now underground. Zhan arrived soon after, placing a firm hand on Ambrose’s shoulder.

“Do you really want to know where this passage leads, my friend?” he asked, squinting into the gloom. As he spoke, a rattling noise echoed out from the far end of the corridor. Zhan swiftly pulled out his curved scimitar, holding it aloft near Ambrose’s head. “Come, Inspector,” he said, “Let us face fear together.”

The rattling increased as the pair walked down the dim passage. Banging and creaking filled the atmosphere around them, and a whistling noise rose up from the far end of the passage, where it met a rickety wooden door. The temperature began to drop as they drew closer, with pale light shining out from cracks in the door’s timbers. Ambrose reached the door and decided immediate action was the cure for the fear he felt clutching at his heart. He pushed the door inwards, and light flooded the corridor. As they stepped through, a second door was visible on the right.

Ambrose looked up and immediately recognised where they were.

“The old well.” He shook his head. The well had once provided water for the Guest House, but Ambrose had never seen anyone drawing water from it. All those years ago as a boy, he had wondered about removing the boards that covered the well and jumping in to see what lay at the bottom. It turned out

that mysteries had indeed waited beneath the few boards that covered the well.

Zhan was already through the second door, and Ambrose turned to follow him. They ascended a dark flight of stairs and arrived at what appeared to be a dead end. Zhan stood there, fumbling around for a switch or handle, all the while cursing silently under his breath.

“Kick the right side.”

Zhan turned and looked at Ambrose curiously.

“Kick the right side,” Ambrose repeated. “If this passage was built when I think it was, then it would have a hidden switch in the bottom right corner of the wall.”

Zhan nodded, and sunk his enormous boot into the bottom right corner. Lo and behold, there was a *pop* and the wall slid open, revealing the bedroom of the Guest House. Zhan stepped out cautiously, his sword at the ready. The room was silent, and as Ambrose followed him, he could feel the tension in the air. Had they found the thief’s mode of entry? What if he had returned and was lying in wait? A surprised assassin wouldn’t be easy to deal with. Ambrose looked back and jumped, letting out a cry as he made eye contact with the figure behind him. Zhan pivoted on the spot, ready to strike as he, too sensed movement.

Zhan and Ambrose found themselves looking into a large mirror. Ambrose breathed out a huge sigh of relief, and immediately felt foolish; the mirror had moved to reveal the passage they came through – there was no one else in the Guest House at all. He looked around the room; its ornate furniture was hard to make out without the gaslights on, but he could see the four-poster bed and bedside tables. Aside from this, the room was sparsely furnished. They made their way to the main door, and stepped out into the lounge where Mrs Mansfield’s body still lay.

And Clink got the biggest fright he had ever had when Ambrose and Zhan appeared at the door a moment later.

It was late in the afternoon, and Ambrose found himself standing in the kitchen once more. He had come down to question Mrs White, the head cook, but hadn't found much that would indicate when poison could have been added to Mrs Mansfield's food.

Mrs Mansfield would usually eat a separate meal from the other guests, in keeping with a strict dietary regime. As her food was prepared separately, there would have been ample opportunities to slip poison into one of her dishes, especially since the kitchen was never locked. Obviously that had changed now, Mrs White added.

Ambrose scribbled notes as fast as he could, and glanced over at the main entrance to the kitchen, where a very bored Zhan stood watching for any suspicious activity. He appeared to be trying hard not to listen in as well, Ambrose noted.

Good.

Thanking Mrs White for her time, Ambrose urged her to keep an eye on the kitchen until he could find the person responsible. She assured him they would be vigilant, and he grabbed Zhan and headed upstairs again. The day was wearing on, and Ambrose was beginning to feel nervous that he might not be able to find the thief before they had a chance to ship the Eye of Gothmore away.

A few minutes later, Ambrose collapsed into a tall chair in the main lounge. It was the most ornately furnished room in the Manor, featuring several lounge suites, large paintings, and beautifully carved gaslamps. Despite the relaxing atmosphere, Ambrose felt exhausted; the pressure of time and confusion weighed heavily on him. As he pinched the bridge of his nose, he wished once again for Percy to be there. Without him, he felt like he was missing a limb. He looked up and found himself meeting the intense gaze of Zhan, who was sitting opposite him.

"Who do you suspect did this?" Zhan asked directly.

Ambrose, not comfortable with such forward questions, responded quickly by saying, "Well, I'm still establishing the facts. Right now I cannot rule many people in or out of suspicion. You see, every case must follow a similar

process, or something important will be missed.”

Zhan nodded ponderously, pressing his thumbs against his beard. “I think I have an idea of who is responsible.” Once again, he gazed intently at Ambrose.

Give me strength thought Ambrose. If there was one thing he wasn’t keen on hearing, it was Zhan’s theory on what happened – especially now. However, Ambrose knew better than to upset the big man. “Tell me, then,” he replied.

Zhan stood and paced the carpet in front of Ambrose. “There is only one man who knows the true value of this gem; who values it as highly as I do,” he said, waving his arms with every sentence. “I was not born after The Freeze, as they say around here, and I have seen a thing or two in my life. As a warrior in my village, I have seen desire first hand; it is in the eye of a man when he sees a beautiful girl, in the eye of a child when they see a delicious meal, and in the eye of someone who has seen something most valuable that they must possess.” Zhan drew himself up so he towered over Ambrose. “And it is the look I saw on the face of Bijonne,” he said. “That man’s reaction when he handled the gem was strange. I watched him carefully as he studied it, felt its shape and weight. He found something of great value, and he immediately desired it.”

Ambrose sat there pondering the Easterner’s suggestion. Perhaps Bijonne had sought to throw him off the trail when the jeweller had told him of his concerns earlier. It wouldn’t be the first time in Ambrose’s career that a man had lied during an investigation – in fact, it was common for people to fib when they found themselves trapped. But was this simply Zhan trying to confuse matters?

“Let’s suppose for a moment that Mr Bijonne did in fact steal the Eye of Gothmore,” Ambrose said, looking off into the distance. “He certainly has a motive for wanting it, but what about opportunity? He hardly strikes me as the cunning sort – or the murderous type, for that matter.”

“It would not simply be Bijonne’s doing.” Zhan pointed towards the upper floors of the Manor. “That ‘Magician’, Mystico. He does not know the real mysteries of this world. Cheap parlour tricks and half-baked illusions are all he peddles. But in him, there is cunning – he has desire too, yes. And I

believe he was the one who committed this theft. He found his opportunity to steal the Gem in the afternoon, and took it.”

“And what of Mrs Mansfield? How did she come to wind up dead by the empty safe?” Ambrose pinched the bridge of his nose between his fingers again.

Zhan paused and stroked his beard. He seemed to be considering the obvious flaw in his theory.

“Perhaps the loss of the gem was enough to stop her heart from beating.” Zhan was clutching at straws now. “In the East, such a treasure would never be allowed out of sight. I know I could not bear it if I lost something so treasured. The loss would kill me too.” He beat his chest to emphasis his point.

Ambrose didn’t mention the poison in Mrs Mansfield’s blood. He simply gave Zhan an assurance that he would interview Mr Bijonne the following morning. Taking his leave of the large Easterner, Ambrose decided to retire to his bedroom and collect his thoughts. Outside, grey clouds chased each other across the sky as the light of day slowly receded. Ambrose found himself aware of how little time he had left to catch the criminal responsible for the weekend’s carnage.

Despite his urgency, Ambrose decided not to take dinner with the other guests. Rumours and theories would be flying around the room, and such unclear thinking inevitably slowed the process of catching a criminal.

It wasn’t long until Ambrose found himself lying on his bed, staring at the shadows of flames dancing in the bedroom’s fireplace. The day had been long and full of half-baked leads, and the evening had left him feeling conflicted. As he lay there, he pondered how much he relied on his partner every day. Despite the numerous small ways in which Percy excelled at irritating him, Ambrose simply couldn’t do without him.

He would have to tell Percy that.

Returning to the case at hand, Ambrose rolled over the twists and turns of the day one more time. Each event had brought about angles and ideas, raising

possibilities as to who had killed Mrs Mansfield and stolen the Eye of Gothmore. And with each clue he thought about, Ambrose felt a tension growing in his mind. It was like... like he couldn't settle on a *reason* that someone would have for killing an innocent old lady when they could have simply stolen the Eye of Gothmore and gotten away with it. All this uncertainty was pulling at his mind, causing him to feel a sort of...

Turmoil.

Yes, that was it. Turmoil. That snake in the grass, that feeling when one's heart simply doesn't agree with one's mind. Ambrose rarely felt it when he had Percy around. He could simply talk things through with his partner, and Percy would reflect back to him in simple words what he was thinking. But the closest thing here at Mansfield Manor was Zhan. Zhan, with his religious fervour and dangerous ideas. He was a man that was hard to trust. Yes, trust was the issue.

I don't want to believe it. Ambrose reflected on the theory that had been circulating in his mind. He thought over the evidence again and again, mentally walking the corridors of the Manor. In his mind, he ducked into the secret passageway that led to the Guest House, opened the kitchen pantries, and looked around the paths that connected the grounds. *Where is the missing evidence I need?* Ambrose was conflicted. Turmoil was his tormentor there in the darkness, without a soul to share his thoughts with. He closed his eyes and attempted to sleep.

Hours later, he awoke to a feeling that the worst might be yet to come. A killer was loose in the house, and there was nothing to prevent him striking again.

Turmoil.

But what if he was wrong?

Even worse: what if I'm right?

Sleep came again, fitful and frightful. When morning arrived, the Inspector awoke with a start and steeled his mind. No, Percy wasn't going to be able to help him solve this case. He would keep Zhan close by his side instead.

Today was the day.

One day to find a thief. One day to stop a killer. One day to arrest an assassin.

Breakfast was a sullen affair. The only conversation that occurred regarded the improving weather, which did little to ease Ambrose's mind. With the snow starting to melt, it wouldn't be long before the assassin could get away, or at least smuggle the Eye of Gothmore out, leaving no evidence behind.

Looking around the table, only a few people had made it to the morning meal. Zhan and The Colonel, true to their training as soldiers, were eating a hearty breakfast and quietly discussing plans for the day. Molly and Felicity, on the other hand, were looking forlorn as they ate silently. Ambrose decided to try and distract them from the situation with questions about The Freeze's effect on Traville's social scene.

Felicity barely responded, but Molly provided some basic pointers at least – warm scarves and hats normally were in fashion during the cold season.

“So, Inspector, are you any closer to finding this mysterious murderer?” Molly asked.

Ambrose shook his head. “I’m afraid not,” *but surely you knew that*. “I’ll resume my questions with the guests later today; I am still confident that I’ll bring the criminal behind this to justice.” *I hope*.

Molly nodded and batted her eyes gently. “Are you planning to interrogate me, Inspector?”

“Only if the evidence requires me to,” said Ambrose, blushing a little. *She certainly is a beauty*.

Before Molly could continue, the house servants began clearing breakfast away. Ambrose jumped at the chance to be excused, fearing further conversation with Molly would leave him redder still. He headed out into the hallway to find Mystico. *Unless he’s disappeared*. As Ambrose reached the entrance hall, a scuffling sound burst out behind him and he turned to find The Colonel following him.

“Couldn’t let you look into things further without protection, my boy.” He patted the hilt of his sword. Ambrose smiled – he would prefer to work alone, but something about The Colonel’s gaze told him that refusing the offer wasn’t an option.

“Very well,” said Ambrose. “There’s a group of young men I want to talk with first off, and I believe we’ll find them enjoying the morning a little too much.”

Ambrose and The Colonel moved through the Entrance Hall quickly, bidding good morning to Clunk, who misjudged his bow once again, shifting a painting off balance and sending a vase crashing into the wall. Ambrose shook his head as he turned the corner and knocked on the door to the Billiards Room.

“Come on in!” The enthusiastic voice of Sam Silcox arose from within.

Ambrose opened the door and had to wave a large cloud of cigar smoke away from his face. Once inside, he could make out three figures standing around the billiards table – Lucas Lamarre, Mystico, and of course, Sam. Each of them held a billiards cue, and Lucas was puffing on an enormous cigar that was about double the size of a man’s fist. Ambrose opened his mouth to speak, but he was struck by how ridiculous the whole scene was. Thankfully The Colonel was perfectly articulate.

“WHAT IN THE BLUE BLAZES DO YOU THINK YOU’RE DOING SMOKING A CIGAR IN THIS ROOM, IN THIS HOUSE, AT THIS TIME OF THE MORNING? YOU’RE LUCKY I DON’T THROW YOU OUT INTO THE SNOW AND LET THE DOGS CHASE YOU BACK TO TRAVILLE, YOU BLIND BUNCH OF BANDITS! PUT. THAT. OUT. THIS. INSTANT!”

The Colonel walked over to Mystico, grabbed the cigar, and thrust it into a pitcher of water that was sitting on a side table. The three men stood with their mouths open – Sam looked like he was about to object, but Lucas caught his eye and shook his head. He looked up at Ambrose.

“Lovely to see you this morning, Inspector. Anything we can help you with, or were you just leaving?”

Ambrose was unmoved by the intent of Lucas’ question. “You can help, yes. Perhaps your first helpful act would be telling me why you’ve decided to raid a cigar from Mr Mansfield’s prized collection.”

Lucas blinked slowly and waved some of the haze away. “We thought it best to honour the memory of Mrs Mansfield with one of her late husband’s cigars. Nothing wrong with remembering the dead, is there Inspector?”

“No, certainly not – but there are more legal ways to remember someone other than stealing expensive cigars.”

None of the men were looking up now. They studied the ground intently, looking anywhere but at The Colonel or Ambrose, who was now satisfied that he had told them off enough.

“Now that we’ve called out your actions, I need some answers.”

“We’ve given you answers.” Lucas looked up and locked eyes with Ambrose. His voice was growing more menacing now. “And if you want more, you’ll need to do better than bringing along a tired warrior with a short fuse.”

He barely finished his sentence before he caught a full pitcher of water to the face, followed by a fist to his gut. Such was The Colonel’s speed that Lucas never saw him coming.

“I suggest a touch more respect for your elders, boy.” The Colonel turned and walked over to block the door, leaving Lucas winded on the ground.

“I’m not much for physical force, but I trust we won’t need any more to have a good conversation.” Ambrose hated violence, but with these young men, it appeared to be working. “Now tell me – and I want the *whole* truth – why are you here?”

It was Sam who broke. “Please Inspector, enough. We didn’t come here to land in any trouble.”

“And why did you come here, Sam?” Ambrose raised his eyebrows.

“We came to rig the auction.”

“No!” gasped Lucas from the floor. “You don’t have to tell him anything!”

“Oh, come off it,” retorted Sam. “Someone’s dead, Lucas. We owe it to Mrs Mansfield to do more than pinch her stuff now she’s gone.”

“Touching,” said Ambrose, with more than a hint of sarcasm.

Sam shrugged and continued his story.

“We heard about the auction months ago, and Lucas and I hatched a plan. One of our businesses makes household items, so we offered some products to Felicity to enter into the auction. We would get a percentage of the final price, and so we figured...”

“... That you would bid against yourselves to drive the price up.” Ambrose looked over at Mystico. “But it couldn’t be one of you doing the bidding, and so you found someone whose magic wasn’t going to take him anywhere like Mansfield Manor, and you offered him the chance to make some quick money.”

Mystico dropped his head. “To my great shame, I foolishly agreed.”

“You should be ashamed,” Ambrose agreed. “But mostly at your own foolishness. These two smooth talkers brought you into a situation that’s well beyond your talents. There’s darkness at play in these halls, and you’re in the thick of it.”

“Darkness, indeed.” Zhan’s gruff voice cut in from the hallway, where he stood beside The Colonel. “Inspector, these men are simple fools with simple schemes. In the East, we would whip them and send them on their way.”

Ambrose sighed. Zhan had a knack for interrupting. “Yes, but even simple fools are capable of great evil, my friend,” Ambrose responded. “Is there a reason you’re interrupting us?”

Zhan smiled broadly. “Yes, of course. Please pardon my intrusion, but I would beg a minute alone. A thought has occurred to me, and I believe it might interest you.”

Even though his timing was poor, Ambrose decided it was better to find out Zhan’s thinking than to continue interrogating Sam, Lucas, and Mystico. Their motives were now laid bare, and there was little more they could contribute at this point. He looked at them standing sheepishly across the room.

“You men have avoided making a silly mistake this weekend,” Ambrose said. “See that you never think up such a stupid scheme again.” Then a thought dawned on him, and he turned to The Colonel.

“Colonel, perhaps these gentlemen would enjoy hearing one of your war stories – I’m sure you have many that involve silly choices by young soldiers.”

The Colonel beamed. “Why yes I do, in fact one comes to mind from the marshes of Morandria, when we were trying to secure a place to alight for the night...”

As he launched into the story, Ambrose edged past him into the corridor, where Zhan was waiting. The big Easterner led the way through the corridors of the ground floor towards the Entrance Hall, where Clank and Clunk were cleaning the pictures that adorned the walls.

As Ambrose opened his mouth to ask the Mechs a question, shouting erupted from the first floor. Ambrose and Zhan made eye contact, and started up the stairs towards the source of the yelling.

“That voice! It is the Jeweller!” Zhan exclaimed.

Ambrose felt his lungs burning as they raced down the hallway. The shouting had stopped by the time they reached the door to Mr Bijonne’s room. Zhan didn’t bother to knock; he simply pulled out his scimitar and charged straight into the closed door, which cracked as it swung open.

On the ground lay Mr Bijonne. A single wound across his heart was weeping red blood over his shirt, where a sword had pierced his chest. Ambrose dropped to his knees, but he knew he was too late. Mr Bijonne’s face had already turned a shade of green, and he had no pulse. His lifeless eyes stared at the ceiling.

“A poison blade!” Ambrose exclaimed, thinking as quickly as he could – was the assassin still in the room? He looked up and spied the open bedroom window – no one would open their window by choice in this weather.

Zhan pounded over to the window, where the curtains flapped in the breeze.

He looked down at the ground outside. “Nothing! Who is this ghost that’s killing the guests?” he blustered as Ambrose joined him at the window.

As he stared down at the white ground outside, and despite the horrific death of Mr Bijonne seconds earlier, two things occurred to Ambrose: firstly that Zhan was no longer even a remote suspect, and secondly that the killer had made a major mistake.

“The ground. We have to see it up close,” Ambrose shouted as he turned and ran out of the room.

“But I’ve seen it! There’s nothing there!” shouted Zhan as he sheathed his scimitar and followed Ambrose down the stairs and outside. The air was freezing, and the snow was piled high against the paths, but nothing was going to stop Ambrose from reaching his destination. He thrashed and struggled until he got to the spot directly below the window. Stooping down, he picked up the object he had spotted from upstairs.

It was a small black canister. Ambrose turned around and showed it to Zhan, who was puffing and panting a few metres away.

“What. Is. It?” he asked between breaths.

“This,” Ambrose said, “Is the missing piece we needed. Now come on, let’s get back upstairs before more chaos erupts.”

Ambrose gritted his teeth as they ran. It was time to reveal the killer’s identity. But who knew what would follow that revelation?

Ambrose stood before the gathered guests and house servants. Some sat on the couches of the main lounge while others stood about talking, waiting for him to begin. Ambrose cleared his throat as the clock behind him struck 10 gongs to indicate the lateness of the hour.

Ambrose began. This was not going to be easy.

“I appreciate you all coming to join me at this time,” he said, “I want to thank each and every one of you for your help in searching for the thief and murderer that has plagued this Manor over the past days. I believe that all of you have an interest, and indeed a right to know, who this individual is.”

Nods and muttering spread through the crowd.

“It may surprise you all to know that none of the house servants were involved in this crime,” said Ambrose. This time the nods were bigger from the staff, and the murmurs were louder. Ambrose held up his hand for quiet. “In fact,” he looked across the room, “The thief acted alone in all of the crimes that took place here.” More murmurs. “And there is a simple explanation for this. You may question how one person could evade suspicion so efficiently and move about so quietly. Well, this is simple – the thief is a member of the Assassins Guild.”

Now the response was shock. Fear was written on the faces of many people in the group, except for Zhan, whose expression showed only grim determination.

“This assassin has moved among us, talked with us, and even offered their assistance to me during the investigation.” Ambrose looked at Zhan. “I had to go to great lengths to ensure I knew exactly what was happening at all times; that is why I took Zhan with me, and got him to stand guard. I never let him out of my sight once my suspicions were confirmed.”

Lucas spoke up. “I knew it!” he snarled at Zhan, “You foreigners. You come here to try and steal our treasures – to ruin our business! How dare you...” Ambrose cut the young man off before he could continue.

“Zhan is not the thief, Lucas,” he said. One thing Ambrose could never tolerate was judgement based on race – and in this case, the young man

couldn't have got things more out of line.

"Indeed, I kept Zhan with me in case the assassin decided to strike at me. Even though I talked with the assassin, they never attempted to attack me. A fine warrior like Zhan tends to be a strong deterrent." Ambrose turned his focus back to the explanation of the crime.

"Several things guided me to the assassin from an early point. Firstly, they needed to have access to Mrs Mansfield's food – not a hard task considering her eating habits. Secondly, they must have had a method to transport poison inconspicuously." Ambrose held up the black container he had found beneath Mr Bijonne's window. "This is the canister that held the poison. The assassin dropped it when they fled after striking down Mr Bijonne. When I found this, I knew I had the final piece of this puzzle."

The tension in the room continued to build. Ambrose knew he had precious little time left before the assassin knew they were discovered.

"To tie this together, let me explain the final key to unmasking this assassin: how the Eye of Gothmore was stolen." Ambrose held up the red clay he had found in the Guest House.

"The thief used this red clay to jam the lock on the safe as it closed," he said. "They also ensured that the door to the Guest House never shut properly with this same clay." Ambrose turned and looked at Mystico, who sat sheepishly in the corner. "All this evidence seemed to point to a magician trying a cheap trick to conceal his attempt to steal the gem." Mystico looked around uncomfortably, and Ambrose decided to put him out of his misery.

"However, this wasn't the case. You see, the thief never used the clay in the door – and this is where I began to get confused. They entered and exited the Guest House through a hidden passage, rather than the prepared doorway."

Ambrose looked at Felicity. "The fact is, the gem was stolen a long time before Mrs Mansfield went out to the Guest House and found it missing. She simply discovered her precious treasure was gone, fainted, and never woke up as the assassin's poison moved through her body." Felicity's eyes were welling up with tears. Molly handed her a tissue.

"This assassin had planned to steal the gem all along," Ambrose said, "But

they had intended to do so simply by using Mrs Mansfield's key. They placed poison in her breakfast, expecting that it would work within twelve hours. When Mrs Mansfield stopped breathing in her sleep, they would take the key and steal the gem from the safe while the house slept, exiting and entering the Guest House through a secret passage. From there on, the evidence of the theft would point to the silly magician and his cheap tricks. When Mystico couldn't produce the gem, everyone would assume he was to blame for its disappearance. As for Mrs Mansfield, her death would appear natural as the poison that the assassin used is nearly impossible to trace." Ambrose paused to gather his thoughts. He felt his stomach churning. *I'm not usually this nervous*, he thought as he continued.

"It was a simple plot, and yet it all fell apart for the assassin. They could have stuck to their plan, but impulsive opportunity changed their mind. When the assassin saw the clay on the safe lock, they recognised a chance to steal the gem early, and they seized it. That was their first mistake. Mrs Mansfield walked out to the Guest House, upset from her conversation over dinner, seeking comfort in the sight of her beloved gem. But alas, the safe was open and the gem was gone. As Mrs Mansfield's strength deserted her, she collapsed, causing the poison to take hold early, and kill her. When Felicity discovered Mrs Mansfield in the Guest house, it set in motion a chain of events that led to the assassin's second mistake."

Ambrose held up the canister of poison. "Their second mistake was to lose this canister. When Mr Bijonne inspected the Eye of Gothmore, his reaction was odd – anyone present would have noticed this. He tried to keep his concerns about the gem a secret, but the assassin clearly wanted to silence him." Ambrose fumbled the poison over in his hands, looking at it intently. "Such a small thing," he said quietly, losing himself in thought for a moment at what was about to transpire. He looked up again.

"This canister used to contain Delphine, the poison that killed Mrs Mansfield. While it normally acts slowly, it can also be used to great and swift effect when applied to a blade – such as the blade that killed Mr Bijonne this afternoon. To keep the poison safe, a person would need a secure hiding place that was unlikely to ever be noticed. This canister tied all my suspicions together when I found it below Mr Bijonne's window; it was the fingerprint of the invisible assassin, putting them at the very centre of this week's

crimes.”

Ambrose cleared his throat. “But what am I saying? Undoubtedly you are all wondering who this fierce assassin is, to stay hidden amongst us for so long. Yes, we each appear to have pure interests, but in this person lingers a great darkness. Of course, unless I can prove this belongs to the assassin,” he held up the canister, “Then I cannot accuse them truthfully.”

Inspector Ambrose drew himself up to his full height and took a deep breath.

“So come, let’s get to the bottom of this theft. I think it’s high time that we all came clean.” With that, Ambrose started walking. All eyes in the room followed him. He stepped past Lucas and Zhan, and headed behind the couch to where the assassin stood, holding the incriminating evidence.

“May I take a look at your umbrella?” Ambrose asked her.

She didn’t look up. Her hands gripped the handle tightly, knuckles white with tension.

“No.”

“I’m not going to ask again.”

“Don’t do this, Inspector.” She looked up at him, her eyes filled with tears. “You know that I can’t just walk away.”

Ambrose looked straight back at her. “Yes, I know, Molly. But you know what you did. Now give me the umbrella.” He held out his hand.

There was silence for a second as Molly held Ambrose’s stare. Then she held up the umbrella and swiftly drew back her right hand, producing a long, thin blade that had been hidden in the handle. Guests and house servants gasped and jumped back, creating a wide arc around the assassin as she stood there, tears rolling down her face at the discovery of her identity.

“I cannot fail,” she said quietly; the words that always preceded death.

Ambrose had to move fast as Molly’s blade whirled towards him. He rolled to his left as the sword crashed into the hearth. He then dove to his right,

grabbing an iron poker from beside the fireplace and swinging it up to cover his face as a second blow came towards him. Molly's sword glanced to the side and Ambrose jumped back from the assassin in order to give himself time to think. The guests and staff fled from the room in a chorus of screams, and Ambrose found himself standing beside The Colonel and Zhan, who had both remained to face the challenge.

Molly's face was now a red mess of anger. She stood in the doorway, framed in the light by the shelves that surrounded her as she heaved in breaths of rage.

"Easy boyo," said The Colonel as he drew his trusty rapier and sized up the opposition. Zhan had drawn his wickedly curved scimitar, and presented it to Molly in a challenge.

"Come," said Zhan, "Let us dance the dance of death."

And with that, the assassin was upon them.

Molly whirled in a wide circle towards her opponents, all ladylike pretences forgotten. Her blade sliced towards both The Colonel and Zhan, who glanced her blows aside.

Zhan held out his hand and white light erupted in the room, knocking Molly backwards as she raised her arms across her body. She screamed and charged at Zhan, stabbing forwards and nearly landing a blow to his stomach. He smiled and countered with two high shots to Molly's head, which parried with ease.

Ambrose had never been much for swordplay, and he knew he would quickly be found out if he wasn't careful. His pulse raced as he ran across the room and took his place beside The Colonel. They watched as Molly continued her advance on Zhan, her thin blade swinging smoothly through the air. Zhan's speed was surprising for such a large man; he deftly turned each blow away, taking measured steps as he retreated in front of the onslaught. As she failed to land any blows, Molly's frustrations exploded into screams and curses. Still the big man never lost concentration.

As he watched, Ambrose realised that Zhan was, however, in a spot of

trouble. He was running out of room, and Molly's intensity wasn't dropping. Ambrose sensed The Colonel moving.

"Better get into the action, my boy!" The Colonel declared. He lunged forward just as Zhan reached the far wall. Molly saw him coming and danced backwards to avoid getting trapped between her assailants. Ambrose followed closely behind as a new attack was now launched by the two warriors. Molly held her ground, blocking both Zhan and The Colonel with fluid, flowing movements.

And so the battle played out in a whirlwind of movement: one moment it would seem that the two men had the upper hand, swishing and swirling as Molly held them back. But then she would advance with furious intent, causing them to back off.

As Molly began another assault, Zhan snapped, "Enough!" He jumped away from her, pulling an object from his boot. As he threw the object, Molly had the presence of mind to move her sword in its way just in time – she stopped Zhan's small dagger in front of her throat. As it fell, she swept her sword behind it, causing a cry of anguish from The Colonel as the dagger lodged in his thigh. He fell backwards, and Molly's eyes lit up. She lunged downwards, only to meet the dull steel of Ambrose's poker. She backed away, ready to fight anew.

"Come on now, Amby," Molly breathed heavily as The Colonel crawled away. "There's no need to fight dear – I'd hate to see this day end with you in pieces." She smiled broadly and batted her eyelids in Ambrose's direction.

"There'll be no pieces, Molly," Ambrose said as he held up his poker, and Zhan ran over to join him.

"And it's Inspector Ambrose to you."

Molly's smile faded into a grimace. "So, you choose death. Fine."

"No, Molly," said Ambrose. "I choose justice."

With that statement, Ambrose felt the last of his turmoil fade away. He wasn't much for theatrics, but he found himself charging at Molly, arcing the

iron poker towards her. She seemed to read the danger in his intent, and swiftly overturned the table beside her, throwing it into Ambrose and Zhan. As they avoided the obstacle, she charged at them again, swinging her sword wildly. Ambrose felt the naked steel skim his shoulder as he tried to block her ferocious assault. Blood flew onto the wall, and he felt his bravery waver. Nonetheless, he swung his poker towards Molly, striking her right arm. Zhan followed suit, and they pushed her back, step by step, blow by blow towards the rear wall once more.

In that moment, Ambrose sensed a turning of the battle – they finally had the ascendancy, gathering momentum to put the dangerous damsel down. But Molly's desperation caused an unexpected turn. She knocked Ambrose and Zhan backwards with two telling blows, and as they charged forwards for a final assault, she smiled calmly and dropped her sword. *What on earth is she doing?* Thought Ambrose.

The room behind Molly seemed to shimmer slightly, and Ambrose found his legs were suddenly heavy. His movements slowed, as if he was running through water. He looked to his left and saw Zhan struggling to move too.

Is this all in my head?

Zhan gritted his teeth and muttered something about dark days. Energy seemed to pulse around Molly as she stood before them, now holding her sword across her body with her left arm outstretched. She pulled her blade up and leapt forward. To Ambrose, it felt as if the world was moving in slow motion, and all he could see was a sword swinging towards his face. He willed his legs to move, or his arm to raise the poker above his face, but his body was like lead.

Move!

Molly's sword was coming towards him at a rapid rate, and Ambrose felt helpless to defend himself. As the blade neared his face, Ambrose closed his eyes and waited for the painful strike.

But no strike came. Instead, the pressure ended with a smashing noise. Ambrose opened his eyes to a startling scene. There on the ground lay Molly, covered in pieces of ceramic. Behind her sprawling body stood a rotund man

in black pants and a red jacket. His thick brown hair was pasted to his forehead in a matted mess, and he held the remains of a shattered vase in his hands. Overall, he looked quite stunned by the situation. Ambrose immediately broke out in a large smile.

“Percy!” he exclaimed, before collapsing on the ground himself.

When Ambrose came to, he found himself lying on a couch in the lounge. Felicity was cradling his head, dabbing a damp towel against his forehead. He smiled at her, and she gave him a relieved grin in response.

Ambrose gave his sister's hand a squeeze and sat up. He had no obvious injuries, but felt incredibly sore throughout his body. All around him the guests were buzzing with a mixture of relief and excitement. Molly sat opposite him, her hands bound behind her back, and Zhan standing watch over her. In the corner, Clank and Sam were seeing to The Colonel's injured leg, which appeared to not be faring too badly considering the dagger that had hit it. Servants were bustling to and fro with food and drinks, whilst other guests chatted about the events that had just unfolded.

As he stood and stretched gingerly, Ambrose could feel the tension flowing through his back. They really had taken a beating subduing Molly. Ambrose heard a familiar voice behind him and turned to see his partner, Detective Percy Portland, standing by the doorway interviewing Mystico. The magician was wildly describing his version of the weekend's events while Percy struggled to scribble notes quickly in his notebook. Eventually, Percy looked up and noticed Ambrose standing there, at which point he politely excused himself and walked over to greet him.

Ambrose grabbed his partner by the hand and shook him furiously. "Percy, I don't think I'll ever be able to tell you how good it was to see you earlier," he said, in an unusually strong outpouring of emotion. He finished shaking his partner's hand and paused to think. "Tell me, how on earth did you know what to do when you found this room in such a flurry of dangerous activity?" he asked.

"Well, to tell you the truth Inspector, I didn't know what to do," said Percy, "I arrived here at the Manor, ran towards the shouting, and got here just in time to see this young lady swinging her sword at someone."

Percy pointed his thumb over his shoulder at Molly. "It didn't seem *normal*, that was all, so I picked up the vase by the door and smacked her over the head with it. I figured that things couldn't get much worse, then next thing, I saw was you collapsing. Thought your heart might have stopped beating for a second!"

Ambrose smiled. How good it was to be reunited with Percy.

A commotion from the corridor caused every head in the room to whip around. Lucas Lamarre entered, carrying a large package wrapped in white cloth that matched his wide white smile. He walked to the centre of the room and carefully placed the package down on a low table. Turning to Percy, he said, “You were right, Detective. It was hidden in the assassin’s room – a short search of her luggage turned it up quickly.”

Ambrose knew exactly what they had found. “How did you know where the gem would be hidden?” he asked, to which Percy shrugged.

“Well, I did a bit of investigation about who this assassin might be,” Percy said. “Word on the street held that the Guild had dispatched a novice assassin who had access to the Mansfield family. Based on the fact that the assassin was a novice, I assumed they might not have bothered to think everything through, such as where to place such a valuable item once they had stolen it. Starting with the luggage is always a good idea.” He smiled slightly, and Ambrose gave him a pat on the shoulder.

“Someone taught you well, my friend,” Ambrose said.

Ambrose bent down and gently unwrapped the cloth to reveal the Eye of Gothmore. As the guests muttered amongst themselves, he picked it up and inspected it. The light from the gaslamps hit the Eye at many angles, causing prisms to float around the walls. Ambrose took a closer look, and then stood up, bouncing the gem in his palm. Gasps arose from the other guests. Ambrose smiled as he looked at the gem sparkling dimly in the glow of the gaslamps.

The Colonel spoke up. “Inspector, I do hope you’re not planning to finish this saga off by dropping the Eye of Gothmore. It wouldn’t do to go to all this trouble just to destroy the gem.”

Ambrose looked at the group. “Yes, it would be a shame, wouldn’t it? And it’s right to worry about dropping the Eye of Gothmore.” He threw the gem high in the air, and Felicity stifled a cry as it looped down into Ambrose’s outstretched hand. He caught it and held it up for everyone to see.

“But this is not the Eye of Gothmore.”

“What on earth do you mean?” said The Colonel. “We all saw this gem in the safe. Bijonne (rest his soul) assessed it in front of our very eyes!”

“Yes he did,” said Ambrose. “And before he died, Mr Bijonne told me that something was wrong with the gem, but he couldn’t quite figure out what it was.”

Ambrose turned to the group, and held the gem up before them. “Bijonne’s words got me thinking. Why was Mrs Mansfield not stricter with the security of this precious artefact? How could it be so easily stolen? Finally, I realised that she was simply following the old rule: sometimes the best place to hide something is in plain sight.” He turned and walked towards the lounge room entrance.

“Ever since I was a child, I noticed that there was something different about you,” he said as he walked. “Why would Mrs Mansfield, a lady with a low tolerance for anything imprecise, put up with you not being able to do your job properly?” Ambrose stopped.

“When did you receive the Eye of Gothmore?” he asked.

Clunk looked down at him. “When I arrived here, Master Ambrose.”

“May I see it?” Ambrose offered his free hand to the Mech, who dutifully removed his right eye, and placed it in Ambrose’s hand.

Ambrose smiled as he felt the weight of the real Eye of Gothmore on his palm. It gently pulsed with energy.

So the rumours were true. It is more than just a stone.

Ambrose wasn’t sure if he believed the whole legend of Gothmore, but this was certainly an important piece of history. He brought it to the group, who admired it from a distance; none more so than Zhan, who seemed to be struggling to understand how he had been so close to the real Eye of Gothmore all this time without knowing it.

“That still doesn’t explain why poor Mr Bijonne had to die,” said Felicity,

slowly processing the dreadful situation.

“Well actually, it does,” said Ambrose, picking up the fake gem and carrying it over to Molly. He looked down at her, grazed from the combat moments earlier. The assassin was a picture of defeat, but defiance burned in her eyes. Ambrose felt his heart pulling at him once again. She put on such a lovely mask.

Ambrose looked around the room. It was time to unpack the solution he had been building in his mind: every twisting piece of evidence had come together to form the final conclusion.

“When Molly noticed Mr Bijonne’s concern about the gem, she decided to quiz him on it. After a gentle piece of persuasion, evidenced by grip marks on his arm, she found out that he didn’t believe the gem in the Guest House safe was the real Eye of Gothmore.” Ambrose looked back at the other guests. “That placed him in a deadly situation. He was the only person who knew that Molly had failed in her task of stealing the real gem, and her dream of progressing as an assassin could well have been over.” He looked back at the umbrella. “Mr Bijonne must have got the fright of his life when Molly dropped his arm and pulled out a sword from her umbrella. Old, alone and unarmed, he never stood a chance.”

Ambrose met Molly’s defiant glare. “You, my dear, have greatness within you. But the corruption you have brought to this house will never be excused. Your inexperience led you to steal the gem when the opportunity arose. And we all know that the Assassins Guild does not accept failure.”

Finally Molly’s resolve broke, and a wave of fear swept over her face. Ambrose drew up next to her and whispered in her ear, “I know who sent you here. Tell me why Morticus wants the Eye of Gothmore.”

Molly’s eyes were wide at the mention of Morticus’ name.

“How did you...?” She could barely utter a word.

“We came upon him by accident, on another case,” Ambrose said.

Molly was about to answer him when a shadow passed over her. In an

instant, her eyes glazed over, and instead of speaking, she smiled and whispered so that only those close to her could hear.

“I cannot fail.”

Her eyes rolled back in her head, and she collapsed onto the ground.

“NO! The poison!” shouted Ambrose. His heart broke as he realised what was happening.

Lucas was already standing over Molly, trying to revive her, as Percy held Ambrose’s weight to avoid him collapsing, too. Felicity was screaming and trying to get to her friend, but Zhan was holding her back. Ambrose made eye contact with Percy and he immediately understood.

“Don’t bother, Lucas,” Percy said to the young man. “She’s taken some of the poison.”

“What? When?!” Lucas asked.

“When she knew we had found her out,” Ambrose said, keeping his emotions down as best he could. “After she killed Mr Bijonne, Molly would have known that the end was coming. The remaining poison would have acted fast to stop her heart beating.”

Lucas stepped back, cursing his luck as Felicity fell to the floor, cradling her once-good friend in her arms. The room was awash with sorrow, and even Ambrose sat down and found himself weeping.

What a beauty. What a tragedy.

He let out a deep sigh, and moved to comfort Felicity, who was gasping for air between deep sobs of anguish.

The horses pawed at the snowy ground outside Mansfield Manor's front steps. The driver of the carriage looked quietly at the horizon, and then back at the two men in red jackets he was waiting on. Up above them, the Manor loomed large, its imposing frontage lit by the rising sun.

Felicity looked at Ambrose as they stood out on the steps, sharing a few moments together. It had been two days since Molly's death, and the dramatic discovery of the real Eye of Gothmore, and Felicity finally seemed to be improving. Ambrose felt a small comfort that such tragedy had at least brought him closer to his sister at last. Finally, she spoke.

"Amby, I must ask you," Felicity said, "All this pain, all this death – what on earth can we learn from it? I find myself consumed by worry that I'll never trust again." She looked downcast at the thought, while her expression was amplified in the pale morning light.

Ambrose thought about it for a moment. "Ambition," he said emphatically.

"What about it?" asked Felicity, somewhat confused at the obscure answer.

"Ambition is dangerous in excess. A little bit is important; it drives change, and makes for progress. But too much ambition can ruin your life." Ambrose looked at his sister, who was thinking hard about his statement.

"Your ambition to be a society lady; don't let go of it," Ambrose said, "But keep it in measured amounts. Molly tried to advance herself – she desired power, and it led her to use people in order to gain what she wanted. And once she had a taste of power, it corrupted her, destroying what good there was in her."

Felicity nodded and gave Ambrose a hug. This time, he hugged her back. He could feel the tension of the weekend beginning to ease out of her as she held him tight.

If only she were this calm all the time.

Eventually Felicity stepped back and adjusted Ambrose's collar. "Thank you, Amby," she said as she dusted off his shoulders. "I never dreamed this trip would end in such sorrow, yet I shudder to think what would've happened

had you not been here.” She smiled a little. “Do promise me you’ll get out more.”

“I will,” said Ambrose as he walked to the waiting carriage. Percy joined him, and Felicity walked them to the open door.

Percy hopped into the carriage first, and made himself comfortable in the corner. Ambrose watched the detective as he alighted.

“Don’t get too comfortable Percy, I want to hear exactly how you managed to make it to the Manor on such short notice,” Ambrose said as he climbed aboard and shut the door.

Percy blinked at him. “Well, it’s quite a story, Inspector – you’ll need to be ready for a long one.”

Ambrose smiled at his partner. “Well if there’s one thing we’ve got on our way to Traville, it’s time.” He turned back to Felicity, who was leaning in the carriage window.

“When will I see you again?” she asked.

Ambrose looked towards the horizon. Far away towards Traville, dark clouds roiled in the light of the dawn. A black tide seemed to threaten the Empire from the capital city, and Ambrose felt a chill run down his spine. He shrugged it off and looked back at his sister.

“I imagine you’ll see me soon enough. When you’ve rested and feel ready, come and see me in Traville – I’ll make sure the guest room is ready for you. But make sure you contact me before you start your journey.” He looked back at the bubbling black clouds.

“There’s a storm coming.”

A short note from the Author.

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