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DARKSIDE

Tom Becker

BLACKJACK



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*For Savannah –
a dark tale for the brightest of treasures. . .*



Prologue

The men came for Samuel Northwich while he was asleep: two of them, with calloused hands and whisky-soured breath. They kicked down the door of his hovel on Michaelmas Street, a fetid back alley in the bowels of the Lower Fleet, and marched up the stairs into his dark bedroom, roundly cursing Sam as they shook him awake. The boy appeared to be in a deep sleep, and when he finally stirred, his eyes remained unfocused and he seemed confused by his surroundings. His arms were wrapped round a large stone marked with a dark red stain, as though it were a child's stuffed toy.

As Sam was manhandled to his feet, clutching the piece of rubble, one of the men recoiled in disgust.

“Lawks, but this one’s a bit ripe, Jacobs,” he remarked to his companion. “Ain’t you heard of a bath, sonny?”

“Aye, Magpie,” the other man replied. “We’ve got ourselves a right case here.”

“Who are you?” Sam mumbled, through cracked lips. “What do you want with me?”

“People have been complaining about you,” said Magpie. “Screaming and shouting all day and all night – causing a right little ruckus. Keeping the entire street up. So we’ve come to take you away.”

“You can’t do that!” Sam protested.

Jacobs whipped out a piece of paper from his jacket pocket and waved it under Sam’s nose. “Oh yes we can. We’ve got *documentation*,” he said, proudly revelling in the word. “It’s signed by one of Darkside’s finest doctors. He says you’d be best off taken somewhere nice and safe, where you can shout your little lungs out to your heart’s content.”

“Come on, sonny,” Magpie said. “Put the brick down and let’s go. You won’t need that where you’re going.”

“I can’t leave it here!” Sam gasped. “It’s the Crimson Stone!”

There was a shocked pause, and then the bedroom was filled with the sound of howling laughter.

“D’you hear that, Magpie?” Jacobs chuckled, wiping away a tear from his eye. “Got ourselves the Crimson Stone here!” He sketched out a mocking bow in front of Sam. “Begging your pardon, sir. Didn’t realize you was *royalty*!”

“Nice try, sonny,” said Magpie, not unkindly. “But take it from two rather more experienced practitioners in the art of the half-truth: you need to start your lies a bit smaller if you want people to swallow ’em. Even Jacobs here has heard

of the Crimson Stone. Who hasn't?" Magpie's voice rose theatrically. "The most famous treasure in Darkside! A magical and mysterious object with the spirit of Jack the Ripper trapped inside it!" He eyed Sam with amusement. "If it actually bleedin' exists, of course, which is beyond the compass of humble men such as ourselves. If it does, though, it's a fair wager that the Stone is under lock and key in Blackchapel. Whereas what we have here – and let's be honest now – is just a mad boy with a brick."

"I'm not lying!" Sam shot back fiercely.

"Course you ain't." Jacobs leaned in closer, baring the lone tooth protruding from his gums: "Now give it here."

As he reached over to wrestle the stone from Sam, the boy wriggled and sank his teeth into Jacobs' hand. Jacobs leapt back as if he had been scalded, howling with pain.

"Right!" Magpie shouted, grabbing Sam by the collar and bundling the boy out through the door, his arms still hugging the stone. "No royal treatment for you, sonny. You can go in the back of the van like everyone else."

They frogmarched him down the stairs, Jacobs gingerly inspecting the teethmarks in his palm, and out into the deserted street beyond. It was freezing cold; wisps of fog teased the cobblestones and taunted the street lamps. A prison carriage was waiting by the edge of the pavement, a small, barred window set into the door at the rear of the vehicle.

Magpie shivered and turned up his collar.

"You've got a nerve – causing us all this fuss on a night

like this,” he said reproachfully. “We’re missing the party because of you.”

“Party?” asked Sam, in a daze.

“You really have lost it, sonny,” Jacobs said. “Hasn’t no one told you? Can’t you hear the cheering?”

He paused, cupping a hand to his ear. In the silence, Sam could hear the sound of a distant commotion.

“What’s happening?”

“Darkside’s got itself a new Ripper, ain’t it? That Lucien won the Blood Succession, bumped off his sister and everything.”

“Never thought he had it in him, meself,” added Magpie, “what with him being a cripple an’ all. But Lucien’s the boss now. If you’re lucky, you might see him on the way past. Now get in.”

As Jacobs flung the back door open, Magpie bundled Sam into the back of the empty carriage. After slamming the door shut and bolting the bars across it, the two men climbed up to the front of the carriage and treated themselves to another celebratory nip of whisky.

“Ere, Jacobs.” Magpie nudged his partner. “Why don’t I go and give Lucien the boy’s Crimson Stone? Would make a lovely coronation present, don’t you reckon?”

“I should think so,” Jacobs laughed. “He’d be so happy he’d probably make you Abettor.”

With that, Jacobs lashed a whip across the horse’s flanks, and the carriage bolted forward into the night.

*

Several streets away, another carriage was moving rather more sedately through the borough: an ornate open-top vehicle, pulled by grand stallions with jet-black plumes. The carriage turned left and progressed up the Grand, where the pavements were bursting with expectant crowds. Fire-eaters spat jets of flame up into the sky while musicians played frantic, giddy tunes. Urchins hung like monkeys from the tops of street lamps, competing for the best view of the two men inside the carriage. Even the brawling street gangs paused as the carriage passed, sheathing weapons as they broke into applause. It appeared as though all of Darkside had ventured out into the night to welcome home their new ruler.

Not everyone, however, was sharing in the merriment.

“This is an utter waste of time,” Lucien Ripper muttered, wincing as he shifted his position. “I have more important things to do than parade, Holborn.”

Sitting beside Lucien in the open-top carriage, Darkside’s Abettor kept silent. A large man with thick, snowy-white hair, Aurelius Holborn had served as first minister to Lucien’s father, Thomas, for so long it had become difficult to know who was actually in charge. It had been largely because of Holborn’s aid that Lucien had managed to claim Darkside’s throne, but if the Abettor had expected his new ruler to be grateful, he was sorely mistaken. Lucien was in a foul mood, shaken by his brush with death only hours beforehand. During a one-on-one combat against his sister, Marianne – a long-standing Darkside tradition of determining its new ruler

known as the Blood Succession – she had brought down one wall of Battersea Power Station upon them both, burying herself in rubble and nearly taking her brother with her.

Now Lucien’s face was marked with cuts, and he was holding his right arm in a way that suggested it might be broken. In some ways, it was no bad thing. If he was hoping to rule Darkside, the population needed to know that he was a fighter. An unscarred Ripper would have drawn suspicion – especially one with Lucien’s dubious reputation. All the borough knew that Lucien had murdered his elder brother James years before the Succession was due to take place: even in Darkside, there were some crimes considered unforgivable. That very evening the *Informer* newspaper had run an editorial pleading with the population to stay indoors if Lucien won. Holborn made a mental note to close the newspaper and punish whoever was responsible.

Lucien had been fortunate in one respect, though – Darksiders weren’t foolish. Even Marianne’s staunchest supporters had to know who was in charge now. It made sense to show one’s approval of the new ruler, no matter how glibly it was given. And besides, few in the borough refused an invitation to a party.

“I thought this parade would please you, Master Ripper,” Holborn purred. “These people are your subjects now – it is only right that you give them the chance to show their love for their new ruler. You are the Ripper, after all. This is what we planned for.”

“What *I* planned for,” Lucien corrected sharply. “And this

is only the beginning, mark my words.” He looked over the crowds. “Only the beginning,” he repeated quietly.

As he followed the Ripper’s gaze, the Abettor was shrewd enough to notice subtle signs of discontent amongst the crowd. Grim-faced men stood with their arms folded, refusing to join in with the cheers; others muttered darkly in their companions’ ears. Although Lucien had won the Succession, his position as the Ripper wasn’t secure yet. Holborn was glad of the hulking presence of the Bow Street Runners lining the route. The giant brick golems always came alive to patrol the streets during the Succession, returning to rest once the new Ripper was crowned. But if the population proved slow to accept Lucien, they might be needed for a little while longer yet.

On the other hand, if Lucien were to be overthrown, who could take his place? The Ripper’s brother and sister were both dead, and he had no heirs. Only one man could claim to have the knowledge and the authority to take the Ripper’s place – the Abettor.

At that thought, Holborn allowed himself a small, private smile.

In the back of the prison carriage, Sam could hear the raucous celebrations getting louder and louder. Looking out through the barred window, he saw ghoulish, grinning faces pressing up against the carriage, and heard Magpie and Jacobs’ shouts of protest as the vehicle began to rock. In the past the disturbance would have frightened Sam, but not any more. Now his mind had room for only one thing.

How long had it had been since Sam had come to possess the Crimson Stone? Days, weeks, months? Time had become so fluid that it ceased to have any real meaning. Sam dimly remembered the first time he had picked it up: the feel of the rough masonry beneath his fingertips; the shiver of foreboding as he had looked down at the red stain – Jack the Ripper’s blood – on its surface. After that, everything had become a blur, a dreamlike procession. The Crimson Stone’s power had consumed him, reducing his mind to the feeblest of sparks. In his more lucid moments, when the fog briefly lifted from his mind, Sam wished that he had never taken the Stone at all.

As the two men had carried him out of his room, Sam had caught a glimpse of himself in the cracked windowpane. A pair of manic, haunted eyes stared back. His face was caked with dirt, framed by lank straggles of hair, while his shirt was a patchwork of grime and sweat stains. Looking down, he saw his ribcage pressing up against his skin.

The carriage had broken free from the crowds, leaving behind the smog-ridden urban sprawl as it headed towards the quieter western edge of Darkside. The road inclined sharply, and through the bars Sam saw an imposing building standing alone atop the brow of the hill, a Gothic outline of turrets and pointed roofs. Although it was grandly elegant, there was something dreadfully wrong about the place: a sense of loss in the wild, windswept grounds; a veiled threat behind the bricked-up windows.

The carriage clattered beneath an ivy-strewn archway

and along a winding gravel driveway. As Jacobs called out “whoa”, halting the vehicle outside the building’s front door, a shiver of apprehension ran down Sam’s spine. He shrank away as the bolts were drawn back, and struggled feebly as Jacobs hauled him down from the carriage.

“Where are we?” asked Sam.

The two men exchanged a look.

“The Bedlam,” Jacobs said finally. “They’ll take care of you now.”

Sam’s blood ran cold. “The Bedlam? You can’t mean. . .”

Jacobs held up a meaty hand. “Listen, don’t argue with us, sonny. We’re just delivery men.”

“Wouldn’t catch us going inside the Bedlam,” Magpie added. “We’re not mad, you know.”

“Neither am I!” Sam shouted.

Ignoring the boy’s pleas for help, Jacobs banged the heavy knocker against the front door. It opened instantly, silently revealing a black abyss beyond.

“Please,” Sam trembled. “Not here. Anywhere but here.”

He shuddered as a pair of long white hands reached out from the darkness towards him. As Jacobs pushed him towards the doorway, Magpie suddenly snatched the Stone from Sam’s grasp.

“I’ll take that,” he grinned.

A searing heat burned Sam’s mind. He howled and lunged at Magpie, but there were strong, bony fingers digging into his arm, dragging him backwards. With a final desperate scream, Sam disappeared inside the Bedlam.

*

“Nearly there now, sir,” Holborn said calmly.

The carriage had left the Grand and was now proceeding at a stately clip up Pell Mell – the broad thoroughfare that swept up towards Blackchapel, the Ripper’s official residence. The wrought-iron gates in the middle of the palace’s towering perimeter wall were waiting open for them, a phalanx of Bow Street Runners keeping watchful guard.

At the sight of his new home, a hint of a smile crossed Lucien’s lips. The carriage moved through the gates, and was swallowed up in the darkness beyond.

1

A lone boy crossed the car park of a London hospital, beneath dark clouds pregnant with the threat of snow. He walked quickly, the wind toying with his unruly brown hair. At the main entrance to the hospital, the boy paused for a second, and then marched through the automatic doors.

Jonathan Starling hated hospitals: the harsh, all-pervasive smell of antiseptic; the dour shuffles of the patients; the pinched, worried faces of relatives in the waiting room. He hurried through the reception and up to the second floor, making for a private room at the end of the corridor. It was a relief to shut the door and look upon the patient before him.

Marianne Ripper was lying unconscious in her bed, her pale face touched with only a shade more colour than the crisp white pillows. The fluorescent dye that usually streaked her hair had drained away, leaving it a muted light-brown colour. Marianne looked peaceful, a far cry from the

bleeding, shattered body Jonathan had carried through the doors of the A&E department six nights before. The attending doctor had taken one look at her and frowned – they had had to operate that night to staunch the internal bleeding.

Jonathan waited in the corridor outside, fielding a barrage of questions from doctors and the police. Who was this woman, and how had she been so badly injured? Jonathan shrugged and said that he had found her in the street, privately offering up a prayer of thanks that he had persuaded his Darkside friends Harry and Raquella to go back to his dad's house. Even though it was clear no one believed his story, on this side of London people had a tendency to lose track of Jonathan. After he'd heard that Marianne had survived the surgery, no one stopped him walking out of the hospital. Every day since he had returned to visit her; every day the staff had treated him as if it were the first time he had visited.

“No flowers?”

Jonathan looked up, startled. Marianne's blue eyes were open, and flickering with groggy amusement.

“You're awake!”

“I'm as surprised as you are. I should really be dead.”

He drew his chair closer to the bed. “How are you feeling?”

“Like a building fell on me. What are you doing here?”

“It was me who found you at the power station.”

Marianne raised an eyebrow. “You saved me?”

Jonathan shrugged, suddenly uncomfortable.

“I don’t remember that,” she said softly. “There was the explosion . . . the wall came down . . . Lucien. . .” Her eyes widened. “Lucien! Did I get him?”

Jonathan shook his head. “They thought you were dead – he went back to Darkside to become the new Ripper.”

“Dammit!” swore Marianne, thumping a fist down on the mattress. “Rot him to hell!”

“Take it easy!” Jonathan said. “There’ll be time to get back at him later. The doctors said you need to rest.”

“Rest?” The bounty hunter gave him a piercing look. “How long have I been here, Jonathan?”

“About a week. Why?”

Marianne gingerly pushed herself up on her elbows, and tried to swing her legs out of bed.

“Wait!” Jonathan said hastily. “What are you doing?”

“I’ve been here a whole week? I need to go to Darkside. Lucien—”

“You need to stay in bed! The doctors reckon you’re going to be here for another month at least.”

In truth, the hospital staff had been baffled by their new patient. Two days after the surgery, the nurses had been staggered to see that Marianne’s deep wounds had already closed over; after four days, one of the doctors had ordered they retake her X-ray results, unable to comprehend the speed with which her bones were fusing back together. Medical science wasn’t to know that Marianne was a Ripper,

and that her rate of recovery was far beyond that of any normal human being.

The bounty hunter slumped back down on her bed with a groan. “I can’t believe getting up could hurt so much,” she muttered.

“Give it some time. Wait until you’re better and then we’ll go back to Darkside.”

“We?”

“Harry and Raquella are here too. They’re staying with my dad.”

“Oh? And where’s your pal Carnegie?”

Jonathan bit his lip. “Lucien’s men got him at the power station and took him away. I don’t know where he is.”

“So what are you doing here? Why haven’t you gone after him?”

It was a question Jonathan had been dreading. Ever since that night at Battersea, he had been haunted by the memory of the men closing in around his friend Elias Carnegie and beating him unconscious. The fact that the wereman private detective had been taken whilst protecting Jonathan only made the image sharper, more painful. It had taken all of his friends’ powers of persuasion to keep him on Lightside.

“We all want to help Elias,” Raquella had said, as they sat around the kitchen table. “But rushing off back to Darkside now would be insane, Jonathan. If we even set foot there, Lucien’s going to have us killed. We don’t even know where Elias is, for heaven’s sake!”

“It’s not just that,” Alain Starling said solemnly.

“What do you mean?”

“Son – we don’t even know if Elias is still alive.”

“Don’t say that! Don’t you dare say that!”

“But he’s right, Jonathan,” Raquella said sadly. “We need to know before we risk our lives too.”

“Look,” cut in Harry. “I’ve sent a message back over to Arthur Blake at *The Informer*. If there’s any word on the street about Carnegie, he’ll pick it up. Until then, the best thing we can do is sit tight and work out a plan.”

“Fine. You stay here and work out a plan,” Jonathan said stubbornly. “In the meantime, I’ll go to Darkside and *do* something.”

“That would be utter stupidity,” Alain Starling said sharply. He continued, more gently: “If Elias were here, he’d say the same thing, son, and you know it.”

So Jonathan had stayed in Lightside, chafing with impatience, trying to avoid the thought that Carnegie might be dead. Although no one said it, everyone knew that the wereman wasn’t the only reason behind Jonathan’s desire to return to Darkside. The same night that Carnegie had been captured, Jonathan had finally discovered the fate of his mum, who had been missing for over a decade. It turned out that Theresa Starling had been imprisoned by Lucien in the Bedlam, a mental asylum in Darkside – revenge for uncovering the fact that Lucien had murdered his brother. After all these years, Jonathan had finally discovered what had happened to his mum, and now he

couldn't do anything about it. It was impossibly frustrating.

He had tried to talk to Alain about it – but his dad had clammed up and refused to discuss the matter. Raquella and Harry said that the Bedlam was more than just an asylum: it changed people. Jonathan didn't care. No matter what his mum looked like, or how she acted, if she was still alive he was going to get her out of there. But then he couldn't do that alone, either. . .

Marianne was still waiting for a reply. Jonathan looked down at his feet. "Why haven't I gone after Carnegie? I don't know what to do."

The bounty hunter began to laugh – a harsh, bitter sound. "And you were hoping I could help you? Look at me, Jonathan! What are you expecting me to do?"

"I thought you'd do *something*," Jonathan said angrily. "You're not just going to give up, are you?"

Marianne sighed. "Far from it. But my quarrel with my brother is a personal one. I can't afford to be running around Darkside looking for lost pets."

"Pets?" Jonathan echoed incredulously.

"Jonathan—" Marianne began wearily.

"Forget it," he retorted. "Do what you want." He got up from his chair and stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind him as he went.

Jonathan was still fuming later that afternoon, as he strode along the South Bank through the encroaching gloom of a

wintry late afternoon. Although he knew it was crazy pinning any hopes on Marianne, it didn't stop her refusal to help him from hurting. After all, he had saved her life – didn't that count for anything?

A small Italian coffee shop huddled beneath a covered walkway by the Thames Path, its bright interior lights warding off the onset of evening. Harry Pierce – the young Darkside journalist, and son of the murdered James Ripper – was sitting quietly at a table in the corner, sipping from a large mug of coffee. He had managed to squeeze his broad shoulders into one of Jonathan's shirts, but it looked as though at any moment his frame was likely to burst out of it, like some sort of superhero. Unlike the other Darksiders Jonathan knew, Harry seemed to relish spending time in modern London. Given another week, Jonathan would have bet money he'd have bought a mobile phone.

Harry looked up, noting the black look on Jonathan's face. "What's up?"

"Marianne's awake."

"Oh." Harry paused. "That's a good thing, isn't it?"

"I'm not so sure now," Jonathan replied sourly.

"Didn't go so well, then?"

"She's not going to help us." He glanced around the coffee shop. "What are we doing here, Harry?"

"Waiting for someone. And if I'm not mistaken, that'll be him now."

Through the window, Jonathan saw a jittery figure

picking his way through the crowds on the Thames Path. The man was small and skinny, wearing a banded hat and a suit one size too small for him. His eyes darted this way and that, scanning the vicinity for possible danger.

“Oscar’s the finest grass in Darkside,” Harry said confidentially. “You want to know something, he’ll sniff it out for you.”

The grass slipped in through the café door and sidled towards their table, his long nose twitching constantly above a pencil-thin moustache.

“Harold,” he murmured, in a soft, squeaky voice. “It’s been a while.” Settling into a chair facing the door, he took Harry’s coffee from underneath his nose and smelled it suspiciously.

“Feel free,” Harry said drily. “Thanks for coming to meet us.”

“I would say it’s nothing, Harold,” replied Oscar, “but this part of town gives me the creeps. You know where you stand on Darkside, but Lightsiders are a rum bunch. Can trust ’em about as far as you can throw ’em.”

“What about Carnegie?” Jonathan said impatiently. “Have you heard anything?”

Oscar glanced at him warily, refusing to answer until Harry gave him a reassuring nod.

“Not a bean. If the wereman’s still alive, he’s stashed away somewhere pretty secure. Arthur’s put out all the feelers he can, but there’s not much more he can do. It’s common knowledge that *The Informer’s* going to get shut

down sooner rather than later. You ask me, Arthur's mad not to be in hiding already."

Harry sighed. "You haven't brought cheery news, Oscar."

"These aren't cheery times, my friend. I've got a bad feeling about this new Ripper. The Bow Street Runners are still knocking about, for one thing, and those Lightside coppers too."

Jonathan's ears pricked up. "Lightside coppers?" he asked.

"Department D, they're called." Oscar twitched. "Imaginative name, eh? Anyway, that hunchback who works for them's been seen sneaking into Blackchapel a couple of times."

"Carmichael? What's he doing there?" asked Harry.

Oscar nodded sagely. "Well, that, my friend, is the question." He took a long slurp of Harry's coffee, draping his moustache with foam.

"And is there an answer?"

"Only hearsay and rumour. But an acquaintance of mine did pass on an interesting suggestion." Pulling his chair closer, the grass dropped his voice to a whisper. "He reckons that they've dredged the wreckage of that power station and they can't find Marianne's body!" Oscar chortled. "That would leave our new Ripper with a bit of egg on his face, eh? His 'dead' sister being alive and well."

Jonathan and Harry exchanged glances. "So if this is true, what are these Lightside policemen going to do?"

Oscar shrugged. “How should I know? I ain’t a copper. If I was, though, I’d do the obvious things: comb the local area, pay any friends of hers a visit, check all the hospitals. . . Hey!”

He watched as the two boys leapt up from the table and sprinted out of the shop. Shaking his head, Oscar took a deep, mournful sip of coffee.

“Bleedin’ Lightside,” he muttered, to no one in particular.

2

In the dark, the blank windows of the hospital had assumed a strangely forbidding aspect. As Jonathan and Harry raced along the main road, an ambulance careered past them, blue lights flashing and siren wailing, and screeched to a halt in front of the main entrance. A team of medics unloaded a patient on a trolley from the back of the vehicle, and wheeled him inside.

As they approached the automatic doors at the reception area, Jonathan flattened himself against the side of the ambulance and grabbed Harry's wrist.

"Look!" he whispered.

Through the glass doors he could see the unmistakable figure of Horace Carmichael standing at the reception desk, talking to a nurse. The bright strip lights ruthlessly exposed every crease in the hunchback's shabby clothes: they looked like he had slept in them for a month. The nurse had a quizzical look on her face, but she was nodding as he spoke.

“As soon as he asks, she’s going to tell him where Marianne is,” Jonathan said quietly. “Do you reckon we can take him? Looks like he’s on his own.”

Harry frowned. “Wouldn’t be so sure about that,” he said slowly. “Check out those guys over there.”

Peering around the ambulance, Jonathan saw two large men standing by a water cooler, silently watching Carmichael as he chatted with the nurse. Their broad frames were covered by jeans and baggy tops, hoods drawn up so that their faces were swathed in shadow.

“Hoods,” Jonathan said grimly. “Only ever means one thing.”

Harry nodded. “Darksiders.”

“Big ones, too. We’re going to have to come up with a new plan.”

The nurse nodded emphatically and began pointing out directions. Carmichael glanced over towards the two men at the water cooler and jerked his head at them to follow him.

“We’re out of time,” Harry said, stepping out from behind the ambulance. “Looks like we’ll have to distract them. I’ll try to lead them as far away from Marianne’s room as I can. You get up there and get her to safety. If I don’t see you, I’ll head back to your dad’s place.”

“What are you going to do?” Jonathan asked.

Harry smiled. “The usual,” he replied. “Get on someone’s nerves.”

He turned and jogged into the reception, where Carmichael and his men were heading towards the lift.

Without breaking stride, Harry dashed up behind the two burly henchmen, grabbed their hoods and yanked them down. The men whirled round as one, revealing black, scaly faces covered in violent orange markings. Beady eyes glinted with reptilian intelligence. Harry turned pale and backed away.

It was at that moment that a nurse looked up from her chart, saw the lizard-like creatures, and began screaming. The reception area descended into pandemonium as people stampeded for the main exit. Through the throng, Jonathan saw the creatures chase after Harry down a side corridor leading away from Marianne's room. Carmichael was shouting something to the nurses, but no one was paying any attention to him. Visibly torn between following his men and finding Marianne, the hunchback paused for a second, and then headed for the lift. He hadn't taken Harry's bait.

When the lift doors had closed behind the detective, Jonathan battled his way through the crowds at the entrance, raced through the reception and took the stairs three at a time. He arrived on the second floor just in time to see the detective disappearing round the corner – in the confusion, Carmichael had gone the wrong way. Jonathan pelted along the corridor in the other direction. With visiting hours over, the hospital was quiet, the patients immersed in television programmes, music or drug-induced dreams.

Upon reaching Marianne's room, Jonathan darted in through the door and closed it softly behind him. He leaned

his back against it, catching his breath. The lights in the room had been turned off, and moonlight was pouring in through the window, bathing an empty hospital bed in bright white light.

Jonathan blinked with surprise. Where was Marianne? He checked the room from top to bottom, even looking under the bed, but there was no one there. Baffled, Jonathan slipped back out into the corridor, only to hear a set of footsteps heading towards him. There was no time to hide. He froze.

When the figure rounded the corner, Jonathan relaxed. It was only a nurse. Adopting an innocent expression, he went to walk past her. But before he could react, the nurse clamped a hand over his mouth, and hauled him with surprising strength into a storage cupboard. As she closed the door behind them and pressed a finger to her lips, he saw that it was Marianne. The bounty hunter had somehow managed to change clothes, and was now wearing a light blue nurse's uniform. She was also, he couldn't help notice, smiling.

"You just can't stay away, can you?" she whispered.

"What are you doing?" Jonathan hissed. "Where did you get those clothes from?"

"Where do you think? I swapped them with a nurse."

"Oh. Right." An unsettling thought occurred to Jonathan. "You didn't hurt her, did you?"

Marianne grinned. "Of course not! She'll be fine. Once she wakes up."

“You knocked out a *nurse*?”

“I know – seems dashed ungrateful, doesn’t it? Unfortunately, I got a funny feeling that it was time to go, and I felt a bit too visible in my own clothes. I left her in the toilets to sleep it off.”

“You were right about one thing. Carmichael’s here, and he’s after you.”

The bounty hunter gave him a questioning look.

“A Lightside detective – friend of Lucien.”

“Ah. My dear brother has sent someone to check on my recovery. Typically thoughtful of him—”

Marianne broke off, and held up a warning hand. From the corridor outside, Jonathan heard a low hissing sound, like a tyre slowly deflating. He looked around the cupboard, searching for a weapon amongst the piles of cloths and bottles of cleaning fluid. With nothing suitable to hand, he picked up a mop.

The hissing grew louder as the creature neared. A shadow slid underneath the cupboard door, then paused. Jonathan tightened his grip on the mop, while Marianne tensed beside him. For one second, and then another, all Jonathan could hear was the hissing of the creature and the thumping of his heart, and then the shadow moved on and the creature continued along the corridor. His shoulders sagging, Jonathan let go of the mop.

“What was that, I wonder?” Marianne said thoughtfully.

“Dunno – but they’ve got black scaly heads, with orange stripes.”

The bounty hunter's face darkened. "Fire salamanders. Nasty things – strong brutes with poisonous skin. Don't touch them."

"There are two of them with Carmichael," Jonathan said. "The other one must still be chasing Harry."

"My nephew's here? Really? If it weren't for him, I'd give up on family altogether, you know."

"You're enjoying this, aren't you?"

The bounty hunter's eyes twinkled. "I told you, Jonathan – I've rested for long enough. Now let's get out of here."

As he followed her out of the cupboard, Jonathan couldn't help but notice that Marianne was limping. For all her flippant humour, it was clear that she was still injured.

They were about to get into the lift when a faint shout rang out from the floor above. Marianne looked sideways at Jonathan.

"That sounds like my nephew. Think we should go and help him?"

They hurried up the stairs and into a brightly lit ward, hitting a tidal wave of patients flooding past them in dressing gowns and pyjamas, some in wheelchairs and others hobbling on crutches. The cause of the exodus could be seen at the end of the ward, where one of the fire salamanders had backed Harry into a corner. The young Ripper was trying to keep the creature at bay with a drip stand – the salamander hissed angrily as it ducked and weaved, waiting for the opportunity to strike.

Grabbing a wheelchair from one of the bedsides, Jonathan sent it skidding across the floor towards the salamander. The creature turned round too late, and received a sharp blow in the legs as the wheelchair crashed into it. Harry followed up by cracking the drip stand over the back of his assailant's head, sending the salamander crashing to the ground. Leaping up into the air, Harry trampolined from one empty bed to the other, keeping out of the salamander's reach.

"Nice shot," he panted, tossing the stand to one side. "Time to go, eh?"

Behind him, the salamander had already risen to its feet. Hearing Marianne cry out a warning, Jonathan turned to see the second salamander approach them from the opposite side of the ward, its black scales gleaming in the light.

"Follow me!" Jonathan cried, racing into the lift and hammering the button for the ground floor. As Harry and Marianne piled in behind him, he heard the creatures lumbering after them.

"Hurry up!" Harry shouted in frustration, as the doors closed agonizingly slowly. Behind the advancing salamanders, Jonathan saw Horace Carmichael crest the stairs and look straight at him. A flash of recognition crossed the policeman's face, and then the doors cut them off.

There was no time for relief. After reaching the ground floor, they sprinted out through the now-deserted reception and lost themselves in the crowds of frightened patients milling around in the car park. In the distance, Jonathan

could hear the familiar wail of a police siren. For now, they were safe.

“Where now?” Harry asked. “Back to yours?”

Jonathan nodded. “Now Carmichael’s seen me, it won’t be long before Department D comes knocking. We need to get home – and fast.”