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CARNIVAL
of the
SPIDER

KIERAN LARWOOD

Illustrated by Sam Usher

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PROLOGUE

PARIS, SEPTEMBER 1870

Even in the early hours of the morning, music can be heard. The echoes of laughter bounce down alleyways. The muffled tinkle of a piano, of glasses clinking, beautiful voices singing.

Paris is a city of painters, poets, sculptors, thinkers, writers, actors and playwrights. You can't throw a rock without hitting some kind of artist. And then they would probably write a sonnet about the sky falling on their heads.

But it is also a city of blood.

The pavements have run with it, are drenched in it. The walls are pockmarked by bullet holes, scarred by musket balls and sabres. There are splinters from barricades lodged in between the cobblestones. You

can find the names of revolutionaries carved into the bricks.

Among all the glamour and wine and song, there is a steely edge. As if the Parisians are ready, at any minute, to leap for either a paintbrush or a rifle, and nobody knows quite which it will be.

It is a place of dazzling light and the deepest darkness.

As can be seen on this very night, in the Rue Chapon, a narrow street not far from the Gare du Nord, that colossal train station that links Paris with the world outside.

Shadows cover the cobbles, the shops and houses have their shutters closed and locked. But there, halfway down the street, a pair of tiny, pale hands emerge from an iron grille in the road.

They lift the metal grid, and a figure crawls out. Skinny, small – it is a child of no more than ten, dressed in torn and patched clothes, with a cap pulled low over his eyes. He stumbles to his feet, lowers the grille back into place, and then rests a moment, leaning against the wall.

Sobs are shaking his body. The muffled sound of his crying seeps down the alleyway, mixing with

the far-off music. Making a sad song sound even sadder.

Then he stoops, presses a hand to the grille as if saying farewell, and staggers down the street. In his hand is a little round ball. A glint of white. Porcelain or china.

Once he has reached the end and turned into the Rue du Temple, the alley is silent, for a few heartbeats. Just the sound of several pocket watches quietly ticking.

You might think there is a watchmaker's in that road, that the noise comes from his stock, beating their little metal hearts behind a shop window.

But nobody sells watches in the Rue Chapon.

The noise comes from a group of figures, standing in the shadows at the far end.

They wait until the boy has gone, then one turns and speaks, a woman, her voice made hoarse and deadly with spite.

'You know what to do, Thom,' she says. 'After him. Now.'

The silhouette of a hulking man peels itself away from the edge of a building and begins to stalk down the street, trailing the boy like a

bloodhound. A sound follows it – the soft clicking of clockwork parts, of springs and cogs, of oiled metal tapping.

... ticktickticktickticktick ...

CHAPTER ONE

In which our new hero flees to London.

PARIS

F*ind her.*

Those were the last words his mother had said to him.

Find Sheba.

He could still hear them, echoing behind him as he staggered forward, forcing himself to take one step after another, each one taking him further and further away.

Go to London. Find Sheba. Find the Carnival.

He had promised his mother he would do it. Promised he would leave her, even though he couldn't bear to. Even now, all he wanted to do was

turn back, to climb down into that cellar again and curl up in her lap.

It didn't matter that she was chained and trapped, that he would be trapped with her. At least he wouldn't be on his own.

But you're not on your own. Not completely.

He looked down at the thing clutched in his hands. Once, long ago, it had been a porcelain doll. A Pierrot – a clown with a white face, black lips and a single tear painted on its cheek. It had been dressed in an outfit of smooth white silk, with gloved hands and booted feet. Now, only the head remained, and that had been cracked and glued and cracked again, until it was just a spiderweb of shards, the edges worn smooth by his worrying fingers.

Still, it was the only friend he had ever had.

'I'm sorry, Pamplemousse,' he whispered to it. 'I know I have you too.'

He reached the end of the Rue du Temple and looked both ways, wondering how he was going to get out of Paris.

This 'Carnival' his mother had told him to find – this 'Sheba' – they were in London. Somehow he had to travel across France and then the Channel beyond.

Him. On his own. The boy who had barely left his apartment.

‘Shall I try and get a train, Pamplemousse?’ It helped him to talk to the china head, even if it never replied. ‘Or maybe I can find a cart going north?’

There was one, just up the road. A large wagon covered in canvas, being pulled by four horses. Some workmen had just finished loading the last of a stack of wine barrels, tying them all in place. It looked like the load was about to leave. At this time of the morning, it could only be heading out of the city, delivering its cargo to some distant place.

‘There, Pamplemousse,’ he whispered to the doll. ‘That’s my chance. Perhaps it’s going to Calais? Then all I’ll have to do is find a ship to England.’

The boy took a step towards it and then paused. He had heard a sound, not far behind him. A quiet ticking noise that was growing steadily louder. It could only mean one thing.

‘They know I’ve escaped! They’re after me!’

His soft steps turned into a sprint as he dashed across the street to the wagon. The last barrel had been tied in place, the workman was shutting the backboard and bolting it.

The boy ran up behind him, so close he would surely be spotted. But then, just as the workman turned at the sound of footsteps, the night seemed to shimmer and ripple. Inky clouds of shadow billowed from the sleeping doorways and windows, clotting together around the shape of the boy.

In a soft rustle, like bats' wings, he vanished from sight.

The workman shrugged, walking to the front of the wagon, just as the driver nudged the horses onward.

With a steady clop clop of hooves on cobbles, the wagon began to move, towards the main road out of Paris. And hidden among the barrels, still wrapped in his cloak of shadows, the boy peered out from the back.

He saw the figure of a man step into the road, standing on the very spot where he had paused just a second ago. *It's one of them*, the boy realised. One of his captors. *The one they call Thom*. Terrified, the boy held his breath, tried to will his heart still, as Thom's eyes looked up and down the street, searching for his quarry. And, as the man's head moved, the candlelight from a distant window caught

and glinted on the side of his face. A metal face. A hinged jaw. A man who was more than part machine.

... *ticktickticktickticktick* ...

*

The wagon rolled on for several days.

Trundling along the dirt roads, the gentle rocking became like breathing to the boy, the space between the barrels his home.

Every now and then, they would stop at an inn or a stable. The drivers unloaded the odd barrel at a town here, a village there. But the boy and his china doll's head were safe in their darkness at the back.

He had heard the men talking, as the wagon plodded northward, and had discovered they *were* heading to Calais. Twenty-five of the barrels were bound for England, for London, just the place he wanted to go.

He was even able to reach under the canvas and occasionally pinch a few crusts of bread and a bite of sausage from their lunch basket. He felt terrible about stealing, but was worried that the noise of his rumbling stomach would give him away. Besides, he was sure

they could spare a few crumbs and the odd swig of wine. Perhaps, when this was over, he would find them and give them a few coins to apologise. Perhaps.

Eventually, when the boy was beginning to think he might have to grow old among the barrels, they entered a busy city and pulled up at the docks.

From his hiding place, he could smell the salt of the sea, hear the *chuff chuff* of steam engines and the shouts of dockers and sailors. He could feel the sun, blasting out its last rays as it sank below the horizon. He could sense the cool lullaby of the night singing to him.

Darkness was his friend (unlike the burning, blistering sun). It soothed his skin and folded him into its inky shadows. He could hide away in it – soaking it up like a sponge until he became part of the gloom. Until the eyes of day-people slid off him, never knowing he was there.

That was his Gift, his mother always said.

Hers was being able to see without light and to move as fast as a striking cobra. She was brave and fierce and deadly – everything he wasn't – although it hadn't stopped the villains from catching her, and beating her and binding her with rope.

And she was still a prisoner: tied up in that mouldy, damp cellar with the rats. With those cruel half-people in the house above . . .

Oh, I hope they aren't hurting her. Just thinking of it made him want to turn round and run back to Paris, back to her arms. But *that* wouldn't help. Only completing his task would.

Go to London. Find the Carnival. Find Sheba.

Peering through a tear in the canvas, the boy watched the drivers walk into an office building, leaving the wagon unattended for a moment. Seizing his chance, he gathered the shadows close about him and slipped out of the back.

A stream of people were passing by: the day shift swapping places with the night. They were all too busy weaving in and out of each other, talking and laughing, to notice him as he crouched behind the wheels of the wagon.

'A ship,' he whispered to Pamplemousse. 'We need to find one going to England. To London, if we can.'

The doll looked up at him with the bright bead of his single eye. *Follow the wine*, he imagined it saying.

‘Of course! The barrels are going to London. I just have to see which ship they’re being loaded on to.’

Giving the doll’s head a tiny kiss of thanks, the boy began to move, out from the wagon towards the stacks of crates and boxes waiting on the docks. He needed to find a space where he could hide and watch where they were taking the barrels.

... *ticktickticktickticktick* ...

That sound again. Soft, hardly there. Blown across the docks on the hot wind and clouds of steam-engine smoke.

But the boy had heard it every wretched day of his captivity. It came from all of the monsters who had snatched him and his mother, who had bound them and kept them in that cellar. He would recognise it anywhere.

He scanned the crowds on the docks, looking for any signs of Thom. Of that half-metal face; the raw, puckered flesh where skin met steel.

There were dockers everywhere; all shapes and sizes, but none looked as though they had clockwork limbs or mechanical jaws. Had he imagined it? Would Thom have been able to follow him, all this way?

Maybe, maybe not. But he had to be careful, all the same.

Zigging and zagging, he dodged in among the mounds of boxes and barrels, hoping to throw any pursuers off the scent. He ran alongside a huge merchant steamer, one that was just being loaded. A large pallet of boxes was being lifted on a crane, about to be swung across to the ship's hold.

The boy didn't think twice. He leapt on to it, just catching the edge, and wormed his way underneath the tarpaulin that was holding everything down.

Up, up he swung, leaving the docks behind.

'We got away, Pamlemousse,' he said. 'But I have no idea where this ship is going. What if we end up in Spain? Or America?'

And that was when he noticed: the barrels he was crouching among were the same ones he had ridden alongside, all the way from Paris. Perhaps the moon was looking after him. Perhaps it was Pamlemousse. But, either way, he had chanced upon the right boat.

He was heading to London.

*

At least two days passed.

The boy could feel the chug of the steam engine, could hear the enormous paddle on the ship's side endlessly churning water. From where he crouched, hidden in the shadows between a stack of crates and the steel hull, his very bones shook as the lumbering machine ploughed through the waves, tearing its way through the water.

'Not much longer, Pamplemousse. I think we're nearly there.'

The tone of the engine had changed some time ago. The rhythm of the waves on the paddle wheel was slower, deeper. And then it stopped entirely until, with a groan and a shudder of protest, it began to turn in the opposite direction. They were reversing. Could they be sliding into dock? Was the journey finally over?

Chuff-chuff-chuff, went the boiler. *Clank-clank-clank*. Until, with a crash that clattered the roots of his teeth, the floating beast of steel and grease smashed against something solid.

'We're here,' he whispered to Pamplemousse. 'We made it. But now we need to get off the boat unseen.'

The shouts of the crew had begun, both inside

the ship and on the docks. Gangplanks were being lowered, hatches were hauled open, cranes swung this way and that, ready to unload the cargo.

Risking a peek around the pile of crates, he looked up to see a square of charcoal sky appear in the roof of the hold. Good. It was dark. Time to move. The boy didn't know what would happen to him if he was found, but it wouldn't be good. When day-people saw him, it never was.

'Every Gift comes with a curse,' his mother used to say, and *his* was the way he looked. That, and the screams that always followed whenever he was spotted.

The voices of the crew were louder now. They were coming down the steps, into the hold. Screwing his courage tight, he forced himself to slip out from beside the crates and clamber down among the cargo.

Don't see me. Don't see me. He began to repeat the words in his head, calling threads of darkness to wrap themselves around him. He could almost feel them: soft, cool tendrils, like floating wisps of seaweed. They flowed around his arms and legs, twisted across his body in plaits, drawing him into the deepest shadows.

When he felt as covered as could be, he held his breath, tucked Pamplemousse into his pocket, and began to make his way through the narrow pathways between the towers of wooden crates, teetering under their tarpaulins.

Up ahead were two crewmen, guiding down a crane hook from the hatch above. Crouching, hugging the edges of the cargo piles, he slid past them unseen. There was another man on the iron steps that led down from the deck above. He waited, hidden beneath the stairway, until the hulking sailor had stamped past in his hobnailed boots, before drifting up the stairs, quiet as smoke.

Stepping out on to the deck, he knew that the sun was just about to rise. The sky was lighter to the east but, more than that, he could *feel* it. An itch that began to creep over the bare surface of his face and hands. If he was still outside when the first beams of daylight touched him, there would be burns, then blisters as his skin cooked and flaked like hunks of meat on a grill.

‘Oi! Nipper! Where’d you come from?’

Lost in his worries about the dawn, the boy had forgotten to hold on to the weaving. His cloak of

darkness had fallen apart, leaving him exposed. And, of course, one of the crew had spotted him instantly. How could they not?

You idiot! he cursed himself, even as he started to run for the nearest gangplank. His mother would never have made such a stupid mistake. How was he supposed to rescue her if he couldn't even sneak around without being discovered?

Making himself as small as possible, he dodged past one sailor, then another. Hands like sides of meat swiped the air above his head, grabbing for his collar, but he was too quick – they missed him by inches.

‘Stowaway!’ someone shouted.

‘Get him!’ called another.

He crossed the deck in a mad panic, eyes wide with terror, his heart a hammering knot fluttering against his ribcage like a trapped bird.

Reaching one of the gangplanks, he started down, using the steep slope to give him momentum, to make his scampering feet even faster. At the foot of it was the dock and beyond that he could sense the cool darkness of more shadows. Scores of them, in between the brick warehouses and rickety cranes,

underneath the carts and wagons that were being loaded and unloaded. They called to him, promising safety, offering to protect him from the eyes all around him and the cruel flames of the sun.

Just a bit further, he told himself. If I can just make it a few feet more . . .

He reached the end of the plank, leaping on to the brickwork of the dock – his first footsteps on British soil – and began to sprint towards the nearest alleyway . . .

. . . and that was when he stumbled. One foot tangled in the other, sending him sprawling, crashing into the legs of the broadest sailor in the whole of London. A second later, and the man's meaty fingers were snagged firmly in his collar, hoisting him up into the air as if he was a sack of cargo.

'Got 'im!' the sailor shouted, triumphant. Then: 'Nelson's eyepatch! Look at 'is ears! Look at 'is skin! What the 'eck are you supposed to be? Varney the Vampire?'

But, before he could answer, the sun decided to rise. And the burning started.

*

Dangling in the air, being slowly choked by his own shirt collar, he could feel the dawn light begin to seep over his skin, bit by bit. It stung as it crept: it felt like his hands and face were being dunked in a bath of hot vinegar. Weak as the first rays were, he knew they would get stronger very quickly. He *had* to get out of the sunlight before that happened.

But there was no escape. Kick and flail as he might, the sailor had him in a lock-tight grip, holding him up for everyone to see. To his horror, a crowd was beginning to form. One that was being treated to a free early-morning sideshow.

‘Look at it!’ someone shouted. ‘It’s got ears like a goblin!’

‘What about its eyes? They’re red as rubies!’

‘And its teef! Bless my muvver’s bloomers, they’re sharp enough to draw blood!’

‘I told you already!’ the sailor that held him bellowed. ‘It’s a vampire! They come through your window at night and suck your blood! Didn’t you never read the Varney books?’

‘S’il te plaît! Je ne suis pas un vampire! Je cherche Sheba!’ In his panic, he forgot where he was and spoke in French, the language he had grown up using.

‘A Frenchie!’ one of the crowd shouted.

‘Throw ’im back in the Thames and let ’im swim ’ome!’ said another.

‘No!’ The sunlight was really burning now. A scream of pain began to build up in his belly, but he forced it down and cried out in English. ‘Please! Let me go! I’m just a boy – my name is Remy! But I can’t stay in the sun . . . it hurts my skin!’

‘Daylight ’urts ’im,’ said the sailor. ‘That proves it . . . ’e’s not natural!’

‘What are you s’posed to do with vampires, then? Chop their ’eads off?’

‘Nah, you bury them at a crossroads. With a stake through their heart.’

‘In China, you write out a spell in chicken’s blood and stick it on their face.’

Remy could feel the flesh around his mouth begin to pucker and scorch. Soon the skin would blister and pop, then it would slide off in gobbets. It would be agony for him, and there was a good chance he might die soon after. And then so would his mother, trapped in that cellar: scared and alone and waiting for him to return.

The thought of it made him sick with fear. He

drew the deepest breath he could and let it out in a piercing scream, one that stilled the tongues of all those crowding around him. And then he shouted into the silence – one last, desperate plea . . .

‘Let me go! I must find Sheba! I must find the Carnival!’

There was silence for a moment. A tiny instant in which he hoped his words had worked.

But then the sailor holding him laughed. ‘A carnival? You need a carnival all right. You should be one of the exhibits! The world’s smallest, crispiest vampire.’

Guffaws burst out from the twenty or so dockhands that surrounded him, loud enough to drown out Remy’s sobs. The skin on his hands was bright pink now, dotted with patches of crimson that had begun to spread. The pain was almost unbearable, and the edges of his vision began to blur. Tears poured from his crimson eyes, making it worse. Through the haze he just about saw the figure of a stocky old sea captain with a threadbare pullover and tobacco-stained beard. Shouldering his way through the gawkers, he barged to the front of the group and looked up at Remy.

‘Did you say Sheba, lad?’ the old man asked. ‘The Carnival of the Lost?’

‘Yes!’ Remy screamed the word, hoping it would be understood. ‘Yes! Sheba!’

The next thing he knew, the old captain had pulled him from the sailor’s grip and draped his woollen jumper over Remy’s head. It smelt strongly of pipe smoke, sweat and old fish, but it cut out the sun’s glare instantly. The searing pain stopped, leaving behind a sizzling, as if he had just been fried like a kipper.

‘You come with me, laddie,’ the old man said. ‘Large ’Arry knows who you’re after. I’ll see you find your way to ’er.’

‘Oi!’ shouted the sailor who had grabbed him. ‘That’s my vampire! I caught it meself! I was going to make a fortune, showing it off in a sideshow!’

Remy could hear a growl coming from Large ’Arry’s throat. ‘You’ll do nuffing of the sort, mate,’ he said. ‘This lad’s under my protection, and that’s the end of it.’

Whoever this Large ’Arry was, he clearly had some power on the dock. The sailor fell silent, as did all of the cheering, laughing crowd.

A gnarled old hand rested on Remy's shoulder, gently guiding him onwards, towards the cluster of sheds and warehouses he had seen earlier. He tried to move his feet and walk, but they wouldn't budge. His eyes scanned the crowd around him, his mind taunting him by painting the staring faces with panels of metal, with cogwheel teeth and spinning, iron eyes. And all the while that sound, echoing in his head: *tickticktickticktick* . . .

Was that Thom, standing on the deck? Or there, in the shadows by that crate? Had he managed to slip on to the boat after him? Was he watching him even now?

The pain, the fear, the sick worry for his mother: all of it spun around his brain like a whirlpool. His legs buckled and, for the second time that day, he fell to the dockside.