


CARNIVAL
→ of the 
HUNTED

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KIERAN LARWOOD was born in Kenya. He moved to the UK when he was two and lived in various places before settling on the Isle of Wight, where he can still be found: exploring rockpools, climbing trees and writing. He taught Reception class in a primary school for fifteen years before becoming a full-time author. Kieran's books have won several awards, including the Blue Peter Best Story and the Prix Sorcières. He is inspired by a life-long love of fantasy stories, which all began when – as a young boy – he picked up a copy of *The Hobbit* and saw the map inside. It just goes to show – you never know where opening a book will lead . . .

SAM USHER is a multi-award-winning illustrator. His books include the Seasons series, *The Birthday Duck*, *The Most-Loved Bear* and *The Umbrella Mouse*. Also a talented pianist, when he's not scribbling you'll find him perfecting a fiendishly difficult Chopin piece.


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Illustrated by Sam Usher

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For Jenny

PROLOGUE

LONDON, SEPTEMBER 1861

There is a full moon tonight. A hunter's moon. It hangs high in the sky, setting the great house's grounds alight with silver. The wide, gravel-lined driveway, the immaculate lawns. Everything sparkles, as if it were midday in some strange, colourless new world.

At the edge of the manor grounds are the woods.

The hunters' woods.

Here the moon paints shadows. Black like spilled ink, thick with hidden secrets. The woods are filled with rustles and squeaks, noises of creatures hiding, burrowing and roosting. Mostly small, furry or feathered ones, but tonight there is something bigger. Much bigger.

You can hear it panting. Its mewls echo between the trees and black-lined bushes. Twigs snap under its feet as it stumbles and crashes over roots. Whispered curses slip from its lips as it is ripped and tripped by thorns and brambles.

Another sound: the soft creak of leather and the yawning stretch of a crossbow string. A click as the catch locks and a slither of wood as the bolt is fitted.

One of the moon's shadows moves, peeling itself away from a tree trunk to stand for a moment inside a patch of silver light.

Not a shadow, then: a man. A fox-man. Dressed head to foot in hunting leather – some kind of glinting smoked-glass goggles hiding his face – and two pointed fox ears jutting from his head.

A heartbeat, and then another figure joins him, raising an arm to point in the direction of the blundering, sobbing sounds. This one has the ears of a wolf, shaggy grey fur framing his goggles, covering his mouth.

This is their wood, their moon. They are the hunters, and they have found their prey.

The first figure raises his crossbow, tilting his head to pinpoint the exact position of the thing in the

bushes. It has stopped running now, and is muttering some kind of prayer.

The tip of the crossbow bolt glints in the moonlight as it moves, left an inch, up, right . . . *stop*.

Two sounds happen so quickly, they overlap each other. A *twang* and a *thud*.

Birds burst from their roosts in the trees and flap away from the woods, up into the night sky where the hunter's moon shines.

In the distance, on the horizon, it gleams across the peaks of a mountain range of smoke and fog, lit from within by a thousand, thousand lights.

As the thing in the woods dies, London sleeps on, oblivious.



CHAPTER ONE

In which cat burglary is invented.

LAMBETH, SOUTH LONDON

‘You thievin’ little snot-weasels! When we get hold of you, we’re going to skin you like rabbits!’

The shout rang out through the courtyard, bouncing back and forth between the crumbling brick buildings that surrounded it and getting lost in the thick grey fog. It was impossible to tell what direction the man was coming from, how close he was, even.

Inji crouched inside a narrow gap between a flight of stone stairs and a pile of steaming rubbish. Horse manure and rotten vegetables, mostly, although there

was a shape sticking out of the top that looked like it might be a dead dog's paw. She didn't look closely enough to make certain.

Somewhere in the fog was her brother Sil. Him and a whole group of Lambeth Lads, the gang they had just stolen a very precious item from. Sil was holding that precious thing right now, and probably doing something extremely stupid, like standing out there in the open, trying to catch the fog on his tongue.

He did things like that, if Inji wasn't there to look after him, which is why she never normally left his side. Except now they had got separated, what with all the running and chasing and screaming. That and this gloopy grey mist that stopped you from seeing your hand in front of your face.

The burglary itself had been fine. They had found the Lads' hideout, just where Skinker said it would be. They had lifted up the loose floorboards and found the safe – no problem. They had even used the combination Glyph gave them to open the lockbox first time. Sweet.

It was when they were leaving the place, robbery accomplished, that they bumped into half the gang

returning (from a gin shop, judging by the smell). Inji didn't know why they were called 'Lads'. Every one of them was at least twenty, and looked like he had spent nineteen of those years being repeatedly punched in the face.

Their first reaction at seeing Inji and Sil was to scream. To be fair, that's what most people did and Inji couldn't really blame them. But they recovered quicker than average, and also happened to spot the leather bag Sil was holding delicately, as if it contained the Crown Jewels.

Perhaps she shouldn't have told him that's what was in it. He *did* have a tendency to believe everything she said.

'What the jibbering heck?' one of the Lads had said. The biggest one, with the ugliest face. 'That's my blooming bag, that is!'

There had been a pause, then, with the burglars and the burgled staring at each other, as if to say *what a terribly awkward situation, chaps!*

Inji had been the first to break it, by grabbing Sil's arm and screaming, 'Run!' Then they had turned tail, back past the hideout, down some stairs and into the street. Feet sliding on cobbles, screams behind

them: but somewhere along the line she had got separated from her brother and the fog had swirled into the gap, hiding him completely.

Now she was in the courtyard, waiting to be found and skinned alive.

‘I know you’re in here, you hairy sneak!’

Damn, Inji thought. She’d been hoping the Lads had been too shocked to look at her closely. Too surprised to notice how her skin was covered with fine fur – delicately striped – how her ears narrowed to points that jutted out of her tangled brown hair, and how the pupils of her eyes were slitted like a cat.

Stupid of her, she supposed, but now they would know exactly who’d sent them. There was only one gang in the underworld of London that had a bunch of sideshow acts in it, and that was Tannikin Skinker’s. As criminals themselves, the Lads would know that. *We’ve been rumbled*, she chided herself, *and if we ever get out of this, we’re in for another hiding when we get home.*

‘They’ve gone in ’ere!’ the voice shouted again, and this time Inji could see the rough shape of a figure: a grey shadow blocking the only entrance to the slum courtyard. ‘Nobby! Chalky! They’re in this

'ere rookery!ⁱ Bring your barkers!

Barkers. Inji shuddered. That meant pistols. Whatever they'd stolen was valuable enough to be killed for. She had to find Sil and get out of there *now*.

One of the – very few – bonuses of having as much cat blood as human was that her senses were sharper than anyone else's. Sight, smell, hearing: Inji's were all like razors. Especially at times like these, when she was frightened or angry. The cat inside her head wanted to take over, then. She could feel it now, yowling and yammering behind her eyeballs.

Careful to keep it under control, she relaxed her grip a fraction, letting her feline side edge out. She felt the fur all over her body bristle, winced as the curved claws in her fingertips popped their sheaths. A hiss and a yowl built up in her throat. Somehow she managed to keep them there.

With the changes to her body came a boost to her senses. The fog seemed to thin a little. The smell of the dead dog in his horse-dung grave grew regrettably stronger.

And there, in a corner of the slum courtyard,

tongue out to catch the fog droplets, was her twin brother.

The Lad at the entrance hadn't seen him yet, but he would soon, when his mates arrived. Inji reckoned she had a handful of heartbeats to get to Sil and scarper before they both became target practice for the Lambeth Ugliers.

Keeping low to the ground, slinking like only she could slink, Inji made her way around the edge of the courtyard, praying hard to whatever god or saint protected sideshow orphans. If there even was one.

For Sil was as strange as her, albeit in another way. For whatever reason (their mother had been a Romany gypsy, and was convinced it was a curse), they had both been born . . . different. Inji had come out looking half kitten. Sil had to be cut free, almost killing their ma. He looked like . . . well, there were no words for it. Not until the day Inji had seen a stuffed armadillo in a curiosity shop and called her twin over to look at it.

That, she'd said. That is what you look like, brother!

Where Inji was covered with short, silky fur,

Sil's skin was stretched over knobbed flaps of armour. His hide was as thick as bone, and his head was too. He didn't think or move too quickly, did Sil. And if Inji wasn't there to guide him, he would probably wander off under a horse and cart, or into the Thames itself, to drown in the black rotten mud.

Slink, slink, she slipped soundlessly between piles of rags and puddles of sewage. Keeping to the shadows, wrapped deep in the fog, she reached her brother without the Lad spotting her. His friends were getting closer now: she could hear their feet pounding the cobbles of the street outside.

'Sil!' she whispered. It came out as the hissing spit of an angry mog. 'Sil! What are you doing?'

She was close enough to see his face now. Those wide brown eyes, full of innocence and lost in their own special world. They blinked at her from under the heavy bone ridge of his brow.

'Give me that.' Inji snatched the leather satchel from him. Normally, she would have felt bad about the hurt look on his face, but now the cat was in control, and cats didn't care about things like feelings.

'I 'eard a voice!' the Lad shouted, stepping into the courtyard now. Another silhouette joined him, this one holding something out in one hand. Something very gunlike.

Inji hissed again. The cat was close to the surface now. If she let it loose, it would probably run up and over the rooftops in a flash of brown fur. Escape for her – death for Sil.

The rooftops, though . . .

Inji focused, holding the feline urges in check, looking deep into her brother's eyes. 'Sil, do you remember that time in the workhouse? That time you climbed?'

Their mother had died in the workhouse.ⁱⁱ Locked up for being a homeless vagrant after she'd left her Romany community. Her children had been locked up too, although they were only four years old. As soon as their mother wasn't there to protect them, they had been beaten and bullied by staff and inmates alike. Everyone in the place feared and hated them, so they had simply scaled the walls and escaped.

'Climb?' Sil said. He rarely spoke, and when he did it was quite loud. Inji winced.

‘There! In the corner!’ There was a *bang* that made her head ring, and a window to the left of them smashed.

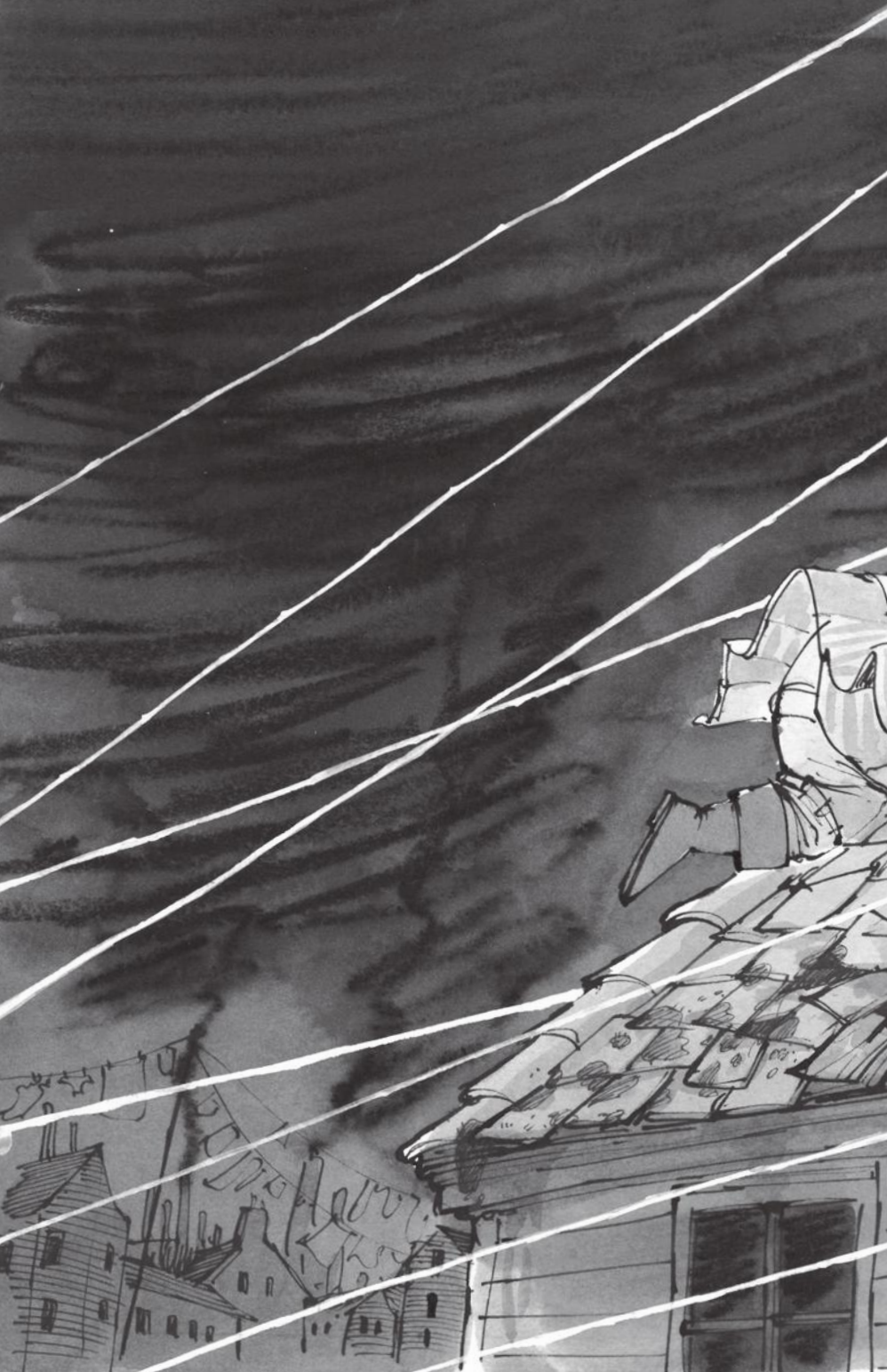
‘Yes, Sil! Climb! Climb now!’

Trusting that he would follow, Inji clutched the satchel in her mouth and sprang up to the wall. Her clawed fingers dug into the crumbling brick like it was stale sponge cake, and she leapt in a series of catlike bounds, straight up the vertical surface to the roof above.

The slum building was tiled with loose, mossy slates, and for a moment she scabbled at the roof edge, tiles spinning loose to smash on the courtyard cobbles behind her.

There was another gunshot – *crack!* – a slate beside her shattered, and then she was up, over the edge, skittering up the slanted roof to safety. Clinging to the ridgepole, she heard a rhythmic crunching sound, and seconds later, Sil appeared.

His armoured body was amazingly strong. Just like in the workhouse, six long years ago, he had climbed the building by punching his own handholds. He smashed holes in the roof now too, pulling himself up and over. There was a final gunshot, the





bullet actually bouncing off Sil's armoured back and tearing the oversized jacket that covered it, and then they were both safely out of range.

'We know who your boss is!' came a shout from below. 'Tell Skinker he's a dead man!'

But they were high above the Lambeth Lads now. The sea of rooftops that was the London skyline stretched out before them, rising from the waves of grey fog that choked the streets. From up here they could travel most of the way back to the river without even touching the ground, and then it was a short trot across London Bridge, back to the East End.

Back to a hiding from Skinker, when he finds out we were seen, Inji reminded herself, but right now she found it hard to care.

She gave Sil a swift hug, and then took his hand, pulling him along on their rooftop journey.

*

The walk back to Whitechapel took up a good two hours. Sil tended to move at a slow, waddling pace, shifting his bulk from side to side. He also liked to stop quite often, fascinated by tiny things that

Inji would normally never have noticed. The drops of mist caught in a cobweb, or a certain pattern of brickwork. He loved the different chimney pots up high, and cooed over funny-shaped ones, tracing the trails of smoke with his finger.

They found a wooden staircase and clambered down to street level. Inji had an old shawl tied around her waist that she used to drape over herself when she was out in public. Sil's jacket had a hood, which hid his lumpy head. He still looked a funny shape, but people with hunched backs or twisted spines weren't that uncommon on the streets. At worst, he got shouted at to walk faster, but most folk just ignored him.

It hadn't always been that way. After escaping the workhouse, they had only lasted a few months on the streets before some enterprising cove sold them off to a sideshow master.ⁱⁱⁱ They had performed almost every night after that. *The Monster Twins* was their most popular name, although they had also been known as *Cat Girl and Armadillo Boy*, *The Devil's Spawn* and, Inji's least favourite, *The Gargoyle Family*.

About a year ago they had been 'rescued' by their

current boss, Tannikin Skinker, who had found a new use for their talents: stealing things.

From sideshow act to criminal. Inji didn't know which was worse.

They headed for London Bridge and made their way across it to the north bank, keeping a careful eye out for any of the Lambeth Lads who might have tried to intercept them. It was early evening, and there was a flow of workers coming from the East End, back from the docks and factories to their homes. Inji and Sil were buffeted from side to side and crushed up against the stonework more than once, but both of them were used to it.

Off the bridge, they walked up towards Fenchurch Street and then on to Whitechapel Road. The gaslights were just being lit, although the fog seemed to be getting worse, so they didn't do much except make shiny haloes in the gloom. A steady stream of carriages clopped their way along the road; the smell of fresh dung and a barrage of shouting made Inji's head swim. She wished she was back up on the rooftops again, with this world of noise and stink churning away below her.

Along Commercial Street next, until they reached

the tall white spire of Hawksmoor's church. It stretched away, up and up, breaking through the fog, its stone skin becoming cleaner the further it got from the stinking streets. Somewhere above, in the darkening sky, the gold cross on top would be gleaming in the last of the day's sunlight.

Next door, the Ten Bells pub was in full swing, and there were gin-swilling men, women and children spilling out into the street, singing, pushing and swearing. Ducking and barging through them, Inji and Sil headed down Church Street until they came to a ramshackle townhouse with soot-smearred windows.

Looking both ways to check the coast was clear, Inji gave the secret knock and stood back as the door inched open.

A bloodshot eye appeared at the crack, rolling to and fro underneath a wiry eyebrow. A long, hooked nose poked out beneath, nostrils flaring, and under that a wispy ginger beard, stained with rum and tobacco.

'What's this?' the face said. 'What's this at my door?'

'It's us, Tannikin,' said Inji, as if that wasn't

perfectly obvious. 'We've got the goods. Please let us in. It's been a long day.'

The door swung wide, exposing a long, gaslit hallway and a stooped old man in a filthy smoking jacket. He grinned and beckoned at them, giggling and laughing like a child.

'Of course it's you, my bonny little buttons! Old Uncle Tannikin was only joking! Only joshing with you. As if I wouldn't recognise my two finest snatchers! As if *you* two creatures could be mistaken for anyone else on God's green earth.' They stepped over the threshold and he let the door slam behind them. 'Besides,' he added, 'Glyph told me you was coming half an hour ago.'

Tannikin, their boss, their 'saviour', stood before them, rubbing his hands together and shuffling from one foot to the other. His quick grey eyes darted from their faces to the leather satchel and back again.

Ignoring his excitement, Inji took her time about removing her shawl and retying it around her waist. She watched him out of the corner of her eye, trying to judge what mood he was in, and when would be best to tell him they'd been spotted. Exactly when she revealed it would have an important effect on

how hard and long he beat them.

‘Well?’ He couldn’t wait any longer. ‘Well?’

He really is a disgusting old man, Inji thought. Apart from the layers of filth and dried food all over his jacket and the ancient, stained shirt beneath, he had a gaping hole in the side of his left cheek. He’d worked in a match factory when he was a young man, and suffered a bad case of ‘phossy jaw’. The phosphorus in the match heads had eaten away the bone and flesh of his face. Now you could see his back teeth and tongue, gnashing and dribbling as he stared at them. *He’s probably the only person in London that looks worse than us.*

‘Yes, we got it,’ she said, handing him the leather satchel.

Tannikin whooped and cheered like a boy on Christmas Day, dancing a happy jig round and round on the spot. Then he trotted off down the hallway, leaving Inji and Sil to follow.

‘Oh, you clever little buttons!’ Tannikin sang, waving the bag over his head. ‘You sweet little burglar-muffins!’

He led them down the bare hallway to a meagre kitchen, where several oil lamps were flickering, and

a pan of some kind of stew simmered on the range. There was a rickety old table, its legs propped up with books, and a selection of threadbare armchairs and stools around it. It was covered in piles of dirty crockery, most of it so chipped and cracked that strands of dried food were all that held it together. Lying open was an evening newspaper, which instantly caught Inji's eye. She had been following a certain case in the papers with great interest. One that Skinker wasn't too keen on her reading about. But before she could look closer, Tannikin snatched the paper and balled it up, throwing it out of sight under the table. He set the satchel down in its place, before taking a chair, still clapping his hands with glee.

Inji pulled a stool across and sat too, trying to keep out of striking distance, still waiting for her chance to break the news. She could see a glimpse of the crumpled paper from where she sat, but not well enough to get a clue what the headline might be. Obviously, it was about the story Skinker wanted to keep from her. *Later, maybe.*

Sil shuffled over to the far wall and sat on a heap of old hessian sacks. The pile instantly began to writhe and wriggle, until a small boy crawled out.

He was dressed in an undersized velvet suit at least twenty years older than him. He had light brown skin, huge dark eyes and a frizzy mop of black hair that zinged out around his head in a crazy cloud. He blinked up at Sil, who blinked back, then reached out a thick-fingered hand to pat him on the head.

‘Hello, Glyph,’ said Inji. The boy didn’t reply, just pulled out a deck of crumpled pasteboard cards from his jacket pocket and began to place them, one by one, on the bare kitchen floorboards, dealing from the top.

Fnap, fnap, fnap.

Inji waited for him to finish and sit back, then she craned her head to see the cards. Instead of suits and numbers, each was printed with a single letter. He had laid out the exact cards needed to spell HELLO.

Glyph was different from other people, like them. But though he looked normal – apart from the desperate need for a haircut – he never spoke, or even made a sound. Instead, the cards talked for him. He dealt them out, always from the top, never seeming to peek, and yet always had the exact ones he needed to spell out his messages.

He could even discover secrets, like he was seeing inside your head. Skinker loved him because he

could deal out the combination codes for safes and lockboxes, hidden away and stuffed with valuables. *No lock in London can cheat me*, the warped old crook used to say, whenever he had Glyph dealing out the cards, and Inji supposed he was right.

‘Well, then,’ said the man himself, jolting Inji back to the present. ‘Let’s have a little look here, shall we?’

Inji took a deep breath. Now was best, when the pleasure of peeping in the bag might lighten his mood a bit. ‘Skinker. Before you do, there’s something you should know.’

The old man paused, hooked fingers hanging over the satchel. He glared at Inji, one eyelid beginning to twitch. ‘Yes, button?’

‘The Lambeth Lads.’ She breathed hard again. ‘They saw us lifting the goods. They know it was you what sent us.’

Skinker remained frozen for a moment more, that eyelid jittering like a dancing flea. Inji could hear his teeth begin to grind through that hole in his cheek. She started to wince, waiting for the first blow to come, but it didn’t. The old man let out a breath and, for the first time since he’d

bought them, seemed to master his temper.

‘No matter, button, no matter.’ He actually gave a laugh, reaching his long, stained fingers into the satchel and pulling out a stack of papers. Cards or etchings, maybe. ‘I was going to have to speak to them anyway, wasn’t I? Otherwise I’d never be able to get them to pay for the safe return of *these*.’

He began flicking through the cards, the smile on his face growing bigger with each one. By the time he reached the end of the stack, he was howling with laughter, tears spilling down his sunken cheeks.

Inji blinked at him in confusion. She tried to glimpse what was so funny. It was a pile of tintype photographs, with groups of children on.^{iv} Perfectly normal kiddies, in sailor suits and bonnets, from what she could see.

Skinker saw her looking, and flipped the top photograph around so she could view it properly. Children, indeed, but very ugly ones. Big-boned, stoop-shouldered, with flat noses and . . . *whiskers*?

Inji peered closer. That boy in the middle, with the peaked cap and teddy bear. Was that the leader of the Lambeth Lads dressed up?

‘What d’you think, eh?’ Skinker slapped the table in glee, making the piles of crockery jump and clink. ‘Should call themselves the Lambeth *Littlies*, shouldn’t they? Oh my trousers, what they’ll pay to get *these* back!’

‘How did you know . . .?’ Inji began, gobsmacked. ‘How did you know they did *that*?’

Skinker took a crusty kerchief from a pocket and mopped his eyes. ‘Heard a rumour or two, didn’t I?’ he said. ‘Paid a few shillings here and there. Found an old member with an axe to grind that told me where the photos was hid. The roughest gang in South London, dressing up like kidlings for a spot of fun. Who’d have thought it?’

Who’d have thought it indeed? Inji didn’t know what to be more surprised about: the Lads’ secret pastime, or the fact Skinker hadn’t beaten them.

‘Good job, good job, my bonny buttons.’ Skinker got up now, taking three bowls from the pile and going over to the stove. He spooned some watery stew into them, and then handed them out to Inji, Sil and Glyph.

‘You’ve earned yourselves a hot dinner and a good night’s sleep,’ he said, smiling in his horrific

way. ‘Old Uncle Tannikin is off to hide these beauties somewhere safe, and then it’s beddy-byes for all of us, don’t you think?’

He watched as Sil slurped greedily from the bowl, while Glyph took delicate little sips. Inji hunted in the dirty crockery for a spoon, one eye on the crumpled newspaper under the table. ‘G’night, Tannikin,’ she said, mentally urging him out of the room.

Instead of speaking, he gave her a quiet, funny look. One she hadn’t seen before. If she hadn’t been so intent on reading that newspaper, she might have thought more of it, but it went unnoticed. Skinker shuffled off, leaving the three urchins to their supper.

*

Inji waited until she’d heard his footsteps go up the stairs. Skinker’s quarters were up there. Properly furnished, she imagined, with actual chairs, tables and beds. She’d never been there, and didn’t want to, really. He sometimes had other – normal – members of his gang about. Them and other crooks he worked with. The place for freaks was clearly understood to

be downstairs, out of sight.

She fished the crumpled newspaper out from under the table. She began to flatten it, when she noticed Sil had stopped slurping, and was falling asleep sitting up, empty bowl still in hand.

She went over, took the chipped stew bowl away and laid him down on the sacking as best she could. She pulled a bit of hessian over him for a blanket, and smoothed the thin strands of brown hair down on top of his ridged, bony head.

‘Sleep tight, brother,’ she said, kissing him gently. He usually liked her to sing to him – one of the Romany lullabies their mother had taught them – but all that climbing and walking must have tired him out.

Glyph’s eyes were beginning to droop as well. Inji took his bowl too, and helped wrap him in some sacking.

‘Are you warm enough there?’

He still had enough energy to reach for his cards.

Fnap, fnap, fnap. Y-E-S.

‘Night night, then.’ She didn’t know Glyph well enough for a goodnight kiss, although she had taken him under her wing almost immediately. Like a

proper Mother Hen. Or Mother Cat.

He'd been at Skinker's when they got there. Bought from a fortune teller in Covent Garden, or so she'd heard. Apparently, he'd been living on the streets with his ma – a poor wretch cast out from the house where she'd worked as a maid – until she'd died of something nasty. Neither Glyph nor Skinker knew who his father was. Chances were he was the top man of the posh house where his mum had worked. That kind of thing happened all the time. One of the sad, sad stories that Whitechapel was filled with.

Satisfied they were both sound asleep, Inji returned to her paper.

It was that evening's *Standard*, and only slightly dribbled on by Skinker. She pored over it while she spooned tasteless mutton and cabbage stew into her mouth.

The story she was looking for was halfway down the front page. A new development in the tale she had been following for weeks. 'Another Sideshow Act Murdered', it read, accompanied by a rushed drawing of a masked figure. Inji didn't have a strong grasp of letters, but she had been taught some by

Elsbeth, the bearded lady from a show she'd been part of. She knew enough to get the gist, and what she worked out wasn't good.

This was the third murder of its kind in the city in the past few months. All sideshow players and all found dead, pierced through with one or more arrows or bolts that the police thought had been fired from a crossbow.

The first had been a tall man, seven foot six, kidnapped from his lodgings and discovered at the edge of Hyde Park. The second, a minuscule lady 'the size of an elf'. She'd had no fewer than ten bolts in her, and had been found floating in the river.

This one was a contortionist (it took Inji several minutes to read *that* word), which she remembered was someone who could bend their body in unusual ways. There had been one at their show who could fit himself inside a tiny wooden box.

This particular player had been found by the pond in St James's Park. Witnesses had seen a horse and cart pull up, and a masked figure get out to dump the body. The murderer had been dressed in hunting leathers, with a wolf-eared mask and a pair of goggles with smoked-glass lenses.

Some brave soul had asked what he was doing, and the masked man had replied, 'Compliments of the Hunters' Club,' before driving off into the fog.

The Hunters' Club. Inji thought about this as she chewed a stringy piece of mutton. That meant there must be more than one of them. A whole group, maybe, killing sideshow acts as if they were wild deer or pheasants.

We could be next, she thought. Technically, none of them was part of a show, but they all had been, once. And much more unusual acts than those who'd been killed so far. The thought of one madman doing it had been terrifying, which was why Skinker had been hiding the paper from her, but a whole *club* of them?

She looked over to where Sil and Glyph lay sleeping, both of them the picture of innocence. A fierce rush of protective anger washed over her, and she felt her fur bristle and a hiss pop from her throat.

Let them try and take one of us, she thought. *I'll scratch their eyes out. Even if there is more than one. I'll teach them to leave our kind alone. As if our lives haven't been hard enough already.*

She looked at the picture again, taking in the wolf mask and goggles. At least now she had an idea of what the villains looked like.

As she stared, she found her own eyes were beginning to droop shut. She hadn't thought she was so tired.

So *very* tired.

Her head swam, and the paper blurred in and out of focus. This wasn't normal sleepiness, she realised. She must have eaten or drunk a drug, some kind of poison . . .

The stew! Skinker must have drugged the mutton stew! Sil and Glyph were out cold and soon she would be too.

Stop . . . eating . . . but her bowl was half empty already, her stomach full of the stuff.

She had time for one thought, just before her head fell on the table.

Why, Skinker?

Why?