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opening extract from

Barnaby Grimes, Curse of the Night Wolf

written by

Paul Stewart and Chris Riddell

published by

Random House

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Have you ever felt your skin being peeled slowly away from your arms and legs? Your muscles being torn and shredded as every bone in your body fights to burst through your flesh? Have you ever felt every tendon and sinew stretched to breaking point as your skeleton attempts to rip itself apart from the inside?

I have, and I'll never forget it.

I remember moonlight. The great silver disc of the full moon bearing down into my upraised eyes, its intoxicating light seeping into my pores and coursing through my veins, stirring something deep, deep within me.

And then the pain. Terrible convulsions

racked my body, my skin seemed to be on fire and, looking down in horror, I saw my fingers and toes contract into hard, claw-tipped paws. My neck strained, my belly cramped, while the muscles in my chest and shoulders rippled and rolled as though a colony of trapped rats was writhing beneath my skin.

At the back of my throat I felt a burning sensation as the root of my tongue swelled and squirmed, leaving me choking for breath. I coughed, and my tongue leaped out between my parted lips and lolled from the corner of my mouth, down past my chin. Strands of drool splattered onto the floor and glinted in the moonlight.

Such pain I endured. Such terrible pain. It felt as though my very skull had been placed in a carpenter's vice, which was being screwed tighter and tighter.

And then the noises began . . .

There was a creaking, cracking sound inside my ears, and I knew that my jaw was thrusting

forwards even as my nose did the same. The next moment I realized I could see them both at the same time through my narrowed eyes. I shook my head violently and tried to scream, but all that emerged were growls and yelps that turned into a terrible howl as my terror grew.

I tried to get away, but was overwhelmed with an impossible heaviness that pinned me to the spot. I was trapped, scarcely able to move so much as a muscle – yet my senses were on fire.

My hearing was more acute than ever before. My eyesight had sharpened, so that everything looked bright and clear – though curiously elongated, as if I was looking through a slightly warped lens. My nose quivered with excitement as a thousand different scents and odours assailed it.

There was the pungent smell of linseed oil in the varnished woodwork. There was the fragrant perfume of a recent visitor – as well

as the sour underlying sweat she had been attempting to conceal. There was tile polish. Spilled milk. Crushed grass. Pigeon feathers. Soot. Dust. Tarmacadam. A trace of vomit. A hint of dog . . .

And then the itching began. All over my body. Scabrous, overwhelming and impossible to ignore, it had me scraping and scratching at every inch of my skin with my claws, using all the energy I could muster. And as I did so, my jaw dropped with a mixture of horror and shock as I witnessed my smooth, almost hairless skin begin to sprout thick, dark fur.

Horrified, I stared up and howled once more. My clothes lay in tatters about me.

The cramped and dingy chamber was heavily padded. Each wall and surface had been covered with a heavy, pale-grey felt quilting that deadened all sound – quilting which, even as I looked, revealed dried splashes of blood.

Above my head was the skylight – a thick

double-glassed window in the low sloping ceiling, like a monstrous eye – which concentrated the beams of light from the full moon down into the chamber. I stared back, transfixed.

Then I heard it. A low unpleasant chuckle that came from behind me. With great effort, I slowly turned my head . . .

A figure was looking down at me.

He was dressed in heavy robes and a huge, sinister hood which obscured his head and face completely. The moonlight glinted on the dark glass panels that concealed his eyes – and on the huge silver and glass syringe he had clasped in his gloved hand.

I stared back, unable to move so much as a muscle.

The next moment the hideous apparition started moving towards me; slowly, deliberately, the syringe held out before him. I let out a whimper as a spasm of fear convulsed my body.

Thump-thump-thump.

He took another step closer, raising the



The moonlight glinted on the dark glass panels that concealed his eyes...

syringe and letting a couple of drops of silvery-white liquid emerge from the tip of the great needle and trickle down the side. My ears pricked up and my lips drew back in a terrified snarl – I couldn't get away from him. I couldn't move. Another spasm ran down my spine.

Thump-thump-thump.

What *was* that sound? Something thumping on the padded floor, as if beating a rhythm with my pounding heart. The figure raised the needle-sharp syringe as I fought to regain control of my pain-racked body.

Thump-thump-thump.

There it was again. With a jolt, I realized what it was thumping behind me . . .

It was my tail.





I'll never forget the events of that terrible night as long as I live; events that, even now, as I speak of them, bring a cold sweat to my brow and a tremor to my hand. Yet speak of them I must, for in their retelling, perhaps I can offer some insight into the black heart of this great, bustling city.

It is a dark world that I, as a 'tick-tock lad', have come to know all too well. And there are horrors I have witnessed that I wouldn't wish on my worst enemy. One such horror is the subject of this tale . . .

As I said, I'm a tick-tock lad – a sort of cross between a messenger and a delivery boy, only a tick-tock lad has to be faster than

the first and twice as sharp as the second. It's no job for a green-willow or a haywain bumpkin, make no mistake.

I know this city like the back of my hand – every alley, every twitten, every street. I have to: it's my trade. Getting about it is second nature to me. Give me any two places and I'll tell you the quickest way to get from one to the other in an instant. Time is money. Tick-tock – the ticking of the clock . . .

That's why they call us tick-tock lads.

You won't find us stuck behind a desk in some poky office. Always out and about, we are. Whether it's witnessing wills or serving writs, recording testimonies or collecting petitions, dispensing subscriptions or running bond certificates, it's all in a day's work for a tick-tock lad. And I've had my fair share of strange assignments, I can tell you.

There was the time I had to deliver a consignment of blue-speckled Muscovy duck

eggs, still warm, to the Wetland and Fen Ornithological Society in time for their Annual Hatching Banquet. There was the occasion of Lady Fitzrovia's secret masked ball, when I had to distribute two hundred gold-edged invitations in the middle of the night – and with half the scribblers from the gossip sheets on my trail.

And then there was the time when I was called upon to deliver subscriptions to Colonel Wybridge-Tonks's historical pamphlet, *Chronic Afflictions from the Uncleansed Drain* – and found myself being pursued through the sewers by a pack of flesh-eating salamanders . . .

But that is a story so gruesome it deserves a book of its own.

The terrible dark evil of my current tale began with the seemingly innocent fashion for fur collars and cuffs, known as the Westphalian trim. It was all the rage a while back – but then fashion is a strange thing.

One week you can't move down Gallop Row for raffish swells in double-hoop top hats. The next, they've moved on to straw tom-o'tassels, just like that. And those fine young ladies who promenade along High Market and Regency Mall are just as fickle. One season it's all fingerless lace gloves and sealskin boots, the next, oriental skirts and lapdogs the size of dormice.

As for me, a twelve-pocket poacher's waistcoat, a coalstack hat and a trusty swordstick are all I need, but then I've never been a follower of fashion. No, I leave that to the swells and fine ladies. And as for them, well, they couldn't seem to get enough of this Westphalian trim.

The fur was thick and soft and luxurious, but what truly set it apart from your average rabbit or squirrel fur – or stray cat, for that matter – was its lustre. It was a lustre that had to be seen to be believed; a lustre so exquisite that the fur itself seemed almost to glow.



They couldn't seem to get enough of this Westphalian trim.

The story went that it was made from the pelt of the great night wolf – a rare species that roamed the forests around the remote mountain town of Tannenburg in the East. The skins of these rare beasts were reputedly so valuable that the merest sliver used on a collar or cuff would enhance the value of a well-tailored jacket or coat a thousandfold.

It wasn't long before the swells and fine ladies of Gallop Row and Regency Mall were competing with each other for the highest collar and most generous cuff finished off in the exquisite Westphalian trim. As I say, it was the fashion, and I would have thought no more about it had it not been for the grim adventure that was about to befall me late one damp spring afternoon as I set off towards the austere legal offices of Bradstock and Clink.

Young Bradley Bradstock and old Aloysius Clink were regular clients. I had picked up a batch of summonses from the two lawyers as

usual and delivered them, before returning to their offices in my usual way. A normal job on a normal day – or so I thought.

I couldn't have been more wrong.

Nothing could have prepared me for the sight that met my eyes up on the old chamber roofs as I took my usual short cut. It was a sight that made my blood run cold . . .

