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Opening extract from

Street Runners

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1
WHAT A WORLD!

Let's drop through winter clouds one night in the Year of the Snake, until London takes shape on the ground. From here, it's just a million points of light like the stars above. The River Thames divides the city. She may look like a glistening black serpent, but appearances can be deceptive at this hour. Pleasure cruisers are moored along the banks, while tourists from every country on this earth are tucked up in hotels for miles both north and south.

Sail in closer and the streets emerge, with terraced rows and high-rise blocks providing order to the tangle. Monuments and landmarks are bathed in floodlight – from Buckingham Palace to Nelson's Column – and form a pattern of their own. The London Eye may not turn until day cracks over the eastern skyline, but the big wheel makes the British capital look like an urban fairground.

Here, in these upper reaches, the chill is enough to freeze the blood. So, despite the attractions and

distractions, it's time to plunge on towards a quarter at the heart of this metropolis. Within it lies a warren of side streets marked out from the rest by strings of paper lanterns and blinking neon dragons. A low fog may have crept out from the river, but swoop in quickly and we'll catch up with a small boy, careering over the cobblestones.

For this is London's Chinatown, and the kid is running for his life.

His name is Yoshi. He's thirteen years old, oriental on one side or the other, and soon that's about all he'll be able to say about himself. This boy may have a bright future ahead of him, but his past is set to become a mystery.

Behind him, an unseen force is closing in swiftly. Yoshi sprints through the deserted market now, upturning pushcarts and poultry cages. *Must. Get. Away.* He urges himself between breaths. *Can't. Go. Back.* He dares to glance over his shoulder. There's nothing to see but a soupy fog, which quickly begins to stir and draw in on itself. The boy doesn't need to hang around to know what's about to push through it. He snaps his attention ahead once more, only to barrel right into a stack of empty packing boxes . . . *Ooomph*! The stack collapses around him, but he's up on his feet and into a side alley before the last box hits the ground.

Now what's this? His first impression is of a

cut-throat kind of cut-through, but at least from here Yoshi can catch his breath and let his eyes adjust. He presses against one wall, head up high as he gulps the air. Seconds later, a shadow stretches across the street he's just left behind. Struggling not to squeak, Yoshi turns to make his escape – and finds himself face to face with a very dead end.

On one side he makes out a laundry, shuttered for the night, and further up a backroom kitchen with bins outside too full for Yoshi to climb into and hide. The door to the kitchen is ajar, however. The boy creeps towards it, on tiptoes now. Hot steam billows through the gap, with a light shining brightly inside. There's a chef at work in there, but the chop knife in his hand persuades our boy not to trespass in a bid to save his own skin. Instead, he creeps on by with his breath well bated. There's nothing beyond but darkness, but at least he can be sure that he's hidden from sight. Until, that is, Yoshi takes one step too far into the gloom, and causes several pigeons to flock into the air.

"There you are, child!"

With his heart in his throat, Yoshi spins to see a figure take shape at the mouth of the alley: a bull of a man in a long white mink coat. Beneath his furrowed brow both eyes are tight on the boy. His nostrils flare, and he takes a slow step forward. Yoshi backs away. A cry dies in his throat as he

connects with the far wall, only to gasp when his heel finds a drop just in front. Crouching among weeds now, he uncovers a grille of some sort: old iron bars buckled apart at the centre. If he breathes in deeply, he thinks to himself, the gap might just be wide enough for someone his size to squeeze through. Lowering himself out of sight, the boy hears the man's idle chuckling turn into a mystified growl, followed by thunderous footfalls.

The space he's in down here feels no bigger than a coffin, and that's precisely what the poor boy believes it'll become when two baleful eyes appear above the bars.

"Show yourself, little worm! Let's make this easy for us both."

"Get away from me!" In desperation Yoshi wriggles from a meaty paw. The litter that has gathered down here is damp and stinky, but the boy is prepared to bury himself in it to avoid being hauled out. "Do you hear me?" he cries out again. "*You can go to hell!*"

"Come and finish the programme like a good boy!" this fearsome figure bellows. "Let's make this easy for us both."

"I'd sooner die than go back again!"

Yoshi twists and turns until his pursuer quits trying to grab him. Glancing up, the boy catches sight of him reaching inside his mink instead.

"So be it," the brute sighs, sounding genuinely sorry up there. "If *I* can't put the squeeze on you then maybe this can . . ." What he draws from his pocket strikes terror into the boy: a *snake,* tail-first, and a long one, too. Hand over hand he uncoils this scaly rope, until a diamond-shaped head clears his coat with a hiss, and a forked tongue flicks towards the boy. "It's a vintage year for you, my pretty. And Yoshi here would like to help you celebrate it!"

Panic-stricken, the boy tucks tightly into his pit. At the same time, he senses that the floor feels unsteady. It's a sheet of corrugated iron, he realises, which is sagging with his weight where it meets the wall. Yoshi barely has time to take in the points of light breaking out as the sheet dips further still. What he can't ignore is the sight of the snake coiling around the bars, slowly invading his hiding space. It hisses again, so close to his face now that it might be whispering to him. All Yoshi can do is shut his eyes, praying that the embrace he can expect from it will finish him off quickly.

"You have a key to this city," the man growls. "If I cannot unlock what is mine, then you must take it to your grave."

"No!"

"Hey, mister!" Another voice cuts in, causing the man in the mink to stand tall and spin around.

He still has the snake in his grip, however, and its eyes seem to pop out on stalks at this sudden exit from the pit.

"The restaurant is closed. What's your business outside my kitchen?"

The chef! thinks Yoshi, but there's nothing left in his lungs to cry out for help. He sees his pursuer slip him a murderous glance, and then turn to explain himself:

"I'm catching rats," he offers. "Slippery ones."

"With a snake?" says the chef, suspiciously.

"It's a new form of fishing," the brute replies, sounding less sure of himself now. "You just cast your snake into the drains and wait for a bite, so to speak. You should try it," he suggests, with yet another glance at the boy watching through the bars. "In fact, you should've seen the one that got away just now."

The chef considers his story silently for a beat, clearly not buying a word of it. "Mister," he says finally, "any rats around here get their tails chopped off by me. The same applies to snakes if I find them lurking outside my kitchen, and that means human snakes, too, if you get my drift. Now scram, before I call out the boys from my backroom. They don't like to be disturbed from their card games, especially by sneak thieves."

"I'm not here to rob you! This is urban angling."

"Sure it is. Now, I'm going to count to three, mister. What's it to be?"

The man in the mink considers things for a moment, and then sighs heavily. From the pit, Yoshi sees him drape the snake around his neck, and then loop it like a scarf to keep out the cold. "Maybe I'll wait on the street," he grumbles, before making his reluctant retreat. "My rat's going to have to make a break for it some time."

"You do that," the chef agrees, sounding more relaxed now. "And tell your robber friends that anyone caught around here after dark is likely to lose fingers!"

Yoshi doesn't breathe out until he's sure that his pursuer has left the alley. He draws the air in deeply, and then promptly holds it in his lungs when the chef appears above the buckled vent again. Yoshi can't understand a word he's muttering to himself, but the chop knife in his hand gives out an unmistakeable message. His apron is spattered with blood, as is the blade that he swipes through the shadows now. If this crazed-looking cook is hoping to connect with cornered vermin, he comes close to a big surprise. Finally, with what sounds to the boy like a curse, he gives up and returns to his kitchen.

It's over, thinks Yoshi to himself, still shaken to the core by what he's just been through. The man in

the mink might be lurking at the alley mouth, but the boy knows he has the time and space now to find a way over the wall and up onto the safety of the rooftops. He reaches up to climb out of the pit, not knowing whether to whoop or weep at his lucky escape. Popping his head through the bars, he's delighted to find the coast is clear. He savours the cold night air, his first taste of freedom ... and promptly takes it down into the depths as the pit floor drops away.

2
WELCOME, YOSHI

Am I in the underworld? This is Yoshi's first thought when he comes to his senses. If he is, then it stinks to high heaven and has cooked him up an infernal headache. He wiggles his toes and fingers, slowly reconnecting with himself, and then braves opening his eyes. His vision swims. The light in here is an eerie red, but the roof through which he fell looks quite solid. A line of hinges suggests it might be some kind of trap door, like the sort of device employed by a stage magician to make an audience member vanish. The only thing missing is a mattress to cushion the fall. Instead, Yoshi's sprawled on top of bin bags reeking of rotten fish. Without them, he would've broken bones. Then again, a hard landing might have kept him out for the count a little longer. Given the dreadful stench, it almost seems preferable. Even smelling salts wouldn't have roused him *this* quickly, which might explain why he feels so fragile.

Wincing now, Yoshi lifts himself onto his elbows. He touches his head, just to check it isn't cracked like an eggshell, and looks around feeling dazed and very confused. Three walls are made from brick and crumbling mortar, but the one behind him is solid steel. In the centre is a hatch with a flywheel. Above it, on a bracket, he spies a closed-circuit camera with a light on top. The camera, poised like some river bird stalking its prey, is aimed directly at him. Slowly, Yoshi clambers to his feet. The camera lifts a notch accordingly. Testing it now, the boy steps to one side, and again the camera keeps him in the frame.

Yoshi pulls a face, daring the lens to do likewise. The camera simply swivels, as if taken aback by his behaviour, and then the red light on top turns to amber. Next, a rumbling sound builds behind the steel wall. Yoshi backs into the brickwork behind him, wishing his head would stop hammering so he can think clearly.

The noise grows louder still, then halts abruptly with a thump. With nowhere to run or hide, all Yoshi can do is watch as the flywheel begins to turn. The light switches to green, causing him to catch his breath. And, with a squeak from the poor boy as well as from the hinges, the hatch pops open.

"Ahoy!" comes a voice from inside, sounding polished and noble like an old-school swashbuckler.

The light from within is so strong that Yoshi is forced to shield his eyes. Next a silhouette forms out of the glare, dipping through the hatch to join him in the cellar. Under the green bulb, it's clear that this apparition is human and no older than Yoshi. If his entrance had startled Yoshi then his outfit leaves him speechless. The breeches and bandanna certainly make the boy look like some kind of pirate. The roller blades, however, suggest something altogether more theatrical.

"The name's Billy," he says, looking down his nose at Yoshi. "Billy No-Beard, on account of the fact that I can't grow one yet. I keep trying," he points out, and strokes his top lip, "but savages like you think it's clever to call me Billy Bum-Fluff."

"I see," says Yoshi, and rubs his eyes just to check he isn't still out for the count. "I'll call you whatever you like if you can tell me what I'm doing here."

"I recommend a rest," says Billy next. "I've just watched you flee across half of London."

"You have?" Yoshi frowns, unsure what to make of all this. He can dimly recall racing through the night, and some drama in an alley, but anything before that is lost in the mist of his mind. Nervously, he runs a palm over his head. There's a bump back there so big it could slow traffic.

"You're pretty nimble for a landlubber, but you could've given that big oaf the slip much earlier.

Whenever you're in a tight spot, it's always worth looking down to find a way out. What did he want with you, anyway?"

Yoshi opens his mouth to explain everything, and then freezes. He looks mystified, at himself mostly. "I don't know," he says finally. "I can't remember."

"So what's your name?"

Again, the boy pauses, searching his memory for something. *Anything*. "I . . . I forget."

"What's with the dog tags?" Billy rolls forward, and draws his visitor's attention to the chain around his neck. Inspecting the nickel plates, Billy pinches them both between his fingers as if estimating their value. "Says here you're Yoshi. *Yoshi 5*."

"It does?" Yoshi is as surprised to discover he's wearing two tags as he is to learn he has a number as well as a name. He finds the plates with his fingers, and looks down his nose to examine them. Several digits are engraved on the second plate, he discovers: an eleven and a twenty-three.

"What's that all about then, Yoshi 5?"

"Search me." The boy spreads his palms wide. "I'm totally lost."

"Then allow me to conduct a short tour." With a swaggering spin, Billy No-Beard returns to the open hatch. "Don't be scared. You're safe as houses inside this tub."

Cautiously, Yoshi steps over the threshold and

into the blinding light. With his head still throbbing, it actually hurts to look around, but it seems he's in a corridor lined with plumbing pipes and pressure gauges, air vents and bare wires. The metal decking clanks with every step, while his roller-blading guide rumbles on noisily ahead.

"Mind your head," warns Billy as he sweeps left and hops through an open hatchway, though there's no danger of Yoshi connecting with the pipes.

Even if he did, the boy thinks to himself, it couldn't make his headache much worse. "Where am I?" he asks.

Billy is waiting for him, one boot tipped onto the toe brake. "This is the Galley, where I do the cooking."

Yoshi scans the surfaces and sink. "What about washing up?" he asks, unable to ignore the piles of dirty pots, dishes and half-finished noodle cartons.

"It's a problem," agrees Billy, only to move on before Yoshi can press him to explain what a place like this is doing way below street level. "Over there is the canteen, and through these doors here is the central ladder. It'll take you to the showers, which it seems you badly need," he adds, wrinkling his nose. "The sleeping quarters are on the same floor, while the lower level houses the Engine Room. It's totally self-powered and blast-proof, with no reason

to shut down for centuries. I believe she's been producing light, power and hot water for over twenty years now. I'd show you round myself but I've only just laced on my wheels for the day. Unless you want to give me a piggyback down two flights and back again, you'll just have to take my word for it: this old tub is entirely shipshape."

"Are we in a submarine?"

"Don't be silly. We're smack bang under the heart of London. Ask me something sensible. You do have questions, don't you?"

"Erm, lots actually," says Yoshi, still amazed that such a space could even exist. He looks up, hoping for an explanation, but his guide has gone again.

"Keep up, Yoshi 5! As you can see I am *way* behind on domestic duties!"

The boy pops his head back into the central corridor, sees Billy turning circles at the far end before vanishing into another room. With a sigh Yoshi heads in his direction, trying hard to ignore the nagging sense that he is not alone down here with his guide. It's the way the hairs on his neck have started to needle that makes him think he's being watched. Nursing the back of his head still, he wonders when his memory will stop swimming with so many question marks.

"Will you please slow down and tell me what's

going on!" he demands, finally catching up with his skate-happy guide. In response Billy turns to face him, and then simply steps to one side. What Yoshi sees still doesn't explain why he's here, but it's enough to stop him in his tracks.

"Oh boy," he declares. "It's mission control."

The room is filled with monitors and radars, arranged in rows and facing a big screen on the far wall. There are complicated-looking control panels at each post. Some are blinking wildly, and walkie-talkie chatter can be heard from a speaker somewhere.

"This is the Bridge," says Billy with a note of pride. "The command post on our humble bucket."

The equipment looks very old indeed, but everything appears to be working fine. Yoshi scans all the monitors, in awe at the sheer scale of the space. Some screens switch between shots of fog-bound street corners and junctions, plazas and station entrances, while others are frozen on what looks like the same video game.

"Do you play?" asks Billy, stepping up to one monitor now, and offering him the handset. "We've got beat-'em-ups, drive-'em-ups, shoot-'em-ups, boot-'em-ups, sing-'em-ups and stealth-'em-ups. You'll find every kind of *up* down here, in fact. But I warn you, I'm hot when I'm on a roll. I'm Lord of the Light Gun Game and the Virtual Skate Czar,

natch." He studies his nails, buffs them on his shirt. "What do you say? Let me challenge you to a round of *High Seas 4: Storm Warning*."

"I don't want to play games!" insists Yoshi, his patience thinning. "Just tell me how I can get out."

Billy No-Beard seems surprised at his response. He tips his head to one side, as if perhaps that might help him understand Yoshi better. "Just a quick round?" he suggests, lifting an eyebrow hopefully.

"No!"

"I'll let you go first."

"This is ridiculous," Yoshi declares, and winces as his skull tells him to keep a lid on the volume. He touches one temple, his memory still blank as the moment he came round on a bed of bin bags. "Right now my whole life feels like it's been turned upside down."

"Then welcome to our world, Yoshi 5."

The boy looks up smartly, if only to confirm that what's just been said hasn't come from Billy.

"There's someone behind me," he suggests, appealing to his guide to help him out, "isn't there?"

With his lips flattened white, Billy simply motions with his finger for Yoshi to turn around. It's been a night of surprises for the boy, but finding several dozen urchins standing in a crescent at his heels is enough to make him jump. What's more, in the middle stands a striking old man who must've

appeared in a puff of smoke. He's wearing a long and colourful patchwork coat, and his hair and beard are as wild as they are white. With his broad nose and brow, Yoshi is reminded of some wise and stately lion. Judging by the wrinkles that bracket his china blue eyes, he could be one hundred years old or more.

"You've come a long way," the man says with a smile. "We're delighted you could drop in!"

3
OUR KIND OF MAGIC

"Who on earth *are* you?" asks Yoshi, his surprise overshadowing all fear.

The man steps forward and offers his hand. He's beaming at the boy now, pleased with what he sees. "My name is Julius. Julius Grimaldi."

"Pleased to meet you, sir," says Yoshi, remembering his manners, if nothing else.

"Oh, no need to be so formal! Just call me Julius, and we shall call you Yoshi. We'll even do away with that number of yours to help you feel at home. If you're as lost as you look, consider us your new family."

"Thank you," says Yoshi, taken aback by such hospitality, "but I really should be returning to wherever it is I've come from."

The old man seems genuinely surprised. "You're free to leave, as is everyone, but it can be a jungle up there. We find that kids who stumble upon us tend to be in need of some shelter for a while. You

might as well stick around until your head feels a bit better. Make yourself comfortable, dear boy. If there's anything you need, I'm sure we can conjure it up."

"Are you a wizard?" blurts Yoshi, and immediately wishes that he hadn't when the boys and girls behind him giggle and titter among themselves. None of them look like apprentices, he realises belatedly, even though the man is dressed like some master magician. Apart from Billy No-Beard, most are sporting worn-out skate gear, hippy rags, chopped up punk haircuts and army surplus accessories. It's a strange combination, almost tribal, but somehow he feels safe in their company.

"Don't believe everything you read in books," says Julius, chuckling to himself. "If I could cast a spell do you think I'd be stuck here? Those bars you squeezed through are wide enough for skinny-ribbed kids maybe, but it would take a miracle for a man of my size to climb out of there."

"You make it sound like you're a prisoner," says Yoshi.

Julius smiles at the suggestion. "I have my own ways of escaping," is all he adds. "Besides, dear boy, it doesn't matter *where* you're holed up. The mind is always free to roam."

At this, one of the kids in the background rolls his eyes and circles a finger around his temple. Yoshi

tries hard not to giggle, but it's enough for the old man to surface from his thoughts. He looks a little bashful, as if perhaps he knows he's alone with this outlook on life, and then recovers to step back with a flourish.

"By way of introduction," he announces, beaming down at the rag-tag pack, "why don't you all show our guest your kind of magic?"

Even before he has stepped aside, a plume of emerald-green flame shoots up from the open doorway. Yoshi jumps with a start and shields his face. When he dares to look again, a thick mist has enveloped the room – and yet none of the kids have scattered.

In fact, they all appear to be floating some centimetres above the ground.

"Hey!" he cries, looking up and around for an explanation. "How are they doing that?"

Julius Grimaldi is standing away from them now, with Billy still sulking at his side. "My crew like to make an impression," says Julius proudly. As he speaks, the hovering band of kids with him spreads out, until Yoshi is entirely surrounded. He turns in amazement, giddy with shock, stunned all the more when they begin to switch fireballs over his head. He wheels around, barely able to take it all in, even when Julius commands them to stop.

"The boy's been through enough for one night," he tells them. "Give him some space now."

With a gentle patter of feet, this circle of angels comes back to earth. Yoshi continues to turn, staring in amazement at one kid after another. It really is too much for his head to take in, from the bump in the cellar to the spectacle he's just witnessed before his very own eyes.

"I think I should lie down," he says weakly, and begins to spin out completely. This time, however, someone is there to catch him when he falls.

During the 1980s, when today's adults were schoolkids, the world lived under threat of total war. Nuclear bombs were the weapon of choice, designed to wipe out millions with a single blast. Thankfully, it never happened. Even so, government leaders and army generals in every country made preparations to protect themselves and survive – just in case one side or the other tried to turn the earth into a smouldering lump of space rock. First of all, they made a big show of their weaponry, like *that* would calm the situation. Then they built themselves bunkers – underground command posts where they could take cover if it all kicked off. Mercifully, everyone woke up to the fact it would be a conflict nobody could win, and concentrated instead on sorry-looking hairstyles and get-rich quick schemes.

As for the bunkers, many were simply boarded up and forgotten over time. Such was the pace of development on the surface that these reinforced hideaways became lost to the world above: just another leftover from a bygone age. But like any fossil, buried in seams underground, there will always be *someone* with an interest in uncovering the past.

For an urban explorer by the name of Julius Grimaldi, the discovery of one such space below London must've been like striking gold.

To the untrained eye, the vent Julius had uncovered at the dead end of the alley seemed unremarkable. What persuaded him to investigate was the military blueprint in his possession, and a desperate need to keep it out of the wrong hands. He may have been younger at the time, but nowhere near as slight as Billy or that strange troupe in there with him. For any grown up, the squeeze between the bars would've been an almighty challenge. Nobody willingly forced themselves through such a narrow space that they suffered cracked ribs in the process, so Julius must've known there was no going back. Then again, like all the ragamuffins and runaways who would come and go while they could, the safety on offer was worth more to him than anything in the world.

*

Right now, many years after Julius first claimed this space for London's lost children, this very same bunker is home to a new arrival. There he is in the Sick Bay on the second floor, down opposite the sleeping quarters. With a flutter, his eyes open. He blinks, and slowly focuses on the presence watching over him.

"Yoshi's with us once more," says Billy No-Beard. "Let's hope some sleep has persuaded him to find his feet on the dance mat. I had to take my blades off so I could carry him down the ladder, so a quick game of *Shake It All Over* is the *least* he can do for me now." Billy's comment is met with a sigh, followed by a playful cuff around the head. "That hurt!" he cries out, and glares across at a lad with spiked red hair and a nose ring.

Vaguely, Yoshi recognises him from the welcoming party that had gone on to take his breath away. He strains to lift his head from the pillow, thinking perhaps he might glimpse feathery wings between his shoulder blades.

"Play nice, Mikhail," says Billy, repositioning his bandanna now. "It's the first rule of gaming. Respect your opponent, win or lose."

"Billy, go tell Julius that Yoshi has come round, and then fix up a bowl of won ton soup." Every word that leaves Mikhail's mouth sounds like it has been clipped and put through a roller. He has

an ice-cold accent that leaves Yoshi thinking of old spy movies. "Our comrade here needs nourishing food to get strong again. Not stupid games."

"Stupid?" Billy covers his mouth, shocked to the core, it seems. "How dare you talk about gaming like that? You're only bitter because you were begging for mercy last time we played *Fencing Master Mayhem.*"

"Just find old Julius," says Mikhail, more forcefully this time. "There is a time for games, and a time for you to vanish." He jabs a thumb at the door. "Why don't you practise your disappearing act?"

"OK, OK, I'm going. There's no need to be so rude!" Flushing angrily, Billy No-Beard breaks for the central stairwell. "Mikhail is from Siberia," he says to Yoshi on the way out, like that will explain everything – and not just his thick Russian accent. "It's a cruel and savage place, by all accounts."

Billy turns and slams the hatch behind him. Mikhail shrugs, but Yoshi has just one question on his mind.

"How did you guys do that thing?" he asks.

Mikhail wrinkles his nose, making the ring through it twinkle under the lights. "What thing is that?" he asks, clearly playing with Yoshi. "You mean levitating?"

"What else! It isn't every day I see a whole bunch of people hover in the air."