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Opening extract from

Darkside: Nighttrap

Written by

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Prologue

August, in a city gasping for breath. The heat had wrapped thick, sweaty fingers around London, and was squeezing mercilessly. Choked streets pleaded in vain for a breeze. Trapped inside stuffy offices and airless tube trains, Londoners sweltered and roasted. Those unable to escape the city made for parks and gardens, and the shade beneath tree branches and sun umbrellas, but the heat sapped life from everything. Down by the riverfront, the Thames slumped lifelessly against the Embankment.

Deep in the bowels of a West London police station, Police Sergeant Charlie Wilson tugged at his collar and stared at the suspect in front of him with mounting disbelief. For a criminal mastermind, this was a singularly unusual figure. He had been in some sort of fight, and there was an ugly swelling on the back of his head. His eyes were wild and he fidgeted impatiently, as though he was late for an important appointment. Since waking up handcuffed to a hospital bed, the only thing he had said

was his name. None of which would have been that strange, but for the fact that the suspect could not have been more than fifteen or sixteen years old.

Wilson didn't know what to make of it. At twenty-four, he wasn't that much older than the lad himself. He had only been in the force for a year, and nothing in training had prepared him for this. He scratched at a damp armpit and tried again.

"Look, Kevin, we can sit here all day if you want. Tomorrow too. It's not like you're going anywhere."

He paused, hoping for a reply. The tape recorder hummed in the silence.

"This isn't shoplifting, son. This is *serious*."

Kevin shrugged, and looked down at the floor. Wilson had dealt before with young lads who acted tough, but there was something different about this one. He was so distant, so disengaged, it was as if they were barely in the same room.

It was clearly going to be a long day. Wilson's mouth was parched and he had already finished off his jug of water. The boy hadn't asked for any, and Wilson was worried that if he went out for a refill he would look weak. If only it wasn't so damn hot!

He was just about to try a sterner approach when the door to Interview Room B creaked open, and in slipped the crumpled figure of Detective Carmichael. Wilson's eyes widened with surprise. A small, hunchbacked man squeezed into a cheap suit, the detective was an unlikely legend

on the force. He shuffled round the police station like a tramp, rarely speaking to any of his colleagues. Yet, time and time again, this unassuming figure had cracked high-profile cases that had stumped other coppers. By rights, he should have made Super by now, but there was something about Carmichael that unsettled his colleagues. To everyone's relief, he seemed happy to remain a detective, albeit one who could pick and choose his cases. And today he had chosen Wilson's.

Detective Carmichael sized up the room with one swift glance and collapsed into a chair. Rubbing an eye wearily, he nodded at Wilson.

"Morning, Sergeant," he said softly. "Thought you might appreciate a helping hand on this case. Why don't you tell me what's going on?"

Wilson shuffled his notes, and replied with a dry mouth:

"Right . . . yes, sir. Well, in the early hours of this morning, an armed police unit responded to reports of gunfire and a burning vehicle outside an address in Kensington. Having gained access to the building, they found evidence of a break-in, and bloodstains indicating a violent struggle. The owner of the residence was nowhere to be seen. In fact, the only person left on the premises was the suspect here, who was lying unconscious on the floor of a high-security vault in the basement. He was clutching this, sir." He showed his superior a photograph of a glittering stone, an ice-blue sapphire. "Experts reckon it's worth a couple of million."

Detective Carmichael raised an eyebrow and turned to

the young boy. "Not bad for a lad your age. Trying to impress a girlfriend, were we?"

Kevin snorted humourlessly. Secretly, Wilson was relieved that the vaunted Carmichael's entrance hadn't improved the lad's attitude.

"The suspect is refusing to cooperate, sir," he cut in helpfully. "All we've been able to get out of him is his name."

The detective gave the boy a long, thoughtful stare. Then he leant forward and said, almost in a whisper, "I bet you didn't give your real name, though, did you, Jonathan?"

The boy looked up sharply, a shocked expression on his face. Carmichael chuckled, shaking his head.

"For a clever lad, you must think we're awfully stupid. Did you think we'd just take your word for it? Did you not think we might run your photo through a database? What do you think this is, son – the nineteenth century?"

The detective's mouth may have still been creased in a smile, but his eyes were deadly serious now. He stared at the boy, challenging him. Jonathan held his gaze, but didn't say anything.

Wilson was lost.

"Sir?" he ventured.

The sound of his voice broke the spell in the room. Carmichael turned back to him, his mouth twitching with amusement.

"This is a very special day, Sergeant. We're interviewing a ghost."

"I . . . I don't understand, sir."

Carmichael settled back in his chair. "Young Jonathan Starling here was kidnapped in central London a year ago. Despite a huge manhunt, he was never found. Suddenly the investigation was closed down and no one – not one family member, not one friend, Wilson – argued or asked any questions. It was as if everyone just . . . forgot about him. And now, out of the blue, here he is again! The only suspect in an attempted multi-million-pound robbery." He smiled again at Jonathan. "Whatever your story is, son, I can't wait to hear it."

The boy sat back and folded his arms obstinately.

"Listen to me, Jonathan," Wilson said, struggling to keep up. "You can't have got into that vault on your own. That place was built like a fortress. Someone was with you – an adult, criminals. Whoever you're trying to protect, you need to think about whether it's worth keeping silent. They've done a runner and left you to face the music. Where are they now?"

"I don't know." Jonathan spoke up for the first time, a note of determination in his voice. "But I'll find out."

Wilson made an exasperated noise. The boy seemed determined to be unhelpful.

"Keep this up, and the only place you'll be going is juvenile prison. Why don't you just tell us what's been going on?"

"What's the point?" Jonathan shot back. "You won't believe a word I say anyway."

"You'd be surprised by some of the things we've heard in this room. As long as it's the truth, son, then that's all right.".

"Where've you been, Jonathan?" asked Detective Carmichael.

"Away," he replied defiantly.

"Have you been OK?"

"I've been fine. It was when I came back *here* that all the trouble started."

Jonathan paused, seemingly unsure of what to say next. Wilson gave him a look of encouragement.

"Go on."

Jonathan sighed, and began to talk.

1

Jonathan Starling was looking for trouble.

At first glance, most people wouldn't have realized this. Trudging round a North London shopping centre, his shoelaces trailing after him across the tiled floor, Jonathan cut an awkward figure. His body was crammed into a school uniform that was at least one size too small for his gangly frame. His hair was a tangled battleground of warring strands. A battered school bag hung limply from one shoulder. A keen observer might have wondered why the schoolboy wasn't in lessons at this time of the afternoon, but no one was watching him that closely. In fact, no one was watching him at all.

It was all very frustrating. Jonathan had spent over an hour in the shopping centre trying to get noticed. In the huge sports shop, he had dribbled a football around the aisles, playing one-twos off the wall, but no one had come over to stop him. He had loitered in the music store, trailing a hand over the racks of CDs and DVDs, without receiving

a single suspicious glance. He had glared at every security guard he had seen, but they studiously ignored him. He was invisible again.

It had been a month since Jonathan had left the cobbled streets of Darkside and returned to everyday London. Moving back hadn't been easy. The problem was, Jonathan had changed. There had been times in Darkside when he would have given anything to feel safe and bored. But now, confronted with the routine of his old life, he was desperate for a buzz, that wave of adrenalin that had carried him from one scrape to another. It was as if somehow he *needed* fear now.

Even with the air conditioning on, the shopping centre was simmering with the heat of early summer. Gentle acoustic music drifted down from hidden speakers. Jonathan looked around at the milling shoppers with disdain. How could they not know? How could they be so blind? If he stood very still and closed his eyes, Jonathan could feel Darkside's presence – a giant, malevolent octopus hidden away in the depths of London, its alleyway tentacles stretching out into the city. Somewhere close by, he knew there would be a secret trapdoor or a dank sewer that could take him back there. Jonathan wondered whether his senses could guide him back. After all, he was half-Darksider: the borough was in his blood.

But he couldn't go back, not yet. He had promised.

In some ways, it was incredible that danger had become such a distant memory. Having crossed two of the most

powerful men on Darkside – the vampiric banker Vendetta, and the heir to the Darkside throne Lucien Ripper – Jonathan and his ally Carnegie had prepared themselves for a tidal wave of vengeful violence. For weeks the wereman spent the nights in his lodgings sat in a chair, his eyes fixed on the door, his hand on a weapon. In the next room, Jonathan woke every time a windowpane rattled or a floorboard creaked.

As time went on, however, they slowly realized that no one was coming for them. The *Darkside Informer* had seen to that. In a series of explosive articles, it not only revealed Lucien and Marianne's true identity as the children of Thomas Ripper, but also the fact that Lucien had murdered his brother James twelve years beforehand. Even by Darkside's high standards, this was considered a foul deed. With his cover blown, and day after day of lurid headlines screaming for his blood, Lucien had been forced to disappear from the face of the rotten borough. Although Carnegie had made enquiries in his usual robust style, no one seemed to know where the Ripper had gone to lick his wounds. And, although one night Jonathan had seen Vendetta's car roaring down the Grand, scattering horses and passers-by like ninepins, the vampire had also withdrawn from the public eye. The streets of Darkside still provided a riotous stage for its cast of treacherous and murderous characters, and danger lurked round every corner, but that was normal for the borough. Eventually Carnegie ended his night-time vigils, and Jonathan's sleep became unbroken.

If anything, the wereman seemed more unnerved by the quiet than by the prospect of violence. He stalked down the Grand, his eyes furtively wary, glowering at anyone foolish enough to meet his gaze.

"It's not right, boy," he muttered through clenched teeth. "This is Darkside. You don't cross people and get away with it. People here don't forgive and forget."

Jonathan didn't know what to make of it. Though he was relieved that their lives didn't appear to be in any immediate danger, the search for his mother had reached another dead end. His encounter with Lucien had only reinforced his belief that Theresa Starling was still alive somewhere in Darkside, but the Ripper seemed the only person who might know where. With his disappearance, the trail to Theresa went stone cold.

In the end, it was Carnegie who forced him to face facts. The wereman had dragged Jonathan to the meat locker of Gol's butcher's shop, where he ravaged a joint of beef while the boy stamped his feet in a futile attempt to keep warm. When the beast within him was sated, Carnegie wiped away a fleck of gristle from his cheek with his shirtsleeve and shot Jonathan a sideways glance.

"Look, boy," he said eventually, "I've been thinking things over, and I've decided it's time you went back to Lightside."

"What? Why?"

"There's nothing here for you. The only lead to Theresa has dried up. Until we find Lucien, we can't do anything."

"Something will turn up!" Jonathan protested. "It has to! And until then, I can help you with your cases. I've done all right so far, haven't I?"

"You've been fine. But I don't need a partner. I only agreed to look after you while Alain was ill, and he's better now." Carnegie's eyes narrowed. "You're not on holiday, and I'm not your uncle, boy."

"This isn't a holiday for me! I'm part-Darksider, remember?"

"You're part-Lightsider too, and right now, that's where you belong. It's been too long since you saw your dad. You need to go and spend some time with him. I'll keep digging over here. If I find out anything about Lucien or your mum, I'll come and get you. We'll start again then. But wait until I come for you. Deal?"

Jonathan spent the rest of the day alternately cajoling and arguing with the wereman, but only succeeded in turning his mood increasingly sour. Eventually Carnegie lost patience and snarled at Jonathan to be silent. That evening, the two friends parted company at a crossing point back to London without exchanging another word.

So now he was back on Lightside, trying to get used to televisions and computers and mobile phones and all the other technological gizmos that had seemed important a long time ago. His favourite songs sounded strange, and films bored him. No special effects could match what he had seen.

This wasn't to say that life was all bad. It was great being back with his dad again. Alain Starling was nearly fully recovered from his latest darkening – an illness caused by the time he had spent in Darkside many years ago. He was a different man from the distant figure who had brought Jonathan up. There were still times he would lapse into silence and stare off into the middle distance, but now a question or a stupid joke could snap him out of his reverie. Jonathan knew that the fact that Theresa remained missing caused Alain great pain, but he was more positive than before. On long, rambling walks on Hampstead Heath and through Regent's Park, the two Starlings concocted various wild schemes to pick up the trail and somehow bring her home.

Occasionally Alain would adopt a serious expression and threaten to enrol Jonathan in a new school in the autumn – "Darkside's all very well, but you've got to finish your education" – but both of them knew that his heart wasn't really in it. Alain understood better than anyone what it felt like to dream of returning to the rotten borough. They spent evenings together leafing through the Lightside books he had collected that contained secret, cryptic references to Darkside. At those moments, Jonathan knew deep down that Carnegie had been right to send him back, but it didn't stop him hoping that the wereman would soon shamble into view and take him back to Darkside.

"Excuse me, son?"

A tall policeman stepped out into Jonathan's path, interrupting his train of thought. He frowned at him in a manner that Jonathan recognized all too well.

"Is there a reason why you're not in school?"

Jonathan beamed at the man.

"Absolutely none. What are you going to do about it?"

This is more like it! Jonathan thought to himself as he hared across the concourse and scrambled up the escalators, two steps at a time. In the past, he would have avoided a chase in such a public place, but this was different. This was fun. His body had smoothly shifted into gear, grateful for the rush of adrenalin. Looking back over his shoulder, Jonathan saw that the policeman was already blowing hard and his cheeks were red. He wasn't in good enough shape for this chase.

Swerving through the crowds on autopilot, Jonathan raced along the upper level of the shopping centre, past a fast-food restaurant. He had almost reached the automatic doors at the end of the wide walkway, and freedom, when he saw a pair of security guards moving out from the doorway of a clothing shop. One of them looked straight at Jonathan, speaking urgently into a walkie-talkie. Great. *Now* they noticed him.

The situation was getting serious. There was a real danger he was going to get trapped. Jonathan took a sharp left and hurtled into a department store, knifing past shelves of ready meals and racks of women's clothes. He was

moving so quickly and so quietly that most of the shoppers didn't seem to notice him. Behind him, he could hear the commotion of pursuit, the angry rattling of hangers as larger, heavier men crashed into them. Jonathan veered away from the cash desks and was urgently looking for a staircase or a doorway when his heart leapt. There was a fire exit in the wall right in front of him!

Jonathan crashed through the door and came out blinking into the bright sunshine of the car park. Without a pause he went ducking and weaving in between the gleaming machines, marking out a labyrinthine trail. He heard the sound of footfalls pounding out on to the tarmac, but Jonathan knew he was safe now. They'd never be able to find him amongst all these cars.

When he reached the far corner of the car park, Jonathan crouched down behind a blue convertible to catch his breath. Peering round the front of the bonnet, he caught sight of his three pursuers holding an irate conference several rows away from him. The policeman jabbed a finger at one of the security guards before stalking back inside the shopping centre.

Jonathan sat down and leant against the car, taking long, deep breaths. All too quickly, the adrenalin drained out of his system, and the familiar feeling of emptiness returned. He was just about to slip away and make for home when a hand reached out from behind him and wrapped itself around his mouth.

2

As he scanned the auction room, Nigel Winterford was surprised to find that he was on edge. An auctioneer at London's most famous auction house, he had presided over thousands of sales in his career. The auction room was his court, and he was its impassive, gavel-wielding judge. From up on his podium, Nigel had calmly organized the sale of the most expensive painting ever – an early work by van Gogh, purchased by an Arab sheikh for tens of millions of pounds. When two American businessmen had come to blows over a Rodin sculpture, he had barely batted an eyelid. He had sold priceless works of art to sharp-eyed collectors, and small keepsakes to elderly ladies.

Tonight, though, was something else entirely.

All the lots in this sale had come from the estate of Sir Basil Gresham, a rich philanthropist whose recent death had been greatly mourned. Given Sir Basil's reputation as a connoisseur of antiques, Nigel had been delighted to be chosen to conduct the auction. But, as he began to read

the strict sale conditions that came with the items, his misgivings began to grow.

First, the auction was to be conducted at midnight, with only those specifically invited being allowed to attend. No members of the public were permitted entrance. Secondly, the bidding was to be conducted in pre-decimal coinage: guineas and shillings rather than pounds and pence. If this wasn't difficult enough, Nigel had to conduct the auction alone. Normally he would have assistants displaying the lots and taking bids on the telephone from those who couldn't be there in person. But tonight there was only one telephone next to him on the podium – an antiquated model with a handlebar receiver that wouldn't have looked out of place in the sale itself.

Most unsettling of all, Sir Basil's will had stipulated that under no circumstances could the auction be halted. If for any reason Nigel stopped, then all the goods would be withdrawn – losing the auction house a great deal of face, not to mention the chance of a fat commission from the sale of Sir Basil's other works of art.

Having not received a single reply to his invitations, Nigel was somewhat relieved when the first person slinked in through the double doors: an elderly man with bloodshot eyes. The man looked around, nodding at the deep red walls of the auction room with something like approval, before squeezing himself into a chair at the back row.

As the minute hand ticked closer to midnight, the room began to fill with people. Nigel had to confess that he had

hoped for a rather more upmarket crowd. These people limped and hobbled, mumbling and cackling, wild eyes bulging out of scarred faces. Their clothes were old-fashioned: dark suits matched with cravats and waistcoats for the men, and flowing, ankle-length dresses for the women. Nigel wondered if they were from some sort of historical society. If that was the case, it was a particularly down-at-heel society. The air rang with shouts and squabbles, while the characteristic smell of lush carpet and wood polish had taken on a sourer aspect, as if a pot-pourri bowl had been doused in vinegar.

Above the hubbub of the crowd, Nigel could just make out the sound of a grandfather clock doling out twelve long strokes. Midnight. Time to begin. He adjusted his bowtie and cleared his throat, just as he had done a thousand times before. This was his job, he reminded himself sternly as he took to the podium. No matter how rough the crowd, he had an auction to conduct.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Nigel began, but even with the aid of a microphone, no one could hear his polite introduction over the din. Two haggard women were bickering loudly in the front row, jabbing accusatory fingers at one another.

"LADIES AND GENTLEMEN!"

The room fell into a shocked silence at the auctioneer's bellow. Even the women in the front row stopped fighting and looked up at the podium.

"Thank you," Nigel continued in a softer voice, smiling

now. "My name is Nigel Winterford and I am pleased to say that I am your auctioneer for this . . . *unique* sale. We shall be displaying items from the collection of Sir Basil Gresham, a man whose reputation for canny and tasteful acquisitions of artwork and jewellery is eclipsed only by his charitable deeds for the Gresham Foundation."

He paused, expecting a response from the audience – a few smiles and nods of recognition, perhaps a spontaneous round of applause. Instead, the temperature of the room seemed to drop several degrees.

"Well, seeing as this event has drawn such a . . . *special* crowd, let's make sure everyone is familiar with auction procedure. You should all have been given a paddle with a number on it." Noting the shrugs and scrabbling under seats that this remark elicited, Nigel decided to plough on regardless. "When you wish to bid for an item, simply raise this paddle. I'll let you know I've seen your bid. Don't worry – you can't bid for anything by mistake. But you've only got yourself to blame if your purchase is too big for the mantelpiece!"

Silence.

"Right then, shall we start? Lot number 1. . ."

It didn't take long for Nigel to realize that this particular auction was not going to go smoothly. The lots were haphazard: antique pistols; hand-carved chairs; rusting thumbscrews; painting after painting of purely black canvases. Very few of the audience seemed interested in actually bidding, preferring to pick fights amongst themselves.

Most of those who did try to bid had lost their paddles, and made their interest known by waving their hands in the air, shouting at the top of their lungs, "Mine!", or – in the worst case – pelting rotten fruit at Nigel. Ordinarily, the auctioneer would have halted the sale immediately, but there was no way he was going to let this rabble cost him his commission. So Nigel took off his bow tie and jacket, rolled up his sleeves and got on with the job.

After selling a series of grotesque gargoyle carvings to the old man in the back row for twenty-five shillings, Nigel was surprised by the feeling of elation that ran through him. Had anyone tried to conduct a sale in such anarchy before? Feeling buoyant, he turned back to the catalogue listing the items for sale.

"Lot 65. An Edwin Spine painting entitled *The Light of Shame*. Shall we start the bidding at tenpence? Sixpence? There's no reserve price on this item, ladies and gentlemen, which means it can go for one penny if needs be. Come on, there must be a bid somewhere! No?"

Peering out over the crowd, Nigel couldn't detect a single intentional bid amongst the flailing arms. Removing the unwanted painting, he turned his attention to the next item: a heavy casket wrought from black steel. He lifted it carefully on to the table next to him before turning back to his catalogue.

"Right, then . . . on to tonight's final item. Lot 66."

The room plunged into a deep, anticipatory silence. Fists unclenched; tussles ceased. Everyone sat down, eyes

now firmly fixed on the front of the room. Nigel looked up from the podium. He smiled.

"I see this is an item of some interest to you. Let me read out the description from the catalogue:

"The Crimson Stone is the most celebrated of enigmas. Little can be said with any certainty. Its origins are a mystery; its age has never been ascertained. It remains locked away in this presentation case, to ensure that only its rightful owner may gaze upon it. For thirty years it has remained hidden from the outside world, leading some to doubt its very existence. Now, for the first time in a generation, you have the opportunity to claim it for your own.

"Popular belief has it that the Crimson Stone was stained with the blood of Jack the Ripper himself, conferring great powers upon both the Stone and those lucky enough to possess it. Whether this is true or not, the Crimson Stone remains an item of incomparable fascination, thought by many to be priceless. We have suggested an opening price of ten-thousand guineas."

As he spoke, Nigel was delighted to see the audience lean forward, hanging on his every word. At the mention of the price, there was a collective gasp. Whatever this mysterious piece was, it was worth more than the rest of the collection combined, and then some. He was in control now, all right.

"Well then, can I hear an opening bid?"

"Fifteen-thousand guineas!" came a cry from the left side of the room. The bidder was standing by the wall, wrapped up in a cowled red robe, and Nigel couldn't be sure if it was a man or a woman. He did notice, however, that the room swivelled as one to stare at the figure, and that none of the glances were friendly.

"I have fifteen-thousand in the room. Do I hear twenty?"

A girl with flaming red hair shyly lifted her paddle aloft. Despite his professionalism, Nigel did a double take. Where would such a young woman acquire that sort of wealth? Then again, what else about this night was ordinary?

"Twenty from the young lady. Do I hear twenty-five?"

A man stood up from his seat. In all the chaos, Nigel had failed to notice him, which was extraordinary, given his height. He had to be nearly seven feet tall. Without a word, the giant slowly raised his left hand.

"The gentleman bids twenty-five. Do I hear thirty?"

Nigel's pulse was racing now. The cowled figure made a noise of disgust and stalked out of the room. The redheaded girl lifted her paddle again, awkward in the spotlight of malevolent glares.

"Thirty bid. Do I have forty?"

All eyes were on the giant now. It was down to the two of them. The man raised his hand again.

"Forty!" Nigel cried out. "We have forty. Do I hear fifty, miss?"

The girl looked down, seemingly unwilling to bid again.

Then, after what seemed like an eternity, she nodded. There were more gasps, and several loud oaths. Though Nigel could tell that the mood in the room was one of ugly resentment, he was getting carried away by the thrill of the auction. He turned back to the giant.

"Fifty-thousand guineas bid, sir. Do I hear more? Do I hear fifty-five?"

A look of consternation crossed the man's face. He folded his arms and shook his head.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the bid stands at fifty-thousand guineas. Do we have any fresh bidders? No? Going once at fifty-thousand. . ."

The young girl shrank in her seat under a barrage of hisses and catcalls. Nigel almost felt sorry for her. But there was no way he could stop the auction now.

"Going twice. . ."

Out of the corner of his eye, the auctioneer saw a burly figure crack his knuckles threateningly. The girl looked terrified. But what could he do? No one had *forced* her to bid for the item. He raised his gavel.

And then the phone rang.

Nigel nearly dropped the hammer with surprise. The murmuring ceased, leaving the polite but insistent ring as the only sound in the room. The auctioneer lifted the receiver gingerly, as if it were a bomb.

"Hello?" he croaked.

"Mr Winterford?" said a desiccated voice. "My name is Cornelius Xavier. Forgive my absence from the auction. I

prefer the comforts of my home to the outside world. What does the bidding stand at?"

"Fifty-thousand guineas, sir."

There was a sharp intake of breath down the phone line.

"My my, that is a lot of money, isn't it? But then, nothing worthwhile ever comes cheaply, Mr Winterford. You may expect my associates presently."

The voice then named his bid, and promptly hung up. When Nigel put the receiver down, his hands were shaking. He returned to the podium and whispered into the microphone.

"One-hundred-thousand guineas."

The room exploded into uproar. Pushes and shoves quickly escalated into punches and kicks. Chairs rained down upon the podium. The redheaded girl was surrounded by a coven of furious old crones, only to be rescued – surprisingly – by the giant, who swatted the women out of the way before picking the girl up and carrying her from the room. They had the right idea, Nigel thought. As he fled towards the safety of a side room, the auctioneer saw a gang of huge men in suits stride into the room and fight their way through the scrum towards the casket on the table. It appeared that Cornelius Xavier's associates had arrived.

Compared to the anarchy in the auction room, the side room was a dingy paradise. Nigel locked the door and leant against it, his heart thudding, the sounds of rioting echoing in his ears. He had been lucky to get out alive.

"Mr Winterford?"

Someone was standing over by the window. Nigel strained to see through the gloom.

"Yes? Who are you?"

"My name is unimportant. I was employed by Sir Basil to ensure that the rules of his will were adhered to."

Nigel drew himself up to his full height.

"As you can see, sir, I have followed every instruction to the last letter, in the most testing of conditions."

"Almost," came the amicable reply. "Every instruction but one."

The auctioneer furiously racked his brains. He had gone over the instructions with a fine-tooth comb. He couldn't have missed anything!

"Oh, don't worry," the voice chuckled. "You've done everything you can. Sir Basil would be delighted. But there was one final instruction that you didn't know about."

"Oh? Which was?"

From somewhere in the darkness came the sound of a sword being drawn.

"No Lightside witnesses. Sir Basil was very particular on that point."

"What? I don't understand!"

The figure took a pace towards Nigel, who stumbled backwards, crashing into a marble sculpture.

"Going. . ."

"Please!" the auctioneer cried. "I beg you!"

"Going. . ."

"This is madness! You wouldn't. . ."

The last thing Nigel Winterford saw was a long blade arcing through the darkness. There was a loud thump as he crashed to the floor.

"Gone," said the voice, contentedly.

3

Jonathan squirmed frantically, but his assailant had him in a tight, muscular grip, a meaty hand staunching his cries for help. He was dragged backwards into a shadowy recess of the car park, his feet scrabbling on the tarmac. Powerless to resist, Jonathan was preparing for the worst when a familiar voice asked: "What *are* you up to, boy?"

Jonathan spun round. Carnegie had relinquished his hold and was now eyeing him with quizzical amusement. The wereman had forsaken his beloved stovepipe hat for a wide-brimmed fedora, but that was his only concession to the modern world. Beneath a long coat he was wearing an old-fashioned three-piece suit, his purple waistcoat splattered and smudged like an artist's palette.

"Jesus, Carnegie!" Jonathan exclaimed, half angrily, half with relief. "You scared the life out of me! What are you doing?"

"I asked first."