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Opening extract from

Wild Boy

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PROLOGUE

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That night, the night the showman came, the moon was the colour of mud.

Above the houses the sky turned from black to dingy brown as a thick fog crept over the city. The monstrous mud-brown cloud rose from the river. It slithered over rooftops, curled around gas lamps and smothered their lights to ghostly orange globes. It crawled along the riverbank, swallowing the warehouses, workhouses and tumbledown tarry-black houses that leaned over the dark water. Doors were bolted. Shutters slammed. Even the rats in the alleys froze in fright as the cloud came rolling in. The fog swallowed everything – but not the showman.

His gloved fist banged on the workhouse door.

No reply.

He banged again.

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There came a clunk, a thunk. A hatch in the door slid open and bloodshot eyes glared through. "Who the devil are you?" demanded a voice.

"I'm here for the boy," said the showman.

The eyes in the hatch narrowed. "What boy? There are *dozens* of boys."

The showman leaned forward, revealing his face in the shadow of his crooked top hat. It was a terrible face, ridged with so many scars he looked like he'd been sewn together from patches of skin. There were whip marks, knife cuts and scratches from nails. There were bite marks and burn marks and cuts from a saw. One long gash ran like purple warpaint over his bony nose. He stroked it with a finger as he leaned to the hatch and spoke in a growl.

"*The* boy," he said.

The bloodshot eyes widened. "Oh! *The* boy. One moment…"

Another thunk. Another clunk. The door swung open, revealing the owner of the bloodshot eyes – a plump, greasy individual who had been in the process of devouring a roast chicken. He wore the bird like a glove puppet, one hand inserted into its neck cavity so he could bite chucks from whichever part he pleased. Nibbling on a scab of skin, he eyed the showman warily.

"My name's Bledlow," he said. "I'm the master of this place."

The showman didn't reply.

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The Master swallowed the skin. "You got the money?"

"Not till I seen the boy."

Composing himself, Master Bledlow unhooked an oil lamp from the wall. "Follow me," he said.

He led the way down a dark and dingy corridor. Cockroaches scurried into cracks. Damp glistened on bare walls. In a hall, a dozen boys in ragged gowns sat slurping bowls of gruel. One of the boys saw the showman, and grinned wolfishly. "He's here to see the monster!" he whispered.

"*Mon-ster!*" the others chimed. "*Mon-ster! Mon-ster!*"

With a flick of his arm, Bledlow sent his chicken carcass flying into the hall. Several boys pounced on it, snarling at one another.

"*Mon-ster! Mon-ster!*" the others chanted.

The Master raised his light, and led the showman up a rickety flight of stairs. At the top was a wooden door with a warning scratched in charcoal. *WILD ANIMAL! BEWARE!*

The Master glanced at the showman. "We keep him in here. On account of the fighting."

"Fighting?"

"Because of how he looks."

The door opened with a groan, and they stepped inside. The room was musty and dusty and stank of damp. A ragged crow was perched in a narrow window, its eyes gleaming like black diamonds in

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the lamplight. Beside the window, another animal nested among a bundle of sacks.

No, not an animal. It was a boy.

The boy sat very still, staring out of the window.

"That him?" the showman asked.

Master Bledlow raised his lamp so its light fell on the boy's back. "See?" he said.

And now the showman saw.

The boy was covered almost completely in hair. Dark brown hair, matted and tangled with dirt. It grew all over his back, his shoulders and his chest. A darker swathe hung from his head, and a thick layer spread all over his face, smoothed and parted down the middle. It hid the boy's features completely, apart from two big eyes, big like an owl's eyes. Startlingly green, they sparkled even in the murky light from the moon. As the boy sat perfectly still, those eyes moved at incredible speed, watching the foggy scene outside.

"Boy!" the Master said.

The boy didn't turn, didn't even flinch.

The Master reached towards him. "Stand up, boy!"

The boy slid away. "Beat me again, Bledlow," he said in a soft, parched voice, "and I'll set fire to your coat."

The Master snatched back his hand. He giggled nervously. "Beat you! What talk! This is a charitable institution… Stand up, will you!"

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The boy rose. He wore a sack over his shoulders, and breeches that were so worn they looked like cobwebs around his thin, hairy legs. Beneath the sack and breeches, the dirty brown hair extended all over his short, slight frame.

"Will he do?" said the Master.

The scars across the showman's face pulsed. He tossed Bledlow a pouch of coins. "He got kin?" he said.

"Kin?"

"Family what might want him back?"

"Ha! Whatever family this boy had dumped him on my doorstep eight years ago. Ugly little baby too. Thought he was a drowned rat!"

"What about a name?"

"Never gave him one. What's the point? Some of the boys had a few suggestions though. Just for fun… How about Hairy Harold the Human Doormat? Or Billy the Baboon Boy? Wait, this is my favourite – The Wolf That Ate Red Riding—"

"Wild Boy," said the showman.

For the first time, the boy turned. His emerald eyes considered the showman, and he repeated the name softly. "Wild Boy…"

"You must be wondering who I am?" the showman said.

It was not a question that expected an answer. But now the boy's big eyes began to move again, taking in every inch of the showman – his boots, his top hat

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and each scar on his shattered face. It was almost as if he'd fallen into a trance, so fast did his eyes move, so still was his head.

The boy blinked. "You're a showman in a travelling fair," he said.

"Boy!" the Master snapped.

But the boy's eyes remained on the showman. "You were born somewhere near the coast, with a birthmark covering half your face. Your dad beat you for it with a belt and a chain, so you ran off to the navy."

"Boy!"

"But you were kicked out and whipped, probably for stealing. Since then you been in two gaols, seven knife fights, been garrotted twice and had half your ear bitten off by a—"

"Shut up, boy!"

The Master swung his lantern, striking the boy hard in the face. There was a burst of sparks, and the room plunged into darkness.

A coil of smoke drifted through the dark, tinged with the scent of burnt hair. And then – *scritch, scratch* – the lantern flint struck. A streak of light broke the dark.

The showman felt the stub of his missing earlobe. For the first time his cold eyes thawed. He looked uncertain. Scared, even. "How the hell did he know all that?" he said.

The Master gave another nervous laugh. "I …

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uh … I'm not sure. The other boys won't even speak to him. They think it's devilry."

The light grew brighter.

"I'll show him devilry," the showman said. "Gimme that light."

"Light? I haven't got the light."

The Master looked down, and screamed. His coat was on fire! He sprung back, bashing himself against the wall to put out the flames. "He set fire to my coat!" he squealed. "He *actually* set fire to my coat!"

In the corner, the boy burst into a wheezy laugh of triumph and delight. His green eyes twinkled and he clutched his stomach from laughing so hard. "I told you!" he said. "You mean old goat! I told you I'd—"

And then – *whump!* – the showman kicked the boy hard in the chest. It wasn't a mere whack like he'd had from the Master's lantern – it was a brutal, rib-breaking blow. Even the Master stopped flapping and stared, shocked by the savagery of the attack.

The boy slumped to the floor. He curled up, gasping.

The showman leaned down and grasped the boy's long hair. "You don't know one thing," he spat. "My name. It's Augustus T. Finch, and they call me the Carnival King. Know why? Cos I show the most revolting freaks at the fair. And I reckon you might be the most revoltingest I seen yet. So here's my offer… Don't pass out, boy! Look at me!"

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The showman tugged the hair harder.

The boy's eyes rolled. Blood glistened on his lips.

"Here's my offer," the showman said. "*Absolutely nothing*. No pay, no holiday and sure as blazes no treatment as generous as you've had from this here Master. All you'll get is food, a roof and work. Times you'll wish like you was dead. Others you'll feel like you was. You'll get spat at, beat up plenty. One freak I showed got stabbed just for looking at a feller the wrong way. Joke of it was he had no eyes. So that's my offer. Take it or leave it."

Tears soaked into the hair on the boy's cheeks. But he gritted his teeth and fought back the pain in his chest. "Will I see things?" he whispered.

The showman glanced at Master Bledlow, puzzled by the question.

"He likes to watch things," Bledlow explained. "That's all the little runt does. Just sits there staring out that window."

The showman released the boy's hair, letting him fall back to the floor. "You'll see plenty, all right," he told him. "Only, where you're going, ain't much of it gonna be pretty."

"A freak show?" the boy asked.

"A freak show," the showman said.

"Listen to him, boy," spluttered Master Bledlow. "It's the only work something like you could ever hope to find."

Slowly, painfully, the boy rose. His legs buckled,

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but he clutched the wall for support. Through a veil of hair, he looked the showman hard in the eye. “When do we leave?”

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