Prologue

Jonathan hastened to keep pace with his friends. They had slipped between a pair of tall trees and slid down the muddy slope that led down to the river. His governess had warned him not to stray too far from the house, but Jonathan had never felt particularly inclined to listen to her, especially when doing so might interfere with an adventure.

It was raining, so the slope was slick, but Jonathan could hear his friends’ voices ahead of him. He pushed off at the top of the hill and let his momentum carry him down. He took off running when he reached the bottom, though the ground was just as slick there as it had been along the slope. More than once he nearly lost his balance and tumbled into the mud. His governess would be furious. His clothes were ruined.

The dots in the distance quickly resolved into the familiar shapes of his friends. Harry, the son of a butcher, who had earned a reputation for being somewhat of a bully and a tyrant. And James, whose father’s gruesome murder a few years after James’ birth had been the talk of the town for years. Whether it was because of his father’s murder or some other cause, James hardly ever spoke a word. Sometimes he might laugh, or smile, or nod, or gesture with his hands, but he never spoke aloud.

Jonathan had been warned to stay away from this pair. His mother called them *common*. She used other names to describe them too, some of them less kind: urchins, vandals, ruffians, scoundrels. Whatever she called them, it only made Jonathan want to spend more time with them. He knew how it drove her mad. Jonathan was supposed to be upper class, but he found other upper-class children tiresome.

At low tide the mud that lined the Thames was often tinted red by countless blood worms, aptly named given their reddish color. Harry, with a laugh, had bent down to scoop up a few handfuls of the reddened mud, unearthing dozens of them.

Harry’s hands were covered in a layer of sludge. Red mud had slopped onto his trousers, not that anyone would notice the additional dirt. Harry lived in a constant state of filth. The blood worms wriggled in his hands.

“Disgusting,” said Jonathan.

“They’re just noodles!” Harry exclaimed.

With a laugh, he mimed eating them. Mud dripped from his hands, and some of the worms wriggled free and fell to the ground.

Jonathan’s stomach churned.

“I dare you to eat one,” said James, suddenly.

Jonathan and Harry both stared at him in silence. James *never* spoke. The silence stretched out into several long, uncomfortable seconds.

Harry recovered first.

“Let John do it,” he said. He held out his hands to Jonathan.

James shrugged and looked at Jonathan.

His expression must have been one of horror, but they were staring at him expectantly. Jonathan never turned away from a dare. His governess would wring his neck, of course, but he wasn’t about to back down. He didn’t wish to get any more dirt on his trousers, though, so he was careful as he leaned forward and looked at the blood worms in Harry’s outstretched hands. He picked out the smallest one.

“Alright,” he said, forcing a smile.

He lifted the worm above his head and opened his mouth. His stomach made a noise. James began giggling, while Harry started clucking like a chicken.

The worm dangled above Jonathan’s head. He gave Harry a look, silencing him. Mud dripped onto his cheek, and he wiped it away with the back of his hand.

“I’ll do it,” he said defiantly. He raised the worm above his mouth again, tilted his head back, and opened wide.

“He’s not gonna do it,” said Harry.

Jonathan stared at him defiantly. “I’m gonna do it,” he said. “Just give me a minute.”

Once he’d accepted the dare, there was no backing down. He knew he would never live it down if he didn’t make good on his promise. *It’s just a worm*, he told himself.

“Down the hatch,” he said. He let the worm fall into his mouth.

He could feel it wriggling. It tasted like dirt. He felt sick, but he forced himself to try to swallow. His throat closed up, tightened against his will. The worm caught in his throat.

Choking, he tried to cough the thing back up, but his throat had begun to swell, and his coughs came out only as a high-pitched wheeze. His hands went to his throat, and he tried to force it back up, but only succeeded in making things worse. He couldn't breathe at all.

His lungs began to ache, and his eyes went wide. He’d never felt so frightened. He was going to die, he was sure of it. This was how his life would end, with a foolish dare.

His friends were turning into hazy blotches of light. Dizzily, he reached out his hands, but they moved away from him. He heard James screaming. He blacked out.

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When he regained consciousness, there was a man with a bird’s face standing at the side of his bed. Behind him, a pale white boy with blonde hair, about his own age or perhaps a few years older, stood against the wall, looking shyly back. Jonathan offered up a weak smile, but the boy turned away from him, busying himself with his work. He had a jar of leeches in one hand and a doctor’s surgical bag in the other. He set the jar down on the table beside the man in the bird's face.

Jonathan leaned back on his pillow and looked up at the man with the bird’s face. His face was made of dark leather, and it was strapped to his head with shiny brass buckles. He had glass lenses for eyes. Jonathan remembered seen pictures in books of doctors who would wear this style of mask in the times of the plague, but he never knew doctors still wore them. He wondered if he was still asleep, if this was something his feverish mind had dreamed up. The candle flickered, casting strange shadows upon the wall.

He tried to sit but the doctor pressed a gloved hand against his chest and forced him back down. He was cold even beneath the blankets, but he was sweating. The doctor had a thermometer in his hand. He placed it on the bedside table and turned back to Jonathan.

Jonathan wanted to ask him what was happening, but his own voice sounded strange to him. Incoherent. Slurred. He had a vague recollection of choking on something. The blood worm. He remembered gradually losing consciousness, and he remembered the frightened faces of his friends as they turned and ran. He didn't know if they'd run to get help or if they'd just abandoned him.

He tried to sit up again, but was stopped once more by the doctor’s hand.

“Restrain him,” said the doctor. His voice sounded strange, too, filtered through the leather plague mask, but a moment later a servant entered the room with a set of leather straps in hand.

Forgetting that the doctor’s hand was still pressed hard against his chest, Jonathan tried again to sit up, and when he met the resistance of the doctor’s hand, he grew more desperate in his need to sit. He grabbed at the doctor’s hand with his own, tried to pry his arm from his chest, but his efforts were in vain.

While the doctor pinned him down, the servant and the doctor’s assistant began to tie the straps around him, binding him to the bed. Three straps, one around his waist, one around his legs, and now the servant moved to tie one around his chest.

Jonathan heard the sound of an animal snarling. The girl stumbled back. She stared at him in alarm, her eyes wide and frightened, and it took Jonathan a moment to realize she was afraid of *him*. He hadn’t even realized he’d done it, but he was sure that sound had come from him. He couldn't explain it, but there was a part of him that wanted to kill her. No, not kill her. *Eat* her. It was an uncontrollable, unshakable need, a desperate animal instinct that frightened him.

The girl took a moment to catch her breath, and the blonde boy came up from behind as if to help her. She nearly jumped out of her skin.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to—” he began.

“It’s alright,” she said. “I’ve got it.”

She bent to buckle the straps in place. She moved in close to tie them up tight. She smelled like meat. Jonathan's stomach growled hungrily. *What was wrong with him?*

Her hands worked quickly, and she was almost finished with the buckle. *Eat her*, screamed the voice in his head.

“Stop it,” he said, gritting his teeth. “Leave me alone.”

He had to warn them. They didn’t seem to realize the danger they were in. He was scared he would hurt them.

“What’s that?” said the servant, bending down to hear him better. “Did you hear that? He just said something.”