

FEAR & MAGIC



Peter Poole

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A novel by
Peter Poole

Synopsis

The home of retired magician Harry Hocus is burgled by two bikers, Paul ‘Cutter’ Graves and Andy ‘Grunt’ Sloan. Cutter has persuaded his girlfriend Rachael to join them, although she finds an arcane manuscript. A frightened Rachael encounters Harry, who charms her with a trick. Cutter attacks the old man, but Rachael intervenes. Angered, Cutter knocks Rachael senseless while Grunt kills Harry. The bikers depart with their haul, leaving Harry and Rachael in the flat.

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Rachael dreams of the past few months. She had tried to paint a sinister forest, remembered from a nightmare, but this caused tension with her friends. Cutter met Rachael in a café, and let her paint in a corner of his motorbike repair workshop.

Cutter discovered his mechanic, Grunt, was planning a burglary with petty thief Nevill. Wanting a slice of the action, Cutter tracked down the real mastermind. Daniel Roberts was a bitter ex-theatrical agent, who had once represented Harry. He had plans to revive his own career by building a leisure centre. Roberts blamed Harry’s dabbling in the supernatural for the demise of both careers. He had hoped to employ Grunt and Nevill to rob Harry, until Cutter pushed Nevill aside.

Rachael’s nightmares had been caused by childhood trauma, and the distorted memory of a picture book. Once the forest painting was finished, Cutter urged her to join him in a new adventure. Reluctantly, Rachael broke into Harry’s flat with the bikers. This led to Cutter’s assault on her person, and Harry’s death.

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Cutter passes the stolen goods to Roberts, while keeping two demon statues. Rachael regains consciousness in Harry’s flat, and leaves discreetly. Roberts calls the police, to allay suspicion.

The officers think Roberts' alibi is highly dubious. They point out many discrepancies, and watch his house. Roberts begins to panic, and becomes obsessed by an antique kaleidoscope amongst the stolen goods. A mysterious buyer becomes impatient, and turns up unannounced. He decides not to pay.

Grunt is attracted to the forest painting, and seems to be transported to its sinister world. Cutter wonders where his mechanic has gone, but hears that Roberts is dead. The goods have been stolen once more, by a bigger villain than he.

Cutter is attracted to the forest painting, and explores the setting with a sense of anger. He finds Grunt's broken body, and fights a demonic entity. This resembles one of the statues. Harry has merged his sinister magic with Rachael's nightmare imagery.

Cutter enters a castle and confronts a cloaked figure. It appears to be Rachael. The real Rachael runs to the motorbike workshop, and tries to rescue Cutter. He mistakes her motives, and another fight ensues. Cutter finds Grunt's body in the workshop, so his death was real. Cutter kills Rachael, and sits to await his fate.

Harry's last trick is to revive Rachael and confront an exhausted Cutter. The biker dies of a heart attack. Rachael escapes before the police can raid the motorbike workshop.

FEAR & MAGIC

For ONE book only,
the remarkable
Mr. Harry Hocus!
Plus, for YOUR entertainment:
Mr. Paul 'Cutter' Graves &
Mr. Andy 'Grunt' Sloan,
aided by the glamorous
Miss Rachael Stanwick

Peter Poole

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1

IN THE EARLY 1950s, the appeal of radio had not been eclipsed. It was truly a mass medium, with comedy, drama and news. The stars and shows were household names, attracting a loyal audience. Television was still a trick.

Back from school on a winter's evening, Martin sat at the living-room table. The unwelcome pages of an exercise book glared up at him. He hated homework. There had been enough lessons for today. The teacher's drone had bored the boy, so his eyelids became heavier and heavier. Martin had felt like a volunteer succumbing to hypnotic influence.

He had snapped awake when the bell went, running straight into the yard. Then it was fun with Dinky cars, marbles and fighting - with the Eagle for space-age escape.

Martin would rather draw rockets in the exercise book than do the sums required. He glanced at the imposing Bakelite radio that dominated the room. It was sombre and monolithic against the floral wallpaper. A sprig of tinsel promised fun in two weeks time, but he would not have to wait that long.

Another distraction wavered through the crackle and interference. Martin's father adjusted the dial a touch. There was babble, a snatch of bouncy jazz - then a formal but friendly voice.

"...an excellent effort from all concerned," it said, trailing in from the ether. "And now we're ready to welcome our very special guest, currently starring in his own show this Christmas. The famous stage and variety magician, Mr. Harry Hocus. Harry - welcome to the programme."

There was a burst of applause at a deeper voice. "Good evening, Mr. Ashley. I'm glad to be here."

Martin chewed on a jelly baby, glad to forget his homework. His gaze focused on the radio's 'magic eye'. This was a green lamp, which pulsed very slightly in time with the broadcast sounds. His mind conjured visions of the unseen performers, and the room grew pale beyond them.

"You must be one of the most talented guests we've ever had on Children's Parade," said Mr. Ashley. "But how, Harry, can one perform magic on the radio? You assured me you could do so!"

"I've never failed anyone yet, Mr. Ashley, and I won't fail your wireless audience tonight. Would you please remove the kerchief from your top pocket?"

"I'm taking it out now, listeners. No kidding!"

"Now, I'll just wrap it around the microphone...and no-one will hear a thing."

"Oh, Harry - you trickster!" exclaimed Mr. Ashley, over a burst of laughter from the studio audience.

"So it would seem," Harry told him, "until you look in your pocket."

This is exactly what Mr. Ashley did, expecting to find it empty. "Why, I...good grief, listeners," he stuttered, "I don't believe it! There's a Union Jack - and another, and *another!* I don't believe it, all over the place."

"You'll never be short of a kerchief now, Mr. Ashley!"

“I’m not blowing my nose on these, listeners. We’ll save them for Coronation Day!”

This was not quite the end of Harry’s game. “Maybe...but look again,” he said. Another shock for Mr. Ashley, who gasped in amazement and stumbled his words. Even so, the upper class accent retained its dignity. “What...! Listeners, this is *incredible!* He’s waving them and...they’ve turned into confetti, falling all over the place. Please, Mr. Hocus! Who’s the lucky bride?”

“No bride, Mr. Ashley. Just...a little magic.”

Smooth and suave, Mr. Ashley steered Harry’s high jinks to an end. Perhaps he had faked his fumbling, in a modest verbal trick. “Then I hope we’ll have some more later on,” said Mr. Ashley. “But now, time for our listeners’ own talent to shine! Here’s master Tim Graham, at nine a mini-maestro of the piano keyboard, with this enchanting medley of popular tunes...”

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Night had fallen on the coastal towns. Night was a negative image of the day. Windows were no longer squares of mystery, laid dark upon sunlit walls. Now they were casting their own light. The tones of yellow, white and fluorescent green, diffused behind patches of curtain. Each was a star in the urban firmament, each an independent nest of life. Each was separated by the void between - which merged walls, rooftops and alleys into shades of the dimmest grey.

The sky was stingy with its show of the heavens. Sea mist rolled over the coastal towns, with clouds like ink dropped in water. Drizzle made the pavements shine. A parade of cars shuffled through the vaporous gloom, their lights glowing in wild reflections. These smashed upon the tarmac like abstract paint, tossed in a fit of expression. The occasional horn was sounded, but who was hurrying? The weather had taken control.

To one lonely driver, it was especially bleak. Problems at the office, problems with his mistress - and now problems getting home to his wife. Grinding his teeth in frustration, the man reached to twiddle a dial. Maybe he would find company on the radio. Loners could not be choosers.

“...despite publicity in the press and alleged connections, the legal process has stamped out these rumours.” It was a mellow but lively voice, to keep you awake on the road.

“Who knows if he’s right,” it continued. “If you’ve got something to say on this, or that other topic - lights in the sky and strange encounters - why not ring in tonight on City Radio? Right now, the only thing up there is rain and mist, coming your way on all coastal roads. Visibility is dropping, with several accidents reported, and generally it looks a pretty grim time. Best stick with City for further news.”

A jingle played as the driver wrenched his car away from the seafront. It vanished into the close, cramped backstreets of Hove. This was the more sedate neighbour to racy Brighton, with its bustling seaside attractions.

“Tonight’s phone-in, kinky politics and street-cred,” said the radio. “Is lust in pinstripe good for democracy? And your minds and lines are open from twelve to Robin Stirwell, our flying saucer man. Stick with me, Tim Graham, here till two on the night shift.”

It was more than forty years since the precocious Tim had sat stiff and overdressed at the piano. So long since he had played his ‘enchanted medley’ to the innocent radio audience of Children’s Parade. How tight the collar had been, how hot the tailcoat. His mother had nudged his talent through lesson after lesson, in a wave of misplaced ambition. Her son had talent, not genius. It was never to improve much further.

Tim still regretted his behaviour. The rows as he turned thirteen, the rebellions, when the piano had been forgotten. He had skirted the criminal life by seventeen, joining a gang of Wandsworth tearaways. They loafed around, drinking, scrapping - harmless enough pursuits. Tim had been done for stealing cigarettes.

Constable Barnes put an end to Tim’s criminal endeavours. He had growled like an angry dog. Tim went back to music, though never the classics again. A friend was forming a blues trio, The Straight Jackets, and Tim bashed the piano for a while. Then the guitar caught his fancy, along with Rock’n’Roll. Tim liked what he heard, though seldom matched it.

Eventually, radio had grabbed him. It was a whole new career. Tim enjoyed life on the nocturnal airwaves, helping talented new bands as the old retainer. Tim’s voice was piped from London all over the country, replacing the silent local stations.

Tim could barely play ‘Twinkle, Twinkle...’ on a xylophone now. The adult hands flipped switches, twisted knobs, groped for a cigarette. “Let’s chill out with a little Angel Dust,” he murmured. “Here’s a moody piece from the B side - if there’s a B side on a CD, trust these rusty old DJs. Anyway, it’s Easy Sleepers from Tales of Tin.”

Flicking a lighter, this rusty old DJ leant back to enjoy his smoke. Digital sounds pulsed from the studio speakers. Butts vibrated in the ashtray.

The rooftops spread in an angular complexity, topped with precarious chimneys. The tall, terraced buildings had stood for generations, and were glossy with the sheen of moisture. Dustbins clattered in the weather’s phantom caress, papers fluttered, cats shivered undercover.

A shabby, deserted street lay deep in this labyrinth of stone. It was defined by the backs of grander facades. The only movement was a drifting vapour, which might have been mist - or emissions from a steaming kitchen. Several windows glowed through these curling trails: a greenish bathroom, a television flicker.

High in a wall of sombre masonry was an orb of gentle orange. An oil-lamp. Its pool of illumination had the slightest flicker, within an alcove by the window. A wooden desk lay cluttered with bottles and jars, of an eerie medicinal nature. The dusty labels were yellow and peeling, their contents unpleasant or unknown. Manuscripts of an obscure and intricate design lay curled amongst strange artefacts. Crystals and ornaments reflected the lamp with an oily, amber sparkle.

The alcove was part of a larger room, which the oil-lamp - exerting its humble power - was unable to elucidate. There was movement. Not the movement of a solid

object, but something on the wall itself. A circle, bright and sharply defined, cast by a probing torch beam. It slid upwards with some trepidation, over a series of framed snapshots.

One depicted a lean, middle-aged man in a dinner suit. He had posed with magic wand, billiard ball and a series of linking rings. A larger frame held the cover from a 1960s Radio Times. Bold red borders and a blocky logo topped and tailed a black and white photograph. This showed the same man grinning in exultation, with 'HOCUS POCUS' in silver behind him. Below, the by-line advertised a television show. 'Magic in Focus...with Harry Hocus'.

The torch beam rippled over furniture and props, to a poster near the mantelpiece. It was a tacky piece of publicity for 'Magic '71'. A shot of Harry's grinning face - clearly older - had been collaged to a tiny cartoon body. 'Have we got some seaside thrills for you!' ran the speech balloon. The figure waved his wand on a yellow sandy beach, with a bug-eyed crab chortling away. It was certainly a contrast to the glossy, flamboyant images hung on the adjoining wall.

Fairy lights speckled the rim of a mantelpiece mirror, where the torch flared like a sun. The beam moved along the books and trinkets, revealing a static female face. A mannequin head. Her eyes were lost behind sunglasses, shaped like yellow hearts.

Wavering a moment, the torch swept up so a circle danced on the ceiling. The inverted rays lit the living female face of Rachael Stanwick. She was twenty-two, fair-haired and frightened. Her image vanished with the click of a switch, and the irises of her eyes widened. They became more accustomed to the gloom.

A figure came fast behind her, throwing the door open. It leered in a silent mime of laughter. Another pushed past, bulkier, jingling. It slapped a hand on Rachael's shoulder. Her heart jumped wildly, and she turned - shivering from tip to toe.

"Bless you, Miss Dainty," said Cutter. "Our coast is perfectly clear."

A biker. Paul 'Cutter' Graves. He moved nimbly, like an elephant that had learnt the art of grace. His chains and mascots tinkled with an almost delicate chime.

Cutter switched on a variety of lamps, till the room was ready for action. His bearded head nodded gladly, so a bullet earring swung to and fro. Cutter returned to his companion near the doorway, and beckoned with a leather-gloved hand. "Andrew Gruntling, my guest. It's magic!"

Another biker. Andy 'Grunt' Sloan. He was a younger man, average build, clean-shaven. The eyes remained wary behind modern steel spectacles. Grunt wore a simple black sweatshirt and black trousers, in contrast to his costumed partner.

Grunt moved with a shifty curiosity, regarding the lamps in concern. "Bit bright for burglars, ain't they?" he asked. "Should have brought me sunglasses, Cuts."

Cutter corrected Grunt with firm deliberation. "I do not wish to blunder in the dark," he said. "We are not citizens. We are outlaws. Outlaws have no fear."

Cutter was getting mythical. Grunt did not like that.

"Please, Cutter," whispered Rachael. "You'll wake him. Let's...just do it and go, *quickly*."

"Awake the conjuring corpse?" smiled Cutter, his voice far louder than Rachael would have wished. No way for a discreet criminal, although Cutter had no wish for

discretion. “Awake the dozy old warlock in a dicky-bow?” Cutter clicked his fingers. “Grunt - search!”

Grunt moved to the mantelpiece, peering at its knick-knacks and oddments. He turned a half-full wineglass upside-down, although the contents did not spill. Amazing! There were playing cards too, which looked normal at first. But some were double-sided or split down the middle, for careful manipulation. They could display the Queen of Diamonds or Four of Clubs, depending on how they were held. One was even printed to suggest a stack, in a most unsubtle artifice. Quick hands would help the illusion, making tackiness sublime.

Cutter crossed to a cupboard in the corner, but stopped by the snapshots of Harry. His eyes flicked left to some posters. Triumphs from a long career. Straightening his homburg hat a touch, Cutter read the decorative lettering. He could afford a short indulgence, while Grunt got on with the work.

‘THE CROYDON VARIETY HALL - PRESENTS - HARRY HOCUS in his XMAS MONSTER SHOW’. The dates ran, ‘MON 5 - SAT 24 December, 1938’.

There was a caption below a portrait of Harry which said, ‘I Guarantee Your ASTONISHMENT!!’ Figures and phenomena lurked round the edges, depicted in a cross-hatched technique. The effect was slightly sinister, to modern eyes. A list of support acts had an enticing ring: ‘Bob, Job & Mick, Alice ‘Cheer-O’ Adams and The ‘All-Star’ Vignettes.’

Another poster was brighter, if dated by its trippy, psychedelic style. It was a product of the 1960s.

“IT’S MAGIC!” Says HARRY HOCUS...Britain’s TOP TV and STAGE MAGICIAN...Now in his own TRAVELLING SHOW!

A television screen erupted with flowers, rabbits, cards and doves. A cartoon of Harry by ‘Marvin’ proclaimed ‘PLUS FULL SUPPORTING REVUE!’ According to the Daily Telegraph, the show had been ‘A Delightful Spectacle!’ and The Evening Standard, ‘Pure Magic - A Wonder!’ Alas, the show was thirty years gone. Hardly ‘Booking NOW for THE BRIGHTON HIPPODROME.’

Far from sure of herself, Rachael hesitated. Should she explore the room? The alcove offered a sense of refuge, with its peculiar oil-lamp. Rachael approached the window, leaving business to the others. Grunt had lifted the mannequin head, to sneer at its pretty features. Cutter began rooting through Harry’s cupboards.

The alcove was obscured by a tatty curtain, which glittered at Rachael’s touch. Torn roughly along one edge, it was the remnant of something far grander. The carpet’s edge marked the boundary of this private retreat, and Rachael crept onto cracked linoleum. Her boots scraped a crystalline dust that powdered the floor, and semi-dried stickiness from a chemical spill.

Cutter regarded a mound on the floor. They were smart and startling costumes, tailored for Harry and his assistants. Cutter had turfed them out, regardless. “A proper little frock,” he smiled, lifting a spangled tu tu. “Cute, Rachael. Want to wear it?”

Cutter’s voice was muffled to the girl. The alcove deadened external sounds with the subdued hush of a chapel. Rachael paid no attention, for she was fascinated by the musty relics.

Grunt offered Cutter the mannequin head. “It might...maybe suit this,” he grinned.

“Where might her body be?” asked Cutter. He pushed the head aside. “Fewer japes, Grunt. The bag!”

Grunt opened a canvas sack marked ‘SWAG’ in colourful, amateurish letters. They had been written to defy the law.

“Here’s the first donation,” said Cutter. He dropped in a brass candlestick, although not the mannequin head.

Rachael studied the den of clutter with an intense, transfixed scrutiny. There were sea-shells, balls of marble and glass, boxes, needles and knives. A silver goblet was caked with a dark brown substance, thicker at the rim. Rachael quivered. Imagine that foul crust touching your lips, she thought. Imagine its nauseous taste...

The labels on the tins and jars were scarcely comforting, ranging from the quack-scientific to purely arcane: *‘Mould Scrapings (mixed)’*, *‘Nightshade Honey’*, *‘Concentrated Blood Salts’*. Also, *‘Fly Agaric (two whole and undamaged)’*, *‘Pill Bugs’* and *‘Deconsecrated Earth’*. Each was written in an inky scrawl, naming crumbled solids or viscous goo. Leathery specimens were also present, shrivelled past recognition.

Rachael’s gaze fell to the desktop, with its papers spread before her. There were grey etchings and hieroglyphic text. One impressive manuscript caught her attention. It was a circular chart inlaid with blue and gold, the colours rich in the gaslight. A human freak or fully-fledged creature stretched to touch the rim. Lightning jagged towards its belly, and flashes touched the head like horns.

Rachael moved closer. She was amazed at the depth in the artwork, the subtle effects of the ink-laden brush. The space fell away, fell away. She inched close...seeing more...the gold eyes, the deep heart. A fabulous mythical being. So it breathed, so it smiled, so it sang in her mind. Its hot blood, its snide snarl...

She jumped back!

The grubby parchment had been mesmerizing. Rachael wrenched herself away by a sheer act of will. She almost fell against the window, her face pressing the cold glass. A gust rattled the pane in its putty.

Rachael could see looming chimneys and slopes of slate, before a backdrop of distant rooftops. Buildings were patched with the luminous shapes of scattered windows and skylights. What lay behind their glass, she wondered. Other stories and domestic scenes. A thousand living operas, and none of them sponsored by soap. For a moment, Rachael envied their cast of characters. A normal evening at hearth and home, with tea, telly and tasty treats. She had known it once, with her family. They did not care for her now.

Cutter had moved from the mantelpiece to a sideboard. It was as old and stained as the desk. He grasped the dangling metal handles of a wooden drawer as Rachael scampered past. Her tasselled skirt brushed his jeans.

“Nice?” asked Cutter, nodding to the alcove.

“Old things,” said Rachael. “A collection. I...don’t think it’s worth a lot.”

“Nothing refused,” said Grunt. “We’re the bin men!”

Cutter ignored this dumb remark. “Most gratified,” he told Rachael. “I wish to see. What’s no value to one - or another - is treasure to the wise.”

Rachael’s only response was a sigh. She was still shaken by the chart’s wild vertigo. Rachael reached the dressing table, a little unsteadily. Its stool was soft and inviting. She sat and left the others alone.

Grunt crawled into the lower cupboards, while Cutter opened the drawers. He found magical props and bric-a-brac, but little of any value. Was the mission a big mistake?

Cutter took a small book, silver cones and a folding bellows camera. Then he felt something at the back of the drawer. Cutter slid an object from a bed of crumpled velvet. “Quality at last!” he smiled.

Grunt glanced up, bashing his head on the drawer.

Cutter’s find was about twelve inches long. It was a hexagonal tube, with the six sides carved in a swirling Celtic style. Certain details were illuminated with gilded strands, bright against the ancient wood. One end was encrusted with gems, and mounted so it could swivel. There was an eyepiece at the other end.

Cutter pointed the thing at a lamp, and peered through the eyepiece. Not even the faintest glimmer. He rotated the end a little, with no apparent effect. “Must be broken,” he muttered. “Neat, though.” Grunt nodded as it fell into the swag bag.

Rachael relaxed at the dressing table. She stared past her reflection in the curved, art nouveau mirror to the backward poster for Magic ’71. Despite its tacky design, there was a charming exuberance. A charm that warmed her eyes with the possibility of tears. The bug-eyed crab was cheery and cute, while Harry seemed eager to please. So why was she here with these sinister raiders - neither helping nor hindering as they ravaged *this*, Harry’s most personal room? Or was the charm another illusion, as fake as any flourish onstage? Something evoked better through art than the man himself. *This Harry*, who

kept that curtained alcove with its mind-bending chart. The alcove where Cutter was heading.

“Santa’s Grotto!” announced Cutter. His soft northern accent gave the words an incongruous, homely ring.

Cutter wrenched the curtain aside, raising a pall of greenish dust. He examined the dingy little setting with evident pleasure. It held shelves of grimoires, almanacs and magical texts. The desk was fascinating, with its scrolls and specimens.

The chart startled Cutter for a second, but his eyes did not linger. They looked to the highest shelf, where they encountered another mystery. A pair of statues with a bronze sheen, made amber by the oil-lamp. They were cast in lively, twisted poses. Very special, thought Cutter. He took them.

Rachael had been unable to resist the temptation. There was a hefty, card-paged volume on the dressing table. A photographic album. She touched, then lifted it with increasing confidence. There was comfort in those enormous, slab-like covers.

A sheet of yellowing tissue masked the opening page. Rachael peeled this aside with a crackle, to reveal a selection of black and white prints. Frilly children in a garden, frozen in vintage sunshine. The light of decades gone by. As if trespassing on some private territory, Rachael explored this snapshot world.

Cutter stepped past the curtain like a showbiz compère. The statues were caught in his powerful grip. Grunt looked up from his sideboard rummaging. “Anyone we know?” he asked.

It was a stupid question. They did not know many demons.

“Perhaps we’ll warm to their acquaintance,” smiled Cutter. “Punch and Judy!” He juggled them around like puppets.

“Lovely presents,” said Grunt.

“Gift wrap,” said Cutter. He chose silky veils from Grunt’s scattered pile, deftly swathing the statues.

Twenty or so pages had passed Rachael’s eyes. Showbiz spectaculars, memories in grey and the earlier tones of sepia. Occasionally, she would find an intriguing surprise: an autograph torn from a smaller notebook, an invitation to some forgotten party. A ticket, a postcard, a restaurant bill with a quaint doodle on the back. The images: Harry shaking hands with a younger, stoutish man. Harry with a poodle and gleeful children. A studio shot of a bearded man with springy, smiley moustache. Harry next to Rachael in a lavish art deco foyer.

Harry was in the room. He was next to Rachael. The framed photographs formed a backdrop to his balding, dusty head. He was dressed so dapper in his best tailcoat, waistcoat and ribbon tie. The old face was a close likeness to the younger versions. Harry might have been well-preserved and ancient, or a few years older but prematurely aged. For there was a perky youthfulness in his manner, yet a stiffness in certain gestures which belied a longer past.

Ashamed, Rachael closed the album and placed it on the stool. She stood, meeting Harry’s eyes with a nervous but direct gaze. Rachael felt unsure, for a deep loyalty bound her to Cutter and his mission of the night. Was she *really* in the

photograph? No...it was a freak resemblance, nothing more. Rachael tried to believe so, but knew this could not be true.

“How perfectly pleasant,” said Harry. “I have not received visitors for some little time. In particular those...uninvited.” He nodded sagely towards the other bikers.

Cutter froze, disturbed by these sober words. He was most proud of his acute senses. Why, he could hear a pin drop at a thrash metal gig. Yet he had not heard the door open, a shuffle or a creaking floorboard. Nor had he seen a hint of movement as Harry entered the room. Harry had just...become present.

Tucking the demonic statues into their wispy wraps, Cutter calmly placed them in the swag bag. Then he and Grunt joined Rachael, and they faced the old man together.

“Uninvited,” asked Cutter, “or unwelcome?”

Harry’s face was unchanged. He was neither frightened by this bearded intruder, nor threatening in return. “I would welcome one of your troupe,” said Harry, flicking a glance to his left - to Rachael. “However, its leader and...*lackey* might have troubled to write, and found the Right Of Admission Reserved.”

“*Reserved?*” frowned Grunt. “And what’s a lackey?”

“Does what he’s told,” hissed Cutter. Harry’s clever-clever banter was a pain. With a glint of metallic reflection, Cutter brought out his ‘cutter’. A flick-knife. Rachael winced as Cutter raised the weapon, which stopped inches from Harry’s nose.

Harry regarded the knife with an absent curiosity, and made a delicate wave of his hand. This seemed a puny defence as Cutter edged the knife forward, although the sense of menace was quickly spoilt. Cutter was no longer brandishing a flick-knife. He was brandishing a pink plastic flower.

Grunt smiled. Rachael gasped. She could not believe it.

Harry gave a sly sideways nod. “I guarantee your astonishment!”

Cutter handed the flower to Rachael, who tried sniffing its plastic centre. Nothing but a plastic aroma. Then he brought up his leather-gloved, steel-ringed fist. “Perhaps you do,” said Cutter, with a quiet menace. “But I’d like to make a complaint.”

Grunt knew he should not participate. He had been with Cutter in violent situations, and Cutter liked to act alone. If help was needed, he would give the nod. Till then, Grunt could only stand by.

Cutter’s bulk, fed by best beer and fry-ups, was ably supported by muscle. He grabbed Harry by the lapels and shook him hard, before shoving him against the wall. There was a crack as Harry dislodged a picture. Cutter paused, while Harry staggered as if to advance. Cutter brought a knee to his stomach. Harry stumbled and fell. Rachael dropped the flower.

The big biker was distracted from Harry by a sudden pounce from the girl. She threw herself round Cutter’s arm, now poised to deliver a thump. Rachael dangled for a moment like a flimsy doll, as Cutter tried to shake her off. “Don’t!” she cried. “He’s too old...”

“Let go!” spat Cutter. “Lose thy grip.”

“You’ve got the stuff,” snarled Rachael. “Just leave him!”

“Such *loyalty*,” said Cutter, twisting her fingers back. “I’ve made the decision, and the decision stands.”

Harry was twitching on the floor. His hands clawed towards Cutter, as if he had another trick. Some chance. As Cutter dealt with the struggling Rachael, his eyes shot a glance to Grunt.

Grunt knew the signal. It was time to participate. He would finish Harry, while the leader taught Rachael respect. Rachael was strictly Cutter's affair. Grunt had his own task.

"You ain't spelling us away!" laughed Grunt. He swung a heavy kick at Harry, elevating the magician for a moment. Harry smacked hard against the wall, and flopped stiff and still upon the carpet.

Cutter tore Rachael's grip from his dark, chequered shirt. He held her flailing, then pushed her with the power of a piston. Rachael shot straight back onto the dressing table, so her head struck the edge with force. The album fell to the floor beside her, along with cosmetics sent flying by the impact.

Cutter was static amongst the debris, like another statue. Then a sigh belied his organic form. He beheld the sprawled figure of Rachael, and passed judgement on the matter. "Shame. Quite a disappointment," he murmured. Cutter picked up the plastic flower. A tulip. Of no value, but a souvenir. He fixed it through the buttonhole of his leather waistcoat.

Grunt dropped a jewellery box into the swag bag. "Anything else worth having?" he asked.

"Take a look," ordered Cutter, as he knelt by Harry. Grunt probed the room a final time.

The old man's breath came as a gargling hiss. He was a dying entertainer. "The days of magic are over," whispered Cutter. "Your audience gone for good. No more jests and japes, Mr. Hocus. No more stupid transformations. Show's cancelled, Harry. Cancelled by the boss." Cutter glanced at Rachael, for a moment.

What was old Knifer up to? Whispering things in a dead man's ear? Hard to tell who was madder. Grunt broke Cutter's conversation with the corpse.

"Feeling all right?" he asked.

"Better than him," said Cutter. "Kill the lights..."

Reversing his motions on entering, Cutter switched off the lamps. Soon, only the alcove's gas defined the interior with a dim wash of orange. Grunt opened the door for Cutter.

"Come, then," said Cutter. He stepped past Rachael's unconscious form, into the passage beyond.

Grunt followed, with the canvas sack bulging on his shoulder. But he hesitated by the door. There, on a corner table, was something special. A top hat. Harry's top hat! Grunt frowned, smiled - then put it on. Why, if Cutter could have his flower, Grunt could have his hat. There was surely no harm in that.

The raiders climbed through the open window and crept down the metal steps, where Cutter startled a cat. They jumped quickly onto their motorbikes, donning helmets for disguise more than safety. After revving the engines with reckless abandon, they were gone into the January night.

Perhaps a fragment of the sound reached Rachael, whose eyes flickered in the darkness. It was hardly enough to stir her, and nothing would ever stir Harry again.

Both Harry and Rachael had fallen that night, after the briefest of encounters. Neither knew of the other's fate. As they lay together, a clock ticked in the hallway. The earth revolved towards dawn. Harry was beyond all mortal contact, while Rachael was lost in her dreams.

3

Rachael ran through the forest in a mood of dainty elation. The undergrowth swept gently past, and she skipped over obstacles with ease. Sunshine gleamed through the branches in stroboscopic flashes, brilliant to behold.

How long had she been running? What was she running from? Rachael did not know. But her constant movement was vital, on, on, through the curtains of greenery, along the ancient path. There was no effort, no tiredness. Her breath was never short. While *ahead*, a place of wonder beckoned with evocative magic.

Perhaps I should turn back, thought Rachael. *Find where I'm running from*. Glancing over her shoulder, she saw how the trees converged in a darker perspective. Gloomy, lurking shadows created an aura of chill. *No...ahead*. That was the best way. She turned back towards its sunlit happiness, bouncing like a breeze-blown blossom.

The path widened to an avenue, then a clearing. Rachael slowed by the lake at its centre, sparkling with silver light. *I could do with a drink*, she thought. The water seemed perfectly clear. Rachael paused by a small offshoot, which quenched the forest's thirst. She cupped her hands to scoop refreshment.

Rachael regarded her sister reflection in the calm, drifting surface. The girl was trapped in her own inverted world. *What was her age*, she wondered. It was rather hard to recall. The girl was dressed in clothes styled more for a child: a frock with ribbons, floral Alice band, white tights and party shoes. Yet the face was older. A young adult. A girl, surely Rachael's age?

Rachael tried to remember the life she had lived, away from the great forest. How long had she been running? Since childhood? So when was *that*? How long ago...?

Rachael turned to look at the view behind. Its circle of gloom had grown larger - encroaching those shining places where she had run in freedom, feeling nothing but innocence and bliss. It spread as a dry liquid, bringing a disjointed corruption to the scenes it touched. Leaves cracked, flowers faded, twigs twisted, butterflies withered. It was more than decay, but less than life. A strange, dark vigour of its own.

Rachael was not granted the luxury of hesitation. Her petticoat billowed with a warm, steamy gust that flowed through the forest like a sigh. She turned on her heel and tried to run, with a distressing heaviness as the gloom overtook her.

Shouldn't have stopped, she thought. *Shouldn't have waited. Should have said go, run, flee without a dither! But it's too late now. The terrible gloom has me, in the clasp of its ghastly embrace.*

Rachael tripped over a slimy, contorted root. Her legs scraped its barbed texture before she jumped the bubbling rivulet, its water now scummy and acrid. The leap was an impossible one, given the force crushing Rachael's spirit. She splashed the edge of the mucky swirl, sliding on a sticky mud-bank.

Rachael scrambled up the dripping slope, with tears in her eyes. Roots scratched her arms, while the frock became splattered with filth. Rachael felt barely able to shift her adult weight, like an unaccustomed burden. She dropped to crawl on her hands and knees. The wind was damp, hot and hateful in its hissing proximity.

Rachael struggled forward with all her might, feeling dizzy, dirty and drained. The brightness drew away from her, shrinking to a distant circle. Then it vanished to a place

beyond reach. The gale wavered - its tone higher, then lower - as if forming a word or sentence. Could she hear it? Did she *want* to hear it? What were these elusive words? They must have a meaning or a message. It must be a message for her.

What did it mean? What did it want? Rachael did not know. She had to find out, get out, find out, get out - wake up, get up - *wake up!*

There was no discernible point at which Rachael's nightmare dissolved into daylight and consciousness. As she blinked with the shreds of memory, Rachael registered the ceiling above her and knew she must be awake. Her head was dull and throbbing, as after a heavy night. She rolled it round with an audible crack, loosening the stiffness of her neck.

What a night it had been! Too much cider, she really ought to cut down. Hoping coffee would cure the hangover, Rachael forced herself from the narrow bed. She donned fluffy slippers and a shabby dressing gown.

Rachael's window was north-facing, so an early chip of sunshine fell directly within. It was shady the rest of the time. The light was soft and insubstantial, reflected from the sky. While the lawn was pleasing to look at, the flowers were dead till spring.

Rachael turned from the cool distance of drifting clouds, her eyes settling on the desk. It took a moment for them to adjust to the differing light of this grey, shadowed interior. She switched on the small lamp, so its cheery shade cast a pool of warmer luminescence. This brought a pinkish-orange rosiness to Rachael's otherwise pale complexion, and the sketches spread before her.

Rachael sat back on the bed to look at her artwork. She was thoughtful to the point of distraction. There were so many aspects to the sketches, made over a long period. If only she could combine the best in a unified, focused whole. Some were bound, some were loose, some were pinned on the wall. Most were pencilled, others rendered in scratchy pen-and-ink. All showed a similar subject.

What had happened in her nightmare? The details always vanished like sand through her fingers, till only the mood remained. Why could she never remember, or never reach the end? The imagery was so vivid with every recurrence, yet so shrouded upon her awakening. Perhaps it was this very obscurity that fascinated her. Somehow, to know the inner workings of her mind, Rachael must probe it in her conscious state. She had to form her evidence through the medium of art.

Rachael took a short, stubby pencil - a very soft 6B - and shaded the tone of a previous drawing. It suggested an overgrown valley or chasm, although the scale was difficult to tell.

Each sketch showed a differing aspect of this landscape. The depths of a murky forest, with linear swirls evoking its roots and trunks. Some had been shaded in greens and browns, although the monochrome versions were the more satisfying. Perhaps the lack of colour had a raw directness, probing a deeper truth.

But the truth escaped Rachael as she dropped the pencil. The shreds of the dream had gone. She recovered her daytime character, and shambled downstairs for breakfast.

Sue was already enjoying her Shredded Wheat while flipping through a stack of photos. A wallet lay on the table, containing the negatives. They had been taken on a cheap disposable camera, for fun more than quality.

“Pictures came!” said Sue, waving a print in greeting. It showed Laura in candid surprise.

“What, the party?” smiled Rachael. “Let’s see!” She took a few from the pile. “Me and, *uh...*”

“*Phil!*” said Sue. “He likes you, Rachael. Even remembers your name.”

“Gasp!” joked Rachael. “The ultimate compliment.”

Sue grabbed her second lump of Shredded Wheat, munching it like a chocolate bar. “No, he does,” she said. “Thinks you’re different. Says you’ve got a lot of insight.”

“*Different?*” groaned Rachael. “Huh! Doesn’t he mean Trish?” Rachael held up a photo to demonstrate the point. “Look at her hat, Susie! Is she on the fashion course? *Never!* Must be a trainee accountant.”

“Hah, hah,” said Sue. “She made me one, too.” Sue dipped in her bag to retrieve a multi-beaded cap. “One of Trish’s little custom jobs. Got the basic thing in Oxfam, then sewed everything on by hand. Pretty, huh?” Sue pushed back her curly red hair, sliding the cap into place.

“Unique, is it?” asked Rachael.

“Only one of its kind...except Trish’s.” Licking the last shreds of wheat from pink-lipsticked lips, Sue sipped at her black coffee. “Yeuch! No sugar,” she winced, dumping in three spoonfuls of Demerara.

Rachael glanced out at the garden where Columbus, the neighbour’s cat, was performing some modest exploration. Laura was hanging a dripping dress on the line, clenching clothes pegs between teeth like addictive cigarettes. “I’m out of it today,” said Rachael, filling the kettle and fetching a teabag.

“What’s new?” smiled Sue, flipping through the rest of the photos.

“That Richard! Kept buying me ciders. Wouldn’t take no for an answer.”

“Quickest way to get drunk, Rach! Here’s Columbus. Didn’t like the fireworks.”

Rachael glanced at the photo, depicting the cat’s unexpected visit. He had dodged inside to avoid the bonfire and bangers, where Sue had snapped a pleasing close-up. Trish had held a wineglass to suggest feline inebriation. “He didn’t sip any of that?” asked Rachael.

“No. Took a sniff, turned his nose up. Choosy! Suppose he prefers a nice Chateau Rateau.”

Laura came in from the garden, dropping leftover pegs in a ceramic pot. It was one of Sue’s early college efforts. Sue showed her the less-than-flattering portrait. “I’m parched like a vampire,” said Laura. “Blood red eyes!”

“Just the flash,” said Sue, “reflecting. You can see your inner soul...”

“Keep an eye on the washing, Rachael,” said Laura. “Whip it in if it rains.”

“Keep me busy,” said Rachael, making her tea.

“Want to wear that dress this evening. The seminar,” added Laura. “Quick change after work.”

“Important?” asked Sue.

“Want to look smart,” said Laura. She quickly combed her dark bobbed hair before slipping on a blue blazer. “Never know who you’ll meet, Sue. Boss, colleagues, staff of the future.”

“Wheeling and dealing,” sighed Sue.

“Mixing and matching,” sighed Rachael.

Sue started to giggle. “Come on, Laura! Join the slackers. There’s a spare desk at college. You could be an art schoolgirl in an art school uniform! Trish could make you one. Fluorescent green!”

“Hmm...dead stylish,” smiled Rachael.

“Yeah - but I can’t draw stickmen without three hours and a geometry set. See you later, girls.” Grabbing her handbag, Laura rushed to the door.

“A...*handbag?*” mused Sue, Lady Bracknell-ish.

“A proper little madam,” said Rachael.

* * * * *

Grunt had never been a Hell’s Angel. He preferred a darker, leaner persona. Grunt left the adornment - the medallions and buckles - to his friend and confidant. Cutter had the bullet earring, mirror-shades and signet rings. Grunt was a sly shadow.

To bike along the coast was pure exhilaration. Grunt had come from the west through Worthing, along to Shoreham-by-Sea. The harbour stretched east in a long channel, dotted with warehouses, cranes and fuel tanks.

Grunt trundled his motorbike over the lock gates so he could hit the Basin Road. This was a thin strip of tarmac bordering a dishevelled, oily beach of pebbles and scattered rubbish. The old power station chimney loomed overhead, standing on a base of intricate brick. It was a tribute to those - including Grunt’s own grandfather - who had built it decades before. A blast of dynamite had dropped its twin, and the site had been all but cleared. There was talk of new development, but nothing much had been done.

This bleak setting was ideal for biking, and Grunt throttled up heading east. The road was a diagram of infinity, with straight lines tapering to a point. The mid-November sun raked an orange-yellow sharpness, casting blue shadows of precise geometry. The light fell upon the sprawling depots and warehouses, lending them a steely richness.

Grunt felt great without his helmet. It was something he liked to risk. The air was gritty, as the coastal breeze scooped dust and sand from the beach. There was a long wall to his right, with mighty buttresses holding the pebbles at bay. To his left, wire mesh stretched away like the edge of a prison camp.

Just then, Grunt saw a flash of reflection in the gutter. Braking his bike in a twisting u-turn, he strolled across the tarmac and knelt. Half-covered with muck and chewing gum, surely - an automobile badge! Grunt winced as he fingered the grubby, dried adhesion. Scrub it later, he thought.

Grunt became aware of a movement, and glanced up from his newfound treasure. Something pounced with a seismic growl, snarling like a Ray Harryhausen monster. Saliva drooled and teeth clashed, ready to bite human flesh.

Grunt toppled on his butt with a painful “Ouch!” But he shook with mirth, not terror, as he realized his mistake. It was just a bored doggy, guarding the other side of the fence.

“Got me badge. Finders, keepers!” teased Grunt, as he staggered up. The dog barked in rabid frustration, clawing at the wire mesh. Grunt dodged nearer, dodged back, to enrage it further. Then he strolled to his waiting machine.

Wharf Road took him out of the harbour, on past the boating lagoon. In summer, its safe inland waters welcomed model yachts and sailboards. There were teas and ices at the café, with a playground for the kids.

Grunt had once owned a model yacht. It had been a present from his granny, made of wood, with white cotton sails and a red flag. He had spent many summer evenings by these gently lapping waters, watching it sail out, out, into the centre.

Nature’s kindness would grant its safe return, so it had been fun to scuttle the toy. Grunt had laughed with ‘Bingo’ Barry, a teenage friend, while smoking their earliest cigarettes. After a series of salty jokes, the pair flicked lighters over the fuel-soaked deck. Launching the yacht from the water’s edge, they had watched the smoke rise and flames burst forth. Both childhood and innocence were lost that day, as the yacht blazed its way to oblivion.

‘Innocence Lost’ were the words on Grunt’s motorbike: a beaten-up Kawasaki Z650. The factory finish had long since gone, remedied by thick black enamel. It had been badly applied by brush, in the days before Grunt knew Cutter.

The bike roared on, towards Brighton.

* * * * *

The model was called Adam, but never wore a fig-leaf. Rather wish he had, thought Phil. The tutor hovered somewhere at the students’ backs, his silent approach undetectable. Then came the sudden pounce and whisper in the ear. The most sarcastic comments.

Mr. Viner had a fair reputation, and topped it with a dash of ego. He extolled the virtues of life drawing and observation to his media-saturated students. Sue sketched happily through the afternoon, as an admirer of Mr. Viner. She had his Buttercup Lawn poster in her attic bedroom. It was his famous, if hackneyed, hit.

But happy sketching was not for Phil. He dropped his pencil so it rolled down his lap. Sue watched his fumbling, and tried to suppress a smile. While her hand worked on her drawing, her attention was on the fun.

“Come on, stop playing with yourself,” said Mr. Viner. His voice was a nasal undertone, which could be heard all over the room.

“Getting my pencil,” said Phil. He found it by groping around, his face hidden by a fuzzy fringe.

There were fifteen other students in a circle, who could barely conceal their glee. Phil was the class jester, and a valuable one. Mr. Viner flapped his arms in bemusement while the model batted an eyelid. He found the low sun rather dazzling.

The same sun beat through an office window, falling on Laura's computer. The screen struggled to compete. Laura peered at a doubtful line through her heavy black spectacles. She added a few numbers, then scrolled the page. Her heart dropped at the density of the text, and the tedious concentration it demanded. But it was work, she had to do it. Ought to be grateful, so she was.

As least temping gave her variety. Many different kinds of boredom. Laura tapped many a keyboard on many a desk, sitting on many a chair. What was this? Some company, problems with the cash-flow, considering lay-offs or bankruptcy. Laura would not decide its fate. She just entered data from another disk, and receipts bulging from a file. Business hospitality - how much? No wonder they had hit the rocks.

Laura liked to chew her Biro. She got through one a week. They started out smooth new plastic, before her teeth worked them to liquorice softness - then a crumbling, spitty mess. Once, blue ink had dribbled on her lipstick: the retouch job had been a masterpiece of cosmetic application. Laura liked to look smart and professional, however dowdy her temporary placements.

Did she feel happy? That was not in the contract.

Laura closed the shutters a little, glancing out at the street. It was a warm day for autumn. How nice to be out there, bustling, divorced from the office clock. Hey - wasn't that Rachael on the corner, in the long polka-dot skirt? No. A near likeness, smiled Laura. She was jealous of her housemate's freedom.

They were around the same age, with such different lives. Rachael had all the time in the world, skimping on state benefits. Laura earned the going rate, but paid the price in confinement. Their styles, their fashions were such a contrast. Rachael in her tassels and beads, Laura in pastel shades.

She returned to her chair by the computer, fingers moving to engage the keys. They settled lightly as if feeling Braille, lacking the motivation to type. Laura gazed at her reflection in the cathode ray screen, face crossed by the lines of figures. Quite a pretty face, she concluded, despite those heavy-duty spectacles. Must get on, get typing. Forget these silly thoughts.

It took a minute or two to do so. Laura pondered that girl on the corner and envied her free spirit. Broke, maybe - but free and easy, unless that was a saccharine view. Unemployment brought time, but it also brought poverty. Rachael relied on her dole cheque. Laura relied on her wage.

She should do something. Write to the papers about how unfair it all was. But a day of typing was enough. Besides, God had a plan for them all - although God alone knew what it was. Scraping the hair from her troubled brow, Laura threw herself into work.

While the girl who looked like Rachael found the chemist's, *Rachael* chewed a cheese and tomato roll. The café was deep in the North Laine area, just below Brighton Station. Ethnic shops mixed with boutiques, bookshops and other retail bohemia.

Rachael preferred this place to the coffee bars. Cheaper, too. The walls were plastered with posters advertising gigs, fairs and meetings. It was like an informal gallery. Her gaze alternated between these and the street outside, with its ever-shifting parade. Hippies, yuppies, wannabe mods. Today's busy, busy lifestyles.

Which was she? Too anxious for a hippy, but never the thrusting kind. Rachael smiled at Sue's definition. She was proud to be a slacker.

'Cutter's Yard'. Here was Grunt at last, after bombing along the coast. He had gone three and a half miles along Kingsway, past the piers, up the slope of Marine Parade. A left turn had taken him through smaller streets, to the cul-de-sac where he dwelt.

The sign had been painted by its named proprietor, bright yellow on a brown background. His talents had also stretched to a motorbike, copied with care from a book. The words below ran 'Bike Repairs - Renovated Machines'.

It was both home and workplace to the bikers, who breathed twenty-four hour vapours of oil and petroleum. The entrance opened to a small courtyard, with a street door set into the battered gates. Duff machines awaited the loving touch, while others awaited sale. There was a pile of crates in one corner, and shelves of bent metal pipes. A sideline in dodgy plumbing? No. Left by a previous concern.

The place was not without its humour. A leaky drainpipe ran into an earthenware pot, with a rubber monster bobbing in the stale water. Posters of curvy girls peeled from a brick wall, with facial hair styled by Magic Markers. A pair of decomposing boots stood as mysterious guardians, one inhabited by a snail.

Stairs brought Grunt to the flat above the workshop. There was a pokey kitchen, living-room, bathroom, plus Cutter's bedroom in the attic. That was a no-go area, for Grunt.

Cutter had housed his mechanic quite simply, by making him sleep on the floor. After a restless spell in the living-room, Grunt had found a better solution. He had dragged a camp bed into the workshop, to sleep surrounded by the mean machines. There was an arousing pin-up on the ceiling.

Grunt flung off his black denim jacket, and took the filthy badge for a clean-up. He ran it under the bathroom tap, scraping the gunge with his fingernails. Then he scrubbed it with Cutter's toothbrush.

The living-room was sparse but relaxing. The furniture sagged and television flickered, but there was no need for airs and graces. The floorboards were bare except for a central rug, while ashtrays marked the approximate sites where cigarette butts might be dropped. Heaps of magazines and old paperbacks lay like ruins behind the sofa. These were mostly Cutter's property. He was quite a reader, our Paul.

The chimney was blocked with a gas appliance, but the mantelpiece held many oddments. Cutter had a collection of badges from biker groups, with intriguing items from America. These included the Red Wings of the U.S. Air Force, given a new rationale. They were awarded to Angels performing a certain dare, in the presence of witnesses. Also, their famous emblem embroidered as a colourful patch. It was a skull in a crash-helmet, sprouting wings. The pride of any one-percenter, leaving the prim and proper way.

Grunt made room for the new item, in his own section of display. He had a variety of automobile badges, some old, some new, some 'borrowed', some not. A poster reared above his shoulders, pinned to the wall. It depicted a mangy rocker screeching woes into a bulbous microphone.

Cutter emerged from the workshop, oil on his hands. The Norton was a challenge, but a fine machine. It demanded his special attention. The yard was short of a spare or two, so he would have to scavenge around.

Cutter stomped upstairs to the flat, and entered the living-room. "Cosy?" he asked, finding his mechanic. Grunt was lazing on a grubby futon. It was by the TV, for emergency landings.

Grunt gargled his lager, and foamy teeth grinned. "Back from the voyage," he said.

Cutter released a snort of derision. "Took the Kwak-a-saki to Worthing. You want a purple heart?" Cutter was no great admirer of Japanese bikes - though strictly through prejudice, not performance.

"Not a bad run," said Grunt.

"Christ, you'll be getting to Littlehampton," said Cutter. "Falling off the edge of the world." This would only have been possible in a thirty-mile world, with Brighton smack in the middle.

"Aye, lad!" laughed Grunt, mimicking Cutter's lilt. "Where you from...Venus or Mars?"

"Neither," said Cutter. "Manchester. Your geography's badder than a blindfold Sinbad's. See your gran?"

"Who, Medusa? Yeah - gutted her piggy bank!" Grunt stretched, yawning with excessive lassitude. For a moment, Cutter imagined him as a great ape lolling in London Zoo.

"Get the *vitals*?" asked Cutter. "Foodstuff?" His tone implied an answer he suspected, and it was not a very good one.

"Oh...no," sighed Grunt. He sniffed the hole in his can.

"What's that? Some kind of cold cure?"

"Did the run," said Grunt. "Bombing down the coast. Didn't think of the grub."

"Great," said Cutter, leaning against the wall. "I've been taking the slack since eleven. My belly's rumbling for a pie."

"Sorry, Knifer. Forgot." Grunt lurched up, tapping the mantelpiece. "Hey! Spot what's sitting up here."

Cutter stared at the jumbled display. It was like a Spot the Difference competition. His mind overlaid a remembered view of the ornaments, realizing one was unknown. Then he lifted the unfamiliar object. It was Grunt's newfound auto badge.

"*That?*" gasped Cutter. "Worthless. Dropped off a garbage wagon."

"Got it down the docks," said Grunt. "Ray had a go at me."

"Ray...?"

"Guard dog. Vicious. I call him Ray." Grunt took a packet of cigarettes, and lit one with several matches.

Cutter dropped the badge with a tinkle. Little things pleased little minds, so the gesture displayed intelligence. He lumbered down the passage to the nook of a kitchen, equipped with dated appliances. There, refreshment might be had.

The window was little more than a slit, though its narrow panes revealed an array of rooftops and chimney-stacks. A bare bulb was reflected in the uncurtained glass, like a late-setting sun in the twilight.

Cutter caught the eyes of his pallid reflection. A spirit free from its body. It gazed at Cutter in equal curiosity, the face broad, bearded and intense. It was just an illusion, or visual trick. But Cutter was fascinated by the strange effects that light and shadow could conjure.

* * * * *

The girls were all home again, back in their cosy shared house. Rachael flicked through a free paper she had found. Nothing but trendy columns, small ads and ego-snaps. She chucked it on a pile for recycling. Sue was doing one of her classic stir-fries: a spitting pan of shredded vegetables, always too much for her. Rachael's relished the thought of a bonus helping.

Laura came in from the garden, now shrouded with the coming of night. However, Laura was shrouded in the flowery frock she was holding up to herself. "Lucky it didn't rain," she said, nodding in Rachael's direction.

"You're gonna wear that?" asked Rachael, with a pinch of sarcasm.

Sue dropped a pinch of spice in her stir-fry. "No, she's going to shred it into tagliatelli - what d'you think? Hey, Laura! You should wear one of Trish's numbers. Get your business noticed all right!"

"Not quite...suitable for the seminar," sniffed Laura, bolting the back door. "I don't think fishnet waistcoats and silver tu tus would impress the captains of industry."

"Captain Flash, more like!" Sue giggled. "No - Flash Gordon, that's the one. Laura the Space Age Sensation!"

"What's she on about?" sighed Rachael. Laura shrugged.

"Just rambling on," said Sue.

"I'm quite happy with this," sniffed Laura. "I shall iron it and wear it, so there."

"Captain Flirt," Sue sniggered. "His rocket's landed. He's after me, you and Rachael. Who's first?"

"What's in that stir-fry?" gasped Laura. "Can't be legal." She went upstairs to her room.

"One of your nutty days?" asked Rachael.

"Poor Laura," smiled Sue. "I'm rotten."

* * * * *

Pixels made the face of a politician, in the bluish pallor of a monochrome tube. It flickered with faulty components, bad tuning and wonky aerial. Cutter did not care.

He was slumped in the middle of the sofa, legs stretched each side of the coffee table. It was a relic of the 1970s, legs flaring like dated trousers. Cutter liked the top with its chess-board pattern. His empty dinner plate lay on the black and white squares, with

a knife and fork flanking the sides. Salt, pickled onions and Worcester Sauce stood for an opponent's rook, king and knight.

Besides the TV, the only light came from a standard lamp in the far corner of the room. It cast a yellowish strata around the lower half of the walls, while the ceiling remained grey like an overcast sky. The television was tuned to silence, as Cutter liked it with Grunt out the way. A new soundtrack pulsed from Cutter's compact hi-fi. It was one of his proudest possessions.

The music was a kind of abstract rock. Great clashes of raw guitar, drumbeats, sampled sounds. Despite the apparent cacophony, Cutter played the tape at a moderate level. He liked sensing its power held in abeyance, as if drifting from the bowels of the earth. This added a surreal backing to the televised images.

There they were, he thought. The same old tired faces with the same tired, dreary ideas. The suits were as dull as their philosophies, racked by a thousand compromises and faded ideals.

Cutter could swipe the words from the Honourable Twatty-Arsehole MP, replacing them with something far more sensible. The mouth moved and, boom, crash, deep bass rolled from within. A conference clapped inaudibly to the noise of a synthesized screech.

Something dropped like a game bird onto the plate. "Burger!" said Grunt. He was no silver service waiter. Cutter leant forward, opening the warmish blob. The burger was squashed and sweaty. Cutter scrunched the wrapper and chucked it at a bucket. It hit the rim, bouncing inside.

Grunt did not bother with niceties. He sat in Cutter's armchair, facing the fireplace, and stripped the wrapper free. After dousing the burger in Worcester Sauce, Grunt ate it straight from his lap.

Cutter sliced his own with a knife and fork. Best to make it a meal. "Chips?" he asked, deprived of the delicacy.

"Oh...yeah," said Grunt. "Chips..."

Grunt dropped a bag onto the sofa, filled with something soft and soggy. He divided the greasy chips, while Cutter scorned the interior of his bun.

"Relish," said Cutter. "You got mine relish. Not the mayonnaise."

"Both the same," said Grunt, chewing away. "Sorry, Cuts. Get a fistful of these!"

Cutter regarded the self-adhering chips with despair. Still, they were better than absolutely nothing - the other choice for tonight. "Want you working tomorrow, Gruntling," he said. "Visiting time's over, right?"

"Yeah," said Grunt, through a chip-stuffed mouth. "Course."

"Course' nothing," stated Cutter, spiking a pickled onion. "You're hardly the dutiful grafter. Not so I've noticed of late."

"*Shirty!*" Grunt snorted, misjudging the serious mood.

Cutter chomped the pickled onion, before jabbing his fork at Grunt. "Shirty, *nothing*," he snapped, spitting a speckle of relish. Cutter dabbed his beard with a napkin. "I've accounts to do, Grunt. Papers, ledgers. You've seen Medusa, you owe me time."

"Paid for the burgers, didn't I?" said Grunt. "That's Medusa's money. Cash for the firm."

“Cash for eating and beers to piss down the pan, but fifty’s nothing in the world of work. Jack Stanley’s quarter’s nearly due, and we’re five tons short of the mark.”

“I pay my rent, don’t I? Proper lodger.”

“Cheapest rent this side of Hell, Grunt. You’re a lodger *and* worker, don’t forget.”

“All right. What’s it, the Norton?”

“No. Tony’s Harley. Want a buyer, pronto. Owner’s a wreck, Grunt. Baby’s abused. I grieve for her tortured steel.”

“How’s the Norton?”

“I’ll stick to the Norton, you stay clear. Wilf’s missing his faithful steed. Won’t make a fast buck from a Fastback. Wilf has faith in me. I’ll fix it proper, you fix Tony’s, we’ll click like a real team. Two pairs of wheels out of here, the banker’s got flesh to chew.”

Cutter felt most assured of his business plan, at least in the shorter term. He leant back on the sofa, hands clasped behind his close-cropped head. Closing his eyes, Cutter tried to forget the room...the yard...the town. He focused on the deep music.

Grunt gawped at the loudspeakers, bemused. “What’s that? A factory or something?”

“The Industrial Revolution,” murmured Cutter.

“What...all of it? All those factories? Bang, crash, wallop, what a picture?”

An eye glowered at the crude mechanic. “The name of the *band*,” said Cutter, his tone as sharp as his name. “Get the tea, please. In a pot.”

“Your turn,” said Grunt. “I got the dinner.”

“My flat,” said Cutter. “I’ve got the hump.”

Grunt considered the situation with a whirr of logic. He considered his home, his job, Cutter’s dangerous mood - and went to get the tea.

Laura's flu had been developing for several days, although she had ignored the situation. But it would be difficult to type with a runny nose dripping between the keys. Laura had given up on Monday, ringing the agency. Regretting her absence from the office, she took refuge in her room.

She was already feeling better despite acting the invalid. It was good to put efficiency aside for once, remaining tucked up in bed. She found company in her teddy bear friends, and spiritual uplift from the Moses video playing quietly in the corner. It was seen through blurred, spectacle-free eyes. Above, colourful posters displayed a religious theme - while a year planner was marked with dates and meetings, ensuring Laura kept herself busy.

"Anyone coming?" called Sue from the hall below, looking up the stairs. Her voice sounded shrill in the quiet of the house, for only the faint buzz of the video permeated the building.

Sue was well-wrapped this cool November morning. As well as Trish's 'nearly unique' hat, she had a long scarf coiled like an exotic serpent. Her duffle coat was patterned with colourful geometry: an intricate design of parallel stripes, some jagged, some straight, some broken. Such coats were popular with Brighton's young. They were smarter than anoraks, brighter than greatcoats, warm and thick for the winter.

The murky stairs rose murky above the pale sunlight, which entered the lower hall. Watching for movement above, Sue was startled by a sudden poke in the back. Turning, she saw the postman's shadow vanishing behind the frosted glass. A bunch of mail protruded from the letter-box like a forked tongue.

Propping her art folder against the telephone table, Sue wrenched the mail from the bite of the spring-loaded flap. There was Laura's evangelical newsletter bringing early festive blessings, a brown envelope addressed to a previous tenant and a letter to 'Miss Susan Thomas'. Sue ripped it open, groaning at the contents. 'We wish you every success', it said. A polite rejection. So much for her fabric designs.

Sue tossed the letters by the telephone, with a pile of forgotten mail. She took the evangelical newsletter and popped upstairs to see Laura.

Rachael's room was at the top of the stairs, with its door slightly ajar. Sue glimpsed its occupant hunched over the desk, one hand pushing a pencil. Moving past, Sue knocked gently for Laura - being granted a muffled "Come in."

"Hi," said Sue. "Your Christian Chorus!" She tossed the newsletter on the bed.

"Thanks," said Laura.

"No better, then?" asked Sue.

"Yes...a bit. Well, a lot actually." Laura curled her knees up under the blankets.

"I'm kind of enjoying it."

"Have your break," said Sue. "Work too hard, you!"

"Mmm. Suppose. I need the change."

"How long?"

"Oh, back tomorrow. No choice," sighed Laura. "Need something permanent, really. Be a perm perm, not a temp temp. It's all insecure. Just everything..."

For a moment, Sue sensed a real distress within Laura. It seldom showed through her brisk personality. Laura usually put her friends to shame, zipping to offices, evening classes, the church. She even did some charity work. Laura held the household together like a maternal figure. She split bills with scrupulous precision and dealt with the landlord, Mr. Randle, over any minor dispute. Laura knew him well enough. She had lived there a good three years, and seen other tenants come and go. Laura had Randle so sorted, she virtually wrote the contracts.

“I’ll pop in to see you later,” said Sue.

“Sure. I’ve got plenty to keep me going.” Laura took a chocolate, glanced at the Moses video and opened her Christian Chorus.

Sue walked back along the landing, although she paused by Rachael’s room. What was she up to in there? Sue was just about to knock when Rachael turned, somehow sensing her presence.

“Ah...Rachael,” said Sue, slightly nervous. “I’m not prowling, just passing by.”

“No trouble,” said Rachael.

Sue stepped forward into the small, rather messy room. It might have been a corner of the art school studio, except for the unmade bed. “I called up,” she added. “Just going.”

“I’ll walk down,” added Rachael. “Need some art stuff. Got to go into town.”

“Right,” nodded Sue, glancing at the desk. While she recognized several drawings, there were many new to be seen. Rachael had certainly been busy.

“Can’t do any more,” explained Rachael. “There’s a lot of imagery, but they’re only sketches. It’s time I started to paint.”

Sue leant forward, picking up one of the pictures. It showed a looming chasm of chunky rock, festooned with creepers and ivy. “What’s this?” she asked. “It’s like a rain forest. Something out of King Kong.”

Rachael smiled. “All part of the dream, Sue. I see...nooks and crannies in the forest, exploring in my sleep.”

“The nightmare?”

“Yeah,” said Rachael. “I can’t remember, so I draw it. Gets clearer all the time.”

“It’s somewhere you’ve been?” asked Sue.

“I don’t think so,” replied Rachael. “I mean...I once went camping in the New Forest, but it didn’t look anything like this. Why would it give me nightmares? It’s a happy memory, not bad.”

Sue lowered the picture. “You want to do a painting, Rachael?”

“On canvas. Capture the atmosphere.”

“Sounds ambitious...”

“Got to start somewhere, Sue. *Picasso* had to buy his paintbrush.” Rachael fetched a purse from her bedside table, counting out the cash. “Want it big. Say thirty-by-thirty...”

“Inches?”

“Yeah. Hope they’re not too expensive.” Rachael gazed at the crumpled notes in her hand.

“Hey - don’t go to a shop!” said Sue. “Come to college.”

“Bit late,” said Rachael. “I’m a reject.”

“No, I don’t mean *that*. Not enrol,” smiled Sue. “Though you should have stuck it, Rach! Made another application. You’ve got a really personal vision.”

“Tutors told me,” said Rachael. “*Personal?* No-one could make it out.”

“Anyway, there’s this bloke there. Mr. Hollis. Makes bits and bobs for the students. Loves making anything! He’ll do you a better deal.”

Rachael considered Sue’s offer. She did not have a fortune. It was half her dole for the week. “All right, Sue. Let’s give him a try,” she said, slipping on her coat.

* * * * *

Cutter had to spend his money carefully. He could not raise the amount available - or not quite yet - but the division, the priorities for pounds and pence, was a science in itself.

He had a small office just off the yard, to the side of the main gates. It was generally out of bounds to Grunt who, despite a sombre, sober appearance, could barely balance a Biro - let alone the books.

Grunt had a simple view of life, which Cutter found strangely endearing. He liked bikes, he liked beer, he liked girls who liked him. But he *loved* the telly. Screw it if he could.

Grunt resented authority, not through bitterness but reactive reflex. He saw the office as an imposition, where he could behave like a brat in school. Somewhere to muck around, joking, jumping on the desk - scrunching bills and chucking them into mugs of cold, scummy coffee. Why sit there hunched over writing and stuff? All those words, all those squiggly squiggles? Nah! I’ll have fun ’cos I’m Grunt the biker - forgetting it was Cutter, the Cutter of Cutter’s Yard, who stopped red letters turning into courtroom costs, who kept the ads in the trade mags, the phone on the line, the business purring like a Harley at a traffic light. Ready to go, not quite going, but all part of the run.

Cutter took pride in his office. It had an almost spiritual sparseness, without the brash posters that graced the workshop. There was a desk in the centre, opposite the wide window with its Venetian blinds. This bore pens, pencils and a clattery typewriter. The power of computing had not touched Cutter’s methods. He preferred the direct and mechanical. The machine’s bashing of letterforms brought a bluntness to his words, ideal for letters and bills.

There were books, files...all the business matters, ranged on metal shelves. A heater glowed in the corner, keeping the wintry air at bay. Cutter had an electric kettle, for his use alone. Grunt had a foul example in the workshop, for grim stewed beverages. Cutter would never touch it.

Sometimes, the office reminded him of other working days. The days he had worked in Hackney, the north London borough, employed by the Department of Environmental Health. Cutter had started low in the labouring ranks: endless trips to council flats of the poor deceased, stripping kitchens greased with fat from a thousand spills, beds stinking from a hundred mishaps. Promotion had followed: typing and filling

in forms, a boring but stable routine. He had been a responsible member of society. Grunt had never known that.

Cutter certainly missed the wages. The Yard had its ups and downs all right, but the current slump felt like the mudslide on a scrambling circuit. Things had not been helped by their French trip. Touring was fine in August with worries aside, but not so with customers scarce. Rent to Stanley was priority one, and he had scraped the barrel for September's. It was going to be a dull Christmas if they saved all December's dues.

Cutter blinked at some metallic hammering. Grunt's noise from the workshop. That was the simple, linear problem Grunt understood. Here's a piece of metal, bash it. Try doing that to your business account.

The figures blurred in Cutter's vision as the telephone started to ring. Actually, rasping was all it could manage. The ancient bell was defective, its clarity lost like a choirboy's youth. Cutter snatched the receiver with an irritated snarl, his face invisible to the caller. But he managed a meek enough tone.

"Cutter of Cutter's Yard."

Cutter listened for a moment, smiling at the caller's identity. "Wait yourself there," he said. "I'll fetch the fella you want." Cutter stood, stretching the flex to the doorway as he called across the yard. "Mr. Andrew Grunty-Gruntling, wanted on the phone!"

Grunt was certainly surprised. He got more birthday cards than phone calls, and few enough of those. So he dropped his pliers on the workbench, strolling towards the office. "Who's it?" he asked. "Recognize?"

"Medusa's daughter," said Cutter, offering the receiver.

Grunt sighed. He didn't need this. "Hello, Mother," he said, in a sour tone. Cutter listened, amused, as he shuffled his papers.

Grunt winced at some heavy nagging. "Yes, I did. Uh-huh. Sorry? Well, she gave it to me. What?" Grunt listened for a moment or so, his features pinched in pain. "That was all, Mum. Yeah, fifty pounds. Oh, come on...you know I'm...what? Oh, Mum...no. No way! *Don't*. All right. Yeah...sorry. Yes, I'm *really* sorry." Grunt slammed down the phone.

"Happy families?" asked Cutter.

"Mum's not so pleased," mumbled Grunt. "Thinks I squeezed Medusa for money. Wants me to pay it back."

"So that's the climax?" leered Cutter. "I'm not coughing up. Burger's been eat-ed, digested, excreted."

"Not yet. Whenever. Christmas."

"Give her a Christmas bonus!"

"Why should I?" said Grunt. "She gave it. Pocket money, like."

"Ah. You're her darling wee grandson, bless those rosy red cheeks." Cutter touched one, kneading it less gently than a responsible granny would.

"Cut it, Knifer!" Grunt sputtered, dodging back. "What's she want with it anyway? Never goes out. She's got allsorts stuffed in tins and piggy banks. Dollars and bollocks and buttons and coins, tons stashed in her flat. Gonna be a goner soon, mate! Likes helping the young ones, don't she?"

“*Ones?*”

“Brother John. He’s a Nancy. Mops and cooks for a fiver. Took her on a coach trip to Bournemouth. Blew his profits in a day.”

“You’re her favourite, then, money-wise?”

“Er...yeah, Knifer! I am! She likes giving me money when I stand there. Standing right over her...”

“Mmm. Would ‘no’ be an option?”

“Eh? What was that?”

“Poor Medusa. She’s ugly, is she? Ugly as a snake-headed, stone-staring tart?”

Grunt sniggered. He scratched his backcombed hair, reminiscent of Stan Laurel.

“Huh! Is Medusa ugly? *Medusa?* Is she ugly?”

“Well, is she?” asked Cutter, shoving Grunt towards the door.

“She’s like...one of those things. Mr. Potato Head!” Grunt gnashed his teeth in delight. “No - those rubber things you stick on your pencil. Funny monsters! You chew ’em all gungey. Skin peels off. Not skin! Paint! Hey, Cutter...”

But Grunt had run out of time. Cutter slammed the door.

* * * * *

Not far from the Royal Pavilion, the art college lay white and modern opposite the green island of Victoria Gardens. While they evoked nothing of a Regency flavour, its sweeping windows allowed the sun to illuminate the desks within - bringing light, warmth and, perhaps, inspiration.

However, none reached the domain of Mr. Hollis, obscured by the main building. He ran a den of ingenuity and know-how, smelling of wood, glue, paint and other practical perfumes. Shelves were jammed with timber, tools and templates. Whatever the job required.

Mr. Hollis was a technician, not a tutor. He was always keen to help any project, however bizarre or obscure. Hollis had worked on all kinds of oddities: lathing inexplicable sculptures, spraying tortured pieces of plastic. He never judged the students’ concepts, which he seldom understood. But his craftsmanship had calmed many a hectic venture, and he left the arty chit-chat to others. Hollis was proud to cut a low-key figure in his gabardine overall, hair greying a little, pencil behind the ear.

Hollis had a particular interest in canvases and picture frames, even if their final imagery held limited appeal. His father had specialized in the trade, and Hollis had trained on the job till illness finished the creaking firm. So he helped Rachael with a nostalgic sparkle in his eye, sawing stretchers, nailing cloth, bashing wedges for correct tension. “Kept me from lunch!” he said past one o’clock, although Rachael’s apology was not required.

With the deft efficiency of a department store, Hollis whipped out a roll of brown paper. He folded it neatly round the thirty-by-thirty inch square, criss-crossing the parcel with string. “Right, Miss,” he said. “Make it a cracker! Hope you’ll be back for a frame.”

Climbing the stairs, Rachael felt a yearning for college and the shelter and support it promised. Mr. Hollis had helped with practical matters, but he could not solve all her problems. Wishful thinking was attractive, but it offered an enticing delusion.

She had signed on the jam roll - dole - for the summer, after a job in a shop had folded. Rachael had looked for other opportunities, but had either been unlucky or unpopular. Shunning employment, she had focused on her art.

Rachael worked without tuition, as she had since school. Nobody could moan at her that way. Portraits, still lifes, abstract compositions. Even pavement art around the town, to supplement her meagre benefits. She had avoided the forest nightmare as a subject. It had not been the time, just yet.

The bedsit had been fine in summer, but Rachael had become anxious to avoid another winter by its guttering gas appliance. She had made the difficult search for accommodation in September, checking the Evening Argus and window postcards. Success came in alternative shops, with their wacky notice-boards. After one or two possibilities, Rachael had found the advert of her dreams. It had been neatly typed, with a wriggle of felt-tipped pen adding a decorative touch.

‘Wanted. Third Girl for Nice Shared House near Seven Dials.’

Sounded fair enough, thought Rachael. But was D.S.S. okay? The adverts often said ‘NO’, but why? Rachael was unsure. She had phoned the number, and gone straight round. Laura told her D.S.S. was fine, as long as Randle got his money. It was more important that the girls got on. Rachael liked the place a lot.

Rachael had met Mr. Randle on her second visit. There was also another tenant, called Sue. She was back in town after the summer break, to continue her fine art degree. Sue had lived with Laura since the previous autumn, although she had returned to her parents in Winchester. The two had got on famously, and Rachael enjoyed Sue’s college tales without the trouble of attending. It was mainly a question of escalating debts, something Rachael was glad to avoid.

Of course, Sue had gone off to her own projects while Rachael was busy with Mr. Hollis. Rachael found the right floor and right desk, where her friend sat sucking something and snipping at something else.

“Want a sweet?” asked Sue, though Rachael shook her head. “How’s Mr. Hollis?” she added.

Rachael tapped the canvas like a Celtic drum, with a dry and hollow tone. “What’s that you’re doing?” she asked. Rachael indicated the cut-out pictures spread around the desk. Sue was turning magazines into confetti.

“Bits of a collage,” explained Sue, shuffling the papers around. “A look back at Britain since World War Two. Visual sociology, but satirical too. I’ll paint the background, stick them on, seal the lot behind varnish.”

There were many familiar faces staring up from the crowd: The Queen, Salman Rushdie, Margaret Thatcher, Boy George, Brady and Hindley, John Lennon. Others lay unidentified, face down, with random text crossing their heads and bodies. It was a mass of chaotic conversation.

Rachael flipped one or two cut-outs over, finding some she knew, some she did not. "Who's this?" she asked, waving a narrow, grinning face. The hair was slick, the features monochrome.

"Oh...some magician," said Sue. "Harry Pocus. From an old Picture Post."

"You ruined it?"

"No. It was covered in mildew. Got stacks from a car boot sale."

"And this...?"

"Sir Edmund Hillary. First bloke to climb Everest."

"That's not in Britain," said Rachael. She replaced the cut-out precisely where Sue had dropped it.

"He's not even British," smiled Sue. "But he's still a Sir. Hey, Rach...you want lunch? I'm hungry."

6

Cutter chewed the last of his jam doughnut, licking his sugary lips. It had been lurking in the office as a sticky reward. Not that Cutter could indulge himself too much. Mustn't overstrain the old heart.

Cutter peered round the office doorway. Grunt was sitting on an old tyre, with his legs sprawled on the concrete. He had one of the trashy paperbacks he deciphered rather than read.

"Another classic of world literature?" asked Cutter, as he stepped into the yard.

Grunt failed to see the irony as he read the title in admiring tones. "Sor the Savage. First of the Basker Tril-gy'."

"*Trilogy?*" snorted Cutter. "Typical."

"They got fans, ain't they?" said Grunt. He took a long drag from a cigarette, which burnt at the side of his mouth. The side away from the office.

Cutter frowned. The Yard was a no smoking zone, with all its inflammable fumes. "Put that fag out," he said, snatching the book from Grunt. Cutter had packed in smoking a year ago, though purely on medical advice.

"Bloody Colditz," Grunt murmured. He stubbed the cigarette on the ground. Grunt thought he looked cool with a fag, like the great James Dean. But no-one else agreed.

Cutter missed the sarcasm as he examined the book's cover. It was a gaudy illustration in orange, yellow and red. "That's Sor, is it?" asked Cutter. "That lump of anatomy?"

"Yeah. There's this endless desert," said Grunt. "Fucking wasteland. Called Basker 'cos it's really hot."

"Makes sense."

"There's a cure in this lost city..."

"What for? Sunstroke?"

"Nah, Cuts! The plague." Grunt stared impassively through his steel spectacles, as if imparting world-shattering news. "Sor's the last of the Basker Axemen. He's got to save his tribe. They're all dead!"

"What, give the stiffs a pint of Horlicks?"

"Nah, not *all*," Grunt mumbled. "Best ones. The others are in this hut. His mum, these sad gits and a girl who's sick. She plays this crystal harp. She's crap. I hope she snuffs it."

"Fat chance of that, Grunty. Got another two books to go." Cutter chucked the paperback at his studious friend. Grunt just managed to catch it - though with none of the lithe, graceful reflexes that distinguished the mighty Sor. "Lunch time over," said Cutter. "Get working. I'm heading out for a while."

"Sick of the sums?" asked Grunt.

"Done enough for now, Mr. Axeman. I'll be working from seven till late tonight. Fix Wilf's Norton to perfection."

Which is exactly what Cutter did. By 'perfection', he had not meant any fanciful definition: something flawless in every way, without any peculiar quirks. No. Such quirks

were part of his definition, which meant the return to a state of satisfaction. The way something was meant to be.

Wilf's bike would never be a poncey chariot, straight from the dealer's showroom. Wilf's bike had damage, wear and blemishes that repair would make *imperfect*. Cutter would not destroy its identity with cosmetic slickness. To Wilf, only one thing was important: that his bike should go, and go like a trooper. Cutter was proud of his duty.

Leaving Grunt to enjoy the run of his flat, Cutter entered the workshop with a surgeon's calm. The characteristics of Wilf's Commando had tantalized Cutter over the last two weeks. He was glad Wilf had given him time to do a proper job and find the best components. It was one of the 750cc models - '69, with the innovative Fastback styling. This tapering tail-piece lent the bike a streamlined quality while avoiding trivial kitsch. Wilf's Commando had seen several owners: resprayed twice, the current shade was a militaristic khaki appropriate to its name. Apart from a new Norton logo, it was otherwise unadorned.

The Commando was a smooth runner. Engine, swingarm and gearbox were mounted on Norton-Villiers' unique Isolastic bushes. These were heavy-duty rubber shock-absorbers, which dampened engine vibration so a rider could enjoy the fluid sensation of speed. Their precise adjustment was critical, however, otherwise steering would be badly affected.

Cutter had dismantled the bike meticulously, educating himself through Wilf's tattered Commando Service Notes. He had replaced the Isolastics with improved parts from the later Mark 3 850cc, although the swingarm bushes were a write-off. Bad lubrication, sighed Cutter. Trooper needs a drink. He fitted new bushes with tender care, putting the pieces back, lubing them with nourishing EP90 gear oil. Then he changed the pads of the twin drum brake, and gave the electrics a thorough overhaul. This involved reconnecting the ignition and boosting the twelve-volt lighting to halogen so the Commando could see sharper than ever before. Sharp enough to cut through the night.

Cutter ended his labours at half-past one, breathing deep in the silence of the early, early morning. He regarded the machine's lean profile with a new respect. "You deserve a medal," said Cutter.

* * * * *

Rachael continued working past midnight, her tea growing cold beside her. The canvas had possessed the texture of a fresh snowfall, so inviting to her pencils and brushes. Then, at last, the first marks were made. Rachael had started her painting.

Leaving Sue after lunch in a café, Rachael had returned home in the afternoon. She had sifted through her previous sketches, choosing segments to guide the final work. Rachael would enlarge and blend them, using the more vivid - though laborious - medium of acrylic paint.

One particular sketch had transfixed her, and would form the basis of the composition. It showed a pathway or clearing of some kind, although the scale was

difficult to tell. A gnarled, blistering tree swept in from the right, while a second - deeper in the picture - split into several spindly branches, becoming entangled with the first. Others diminished in size with distance, their roots and branches merging in a complex, interlocking scribble. Rachael sensed a deep, subliminal knowledge of this area. A place of hidden secrecy, framed in receding perspective...

Any misplacement of the elements had frustrated her. The images needed the precise flourish of a signature in order to please her eye. Even so, the sketches never brought pleasure. The urge to draw came in a state of confusion, when problems threatened her mind. Worry about parents who no longer cared, a life with no direction.

Rachael had a cosy nest in her newfound home, but how long would its comfort last? Would she argue with Sue and Laura, and resent their presence? Would the friendship wear away?

As dismay turned to depression, Rachael had turned to her pencils. Perhaps the sketches had offered a kind of escape, although why run *into* a nightmare? Rachael had not understood her own motivation. Drawing the forest was a compulsive act, to banish its dreadful influence.

The painting. That was more ambitious. She would need to focus her energy now the time had come, and keep the momentum up. Lately, she had been drawing in a shroud of dizziness and nausea - scratching away, crying, muttering curses and oaths. Snatches of nightmare haunted this driven girl, brimming to the surface of her conscious mind.

Sue tried, but she could not understand. She created her artwork in a happy buzz, putting fun above sombre psychology. College was no place for Rachael. It judged process rather than product, attitude more than achievement. Maybe Rachael could make a masterpiece, but would they stand for the ranting and raving?

There had to be a time of pure concentration, when these forces reached full expression without compromise or distraction. Rachael knew she must mould the forest into its final form before its influence drained her dry. Once done, the picture would *become* the nightmare. Just a piece of canvas, dead and flat. Her head would be clear once more.

There was a delicate balance to strike while exploring these images. She must sketch them as a dominant mistress, without falling into a desolate abyss. Rachael knew she could take the sketches no further, for many held inspired corners of discovery. Others lay crude, lacking sincerity like the work of a dull forger. Rachael needed to combine the best of all, and whisk away the shroud for good.

It was that receding perspective which swallowed her in the pre-dawn hours. Her body lay tossing and turning in its tangled bed, while her soul drifted away.

Rachael lay on the foul mud-bank, sliding with lubricated smoothness towards the bubbling waters. The horror of their stench repelled her with an oily sickness. With an almost reflexive twitch, Rachael grabbed a cracked, unhealthy root and pulled for all she was worth. It sagged, but took her weight as she scrambled forwards.

Wiping back a mud-caked fringe, Rachael turned to see the shadows behind. The beauty of the forest was made loathsome by a cloak of iniquitous dread. No, she thought. I cannot escape by running - for the darkness toys with me, follows me,

overtakes me in its vile, odious momentum. I cannot find what I've lost by running, only by turning back. Turning to face my inner fears, to confront their bleak advance. I must face the darkness. Know it, embrace it. I must conquer the only power it knows. The power of corruptive despair.

With this, a calmness flowed through Rachael as a warm inner glow. She began walking - slowly at first, then with the deliberation of a military march - into the shady realm. She was noble yet comic in her incongruous clothing, as if performing a childish burlesque. Her pretty shoes trudged through the oozing filth, her tights splattered, petticoat tattered. But her mind was detached from discomfort, knowing peace lay ahead. It was somewhere deep in the forest, beyond the source of her trouble and pain.

As her spirit walked on through the nightmare, Rachael's body grew still in repose. The face became relaxed again, and her breath slowed to a natural rhythm. The conflict in her mind was over, even if the mystery remained. She could sleep in peace for now.

* * * * *

Business was Cutter's department - and he meant it. Lifting the office phone around ten o'clock, he dialed a memorized number. "Hullo. Is Wilf there?" asked Cutter. Someone shouted over kitchen clatter. A croaky voice told him to wait.

"Fine," said Cutter, as he listened to the noise. Someone knocked the other receiver, then Wilf's voice came on the line.

"Up to my arms in it, Cutter!" said Wilf. Indeed, he was speaking the truth. Wilf had been up to his arms in gruesome crockery from a plethora of greasy breakfasts.

Cutter smiled. He was glad of his cosy office. "Norton's ready," said Cutter. "He's crying for his lover."

"Want to break my heart?" whined Wilf. "I'll come this afternoon."

"Here from dawn till dusk," said Cutter. "The rest of those darned accounts..."

"Keep your sanity," said Wilf.

"The numbers are mad, not me," said Cutter. "Bye, *Wilfred*." Cutter replaced the phone with a chuckle. Wilf would rather be rid of that name.

* * * * *

Work had kept Rachael from bed till two that morning, and she slept through soundly till ten. She slept as Sue left the house at nine, and Laura slouched her way to the living-room about half an hour later.

Laura sat slumped in her dressing gown, studying a women's magazine. "Still sick?" asked Rachael, startling her with a sudden, silent appearance.

"Uh...yeah," said Laura, shuffling the pages. "Flu's kind of hanging on."

"Need anything up the shop?" asked Rachael. "Got to get some food and stuff."

"Oh," said Laura, distracted by the magazine. "Get me some fruit. Bananas."

"That all?" wondered Rachael, smiling. "You're not a monkey in the zoo. I meant something for your cold. Pastilles? I'll make a honey and lemon."

There was an uneasy pause in the living-room. Laura glanced at Rachael with bleary eyes. "A chocolate bar," she said. "And bananas. And another magazine. Here's a fiver." Laura slipped a purse from her dressing gown. She liked her cash close to hand.

"All right," said Rachael. "Which mag would you like?"

"Just this!" snapped Laura. "Same as this, *right?*" She waved the title under Rachael's nose - then froze, sorry, perplexed she had felt so edgy.

"Sure," said Rachael in a flat, disinterested voice. She took the fiver and left.

Laura clasped the magazine as if swatting a fly. Her mind was clogged with confusion. She shouldn't snap at Rachael, who was only trying to help. But her own life - her own existence - held nothing but sheer monotony. The magazine offered glamour with its glossy pages of carefree, lithographic ladies.

The sunshine and chat were just ink on paper, and she needed more than that. Her faith. She would trust it. The power of prayer. Or, should the Almighty fail her, write to the Agony Aunt.

* * * * *

There was a timid tap on the office door. "Enter," growled Cutter, expecting Grunt.

The mechanic's non-appearance was hardly a let down. With a squeak of all-over leathers, the gangly figure of Wilf Mitchell strode across the threshold. "*Customer care,*" he whined in a jokey way. "Guess Cutter's Yard's given up."

Cutter's tone changed to cheeriness as he stood to greet his friend. "Don't waste it on the workers," said Cutter. "Thought I was shouting at Mr. Grunt."

"And where be he?" asked Wilf.

"Making the clangs," said Cutter. He glanced towards the workshop, just across the yard. The pair listened to the noise with their heads cocked, as if relishing an operatic aria. They were treated to the muffled babble of the radio, several clangs and a swearword.

Wilf spotted the work on Cutter's desk. "Ah, the books," he said. "Not intruding?"

"Glad of it," said Cutter. He found two bottled beers, and prised the caps with a penknife device.

"Trouble with the sums?" asked Wilf.

"Need a bent accountant," said Cutter. "But I can't afford to pay the bastard."

Wilf took his drink, and relished the taste. His lips clenched the bottle beneath a heavy moustache. He tipped it further and further back.

Wilf was a decade older than Cutter - late forties - and cut a debonair figure in the biking world. The crisp voice suggested an air ace or art critic - although Wilf was something of a pacifist, and thought little of galleries and culture. Wilf was more interested in clubs and dancing. The art of the male body rubbing up to his.

Cutter and Wilf had worked in the same factory in the mid-1980s, when Cutter first moved to Brighton. Wilf had helped Cutter times beyond number, and Cutter in return. Cutter's bust-up with Jane 'Jackie' Kennedy - Bevendean's answer to Nancy Spungen - had resulted in a sudden, painful eviction. Wilf had put Cutter up for several

weeks, letting him sort his own problems in his own time. Wilf's boyfriends might have thought it curious, but he was loyal to the big biker despite the embarrassment the situation created.

Equally, when Wilf's special friend - David - had been confirmed HIV positive, it had been Cutter filling shifts at the Midnight Café, holding the job till grief could be borne. Cutter liked the girls, Wilf the boys. But Wilf never tried it on Cutter, and Cutter respected him for that.

Wilf had knocked back the imported brew. "How's the old soldier?" he asked.

"Old soldiers never die," said Cutter. "They simply ride away." The two went out into the concrete yard, where a patterned bedspread covered an object suspiciously like a motorbike.

"You do the honours," said Wilf.

Cutter took one corner of the drapery, and tugged it with a flourish. There was the Norton Fastback Commando, standing to attention. "Improved, tuned and tested," said Cutter. "Took him out this morning for a breath of air. Felt like a fighting force."

"Ecstatic," said Wilf. For him, this mild statement meant an outbreak of joy.

"Fancy a run?" asked Cutter. "Need an afternoon off."

"Working days getting you down?" asked Wilf.

"Working nights too," said Cutter.

"Get your machine," said Wilf. "Join me on the road."

"Bomb up to Devil's Dyke?"

"Supreme."

The two strapped themselves into helmets, and mounted their metal steeds. Each became part of their own machine, so the controls blended with their instincts. The Commando could be proud this afternoon, as they took to the road. It was an escort to Cutter's gleaming Harley-Davidson, an FXS Low Rider.

The revving jolted Grunt from his labours, and he squashed his face against the window. A feeling of nausea passed through him. Grunt was not worried by Cutter's departure, as he had been working long and hard. It was the leather-clad *Wilfred*, so frightfully debonair.

Wilf might be an old friend of Cutter's, but Grunt despised him. He hated his humour, his happiness, everything. Wilf had a confidence that Grunt could never achieve. His own attempts at cool were laughed at, while Cutter relished Wilf's persona. Grunt imagined what he could do to the squeaking, leather biker. There were lots of tools he could use.

It had been too long since Mr. Roberts felt dapper. Yes, that was the very word. It meant more than mere smartness or acquired style. Those were the off-the-peg qualities of any decent garment, to be found in any office or nightclub. But to feel *dapper*! That was something different. It was care, dexterity, an attention to detail that made this special quality.

The gold cufflinks had been trapped in their velvet-lined box for an almost cruel duration. Roberts cherished the pleasure of their gleaming release, clipping them into place. The new tie had been knotted with sculptural precision, a pin holding its position with a subtle glint. Chin shaved, moustache snipped, just the right amount of aftershave. Fingernails filed, hair gelled, then combed to moulded slickness. Breath freshened, teeth flossed, odour deodorized. Once his shoes were polished to a mahogany finish, Roberts finally discarded his slippers.

The doorbell rang. Must be the taxi. Roberts fastened the gold buttons of his navy blue blazer, and stepped into the hallway. Allowing himself a moment, Roberts took an admiring glance in his mirror. It was an antique, which he had treasured for years. The full-length glass was surrounded by smaller panes, made with a copper backing. These presented a warm border to the reflected portrait. Daniel Roberts, a dapper man.

“It’s going to be a good Christmas,” said Roberts, as he slid inside the waiting vehicle. After a drive west along the coast, the taxi stopped by the seafront hotels. Roberts took pleasure in slipping the driver an unaccustomed tip. Once he had dished out fivers like free leaflets, but that was another age. It was great to be out this Friday night - and what’s more, out with a purpose.

Roberts had just turned sixty, and was facing his pensionable years with growing dread. Had the circles of wealth and esteem departed, forever beyond his realm? Roberts had felt buoyant through his hours of preparation, before leaving for the appointment. Now the hotel loomed before him, with its lobby glowing. He was shivering on the pavement, while confident figures moved within.

Roberts felt a sudden queasiness in his stomach, a heavy pounding of the heart. He turned aside to catch his breath, hoping the doorman had not seen his condition. There...that was better. Nothing like a snort of sea air. Good old Brighton had plenty of that, with a dash of carbon monoxide. Straightening a straight-enough tie, Roberts gritted his teeth and entered.

The main lounge was an expansive landscape of armchairs, tables and potted shrubs. Pools of light picked out groups both intimate and business-like, although not the appropriate man. Well...I’m a touch early, thought Roberts. He reached the bar, and ordered a whisky to steady his nerves. Christ! You’d think I’m a wimp straight out of school, with nothing but hopes and grades. Roberts smiled at the image. Come on man, you’re here, you look dapper. You mean serious business, so do it.

Roberts strolled to find Lawson with contrived ease, although there was little mistaking the man. Lawson sat with the air of one used to luxury. He had a briefcase by his side, a cocktail on the table, and an electronic organizer of the latest design. Lawson

recognized Roberts as he approached, for he had already seen his photographic likeness. Giving a single nod of greeting, Lawson indicated the opposite chair.

“Mr. Lawson,” said Roberts in a half mumble, sinking into the upholstery. He aligned the creases of his tailored trousers with geometrical sharpness.

Lawson’s tan told of travel to brighter climes. His blond hair was ashen in places - as if age was finally dulling its sun-bleached shade - but it matched his cream linen suit. His face was lean, with a placid expression. He occasionally smiled in a rigid manner, as if the right button had been pressed.

“Daniel Roberts,” said Lawson, raising a single eyebrow and fixing Roberts with a stare.

Was it a question or a statement? Roberts could hardly tell. His throat went dry for a moment, before he managed a few simple words. “Pleased to meet you, Mr. Lawson.” Roberts took a good sip of whisky.

Lawson offered one of his mechanical smiles. Then he slipped the hi-tech gizmo into his briefcase, and produced a slim dossier. Roberts found his attention riveted, although not through curiosity. Roberts knew all about the dossier. He had written it himself.

There was no question Roberts could ask without feeling too assertive. He could only sit there, watching as Lawson mastered the situation. He wanted to drag the answer from Lawson’s thin, dry lips - but Roberts knew this was not the way. Lawson was controlling the situation as carefully as a hundred client accounts.

Roberts felt his attention wander to the fronds of palm, hanging overhead. The place was like a conservatory. What were they - real, or plastic? Very realistic, anyhow. It was a smart hotel with prices to match, but the lounge gave a small sample. Shame he couldn’t linger on a social call. He knew that chap over there...

Lawson’s voice cut into Roberts’ distraction. Perhaps Lawson had detected it, or induced it through his languorous manoeuvres. He had waited like a hungry spider, scuttling forward at the moment of its victim’s weakness.

“*Both myself...and Mr. Portman* have taken considerable interest in the plans you have put before us. The concept of a leisure centre is a good one, and has an appealing twist. We like the combination of sport and casino with quality arcade games, and an evening cabaret. However, your cash-flow and profit forecasts are biased in favour of instant success. A success neither myself nor Mr. Portman feel is by any means guaranteed.”

A dull sensation began to hit Daniel Roberts. The pain of coming disappointment. He tried to project sentences ahead of Lawson’s words, as he had tried to project the future of a booming enterprise. But Lawson’s tone implied nothing but a negative outcome. Roberts maintained perfect composure in the silence that followed. He downed the rest of his whisky to punctuate the pause.

“Mr. Portman has some sympathy with your financial situation, and acknowledges your past success. Although we feel the leisure project unsuitable in the current climate, we can tell you have a valuable imagination. Imagination, Mr. Roberts, is a commodity. It can be sold, traded, purchased like any other. Should you develop more

projects of a speculative nature, Mr. Portman and I would welcome a look. We're always interested in new ideas. We'd pay you well for the rights."

These last words came with another mechanical smile. Roberts was startled by what he had heard. His ideas were good, then? So what was the problem? Why was he being refused?

"You say...you could buy my ideas," said Roberts. "But that leaves me idle, Mr. Lawson."

"We have no other interest," said Lawson. "Your involvement would not be...the best strategy."

Roberts faltered. They were teetering on the brink of argument, yet he had to keep polite. "Mr. Lawson," implored Roberts. "I'm a *businessman*! You know the whole philosophy? I've never split creative thinking from management. My concepts need the personal touch! I'm no ego, I'm not grabbing the glory...but inspiration means perspiration. If there's a job to be done, Mr. Lawson, I believe in seeing it through. I did it with Harry, with Godwin and the Bristol boys. We worked together, made a success...not by flogging ideas off the back of a van, but sticking close as a team."

Now, it was Lawson who provided the punctuation. He sipped his cocktail with a smooth, precise motion that hid all inner response. Folding his arms across the cream jacket, he fixed Roberts with a firm but blank expression. "You understand, Mr. Roberts, that this is a public place. We use secluded, but public, places for these meetings. It prevents...unsightly scenes."

Roberts squirmed like a naughty schoolchild. He was tense beneath his dapper surface.

"We know how long that proposal took, Mr. Roberts. Despite your assurances last summer - despite the alleged desperation of your plight - it has taken over a year. Yet I look through the document, and what do I find?" Lawson waved the dossier in emphasis. "Great flair, great whimsy, no shortage of that. All manner of fancy words. But the realism, the facts, the market research? They're not to be found in these pages."

Lawson slapped the dossier down. Roberts squirmed a bit more.

"You are now aged...sixty? Sixty-one? Look at the longer term. Would you have time and energy for these airy ambitions? I don't mean the dreaming, Mr. Roberts. I mean the hard, boring work. The nuts and bolts. The discipline."

Roberts moved to speak, but the words dried in his mouth. Lawson took the cue to continue. "More ideas, Mr. Roberts? How long do we wait? A year? Two years...for another plan that might, just *might*, be adequate? I fear we would be waiting for yesterday's man. One who rises to a challenge with tired steps. When I say your ideas cost a market fee, we don't expect to sign a cheque. We don't expect anything, Mr. Roberts. We're just trying to be polite."

The one thing Roberts could not stand was manipulation. He had been in these situations before: taking things on trust, until the trust was wrenched away. His colleagues had become predators, hungry for his charms. Because that's what Roberts had. Flair, novelty, inspiration. Things those bread-head bastards despised.

"This whole meeting," muttered Roberts, "just to say that?"

“It’s not a question of saying *anything*,” said Lawson, fiddling with his cocktail stick. “More a question of...gauging your reaction.”

“Oh, *really!*” snapped Roberts, rising to his feet. “I’ve been in business forty years, Mr. Lawson, so don’t say my proposal’s inadequate. Over two decades in the entertainment trade. I know how to grab the punters.”

Lawson winced at the crude language. Punters? He wanted *clientele*.

“Is it really too much?” snorted Roberts. “The chance to shine again? Retire with a monument, not a pension. The leisure centre, Lawson. A marvel! I’d be there in my eighties propping up the bar, watching the variety shows, the roulette wheel. That’s the dream, that’s the prize, that’s the big reward. My place, my centre, my vision!”

Roberts’ eyes glared manically wide. Lawson failed to react. “You love nothing but figures on a scrap of paper. Trust that stupid calculator more than a man. I’m the man with the energy - damn you! You’re a mouldy bagful of shit!”

An embarrassed hush fell over the hotel lounge. Everyone had frozen, staring in bewilderment. Smiles flickered on the wealthy faces as they relished the curious scene. Roberts felt like a fox in a dog pack, confused by its next move. Give ’em a run for their money, he thought. He had been in showbiz, after all.

Roberts sneered at Lawson, the placid man. He grabbed a potted palm, which - in a bizarre, detached moment - he realized was artificial. Roberts yanked it brutally from its heavy base, growling like a wild animal. Lawson watched with a quiet disinterest as Roberts threw the plant towards him. It smacked the criss-cross struts of a wooden divider, which wobbled at the impact.

Roberts snarled at his gaping audience, kicking Lawson’s table. Everyone remained calm. Roberts stormed to the door ahead of a brisk waiter, cursing and spitting as he went. His grimacing fury repelled any challenge. It was better to pay the repair bill than be flattened by rage.

The waiter reached Lawson, apologizing, snapping fingers for help. “Sir, is there anything we can do? This is most unpleasant...”

Lawson brushed the waiter aside. “Just fetch another one of those,” he said, indicating the unspilt cocktail. The waiter quickly obliged.

Lawson took out a slim pocket telephone, and dialled an automatic number with a look of mild disappointment. “Michael? I tried the standard stress test. Failure. Pity really. Quite a nice chap.” Lawson nodded to himself, or the invisible Portman, as he summed up his inner feelings. “Like the leisure centre concept, but the staff make or break. Danny’s a live volcano.”

Lawson ended the call, finished his cocktail and awaited its complementary sequel. Yes, it was the staff that made the difference. Had to be reliable. Had to take failure on the chin. If Roberts could not do that, he was no good at all - however quaint his ideas. After all, thought Lawson, they had to be careful. They had a lot of money to lose. Dabbling with drugs, piracy and computer crime, they did not dabble with fools.

* * * * *

To Cutter, there was no vision in the world more beautiful than an exploded diagram of a motorcycle engine. He disliked the airbrushed or computer-sketched versions, believing their colours a tacky intrusion, the finish a gloss of falsehood. No. Cutter liked the old diagrams: detailed line drawings of mechanical parts, floating in a weightless void. Their clarity was astonishing, the shapes intricate beyond the capacity of memory. Drawn by the most meticulous draughtsmen, thought Cutter, as his eyes drank in the lines. Clerkish 1950s types, scratching away in some dowdy premises in a provincial factory lane. He pictured them chugging home on good, sturdy machines. British bikes like the Ariel Square Four, with maiden typists riding pillion - hanging on for dear life. Cutter warmed to the imaginary couple, just like his own mum and dad.

Cutter's father had worked in a Manchester drawing office, specializing in less glamorous items. Cutter still had some of the catalogues, and admired their letterpress printing. Basins, pipes and u-bends were hatched with an almost gothic sensibility.

Cutter sat on his armchair in the grubby living-room, with the standard lamp shining over his shoulder. He studied the motorcycle manuals with transcendent devotion, noting every curve and connection. Cutter was seeking a conceptual understanding of what lay before him. He was surgeon to this steel anatomy, tracing with evermore clarity the maladjustments to health and performance.

Cutter sipped coffee, eyes riveted, reading technical language like classical verse. No. This was greater than anything mere literary art could offer. These words were *real*. Their form was at one with their function. Each was a vital part. Crankshafts and gaskets, washers and screws. Their linkage was conveyed through written language, a parallel to solid engineering. Each word was part of a sentence. The sentence was a verbal machine.

"Bollocks!" spat Grunt, rocking on the sofa. Cutter chose to ignore the outburst but, in the very process of decision, let it disturb the stillness of his concentration. The manuals needed an atmosphere of hush - like the Bible - and Grunt was spoiling the scene. Cutter lowered one of the volumes, regarding his lodger with the air of a disdainful psychiatrist.

"Feeling pain?" asked Cutter, ruefully.

"All these bits," snorted Grunt. He pointed at the table with its chess-board top, covered by his labour. Grunt's assembly of a motorcycle model had resulted in a sad, sagging parody of the box-top image. Grunt's work with the polystyrene cement had blurred, even merged, several engine parts into a biomechanical mess of H.R. Giger complexity.

"Stick to the real thing," said Cutter, tapping the cover of his manual.

"Looked fun," said Grunt. "Brilliant kit! Good on the mantelpiece."

"If that loathsome runt even nears the mantelpiece," said Cutter, "I'll melt it into plastic rashers."

"Not *that* bad..." Grunt murmured, toying with the miniature machine. Its makers would have cried Japanese tears.

Cutter left his manuals for the moment. Better get this nonsense straight. "Put it this way," he said, with a charming smile. Cutter performed a close-up inspection of the model, and gave his final verdict.

“You know those fellows who fumble through jumble sale comics, after some tedious, bedraggled back issue? Pale, pasty men with pimples? You know the ones I mean?”

Grunt grunted.

“If one of those was a superhero - with a Bat-Cave or Spider-Web deep in his council estate - he wouldn't drive a Batmobile. No. He wouldn't ride a Spider-Scooter. He'd just have a bike like this. The Andy 'Grunt' Sloan blobby banger special with bendy handlebars, wonky wheels and droopy-draws exhaust.”

Cutter backed away as if fearing infection. He tucked the manuals behind the cushion of his chair, and left the room in silence.

Grunt stared at his model, so rudely insulted, while Cutter strode out through the yard. Keys jingled, the street door opened, Cutter slammed it hard. The gates rattled with the impact as Grunt sat brooding. He could hear the click of heels on the road.

Sue opened the door, Phil followed. The sound of television welcomed them like laughter from a playroom. "Back to the mad house," said Sue, closing out the cool night air. She straightened her 'unique' headgear, then popped it on a peg nearby.

"Seen madder!" said Phil, removing his long brown coat. He smoothed his hair by a mirror near the telephone table. Cheeky postcards decorated the rim.

"Go in...I'll fetch some coffee," said Sue, nodding towards the living-room.

"Who's home?" Phil asked. "*Rachael?*"

"Probably Laura. You remember Laura?"

"Ah. The cross-eyed Christian."

"Say hello," said Sue. "She wasn't too well." Sue lowered her voice. "*Depressed.*"

"Cheery," said Phil in mock despair. "Lovely end to the day."

"Go on!" Sue urged with needling glee. "Your coffee's in jeopardy, Phil."

Phil conceded defeat with a wry smile, doing what he was told. Sue followed him to the living-room, peeping in as he entered. Yes...there was Laura, maybe feeling better. She sat comfy on the sofa in a long skirt and sweatshirt, a touch of make-up on her face. Laura offered an inaudible greeting, and Phil nodded in a loose, lanky way. Better make that three coffees - even four, thought Sue. Her eyes rolled towards the ceiling, and the other housemate.

Time was shrinking for Rachael as she worked on the canvas. Her sketching stage was over, and the painting had begun. Slabs of pigment gave a basis for the colouration, spread with a palette knife and spiky brush. There was no method in her progression, no particular technique. Rachael would stare at an area in deep concentration, visualize its desired appearance, then match the visualization in a desperate onslaught of paint.

The staring lasted longer than the onslaught, which often missed the mark. The result could be a wave of emotion rather than an expressive stroke. Rachael was seeking a verisimilitude of texture, tone - and above all, atmosphere. A finish to her painting that would finish her nightmares, absorbing their baleful energies. Art, after all, was artifice - and artifice was not real. If this took layer upon layer of acrylic paint, great blisters of impasto, so be it. Better to burn the obsession in a short-term frenzy than let it haunt her mind forever.

Even frenzy had to take a break, and Rachael lowered her tools. Each day brought a punishing schedule, and Wednesday was no exception. Following a late lunch around half-past two, she had been going full blast ever since. Just tea and biscuits in an eight-hour stretch? No good for a working girl.

Hadn't someone come in a moment ago? Probably Sue and a college friend. Hope they aren't stuck in the kitchen, thought Rachael. She liked her privacy right now. But desire for food was uppermost, and Rachael gave in to hunger. Sighing heavily with satisfied frustration, she jingled her brush in water.

Sue peered at the coffee granules. Hardly enough for one. She shook the last few into her favourite mug before twisting open a new jar. Maybe Phil would have a chat with Laura, who had missed several days' work. Hard to say which caused which, the depression or the flu. Either way, Laura was down in the dumps.

Romance? That was a joke between Phil and herself. Sue had thought of it during the long summer holiday, which cut a ten-week chasm between the first and second years. They had enjoyed that gallery trip to London, then the slow cruise down the river. All the time, Sue had felt Phil's amused reactions to her feeble humour - and her genuine giggles at his - had left a lasting impression.

But Phil returned unchanged from his parents in Wimbledon. Yes, still his old, friendly self. Still passionate about art. But his hello to Sue had been nothing more than friendly. Just the hello between acquaintances who had parted awhile. They had still got on, she had asked him to the party...combining Sue's twenty-first birthday, Bonfire Night and Welcome Back to Art School. Phil had come, nice chat - but as Sue remembered, he had been drawn to the mysterious Rachael. Sue fumed for a moment, thinking how hard she tried.

Rachael lurked in her garret, dodging romance, but she had things in common Phil. They were both heavy theorists when it came to their art, taking hours in deliberation. Sue had a far lighter touch, and an instinctive flexibility. Phil's ideas on performance were keen and sincere, although Sue found the results somewhat ludicrous. Phil made what he called 'satirical costumes' - decorated overalls - which he hoped to display in galleries and wear during live shows. A few props, taped music, although the format never varied. Phil stomped around spouting a semi-poetic rant, clinking and clanking like a scrap metal Morris Man. The intention was a profound display of visual intellect, combining elements of Constructivism and dance. The result was a clumsy charade.

Rachael entered the kitchen, breaking Sue's train of thought. Maybe she had heard Phil and come to see him, or just wanted a change of scene. Rachael's sleeves were smeared with greenish paint as if partly camouflaged. She must be busy on her canvas.

"Coffee, Rach?" asked Sue, putting her doubts aside. The trick made her a highly amenable housemate. The talent was much in need.

Rachael frowned, considering the question like a troubling teaser. "Don't know. I'm really hungry," she said. "Might do a beans on toast."

"Phil's in there with Laura. Want to join us?" asked Sue. "Think he'd like a chat."

"Oh - I'm not sure," said Rachael.

"He likes your insight, Rachael. Wants to know more. He's sick of my chit-chat. What's Laura's been saying...?" Sue gazed at Rachael, expecting her mood to brighten.

"Mmm. Insight?" murmured Rachael. "I don't know, Susie. Need my head to myself."

Susie? It should have been friendly, but Rachael's slow and vacuous delivery gave the endearment a weary edge. Sue observed Rachael with an almost sisterly concern. Her face had turned pasty, and her figure was dishevelled and worn. She fiddled nervously with her messy hair, where droplets of paint bound strands into mini-dreadlocks.

Sue had to say something. Her friend was falling apart. "You look shattered, Rachael. You're working too hard."

"I'm doing what I can," said Rachael. "We all work hard. So do you, so does Trish and the wonderful Phil..."

“I work *hard*,” nodded Sue, “but I know how to pace it. My stuff’s positive, uplifting, bright side of things - like Peter Blake in the sixties. But your focus, Rachael. It’s obsessive. All this darkness. This *ritual*. It’s unhealthy.”

“Just my nightmare,” said Rachael. “Just getting it down.”

“But the *stress*,” said Sue. “It’s too much.” She wiped the rim of a mug before spooning in some coffee. “Little and often, Rachael. Lighten up! It’s bad enough with Laura’s preaching.”

“Thank you, *Mother!*” snapped Rachael, with sudden spite. She glared at her worried friend.

Phil let his eyes roll around the living-room, interested in each and every detail. He had only seen it at the bonfire party, when the lights were low and the place crowded. There was a cosy, cared-for atmosphere - unlike his own shabby digs. It would be nice to find a room here. Did they want a man about the house?

Phil was unsure what to say to Laura, who he hardly knew. It felt wrong to jolly her along, yet he wasn’t here to start moaning. She looked more relaxed this evening, he thought. The rest must have done her good. It had taken tension from her brow, tightness from her lips. She was a lot prettier than he had realized.

Laura snuggled against a large, puffy cushion, checking the listings of a TV guide. “Watch the news after this?” she murmured. A sit-com burred in the corner.

“Seen it before,” said Phil.

“What, the comedy?” asked Laura.

“No...the news,” said Phil. “Repeats.”

Laura looked quizzical for a moment. But she failed to suppress a smile.

However, there was not much mirth in the kitchen. “Excuse *me*,” Sue whispered, trembling inside. She was flinching from Rachael’s sarcasm.

“It’s my business,” hissed Rachael. “I’ll sort it. You’ve no right to question me.”

“I’m not,” said Sue. “I’m not prying. Just hate to see you upset.”

“Oh...*upset*, am I?” snarled Rachael. “Nothing to what’s in my mind, Sue. Nothing to what’s in here!” Rachael poked a finger at her temple and spun towards the door. Her fair hair flicked behind her.

“Where you going?” asked Sue, who kept perfectly polite despite the fierce barracking she had received. Not that she wanted to conceal her emotion. Sue felt pain more than tension and rage.

“I can’t put up with this tonight,” said Rachael, her voice struggling for composure. “I know Phil. He’ll pester me, nag, nag, nag...what am I doing, what’s it all about? But I can’t talk, Sue. Can’t tell you or anyone.”

Sue nodded slightly, in sympathy. Rachael found a moment of calm. “I’m...look, sorry. I’m just so intense,” she said. “The painting. I’ll be fine when the damn thing’s done. Got to keep it in my head, get it down on canvas. So understand what I’m *saying!*”

Rachael’s face convulsed with the last sentence, her voice rising like the hiss of a venomous snake. Then she looked weak, drained, as if ready to cry. Rachael shook the mood aside with a rush of willpower, and stormed out to the hall. She donned her quilted anorak with angry, thrashing motions, and quickly left the house.

The slam shook the very foundations, sounding as a deep bass note. Laura blinked, Phil frowned, while Sue stood alone. Her features were tearful and hurt.

* * * * *

Cutter stood at the counter of the Midnight Café, holding his tea like a pint of beer. It was nearly as strong - but with a final gulp, Cutter was ready for another. It spouted from the nozzle of the great silver urn, before milk clouded its hidden depths. "Most welcome," said Cutter, gripping the mug. It resembled a china tankard.

Wilf dropped the coins into a clattery till. "Anything else?" he asked.

"I'm thinking," said Cutter. "Slack tonight?"

Wilf looked around the steamy premises. There was a lively pair by the window, a morose old man - but the place was otherwise empty. "Middle of the week," Wilf nodded. "Better Fridays. Surprised to see you here."

Cutter grinned. A pinboard had a mass of business cards, jostling in a colourful patchwork. 'Cutter's Yard' was among them, and a new one - 'Benny's Bikes'. It was printed on bright yellow cardboard, with a stiff drawing of a chopper and 'Way to Go!' in Coca-Cola style lettering. Cutter wrenched it from the board with casual arrogance, and scrunched it in his hand. If Wilf noticed this minor sabotage, he offered little objection.

"I love the Yard," said Cutter, "and Grunt's a decent lad. Yet one could wish for better company, sitting late of an evening."

Wilf laughed. A tooth glinted with a touch of silver beneath his drooping moustache. The effect suggested a pirate chief. "Your Gruntling's blunt in his ways," said Wilf. "Doesn't think much of me."

Cutter snorted. "You know why, Wilf. Doesn't appreciate diversity. I'm as gay as a Goth funeral, yet we've always spoken with courtesy and treated each other with respect."

"Yes. He's never nasty," said Wilf. "Just grunts."

"Vocabulary's distinctly lacking," said Cutter. "His words fit like jigsaw bits mangled by the dog."

"But you find his society...amusing?" asked Wilf. His tone evoked Oscar Wilde.

"There's fun to be made, Wilf, I'll grant you," said Cutter. His tone was detectably crueller. "We laugh at, not with, the Gruntling."

Wilf took a Kit Kat from the glass cabinet. He snapped a stick and held it like a slim cigar. "But he brings in money. His work?"

"Just about."

"And his rent?" asked Wilf.

"Just about."

"Got to learn to lump it," said Wilf.

"Not my favourite lesson," said Cutter. He took a stick of Kit Kat and dunked it in his tea.

Another customer was waiting, so Wilf chomped the rest of the wafer. "Talk later, when I take my break."

“Mmm. Give me a Number Two fry-up,” said Cutter, moving to a nearby table. Hunger. The word flashed in Rachael’s mind as she walked the streets of Brighton, with no aim or purpose to her journey. She passed burger bars and take-aways, though none were very inviting. There must be something better, in this dense-packed town. Anyway, the walk was doing her plenty of good. The air brought its own refreshment.

Round the steep curve of Terminus Road, past the railway station and the beggars of the underpass. Down through the North Laine, so bright and relaxed in daytime, so hushed and empty at night. Rachael would find what she was looking for, somewhere, however many twists and turns it took. She was hardly sensing, hardly seeing. Driven to walk alone.

Her eyes were fixed on the middle distance, waiting for something to come into sight. The welcome light of a place unknown: somewhere to sit, unrushed, to unwind in the warm. Somewhere without any hassle.

Rachael noticed a blur at the edge of her vision, and slowed to an inquisitive stop. A blue glow gave the alley a mood of spookiness. She dared herself to enter the weather-beaten passage, and found its source of luminescence. Just a short stroll away, along a redbrick path, shone the sign of the Midnight Café.

It did not seem very busy. There was an old man in the corner, and others dotted around. Some bearded guy by the chalked-up menu gorged on a huge fry-up. Looks perfect, thought Rachael, and the prices weren’t bad. She walked to the counter, removing her anorak. The place was as hot and humid as a tropical greenhouse.

“Double egg and chips, fried slice!” yelled Wilf, deep into the bowels of the kitchen. The customer took his coffee, moving aside, and Rachael was next in line. Since the menu was a scrawl of hieroglyphic complexity, she made an obvious choice.

“Er...what’s that?” asked Rachael, pointing to the great greasy meal currently being consumed nearby.

“Number Two fry-up!” said Wilf with a grin. “Best in town, true enough?”

Cutter glanced up, his cheeks bulging with food. He was too stuffed to speak. He still spoke, though. “Best there is,” he managed in a muffled voice. “Highly recommended.”

“What about the...Number *One* fry-up?” asked Rachael. There were looks of utter disbelief.

Wilf leant forward with a raised eyebrow. “*No-one*,” he said, “orders the Number One fry-up. Not without grievous need.”

“*Desperation*,” said Cutter. “Two’s more than plenty. Two can bust any gut.”

“Sounds great,” said Rachael. “Number Two, then. Need a serious gut-bust. Oh, and coffee.”

“Joined the Marines?” asked Cutter, puzzling Rachael. He pointed at her green-smearred jumper. “Love the khaki camouflage. Joined the Fastback Commandos?”

“That’s just paint,” said Rachael, taking her change. Wilf yelled at the kitchen again.

“Paint?” frowned Cutter. “You’re painting yourself?”

“Not exactly,” sighed Rachael. Hadn’t she escaped all this?

“I’m curious,” said Cutter. “But no pressure. Tell me in your own time.” Cutter pushed a chair from under the table so it seemed to move by itself.

* * * * *

Grunt finished his motorbike model at some godforsaken hour. The ashtray was surrounded by cigarette stubs, with one or two on target. It had been ten past twelve last time he had looked. The clock ticked on through the bitter night, exploring its obscure chronology.

Still no Cutter. How long was that? Too long. The pubs had closed ages ago. Probably off with mates down the Lost Souls nightclub, or crashing at some beer-drenched party with a bundle of deadbeat drongos.

So this was it. Grunt’s night-life. Alive and at night, yes, but scoring zero on the excitement scale. Still...the Yard was empty, all to himself. He had prowled its nooks and crannies, slurping a can of lager, thinking about his future. It didn’t look bright.

Grunt looked at the four walls of the living-room, suddenly resenting its posters, its books, its shabby furniture. He remembered Mum’s in Portslade, to the west of Hove. Medusa’s daughter, he called her, for Granny was Medusa. Christ, she looked the part!

The *luxury* of that council house compared to this. The loving care lavished on its decoration, despite a grey and modest exterior. Not posh, thought Grunt. He wouldn’t say that. But a palace next to Cutter’s charity shop decor. Soft chairs, cushions, colour TV...sandwiches made to order, loafing around. Shame about the violent rows.

Grunt had slapped her. Poor cow deserved it. Mum was always moaning away. Wipe yer oily hands, mind this, mind that. The film had started, but would you believe? She had nagged worse than ever before. He had been perfectly fair. He had warned her. He had said, “Mum, please - [SLAP!] - please shut it.” So the bitch got dizzy and fell on the floor. Dad couldn’t blame him for everything.

Dad was dead, thank God. Electric shock. Not-so-handy about the house. Grunt had left by then. Well, booted out. Dismal job in a warehouse. Mum had sort of forgiven him, though he seldom saw her. He saw Medusa when money was tight.

So this was it. His destiny. Lackey to that smart-arse Cutter, the walking attitude problem. Despite his wisdom, the boss had lost more jobs than a hit man with a water pistol. Grunt hated things, but he did not moan. He just took the little motorbike, placed it on the floor and began to stamp very hard.

I’ll have fun, Clever Cutter, thought Grunt. I’ve got another clever friend. He’s got plans! I’ll have money soon. Can’t wait till Friday night.

With the coming of December, Roberts found his lone existence in the cliff-top villa an increasingly philosophical one. The anger of rejection had grown in him - burned in him - after the disastrous meeting with Lawson. Roberts had stalked the plush carpets of his expansive home, shadow-boxing Lawson and the unseen Portman. He had tapped them on the chin, the nose, right hook, left hook - sometimes swiping savagely, just missing the wall, on other occasions not. Roberts' bruised knuckles attested to this lunacy, and he had found the willpower to calm himself. There was much solace in the villa's splendid sea view. At least this wouldn't drain his wallet.

Roberts had always loved the coast. Not the bustling beaches of Brighton itself, but the bracing heights of the chalk cliffs as they stretched away towards Eastbourne. The infamous Beachy Head had claimed many a life. So many, the Samaritans had a signpost offering their patient services.

Once the frenzy had faded, Roberts turned to his old pleasures. He would savour a slow cigar, and relish the glow of a port or sherry. It was true he had little money, but stocks of these pleasures were good. Roberts would sit on the veranda of his cherished home, relishing the peace of mind. He remembered the barbecues he had held here, the wonderful parties. He sent few invitations now.

Peacehaven was a visionary, utopian development created between the wars, and this was one of its finer houses. Founder Charles Neville had planned a garden city by the sea, and built his own utopia. To many, it was nothing but suburban sprawl, although Roberts had found a haven of peace. His home combined the sweep of Art Deco styling with the gleaming whiteness of a Spanish villa.

The house was around four miles east of Brighton, and commanded a fine prospect of the English Channel. There were just yards between the veranda and undulating chalk, with a narrow cliff-top lane. Roberts had moved here in the late 1970s, when his showbiz days were fading. But his cash could still buy property, with mortgage a dirty word. He hated a death bet over his head.

The cloud shadows were great patches of slate blue, in contrast to the silver sparkle of sunlit waves. Roberts thought of the towns and cities that covered the land, with their trivial rantings and bickerings. How insubstantial and flimsy they were, against the measure of this aqueous continent. How quickly would their chatterings be silenced by its rolling tides, gushing through the streets. The sea had been a constant inspiration to Roberts, calming his whiplash swings of temperament. It had kept his mind broad and vision sharp. Yes, he still had the old zest.

Lawson had accused him of dawdling: of failing to draft the leisure concept to a tighter timescale. But where was Lawson's vision, or Portman's? They could never build a dream by squinting at figures, minds numb to innovation. Their types put the *grey* into business, the *dull* into professional. Where was the spirit? The magic? Nowhere. No boldness, no risk, no snap decisions. How could they misconceive his plans so badly? Dismiss his charisma, his patter, his *showmanship*? Qualities that had taken him to the top!

A wave of righteous indignation pulsed through Roberts, as vivid as a sudden fit. "No!" he gasped, with a pounding head. His sight became grainy for a second. Roberts

gripped the veranda wall for steadiness, stubbing his cigar on its gritty texture. Deep breaths of salty air recovered his mental clarity.

Good job he had bought the house, thought Roberts. He could thank his younger self for that. How pitiful he would seem to his younger self, if the two could ever meet. Roberts Junior had always had his problems, but nothing to worry about. 'Defty' Dan could get out of anything. Couldn't keep a good man down!

Fate proved a harsh mistress. Things had gone drastically wrong. There were new schemes, new businesses, keen new colleagues - and, yes, Roberts had maintained a reasonable existence. But gone were the long holidays, sleek shiny cars and suits tailored on a whim. Nothing ever hit it big again, once Roberts had lost his way. There had been more troubles, and enemies made. Not all the businesses were kosher.

Time passed. The glorious era became a fading glow - eclipsed by the memory of a compromised future, itself becoming the past. It had been Roberts' greatest comfort in life. When this had been so for five years, then ten, yesterday's glamour was a distant haze. It was a miserable low for Roberts, who realized the last days of Roberts Junior were gone. These were the early days of Roberts Senior. Imagine the dreary status of Roberts R.I.P.

Roberts stood quaking at the very prospect. The sure reasoning of the senior man took over, as a sea breeze rippled his snowy hair. His mood was calm again, with the anger held in check. This was not the way. He knew it. Only plotting, patience and planning would get him out of this hole.

"Need a drink," said Roberts, heading inside. He reached the bar with medicinal urgency, and poured a short sharp shot. Roberts drained it in a single gulp.

The phone warbled on the coffee table, waking the answerphone. "Hello. You've reached Daniel Roberts. I'm a busy man, but I'll listen after the beep."

"Still waiting for my cheque," said a husky voice, calling on a crackly line. "Waiting, waiting...what did you say? Shouldn't have to call like this. You'd better keep your end of the deal, right? I delivered. Never let you down. I know the pattern. Should have been a pay out. Not talking lottery, but not talking pennies. You blown it, Robby? I'll tell him. No, I'll tell him *again!*"

The voice disintegrated in a burst of static, before the phone was slammed into silence. Roberts cancelled the message. He knew who the caller was. Money, thought Roberts. It was always money. He often shielded his calls.

Roberts had bills spread on the tabletop. The brown envelopes were crumpled like ancient parchment. Some could be stalled. Some had been, and would not wait again. What were the choices? Sell up, pay the lot? It was certainly a zero option. But he could not end his days in some dismal flat, built for the late in life. He had seen the billboards with silver-haired couples, grinning to the grave. There had to be a better way.

How could he raise some cash - say, ten or twelve grand - just to keep the wolf from the door? Try Lawson again? Never. He had rather smack him in the mouth. But another venture capitalist, with money to burn. That would buy time to relax, and re-shape his plans. Time to make a real fortune.

Roberts knew the pitfalls now, through bitter experience. He would not promise ahead of completion, or exaggerate his claims. Snivelling little slime-ball though Lawson

was, he had made a few valid points. Roberts would bide his time, wait for the opportune moment. Then, hey presto! Out with the new proposals, out with the Roberts magic.

For the first time since the Lawson meeting, Roberts felt a real surge of optimism. He had been through the darkest hour. He had seen the despair that lurked there, and knew it was not for him.

Just an idea, thought Roberts. That's what I need. If life is a journey, there's a river to cross. I need a bridge to the paradise ahead.

* * * * *

Rachael turned down the cul-de-sac of neglected buildings. There were cats scavenging near dustbins, while the pavement was cracked and uneven. The cars were old and dusty, as if parked and forgotten. The street was deserted this Friday afternoon. It did not invite many visitors.

Cutter's Yard gave the impression of a renegade outpost. Its double gates were firmly closed, although there was a smaller door set into one of them. This had been left ajar. Rachael could hear loud metallic crashes, echoing within. Then a soft, almost musical tinkle and the clang of a heavy tool.

Variations on this soundtrack continued as Rachael reached the narrow door. She had a flat square package which was awkward to hold. A bag hung loose on her shoulder. Rachael had worn jeans today, and an old denim jacket. She did not want to smudge anything smart in these filthy premises.

Rachael's necklace rattled as she edged round the door, first one eye, then another. She recoiled from the acrid smells of petroleum and oil, but recoil would not help her much. Cutter was scrabbling in a mass of metal junk, strewn all over the concrete. He tossed bits in a tin, others the bin. Silently, Rachael approached.

Perhaps Cutter had seen a movement from the corner of his eye, or heard the faintest scuffle. For he stopped rummaging in a battered toolbox. A hand hovered close to his knife.

Cutter rose with a smooth, hydraulic ease. His head rotated with suspenseful deliberation. The eyes were lost behind mirror-shades. Rachael could see her distorted reflections in their purple lenses. They were tiny and distant, like twin baby dolls. Cutter's mouth displayed a smile of wonder and a sneer of shock, somehow intermingled.

So the girl stood before him. Her eyes were keen and alert. Cutter had never thought she would come. He scratched his grey beard as he loomed above her, struck dumb for the moment. Cutter's leather waistcoat resembled a half-shed skin over a stained, grime-smeared T-shirt. The sleeves were short for such cool weather, yet Cutter liked to brave the elements. His work produced warmth aplenty.

Whose line now, mused Rachael. Her own, perhaps. She was the newcomer, after all. "I brought my painting," she said, raising the paper-wrapped package. All was secret inside.

Cutter let the bias of his expression tilt to a smile. It revealed his teeth with the tease of a stripper, unzipping her dress to the corset. "Fine to see you here, Miss Stanwick," said Cutter. "I'm having a sort-out. Drastic."

"Does that include the cubby-hole?" asked Rachael. "You said I could work there, if I liked."

"Made it top priority," said Cutter. "Spartan, but somewhere to hide." He signalled Rachael to follow. She stepped nimbly through the scattered ironware, and reached the door of the workshop. They entered its dim interior.

Grunt was fitting new spokes onto a damaged wheel, with a small lamp shining on his work. Orange light etched the profile of his grim-set features, the scene evoking a blacksmith's forge. Grunt looked up, and blinked at the silhouettes outlined by the cooler daylight. As his vision adjusted to the relative brightness, it revealed details of bulky Cutter and a wraith-like girl. He had never seen *her* before.

"This is Andrew," said Cutter. "But you may call him Grunt."

Grunt did not like this, and tried a clever rebuff. The words failed to form before he moved his lips, proving the name's validity.

Ignoring his surly mechanic, Cutter nudged Rachael further into the workshop. They passed crates, tyres and disabled bikes. Cutter stopped by a plastic curtain of coloured strips, which concealed a door to the right.

"In here," said Cutter. He flipped the outer light-switch. Rachael hesitated for a second, then entered. The strips rustled like pampas grass.

Rachael dropped her shoulder bag with a soft thud, and placed the flat square package in a corner. Cutter appeared through the plastic strips, like a ghost walking through the wall.

It was a small place no bigger than a bathroom. Bare rafters crossed the ceiling, while an electrical meter ticked quietly by the fuse-box. There was no natural light except a glimmer through an airbrick. The floor was concrete, the same as the workshop.

"I'll have shelves soon," said Cutter, "and a workbench." His voice bounced with a slight acoustic. "Need hi-fis and radios, TVs and videos. Get 'em cheap, fix 'em, flog 'em. Another branch to the firm."

Rachael nodded. "Looks ideal."

"Place full of junk?" shrugged Cutter. "Wasted. I want Cutter's Yard running smooth."

Rachael circled the room in a tight motion, given its confined space. Cutter moved in unison, so the girl could see every angle. It resembled a courtship dance.

"How long can I stay?" asked Rachael.

Cutter scowled at the electrical meter. "How long's your painting?"

"Quick as I can," sighed Rachael. She touched the package with the tip of her scuffed boot.

"As long as you like," said Cutter. "My pleasure to see your work."

"You want to?" asked Rachael, brightening in tone. Her hands moved to the brown paper wrapping.

“No,” said Cutter, with deliberation. Then his voice softened to an understanding tone. “My privilege must wait till the finish. Only your final vision will do.”

Rachael froze. Cutter seemed to sense her methods, for he spoke with real affinity. The days of long intensity would clear a burning obsession. Cutter looked at her with knowledge: an awareness of her deep anxiety. Perhaps he knew it must reign within her - though how, she could hardly tell. Cutter, thought Rachael. What a name. Must be a cutting intellect.

Rachael moved away from the painting. She hoped to probe the biker some more. “I can see why Grunt’s called *Grunt*,” said Rachael. “But why do they call you *Cutter*?”

There was a short silence between them. Had Rachael shattered the spell of sincerity? Had she pushed curiosity too far? But Cutter needed time to clarify his thoughts, and was proud to give a reply. “Nobody called me Cutter,” he said. “It’s my legal name, taken for the right degree of class.”

“What did you do?” asked Rachael.

“My party piece,” said Cutter.

“Something dangerous...?”

“Practice made perfect,” said Cutter. “It was a duty, Rachael. A discipline.” The biker stood tall and erect.

Rachael could not resist a giggle, despite the mythic quality of Cutter’s words. “I’d sure like to see it,” she smiled, hoping he would not take offence.

“I’m flattered,” said Cutter. “But be patient. Concentrate on your work. Show me when it’s ready, Rachael. Perhaps we can amaze each other.”

“I hope I can,” said Rachael.

“I *know* you can,” smiled Cutter. “A splendid time is guaranteed for all.”

While she felt somewhat bemused by his strange manner, Rachael was grateful for Cutter’s help. “Okay,” she nodded. “I’ll do fine in here. No-one poking around!”

“Great chance,” said Cutter. “I’ll lend you a lamp.”

“I...haven’t got an easel,” frowned Rachael.

“Never you mind,” said Cutter. “Andrew Gruntling will oblige.”

But Rachael paused before the awkward question. “Er...what about the rent?”

Cutter looked startled. What was she thinking? He peered over his mirror-shades like a respectable publican, querying an underage drinker. “The...rental?” he mused.

“Can’t spare a lot,” said Rachael.

Cutter sighed. “We all want money, Miss Stanwick. That’s the way of the world. But no true outlaw takes pennies from an angel.”

Roberts' ears were submerged in the warm lagoon of deep, blue-tinged water. They could still hear the lively jazz pulsating from the lounge. Indeed, he had built quite a collection: LPs, 78s and - more recently - compact disc re-issues of the classic recordings.

Sometimes, Roberts preferred the silence. Sometimes, confusion could not tell him which way to turn. He needed the stillness of the night, the quiet of the day, as counterpoints to his busy mind. With decisions pondered, then carefully made, he was able to give into the music. Roberts let it beat lively in his pleased ears, subduing mind and body in an audio massage. Rhythm combined with the heat of soothing, aromatic water - evoking tropical beaches in faraway lands, all in a Peacehaven bathroom.

Still, this was quite a bathroom. Roberts had not skimmed on fixtures and fittings - at least, when the money flowed. Ceramics were a matching sandy beige, reflected in tall mirrors steamed to a pearly frost. These doubled his shining collection of ornate glassware: tinted, illuminated bottles, both classical and modern in design.

This was the best way to tackle a problem. Far better than bashing away in the conscious mind, becoming flustered in the process. Relax the tired old body, let the inspiration flow. Distract the senses with stimulating comfort, so the deeper intellect could work.

Steam rolled into the passage like an indoor storm-cloud, as Roberts emerged from this prolonged soak. His body was pink, glowing and naked except for the towel round his waist. Steamy tendrils curled from his outstretched arms, as if he was newly born from the elements. The bathroom heat had brought sweat to his brow. It was a novel sensation in winter.

Roberts decided to cool before dressing, and walked slowly down the plush hall carpet. Halogen bulbs defined pictures and photographs in sharp triangles of light. The jazz grew louder. There was a stylish riff, towards the end of the final track. The laser slid to standby with an undetectable whirr. Silence, and the steam.

Roberts passed the photographs on a daily basis, for he could scarcely avoid the bathroom. One of the images caught his eye. As can happen with the very familiar, its absence would have struck him more forcefully. It was a momentary fragment of his past.

Roberts had reason to ignore the photograph, and might have removed it for good. Yet it was difficult to shed this remnant, given the truth it had to conceal. The image was a constant warning, illustrating a personal belief. Never take anything at face value, trust no-one all the way.

Roberts continued to stare, mesmerized. His eyes were locked in fascination. Incredible to think that moment in 1960 had been preserved by chemicals and paper. But there it was! The Goldmans' party, caught in black and white. Harry and his agent, Danny Junior, in a roomful of admiring guests. A night of radiant triumph, snapped by the London press.

Roberts had always been amazed by photography. It was a kind of magic, in its way. Maybe he had always been gullible. There they were, grinning in 1960 - and still

grinning over thirty years on. He was a much older Daniel Roberts. Roberts Senior, in fact.

He had replaced many of the photographs with abstract prints, to complement his musical tastes. Artists improvised with shape and colour, just like jazzmen with trumpet and sax. Besides, the studio portrait of Harry had annoyed him. It held no hint of a darker motive, with its slick and smug depiction. Another shot, of Harry accepting his award at the Society Of Magical Entertainers, rubbed salt into gaping wounds.

Shaking himself from this reverie, Roberts moved down the hall. He closed the living-room curtains, blocking the pale backdrop of a coastal dusk. Switching on the main lights, he pressed his CD player to repeat the disc. Then he donned a dressing gown and slippers, and poured a dry Martini.

But Roberts could not resist a closer look at the photograph. He returned to the hall with his glass in hand, like an intense critic at an art gallery. This was his private view. Roberts tried to divine the deepest details, and probe the precise proportions. There was a lot to see in that black and white snapshot. He had never looked so hard.

Harry was tall, lean and a little weary - although his face appeared happy enough. The emotion may have been genuine. Harry was still wearing his suit from the stage performance: a dinner jacket, waistcoat, frilled shirt and dicky-bow. One hand held a nibble from the buffet. Roberts had stripped to his shirtsleeves, with a loosened tie. Sweat was visible on his brow. He was a touch chubby, but little different from the cheeky teenager who had entered the profession. The image captured a moment of innocence before cynicism, tragedy and despair. There was hope in that simple fact.

The background figures intrigued Roberts, like grainy phantoms. They stirred buried memories of conversations, and fleeting friendships vanished for years. That woman - Valerie - leaning against the wall, smiling in a little black number. What an awful beehive hairdo! They were all the rage back then. George was half cut by the edge of the frame, and looked past the photograph's border. What had caught his attention? Who could ever know?

Without any sense of indulgence, Roberts studied his younger self. He caught the eyes of his photographic likeness, as if beholding a cherished son. For an instant, Roberts saw the life in those eyes. He shared the youthful drive, the boundless energy. He had lost both sensations, and strained to recreate them. But he would never begrudge them of his junior.

* * * * *

Roberts had got that break with some persistence. He had been seventeen, and sick of school. They had also been sick of him. Roberts had banged the door of the Leicester Playhouse, day after day. They had no option but to give him a job, or call the local constable. Knowing how useful such doggedness might be, the manager had made Roberts a backstage gofer. Changing light bulbs, tugging curtains and holding cue cards were hardly the most glamorous tasks.

Mr. Collins had been a sombre man, but a shrewd judge of character and public taste. He had recognized that eager sparkle in Roberts' eye, and known it would thrive

on work. Roberts had gained a grounding in solid graft and an awareness of theatrical basics.

Help beyond the call of duty cemented Roberts' position, during a tummy bug that floored the staff. Roberts worked through his illness, becoming assistant stage manager in 1955. This proved a constantly challenging role, and brought contact with many a touring thespian and variety act. Finding their endless yarns so amusing, Roberts would leave jobs to the last minute - earning the nickname 'Defty' Danny as he sprinted to sort things out.

These practical chores were an increasing hindrance, to one whose knowledge was growing. Roberts felt a role in management would be more rewarding. Encouragement followed from impresario Eric Veldt, and when singer Roland D'Arcy - fresh from Dublin's Gaiety on an extended tour - let Roberts' organize publicity, the outcome proved wildly successful.

At the tender age of twenty-four, Roberts found himself proud co-tenant of a pokey attic in London's Charing Cross Road. The place had nothing but a telephone, snapshot folder and diary-cum-doodle pad. This was the birth of Roberts Creative Talent, agents to actors, singers and assorted wannabes. It was 1958.

The other desk was that of Malcolm Stuart, an aspiring publisher who would become notorious in the 1960s following the infamous Sin-Bin trial. That put paid to a cushy line of magazines, and led to Stuart's suicide in 1969. At the time, Stuart had been pleasant enough company. He had written blurb for Roberts' clients, getting their juicy stories in return. 'I once knew blah, blah, blah who slept with you-know-who!' Mostly hearsay, of course.

There had been few enough stars in that galaxy, despite a handful of minor twinkles. The popular *What's Up?* films had needed character parts. "Someone with a cackling laugh?" they asked. Roberts found just the man.

Harry had appeared out of nowhere, just like one of his white rabbits. Roberts had been on the telephone, while Stuart was scouring the gossip trail. He would often return late in the afternoon, and spend half the night typing his copy.

Suddenly, Roberts had been startled by a man's profile. It was poking round the door, alert and observant. He wondered how long he had been watched. The face resembled a wise old parrot, with a beaky nose, piercing eyes and slowly rotating neck. However, it flashed an amiable smile. The man pointed to a chair, and Roberts nodded. He entered the office, took a seat, and placed a large black bag on the floor.

"Only defending the talent, Roger," murmured Roberts. It was hard work organizing a perfume advert, and the call was becoming tiresome. "I'm the front line, that's what they pay me for. Or I pay them - ninety percent of my earnings, hah, hah. Offer's on the table, then? Okay, I'll diddle the expenses. See you in the Royal Box!"

Harry raised a quizzical eyebrow.

"Just an expression," said Roberts, putting down the phone. "Means I've sorted the deal."

Harry nodded, and leant back on the chair. His chin rested on the apex of a narrow triangle, composed by his long fingers.

“Welcome to Roberts Creative Talent,” said Roberts. “Don’t ask for the world, I don’t give it. Don’t want to disappoint.”

Harry did not expect the world, so he stuck to a straight question. “Do you know Derek Scott of the Scott and Chandler Agency?” The voice was a dead level calm.

“Do I *know* him?” snorted Roberts. “One of the best! Bought out Chandler, stuck his name in front. Doesn’t take no for an answer.”

“But he likes to *give* it,” said Harry, in a downbeat tone. “He sent me here, Mr. Roberts. Thought you might help.”

“Ah!” said Roberts. “He sends me the rejects. Um...his books are pretty full.”

“See this tan?” said Harry, tapping a hollow cheek. “I’ve been abroad the best part of two years, and have quite lost track of the London entertainment scene. I parted amicably with my previous representative - and while I’ve met him socially since my homecoming, I know Mr. York is planning his retirement and hardly desires the pressure of a new enterprise. Hence, I was recommended to several agents - including Scott and Chandler, who were kind enough to mention you.”

Roberts snorted with a trace of amusement, a trace of a slight cold. “Makes me the last port of call,” he said. “Your fate rests in my hands. A drink?”

“Don’t mind if I do,” said Harry.

Roberts moved to a small cabinet, and took out a bottle of sherry. He poured each an economical glass. “What line are you in, Mr...?”

“Hocus. Harry Hocus.”

Roberts paused, the glass an inch from his lips. This was quite an achievement for Defty, who was no shirker from alcohol. Hadn’t he heard the name? Roberts pondered the syllables, finding a trace of memory. “You were...*yes*, on the radio. Maybe the mid-forties?”

Harry took his drink, half chuckling. “Wireless Wonders,” he said. “Crackpot science for children, with magic to keep them awake.”

“Right!” smiled Roberts. “Used to listen at school. Got us all gathered round this monster radio. Marconi’s first effort, massive! Who was it...some nutty professor? Had these crazy arguments, just like the Goons. A touch ahead of your time!”

“Dr. DeWulfe,” said Harry. “It was mainly his show. I’d been conjuring away for years, you see. That was something of a low point.”

Roberts craned forward, eager to listen. He was absorbing the memoirs as much as the sherry.

“Started young - influence of my father,” added Harry. “Used to do the odd spot on variety bills, then my own touring shows. The war put an end to that, but I was scouting for work come VE Day with half of ENSA and every drag queen in a demob suit.”

Roberts laughed suddenly, loudly, spilling a drop of sherry. Yes, he kind of liked this guy. “Know the sort,” said Roberts. “Had them camping it up round the Leicester Playhouse.”

“A fine old theatre,” said Harry.

“Yes, it *is*,” said Roberts, suddenly less stingy with his drink. “You’ve actually played there, Mr. Hocus?”

“No...although I auditioned for *The Tempest* under the direction of Trevor Duncan. Illness prevented my appearance.”

“Ah, *Trevor*,” murmured Roberts. “Gone back to Glasgow. Had some fine times together...”

“Real imagination,” nodded Harry. He took a slow sip of sherry, and fixed Roberts with an inquisitive eye.

“So you’re...out of a job?” asked Roberts, his manner tactful but sympathetic. It was a good knack for an agent.

“I am,” said Harry. “Though there is more than chance in the matter. For reasons as varied as a music hall playbill, I needed a break from the business. Father died in ’54 - and after I’d sorted that out back in Germany, I resolved to fulfil one or two ambitions. I had enough money by then, and set off with a young graduate of the ethnographic sciences...a Dr. Grahame Gilbert. He was no bluffer, *unlike* Edward DeWulfe! Our travels took us into deepest Africa, then across to Madagascar. We encountered many mysteries on the way. If the full story were ever told, it would make the Saturday serials seem pale.”

The office was a vague shadow to Daniel Roberts. Harry’s voice - quirky yet resonant - had transfixed his critical faculties.

“We returned to England this spring,” resumed Harry, “where I faced an uncertain future. Indeed, summer brought me little success. Dr. Gilbert has his artefacts to study, but myself? I’m left at something of an impasse. Do I forget conjuring forever, and stick to my...*academic* work, or polish my dormant skills and top anything I’ve done?”

Harry returned his fingers to their previous position, of a curiously meditative geometry. His expression, though placid, conveyed an inner gravity. Harry expected an answer.

Roberts considered the situation. Outside, the London traffic rumbled in its constant parade, while the pavements thronged with office workers after their lunch.

“It seems to me,” said Roberts, “that your being here...indicates a possible choice.”

“I’m looking at either option,” said Harry, with a keener edge to his voice. “Truth to tell, I’d hate to leave the business. It’s fine tinkering in private, but one is starved of the wider public. There’s still...so much to be done.”

“I’ve never seen your act,” said Roberts, “and I’d hardly count Wireless Wonders. How could anyone do magic on the radio? We’d never believe it now!”

Harry was not to be foiled by a skeptic. “Would you care to look in your top pocket?” he asked.

Roberts blinked. What was this, some feeble joke? He smiled a touch. Very funny! But could Harry actually amaze him? He had to see for himself. “We’ll arrange something, Harry. A private demonstration. Drag your props out of store.”

“Don’t be so patient,” said Harry. “Here’s a glimpse. Kindly look in your top pocket.”

Feeling wary for the first time, Roberts groped inside the pocket of his open-necked shirt. What could the old fool mean? There were tricks of misdirection and sleight-of-hand, which Roberts had seen before. He had not approached Harry except

to pour the sherry, when Harry's hands stayed on his lap. So what could there be in his pocket? Nothing, it seemed, as he felt inside. Nothing but a pocket handkerchief.

Roberts might have dismissed Harry, there and then, before the realization struck him. His handkerchief was in his jacket, which was hanging on the door. In any case, his handkerchief was blue and cotton, unlike the yellow silk he had grasped.

Tugging the corner with a baffled scowl, Roberts unfolded the silky square. Yet the corner was tied to another - and another - decorated with stars, diamonds, clubs, spades, hearts, circles and stripes, as varied as international flags. As they tumbled, Roberts laughed - and Harry laughed, too. It was the genuine, endearing laughter of one who had scored a triumph. A skilful, good-natured victory.

"My *pocket!*" gasped Roberts, peering inside. Only a couple of dog-eared address cards. "How did you do it, Harry?" he pleaded. "I've got to know!"

Harry's frown wavered between true and mock solemnity. "I could hardly say that, Mr. Roberts. If you feel so impressed by a simple thing, performed without notice, you might relish the less elementary."

"Quite," nodded Roberts. He dabbed his brow with a shirtsleeve. Though the room was hardly overheated, the focused intensity of this strange encounter had raised its September temperature. "Mr. Hocus," added Roberts. "*Harry*. I don't know what your plans are, and it's too soon to be...wholly definite. But I'm confident we can work together."

"I very much hope so," said Harry.

Roberts took one of the cards from his pocket, and scribbled lines on the back. "Here's my home address and number," he said. "Call as soon as you like, bring some of those tricks. I think we'll be...talking business."

"My thanks," said Harry. He vanished the card with a wriggle of his nimble fingers. Then he offered his hand to fix the deal, and Roberts shook it with pleasure.

"It's all about presentation," explained Roberts. "I try to be more than an agent. I have a special vision, for each of my artistes. Show me ten tricks, Harry - I'll show you the West End!"

Harry smiled with a sly sideways nod. It was a long-established mannerism. "I guarantee your astonishment," he said. Harry took his black bag, stood, and made for the door.

For a moment, Roberts wondered what the bag contained. Shame Harry had not thought to show him. He never did learn the answer.

Harry had arrived down in Sydenham some days later, at the house where Roberts was staying. Neither he nor Brian, a fellow lodger, had felt Harry broke the guarantee. Far from it. The vanishments and transformations were marvellous: all the more for Harry's amusing patter, and an effortless style of performance.

Brian had been wary of Harry's own props, and challenged him with an orange from the fruit bowl. The consequence had been no less impressive. The discovery of their door key within the sliced citrus had sent Brian's complexion white. He would think back on the moment for years to come, forming many a false theory. This was an act to make Roberts a fortune. He barely slept a wink that night.

* * * * *

“You didn’t tell me your other little hobby,” snarled Roberts, glaring at Harry in the photograph. They remained together in black and white, as if trouble would never come. Roberts touched the brow of Roberts Junior. He felt at one with his earlier self.

If only he could send his knowledge back in time: stop things there, while the memory was pure. “Don’t stay,” murmured Roberts, to his junior counterpart. “Time to go, leave, it’s not your party. Harry isn’t any *good!*” A dull headache began to throb in Roberts’ skull, and his dressing gown felt chilly rather than cool. It was time to get dressed and take further refreshment, after a parting shot at Harry.

“You won’t waste my time, you won’t get my help, you won’t spoil my life - *Harry Hocus.*” As Roberts pulled away from the photograph, he knew he was deceiving himself. “That’s what I *should* have said,” he added. The tone was subdued by regret.

* * * * *

A few miles west along the cold winter coast, a drama was being enacted. The players: Andrew ‘Grunt’ Sloan and his good friend Nevill. Friday night had arrived.

“Is this *loud* enough for you?” snarled Nevill. “Are my words clear in your brain?”

“Speak up!” snorted Grunt. “Speak up!”

“Not so loud,” hissed Nevill. “Don’t wake the neighbours. Might be awkward, Mrs. Jenner.”

The pale eyes stared from their tear-moistened sockets. The skin was thin, crumpled and papery. The old lady stared at Nevill with an unflinching, deadpan terror. Nevill felt his hardness falter, and looked away. “Do the speech,” he told Grunt.

Now it was Grunt’s turn to be eloquent. Time for him to shine in the dialogue stakes, away from Cutter’s verbal domination. But the words were muffled by his crash-helmet, retained - like Nevill’s - for disguise.

“I’ve got a gran,” said Grunt. “Called Medusa. God, she’s an ugly cow. Not like you. Must have been a pretty, once. Back in the flappy old wartime era...”

“Cut the nostalgia,” said Nevill.

“Silence is gold, Mrs. Jenner. Silence is, like...*pure*. That’s what we want, madam. No struggling, no shouting, no breaking your leg and getting us both the blame. So sit there. Sleep. You never saw us. Meals on Wheels or Disabled Brownies, they’ll come poking their snouts around. They’ll undo the gag, rip off the ropes. So sit there, Mrs. Jenner. Be patient.”

“Got what we wanted,” said Nevill.

“Pretty things,” said Grunt, his magpie instincts satisfied the more. “Nevill and me, we’ve treated you fair. Left that creaky cuckoo clock and your hubby’s pic. Royal Air Force, eh? Great moustache, just like all the films. But he ain’t here to save you, Mrs. Jenner. Spitfire’s sold for scrap.”

“That it?” asked Nevill. He checked his watch, as if timing a commercial jingle.

“Said it all,” said Grunt. “She knows.”

“You *know*, do you dearie?” asked Nevill, in a patronizing whine. He brought his face close to the old lady’s, so she almost touched the visor. Her pupils shrank into tiny dots. Guess she knew all right.

“Time for bed,” said Grunt. He lifted a bulging bag. Nevill adjusted his own rucksack, and they moved to the open window. The lock had been forced with a jemmy.

The raiders sneaked out of the back gate, into a dark alley. Grunt kicked a milk bottle, getting a “Shh!” from Nevill.

“All right,” said Grunt. “Keep your scales on, Tommy.”

“Who...?”

“Tommy the Tortoise!” grinned Grunt. He slapped his companion’s rucksack.

Nevill scowled at Grunt’s pathetic joke. The guy was a bit mental. But the silence was shattered by sudden sound: shrill and sharp like an electric alarm. It pierced their position like a pin through a map.

“It’s that cow,” gasped Nevill. “Run!” He almost tripped as Grunt lunged ahead.

The getaway bike was just round the corner, but it seemed like a mile away. Grunt leapt onto the old Kawasaki, firing its engine as Nevill struggled aboard. He clung to Grunt as the machine rumbled forwards, although its balance was unsteady with the heavy bags.

Mrs. Jenner stopped screaming, dead precise - took a long, deep breath - then continued.

Grunt had missed a trick in the bathroom, while choosing a suitable gag: there was dental floss, toothpaste, a bright new brush - but not a denture in sight. The lady might have trouble walking to the shops, but all her teeth were her own. Strong enough to bite through the nylon stocking, tied tight round her jaw.

I'm travelling, thought Rachael, not painting. The canvas is beginning to fall away, the layers beginning to recede. She had created a sensation of spatial depth, yet the forms were vague and intangible.

Grunt's easel was a crude affair. It had the brutality of an amateur crucifix. A rough plank leant against the wall, with table legs bashed on sideways. It wobbled a little, wedged by bricks, but could support the emerging picture.

Rachael had set herself a rigorous regime, starting on Monday morning. There would not be enough hours by night, and she fought her nocturnal yearnings. Rachael was squeezing paint by ten o'clock, alarmingly efficient. The sketching had been a spontaneous affair, but the final work was different. It had to evoke the subtleties of texture and tone, along with a complex detail.

The cubby-hole was a chink of lasting night, like a permanent two in the morning. Its dangling strips blocked light from the workshop, while the airbrick's glimmer was a starry grid. Cutter had trailed a cable to power the lamp, as Rachael disliked the overhead bulb. She preferred to work in a disc of close illumination. The cubby-hole was darker past its edge.

Grunt seemed cheerful as the week began, which Rachael had not expected. He was hardly singing her praises, but had smiled at her quirky greeting. Gone was the lurking outcast of Friday's encounter, with his air of resentful menace.

Rachael could hear the biker through those insubstantial strips, choo-chooing an impression of heavy rock. It was more like Sammy the Shunter. Grunt tapped lids and boxes with a rhythmic beat between heavy mechanical clangs. None of it very musical, but at least he was having fun.

Must have met him on a bad day, thought Rachael. Migraine from all that work. Perhaps she had disturbed him at a tricky stage, and today was the usual Grunt. Things were looking up, she reckoned. She was starting to feel at home. Rachael swivelled on her ancient stool, grabbing a chocolate wafer.

Cutter wrenched another chunk from his ham roll and chewed it with determined relish. He pounded an estimate on the hefty typewriter, so the keys clattered with a satisfying din. His accountancy problem was over, solved by several late nights with a bottle of Jack Daniels and a paperback on self-employment. Anger had not solved the problem. Neither had evasiveness or compromise. The only way had been the lean, focused way.

Cutter had ploughed his lonely furrow, allowing the calm neutrality of a receptive mind to absorb the printed advice. The author hardly looked a charismatic guru - grey hair, bifocal glasses and fussy bow-tie - but had sliced Cutter's dilemma to the quick. Method. Patience. Those were the tricks. Once Cutter knew it, troubles dissolved. Now his books were neater than a Mod's mohican, and Cutter could concentrate on the real business. More toil for Grunt, jobs for himself - plus the start of that cherished electrical den. Once Rachael had finished, of course.

Cutter wrenched the paper from the typewriter, and beheld his bludgeoned words: a diagnosis of the Honda Gold Wing, well-knackered by its carefree travels. Love

or loathe this bulky model - and Cutter would never blow it a kiss - the guy treasured its sentimental value. Cutter would not let him down.

Cutter caught a movement through the window. There was somebody nosing round the yard. He craned his neck, spotting a dull brown coat and profile of morbid expression. Yes, old Stanley in a typically sunny mood. Best see what his lordship was after.

Stanley held a complex engine part like some gruesome transplant organ. He weighed the solid lump in his nicotine-stained hand, face sour with squeamish displeasure. Stanley's coat consisted of leathery bat-wings: brown flaps crumpled round his body, folded into wide lapels. His pullover was beige and laddered, framing a thin knitted tie, while his grey hair was slicked to the scalp with a slurry of grooming gel.

"Mr. Stanley," said Cutter. "Fancy one of those?" The biker had emerged from his office.

Stanley turned, still fingering the oily component. "Looks like something I had out," he sighed. "Out from here." He patted his hollow stomach.

"Cute," said Cutter.

"Aches and pains," said Stanley, placing the component in its crate. "Wish they could bolt another bit in me. Another component."

"Take your pick," nodded Cutter. "We've plenty."

"Wish they could, but they can't," said Stanley. "All these surgical gurus? All these brainy quacks!"

"Bikes are built for repair," said Cutter. "Better engineering."

"Better than the old guts," muttered Stanley. He threw a feeble fist at Cutter's chest, with a glint of his gold watch. Cutter did not like the experience, but his flinching was extremely slight.

Stanley had noticed Grunt's shadowy form screwing in the workshop. Not Rachael Stanwick, a speedometer. "Going all right...the business?" he asked.

"Chugging along," said Cutter.

"Glad to hear it, Paul. *That's* nice!" Stanley had spotted a bulk under a draped tarpaulin, rolling it back to see. The bike was a beautiful Rocket 3, with a sidecar scuffed like a boot.

"Classic BSA combination," said Cutter. "Do it up like a dream. Full restoration for the collectors' market, or keep it myself. Real class."

Yes, wouldn't that be something? Just like his father's Manchester days. Who would be sitting in the sidecar, though? Not the Gruntling. *Rachael*...?

Stanley bent forward to examine the bike. "But you *can't* afford to keep it, Paul," he frowned. Stanley's mouth drooled in delight.

Cutter looked a touch bemused. "Not sure, Mr. Stanley. Like to. But I've business to think of, true."

"True enough." Stanley fumbled in his coat for a tin of Old Holborn, rolling a liquorice Rizla. It was mostly 'NO SMOKING' in the Yard, but Cutter stretched a point for his landlord. "Mind if I do?" asked Stanley, tapping the Rocket 3.

"Be my guest, Mr. Stanley. My pleasure."

Stanley mounted the bike with a bony litheness, teeth clenching the cigarette. His hands cupped to light it with a Swan Vesta, spluttering as he did. “Drains all right?” asked Stanley through a pall of smoke, his voice a gravely mumble.

“Fine. Got a bloke. Very reasonable.”

“Good. Knock it off the quarter.”

Cutter was impressed. “Thanks, Mr. Stanley,” he nodded.

Stanley stretched his arms in a stiff, slow motion, clenching the handlebars. He gazed beyond the gates to an imaginary open road, rather than a run-down backstreet. “You never can tell,” said Stanley. “I might be that very collector.”

Cutter looked startled.

“You never can tell,” added Stanley. “Just have a word with Alice.”

“Ah.”

“Worried about my safety. Thinks the moped’s a bit much.” Stanley shook his head ruefully. “If only I could persuade her...”

“Worth a go,” said Cutter.

“Huh! Easier said than done,” said Stanley. “Bet she says, ‘Jack! No way, Jack! You’ll be dashing round like George Formby!’”

“Oh, aye?” frowned Cutter. “Cleaning windows?”

“Riding at the TT races,” chuckled Stanley. “Time Trials, Isle of Man, *vrmm!* That was a cracking film...”

Grunt had broken off from his engrossing labours, catching the last of the talk. “Seen it,” he said. “Black and white bollocks. Vintage, falling apart.”

“Hey, you can’t beat the old black and whites,” said Stanley, waving his cigarette. Plumes of smoke poured from his nostrils, bringing a foggy distance to his face. “I mean, take our George...George Formby. It’s innocent, but there’s jokes and slapstick. There’s music...”

“What, the bongos?” asked Grunt.

“No - the *ukulele!*” whined Stanley, with the fire of a true fanatic. Stanley’s arms formed a rigid posture, and he began to strum imaginary strings. He matched the moves with a brief melody, performed with much spittle and flapping of the tongue.

Cutter gave a hearty laugh, while Grunt was initially dumbstruck. Stanley must have mistaken this for admiration, as his pause for a suck of cancer fumes was topped by another tune. Then Grunt became a little agitated, adding strange choo-choos and dun-dun dahs!

What was this madness, thought Cutter.

Stanley’s noise tailed off in a multi-note pile-up as he suddenly lost his way. Grunt was left choo-chooing for a moment, hissing to a lonely halt.

Looking up, Stanley spotted Rachael peering from the workshop window. He improvised the tuning of his instrument. Rachael frowned in perplexity, moving to the door.

“Like your new lodger,” said Stanley in a hoarse stage whisper.

“Not quite a lodger,” said Cutter.

“Oh-ho!” chuckled Stanley, implying she was rather more. Cutter had meant less, which was less than he wished. His eyes ravished her as she stepped onto the concrete.

More posing, more spittle and Stanley was at it again. This time, he added lyrics. “Now, I know a lass in a cycle yard, with a big tough biker who reckons he’s hard. They work all day with spanners and screws. I bet he’s got the oily blues!”

Cutter observed the serene oddity of the scene. Most landlords would bash on doors, moan about damage, demand money. Stanley confined himself to execrable musical renditions. Maybe Cutter should be grateful.

The yard became a three-ring circus. There was Rachael, gyrating in the corner - a tyre round her waist like a hula-hoop. Grunt added vocals and percussion, banging on some empty oilcans. Stanley gave a pleasurable giggle, and thrashed a phlegmatic final flourish on his air-ukulele. Grunt snorted a closing chord, and knocked the cans flying with a crash.

Rachael froze, stretching her arms apart so the tyre wobbled to the ground. Cutter viewed the scene impassively. “Welcome to the funny farm,” he said.

* * * * *

Ice creams in winter? A peculiar choice. But if that’s what Harry wanted, that’s what Harry got. Roberts had even joined him, although his taste in flavours was different. He had chosen the faintly alcoholic taint of rum and raisin, over Harry’s gleaming vanilla cone. That Italian place was famous for quality.

Despite their old disputes and troubles, Roberts had not abandoned Harry. True - *for a time* - he had. But things were different now. The world had changed, with new decades welcomed at a million parties. Roberts could neither forget Harry’s misdeeds and deceptions, nor shy from his former friend.

Roberts had tried hard for new success. He had revived the agency in the early 1980s, but fallen prey to broken contracts and faded promises. These new stars were a fickle lot - and he was not the feisty kid anymore, happy to scrape along.

Roberts still had the push. He knew it. But how much sparkle had been due to Harry? Had he ever built another star like that?

Dick Chance had been the nearest contender: a portly blue comic found in a Swansea pub in 1981. Dick gained rising popularity, and might have made it to the box - but two heart attacks and racist slander finished his career. No. Harry had been the mainstay, two-thirds of the firm. Roberts was nothing without Harry, though it was a bitter truth.

What of his other enterprises, away from the showbiz world? Roberts had known twelve years in that wilderness, like an animal scavenging beyond its natural habitat. Oh, sometimes he had been lucky. Sometimes a scam made it, a gimmick worked for a while. Joe Vince, for example. He had inspired Roberts: another illusionist, in his way. Make them believe the numbers, said Vince, and you’ve got the customers’ confidence. Get that, you’ll get anything you want. Money, usually. Cash up front. Vince had even convinced Roberts, till the police arrived one morning and smashed the warehouse door. Forged goods, yes - but cheap to buy. Why should anyone care? Roberts pleaded innocence, got off by a whisker. Vince got eighteen months.

Breaking the law? Roberts had a code of ethics to alleviate moral dilemmas. He had once known the splendours of his chosen profession, yet the glittering prizes were gone. What next? Survival of the fittest among an adoring, innocent public? Evil firms and egos would be judged with contempt, and get what they deserved. To Roberts, there was no business like show business. He fought when he was down.

But not today. This was Harry's day, with time for a seafront stroll. The promenade was quiet in the off-season, while the air was bracing and clear.

The marriage. He had not thought of it for months. Must have been the associative power of the beach huts, jogging memory of moments lost. Sheila was gone now, the last of many separations from him and his various woes.

A beach hut. Something Roberts had meant to buy. He had even told Sheila, and she smiled. Despite cash splashed on luxury living, this small expense had never been priority. Perhaps it was fate, observed Roberts. The butterfly effect. One tiny decision to change the future. A beach hut might have meant happiness. It might have kept Sheila around.

This was not a helpful train of thought. Roberts knew - despite their retrospective variation - how alternative futures merged. A nip here, a tuck there - but given his arrogance, given his certainty that success was forever round the corner, Roberts knew the outcome had been inevitable. As he roamed from one brash scheme to another, it had all become so impossible. Roberts had lost both lifestyle and personal esteem.

It had been time to change after the building firm fiasco. Get back to the business he loved. A novel variation, not a pale imitation. He would not be an agent, hawking his wares, but master of his own domain. A leisure centre! The Daniel Roberts Centre? Danny's? No - *Defty* Danny's!

There was quite a ring to that...

What a place! Sleek and sharp like Bexhill's De La Warr Pavilion, all smooth white lines and graceful curves. His name up huge in neon! Leisure, pleasure - let variety be the spice of life, and Roberts the beaming host. This was the new ambition. The greatest ambition! Soon, it would all come true.

Teething troubles, of course. *Lawson*. Stupid prat could keep his money. Let him choke on a wad! Roberts would do it, Roberts would make it. Just needed to buy some time. Only plans both methodical and true could win his cause in the end.

The figure was stark against the milky blue of a winter sea. Harry looked so delicate, but remained an upright old fellow. He walked slowly but surely, with a defiant lack of a stick. Harry's diagonal path took him across the empty promenade, where he gripped the decorative railing.

Hove. No golden mile, but a strip of pebbles in every greyish-brown shade. Seagulls glided over the swelling surf, their cries blending play with a bleak sensibility. Further east, the isolated ironwork of the West Pier broke the horizon like an ocean liner. It had long been deserted by the tourists.

"You played there once, didn't you Harry?" asked Roberts. He gazed at the disintegrating relic.

The magician avoided the embarrassment of poignancy by sucking the dregs from his cone. "I need no recollection," he stated. "The shoreline is most refreshing. It is enough for me to walk here and feel the atmosphere."

So much for conversation, thought Roberts. He continued to scrutinize the architecture's decaying majesty. Perhaps it was a symbol of his own career, or Harry's. "Good way back," added Roberts. "Early seventies? Shame you can't spell this scrap heap new."

Harry smiled a little, his black cloak rippling in the breeze. The West Pier was a sad relic of its former splendour, while its neighbour - the Palace - sprouted so many modern touches it barely counted as Victoriana. "Even I can't do that," said Harry. "But I do enjoy these walks, Daniel. Twice a week, it's a fine routine."

"Makes me glad," said Roberts. He bit the tip of his cone. "But Harry - we need to talk."

This was it, then. The crunch. Roberts' cone was no more. Harry raised an eyebrow, inviting Roberts to speak. He had the solemn countenance of a judge.

"*Harry!*" said Roberts, with misconceived joviality. This cooled as he began his piece. "I'm still a...fair bit younger than yourself, old boy. Not the nipper that got your breaks, but still...I resent the idea of retirement."

"I believe you," said Harry, with one of his sly sideways nods. Only this time, he omitted the smile.

Roberts nestled deep into his Burberry overcoat, preening his bushy moustache. The moves masked any nervousness, any signal of guilt. "Anyhow, this...leisure scheme of mine. *Defty Danny's*. It needs a great deal of planning."

"I can imagine," said Harry, nodding sagely.

"Look, Harry! Facts are facts. I'm not dumping you or anything, but time's running out. I can't come over so often."

Harry blinked.

"Once a week, or a fortnight," said Roberts. "That's the best I can do."

"Is it really...?" murmured Harry. "I'm grateful for anything, of course."

Roberts stepped forwards. He spread his arms to cling the cast iron railings, which divided the promenade from beach. "God knows, it's great you're so active," he said. "But living on your own? Remember your fall last year?"

"I do."

"Broken wrist, Harry? Brittle bones. Next time - down those stairs, smash! Head's split like an eggshell." Roberts slapped a fist into his hand.

"Your picture is a vivid one," said Harry. Roberts had almost relished the words.

"Harry. Your flat...it's delightful. But the upkeep, the effort...so much time. I clean for you, take you out and about. But when I *can't*, Harry, what happens? You're stuck there, you're miserable, you're lonely." Roberts jabbed at Harry, in emphasis.

Harry's eyes narrowed. "You think so? There's always Mrs. Bracewell."

Roberts shook his head with reluctance. "You can't rely on Mrs. Bracewell."

Wincing with inner agony - whether real or simulated - Roberts forced himself on. "There's something you could do, Harry. A favour. Make up for the difficult times. Please, Harry...I've said it before. Why not a nursing home?"

Harry's face remained static. It was true he had the burden of age, but also the defiance of youth. "You need not ask me," said Harry, "for you know my answer. I will not go, and you cannot force me. Walk away, build your Tower of Babel. I'll keep my affairs in order."

Harry turned aside with real vigour, and walked along the promenade. Such a theatrical gesture was worth physical strain. The facades of Kingsway loomed above the beach huts, with their spectrum of cheerful doors. They might have been props in some magical trick, once performed on the shore.

"But Harry!" groaned Roberts. "I couldn't leave you like that. There's loyalty, whatever our past." Roberts out-manoeuvred the magician, and gently gripped his arm.

"Oh, please Daniel!" snapped Harry. "I might be older than the Albany Grimoire, but the brain up here is still sharp."

Harry tapped his temple to stress the point, his eyes glaring at Roberts. "What of my work...the collection? Imagine that in a...pensioners' parlour. The old dears would love an occult statue, slap in their television lounge. Perhaps they could make it a cardigan!"

Roberts' heart seemed to skip a beat. Harry was dangerously near the truth. Roberts could sell his things once the flat was free, funding his own hopes and Harry's decline. The lion's share would not be Harry's, although there was nothing new about that. Harry had never known about money, while Roberts had known too much. He had always taken more than his agreed percentage. It was the agency's standard practice. Roberts Creative Talent had been very creative with sums.

What now? Harry was creeping forward, with a vacuous calm to his face. Oh no, groaned Roberts. Here we go. One of those mystical rants.

"Daniel. This body is the mortal flesh. It is merely a state we pass through." Harry held a bony hand to his greyish cheeks. Yes, he looked mortal enough.

"My flesh is tired," said Harry. "More tired than you know, for its span has exceeded the natural through the very techniques you despise. I can remember...quite *clearly*, through six score years and ten...so much from the history books. My father and I...we've followed a similar path, though he has been gone these forty years. He raised me in Germany, taught me so many things. Then I left for the brighter lights. Now the shades of mortality creep upon me, and spells will not work for long. But I must be firm, Daniel. I must carry on. Such talents bring a special duty, which can never be forgotten. There is a certain act I am impelled to perform, on resigning my privileged powers. That shall be the last of Mr. Harry Hocus. You will be spared your irritating chores."

Roberts stood as frozen as his dollop of dairy ice. How much he had forgotten of this wily trickster, and how much he had never known. So Harry was still dabbling in the strange and arcane? There was little doubt of that. For the skin might be withered like crackling leaves, but those eyes shone a sinister wisdom.

"Time we were...heading along?" asked Roberts, raising a tufty eyebrow. The simple request cleared his mind.

"Yes. The weather is a little chill," said Harry. He offered Roberts his arm.

Rachael's eyes wandered over the nooks and crannies of Cutter's favourite pub. It was not too crowded this Wednesday night, and the characters were commonplace. A silent, anoraked man stood by the doorway - munching crisps with morose precision - while a stout chap balanced on a barstool. An Alsatian lay on the floor nearby, its legs stretched by the fire.

Cutter was glad of his strong imported lager, cool, frosty and inviting. He wrenched the cap from the bottle with a penknife attachment, and offered Rachael a toast. "First week you've known me. Best congratulations." Cutter knocked back a swig.

"Cheers," said Rachael, sipping her shandy while Grunt slurped his deep brown brew.

Cutter scrutinized the girl's every detail, beyond the gleam of his lager bottle. Rachael was snuggled in her brown corduroy jacket, hands still in their frayed woollen gloves. Her lips held the form of a subtle smile, but her eyes gazed past the bikers - away, to some secret place of her own. Worried about her work, thought Cutter, or troubles he did not know.

Cutter tried to think of something to say, but the choice was a tricky calculation. Should he chance some witty remark, which might fail to be witty? Or wait longer to hone the finest words, and miss the magic moment?

"I'm no genius," said Grunt. "Grant you that. But I shine next to common thickos." Grunt's plodding brain had broken the ice, prompted by alcohol. Cutter felt forced to respond.

"Who, the citizens?" frowned Cutter. He clicked his fingers. "Snap goes the mind, Gruntling."

Grunt sniggered. "Yeah - like Stanley!"

Rachael's smile brightened as she remembered Stanley's visit, a couple of days before. Cutter was quick to tell her more of the Yard's eccentric landlord.

"Stanley's a character," said Cutter. "Got to keep him sweet. Keep Cutter's Yard running smooth."

"Pay the rent?" asked Grunt.

"It helps," said Cutter. "Buys him a new ukulele."

Grunt snorted.

"I've been down before, and never again," said Cutter, tapping the table in time to his words. "The Yard's ticking over but it's got to stay sharp, or Stanley grabs the keys for his charm bracelet and it's goodbye Mr. Cutter and Grunt."

"Know what you mean," Grunt snorted. "You wouldn't want Bingo in charge."

"Bingo's your mate, not mine," said Cutter. "His mind's snapped by a transient world. Poverty decks your brain, sure as progress. Build your own haven, stand or fall. Don't give bastards tools for the grind."

"What, like the Job Centre?" murmured Grunt.

"That's not the point of my policy," growled Cutter, gaping in disbelief. "You've got to know this, both of you. Rachael..."

The girl looked up from her shandy. Her face was apprehensive.

Cutter spoke. He spoke in a steady flow, words dropping into place with relentless precision. He had perfected every nuance of desire, knew exactly what he wanted to have. His eyes were narrow, his face softened by the amber light. Cutter spoke his deepest thoughts, and found those thoughts to be good.

“Cutter’s Yard? I’ll say what it is, right? Pivot of my life and labour. Middle of my private road. Place I know to be legal, decent, honest and true – not ’cos they tell me, but ’cos I’ve made it that way. Place where our lifestyle’s not relative to Citizen Square and his scroll of restrictive credos. Place to keep the stress as your servant, not the master of body and soul. I like the right kind of stress. Stress ’cos I’m motivated, ’cos I’m doing my thing - not squashed by the mechanical moralizers with their putrid pastimes. Oh, they give us some flack. We’re the scum. The outsiders. But I’m taking no body blows.”

Cutter gulped his lager, much to Grunt’s relief. The monologue was out of steam. Must be all those books he kept in the living-room: chunky paperbacks with dodgy covers and difficult words. Current Events, Political Science and Sociology. Cutter bought them in musty little shops, where the air stank of old paper. They refunded half the money on return, although Cutter never returned any. Grunt preferred his fantasy stuff - or at least, the action bits. Cutter should try one of those.

“Solved all the problems of the world, then?” asked Rachael, hoping for light relief.

“*Thinks* he has,” said Grunt, lowering his empty glass. “Anyway...got to be off, kiddos. Thanks for the drink, Knifer.” Grunt buttoned his black denim jacket and tapped a finger to his nose. A rush of air through the side door, and he was off and away.

“It’s his round,” said Cutter, “or he’s up to mischief. Drinking more, Rachael?”

“Not for me, thanks,” sighed Rachael. “Time I was getting home.”

“Home?” asked Cutter, raising a quizzical eyebrow. “I wonder...where would that be?”

“Across town,” said Rachael. “Up near Terminus Street.”

“Cosy?” asked Cutter.

“Confusing,” said Rachael. “But, yeah...kind of cosy too.”

Cutter whipped-out a hard-earned tenner, ready for more refreshment. “Go on. You’re part of the Yard, right? Pivot of my life and labour.”

“Worth a celebration,” mumbled Rachael.

“Don’t sound so keen,” said Cutter.

“All right,” said Rachael. “Guinness?”

“Goodness! A Guinness on its way.”

Rachael sat alone for a moment, enjoying a little quiet reflection. How chill and blue was the night outside, how warm this pleasant interior. She loved the wood, the brass, the smell of the beer - the whole feel of the place. It was a tiny retreat from a random world, kept alive for their pleasure.

* * * * *

Ought to be pleased, thought Rachael. Home after a hard day's work. The pub had been a break, but her wacky old house? Always some fun and games.

She ought to be pleased, but she wasn't. Somehow, it wasn't the same. Rachael closed the door, glancing at the telephone pad. A short message from a vague acquaintance, with the letter 'R' for her name. She could tell it had been written by Sue.

Who was 'R'? It was always 'Rache' or 'Rachie' - hardly pleasant endearments, but warmly meant. Sue's handwriting was familiar, yet appeared stiff and formal. She had recorded the message through duty, not the affection of friendship. There was love lost between them. Home wasn't so cosy now.

The post? Some waffle about an arts grant, with a tricky application form. Rachael dropped it with dead letters to previous tenants. A laugh broke the silence. It was Laura in the living-room, rid of her stroppy mood.

Rachael went straight upstairs to her bedroom, but spotted a glimmer from Sue's. This was a pleasant attic conversion, reached by a stout wooden staircase. Rachael stared up like a little lost orphan, hoping Sue might sense her and peep down. There was nothing but a line of yellow light, bordering the narrow door.

Sue absorbed the photographs like a calming drug, their effect both escapist and relevant. The fun there had been on Bonfire Night! She had the pictures to prove it. Trish had made an outrageous Guy from yesterday's fashion cast-offs. Far too good to burn, but Phil had burnt it anyway.

Sue wished it could be the party again, when friends might be made forever. Now Rachael was lost in her own dark world, and Laura was drifting away. That was me, thought Sue. Encouraging Phil. But Laura had needed his company. Sue had made the match.

To Rachael, her bedroom had become lifeless. *Empty*. There were still her posters, still her clothes on the floor. But the desk sat as blank as a mortuary slab, once the funeral was over and done. No painting. That was it, she realized. I've lived with my painting - my inner turmoil - and now we're parted at night. Is this healthy? Will this push the worries from my mind? Or have I hidden the means of their exorcism, only to allow their return?

Rachael took a fluffy pencil case from a desk drawer. Paper? There was plenty of that. She sat, unzipping the case for a biro and a few felt tips: pink, yellow and blue. Staring awhile at the desk lamp, the image lingered in her eye. The bulb became a green-rimmed yellow blob, floating in the air. It resembled an orb of energy.

Cutter found himself alone in the Yard, just the way he liked it. Closing the street door, he remained in the chill night air to relish this private tranquillity. He breathed slowly, taking the maximum air deep into his lungs.

Cutter felt alive. It was a sensation he loved, for how the minutiae of the place had drained him. He had to stay the respectable proprietor, and deal with every niggling problem. Yet he secretly loathed much of this trivia, in a phobia he was forced to repress. Cutter had to keep a brave face for the customers, especially Tony and Wilf. But one of these days...

One of these days...

One more goofy remark from that dunce mechanic, one more bounced cheque or leaky roof - Cutter would take his monkey wrench and do some serious, permanent damage. Glass, flesh, bone, he wouldn't quibble.

It had never come to that. His lonesome poring over the library book, calls from the trade, even the droll reassurance of Stanley: all had combined to calm him. Now Cutter felt the stirrings of contentment again, with the coming of Rachael a blossom in the gloom. But how long would a blossom bloom?

Sod the hi-fi cubby-hole, thought Cutter. Rachael could stay for good. But would that help? Would she paint another picture, or was this her first and final fling?

Cutter unlocked the door from the yard, entered, then closed it behind him. He started to climb the stairs to the flat, yet found he could not continue. Gripping the banister, Cutter beheld the filthy workshop. He was stunned by its nocturnal beauty under the false moonlight of a security lamp. A grid of window-shade etched geometry onto the greasy floor, while metal chunks resembled entrails in a mechanical slaughterhouse. Over there...the curtain. The plastic strips. Rachael's painting lay behind.

Cutter stood for several minutes, crawling with indecision. Suddenly, his workshop was a forbidding place. Should he venture towards the threshold of its inner doorway, into the cubby-hole? Then he could see the painting. But it would be a childish breach of trust.

Cutter's stomach churned with inner conflict. It would be so easy. Rachael would never know. But he shouldn't. Shameful idea.

Just a few steps. Hardly anything. Switch on the light. Quick peep.

Leave it, said his conscience. Spin yourself round. Get up those stairs, pronto. In a minute you'll forget all about it. You'll be knocking back tea, flopping on the sofa, banging some music on. The Industrial Revolution? Deep enough sounds, take the urges away.

Inertia, though. Sheer inertia. That's what Cutter felt. He tried to move his body, but his gut heaved with a ghastly sensation as he began to climb the stairs - and tingled with a wave of pleasure at the thought of the cubby-hole.

No option. Cutter's shadow fell squat - foreshortened - on the oily concrete floor. It moved like a chubby troll. There! The plastic curtain, with lines of darkness separating each strip from the next. Cutter's hand moved to the light-switch, flicking it on with a click. This divided the strips of coloured plastic with strands of tungsten gold.

Inside the cubby-hole, the strips rustled slightly - then parted - as Cutter's grey, close-cropped scalp pushed through. The head tilted upwards, with both eyes closed. His expression was as contemplative as a Buddha. The eyes opened.

Rachael trembled, almost dropping her pen. She was shivering with sudden cold. Must be the window, she thought. Silly to leave it open.

Glancing down, Rachael examined her latest doodle: a rough beard, dangling bullet earring, heavy neck-chains, brooding eyes. It was the eyes that had made her uneasy. They appeared so intense and piercing, staring at her, into her. If the eyes were the windows of the soul, thought Rachael - what kind of soul was this?

Cutter's eyes were staring wide and startled, wondering whether to frown. Then he smiled with a slow, broad smile: the smile of one who had been licked, but did not care. Why, to be licked by the lovely little Rachael? Hardly a pain, a pleasure.

The painting was before him, draped in a faded curtain. There was a cartoon of Rachael pinned to the cloth, in the frilly frock of her dreams. 'No Peeking!' ran the speech balloon, and Cutter obeyed its words. Clever Miss Stanwick had read his mind. He would read hers when she was ready.

So Cutter slipped back from the doorway, and switched off the light. He was pleased things were buzzing in the Yard. It was a credit to his own authority. Cutter's eyes roved the workshop clutter, finding engines, wheels, bent exhausts - and there, in a heap of musty junk, a long-neglected toy.

Missing the fulfilment it had given him, Cutter grabbed the end of the object. It glimmered in the window's raking light. There were blades of scalpels and craft knives screwed to a strip of wood, a couple of inches apart. It resembled the jawbone of a carnivorous fish.

But the toy was not a weapon. It had a very special role. It was Paul 'Cutter' Graves' own chopping-board. His party piece.

* * * * *

Nevill's seedy house lay deep in the terraced streets, just to the north of Kemp Town. They rose towards Brighton Racecourse, with many a quirky household or cosy pub. The area was known as Hanover. Nevill's place did not do the neighbourhood any favours, though the rent - to be fair - reflected its dilapidated state. But Nevill liked his space, and cared little for decor. There was grubby wallpaper and peeling paint, all with a definite sheen of austerity. The furniture had been bought at various flea markets, and wobbled with dislocated limbs. All was overlaid with second-hand junk, then overlaid in turn by dust. Vinyl records without a player, computer games with no console. Magazines were bought for a single article, then neither read nor discarded.

Nevill gave a permanently shifty impression, but it was not the moves he made. He could sit static, eyes staring at an equally static fly, and *still* give a shifty impression. It was surely something about his eyebrows, which were thick and unnaturally low.

Nevill had tried many twitches of facial muscle, moulding his expression like living clay. He had always considered his appearance rather wimpish, and wanted to make amends. Perhaps a mix of humour and hardness, frankness and ferocity, would create a suitable identity. This low-browed look had impressed him, along with supplementary additions: clenched teeth, squinting eyes and even a jutting chin.

But the frown had been sufficient, with those extras available for dramatic moments. Nevill had held it consciously - then unconsciously - till his muscles became locked in its grip. He applied a similar contrivance to his vocal chords, by emphasizing the deeper notes. Nevill sounded almost Jamaican at times.

Nevill was balanced on the arm of a tatty chair, rocking gently back and forth. He fiddled with his dark ponytail of hair, while Grunt sat playing with a plastic boomerang.

Nevill sniffed, and pulled a tissue from his duffle coat. It was worn to keep gas bills at bay.

“What would he say?” asked Nevill. “Your Cutter...if he knew you were such a brat?”

“Not a brat,” said Grunt. “Versatile.”

“Might be proud of you,” said Nevill. “The versatile Grunt.”

“Not a Grunt,” said Grunt. “Not a Grunt...”

Nevill did not push it. He chose a biscuit with meticulous scrutiny. A Bourbon or Jammy Dodger? No, a Rich Tea. “Make you his right-hand hit man,” said Nevill. “Not a leftover handyman.”

“Waltzing Matilda!” cried Grunt. He tossed the boomerang onto the sideboard. Incredibly, it never came back.

“Cutter’s no cherub,” mused Nevill. “Been in trouble?”

“Done for speeding,” said Grunt. “That’s it.” He stood to retrieve the boomerang, faltered, and sat down again.

“That all?” nodded Nevill. “He’s cunning.”

“Sounds like you know him,” murmured Grunt. He grabbed any old biscuits.

“Only by reputation,” said Nevill. He munched his biscuit with delicate precision.

“Uses you, Andy. Takes advantage.”

“He’s a laugh,” said Grunt. “Sometimes. When he’s not, I’m off out the door.”

“And if he knew what we do, Andrew...would he corpse like a stony gargoyle? *Warrgh!*” Nevill mimicked a gargoylic appearance, treating Grunt to a view of the mashed biscuit.

“Earn my way,” said Grunt. “A pittance. Spend it in seconds. Need savings.”

Nevill stretched his arms with a lazy yawn. “Planning to retire?”

“Savings for...after Cutter,” said Grunt. “Won’t be his friend for good. Other mates treat me better - like you, Nev. You’re okay.”

Nevill nodded. Half slipping, half stepping from the arm of the chair, he slouched across the rough carpet. All was brown, stained and dowdy, while the ornaments were a jumbled kitsch. Nevill’s taste was that of a deranged Grandma, with frilly doilies, tablecloths and cushions. These were filthy, torn and unravelled as if picked from a period bombsite.

Nevill glanced through the yellowing net curtains to the street outside. The sodium-vapour midnight was orange. Then he pulled the wooden handle of a sideboard drawer, revealing another biscuit tin. Grunt became visibly excited as Nevill resumed his perch, opening the scratched tartan lid.

Inside, there was a muddle of petty paperwork: money off vouchers past redemption date, foreign postcards, unused diaries. Delving deep, Nevill retrieved a brown envelope marked ‘Andy’. He handed it to Andy ‘Grunt’ Sloan.

Tearing the flap, Grunt leafed through the contents. He scowled as if copying Nevill’s facial contortions, and counted a few tens and fives. “Sixty quid...that all? Daylight robbery.”

It was not even daylight.

“Didn’t get much,” said Nevill. “That’s your split, fair deals.”

“What about those jewels?” murmured Grunt. “Worth a mint, you said.”

“Glass, mate,” said Nevill. He took a ruby-studded pendant from the tin, and looped the chain round his neck. “Better as a souvenir, right? Look like the Mayor, don’t I?”

“Gutted,” said Grunt. He slumped in his chair. “Who bought the other stuff?”

“Roberts. Saw him Tuesday. Wouldn’t rip me off. We stole a load of knick-knacks. Bollocks, man.”

“Do another job?”

Nevill munched a second biscuit, selected with care - this time, one of the Bourbons. “Let things chill, Andrew. Pensioners. They get wary, see.”

“Yeah, but...”

“That Jenner was in The Argus. Moaning. Not very good publicity. Take it slow, easy...or we’ll have the Neighbourhood Hawks on our backs.”

“But when? Christmas? Three weeks to go. I want my presents, Nev!”

“Cash-free society with the thieving magpies? Patience is a virtue, Andy.”

The word ‘virtue’ triggered a memory, deep in Grunt’s brain. Who had virtue? Yeah - that girl in Sor the Savage, playing her stupid harp.

“Virtue’s for sissies,” said Grunt, lighting a cigarette.

“I’m no sissy,” said Nevill, in unsissy tones.

“Wearing a necklace, Nev.”

“Means I’m the Mayor,” said Nevill. “Got your vote?”

Grunt was not so impressed. “Huh! Can’t change nothing, Mr. Mayor. Voting’s a pile of piss.”

“Well - here’s my policy, Andrew, no pissing around. Let things chill, then a house-to-house. I’m not talking charity tins! A whole pile of treasure, in a bag marked ‘SWAG’. Got your vote now, Mr. Sloan?”

“Heard it before,” Grunt muttered. “Always the big ideas. What do we make? *Nothing*. Bloody nothing!” Grunt banged his fist into the palm of his hand, wincing at its painful impact.

“Hey,” said Nevill, with a dull nasal intensity.

Grunt thumped the cushion.

“Hey, *relax*...”

Grunt seethed in his seat.

“*Relax*, man,” said Nevill. “Mellow *downnnnnnn*.” He stretched the word to a hypnotic hum, dulling the sudden tension.

“Okay, I’m droopy,” said Grunt. He took a slow drag of his cigarette.

“Droopy? Flop on the sofa, trust the Mayor.” Nevill rattled his chain. “You happy?”

“Happy?” mumbled Grunt. “Um...dunno.”

“Good. Then *everybody’s* happy!” said Nevill. He pulled two video cassettes from a teetering stack, both with lurid covers. Nevill offered them to Grunt like a conjuror with cards, inviting his selection. Grunt pondered, Nevill inched his favourite forward. Grunt chose the other one.

The tape began to whirr in the clapped-out player, and the credits flashed onscreen. Soon, Grunt was grinning at the shrieking zombies. All was right with the world.

13

Grunt stumbled into Cutter's Yard at half-eleven Thursday morning. He was late for work, though Cutter had not fitted a time clock. Grunt could make up the lost hours. Cutter would see to that.

There was Cutter, scrubbing the BSA Rocket 3. "Looks pretty," said Grunt in a mildly slurred manner. Alcohol was not without an influence.

"Tender loving care," said Cutter. "She's had rough owners in her time."

Grunt grunted. "Sorry I'm late, Cuts. Nipped down Nevill's. Got gassing, drinking, watched this zombie flick. Bloke got eaten. Excellent! Crashed on the sofa."

"No problem," said Cutter, wiping his hands on a rag.

"The girl here?" asked Grunt, a little too casually. A little too lacking in respect.

"The *girl*?" growled Cutter, voice darkening. "Would thee mean...the fair Miss Rachael?"

"Yeah," said Grunt. "Course I would."

"She's in the cubby-hole, painting - so do not disturb. Keep down the noise, good lad."

"Great," shrugged Grunt. He glanced towards the workshop. "Wrap the tools in cotton wool?"

"Work in the yard with me."

"What? It's *perishing*!" Grunt performed an exaggerated shiver.

"Want to keep Rachael happy," said Cutter. "Christmas cheer's what we need. Here, take this tenner. Get baubles, balloons..."

"...paper chains, tinsel?"

"All the trimmings, Gruntling. Dig out those fairy lights."

Grunt pondered the list. "Where's the tree?" he asked.

"No tree," said Cutter. "Rachael's...happy without one. Get a pretty fairy, Grunt. Angelic cherub. Hang her from the ceiling, twirling around. Floating in nicotine clouds."

"Hang her in a noose," Grunt snorted. "Swing 'er up, I'm the hangman!" Grunt mimed a self-strangulation, so his tongue curled like a patty of uncooked mince. A health inspector would have closed the butcher's.

So off went the mechanic, strolling into town. There were plenty of bargains to be had. Baubles, glitter and tat were offered by recession-hit stores and cheap emporiums. These operated from vacant shop-fronts, with goods spilling onto the pavement like offerings at an exotic bazaar.

Grunt went straight through Cutter's tenner and out the other side, adding cash of his own for goodwill. Just one thing he had not found: the fairy. Grunt made do with an imitation Barbie doll, its skirt as stiff as a cake frill. Paying with cringing embarrassment, Grunt soon had his compensation. Back home, he took out his modelling tray and fixed the plastic female.

Grunt teased the blonde hair into spikes with khaki enamel, splattered the skirt with brown, and lined the eyes to slut-like gashes. He cut two wings with tin snips, painting them brilliant red. The red wings of the Angels! Cutter was sure to like those. A

nut from the workshop made a heavy metal halo - suspended on bendy wire - after which this sad abortion of the feminine and divine was ready to meet the noose.

Rachael popped up to the flat around seven. She was keen to share some chatter, and enjoy a mug of tea. Cutter was still absorbed in his work on the BSA, relishing the intricate complexity of the task. He stripped down its engine by the pure white rays of the external security light.

Grunt wondered how Cutter could stand the cold. He was glad to be in tonight. Cutter never minded the weather: come January, June or December he preferred the open air. Was it an escape from the constrictions of the office, or his plans for the cubby-hole's future?

Grunt had no answer. It was enough strain planning the decorations. Big, big questions like how to hang the paper chains, where to put the squiggly balloons?

"Mind if I look?" asked Rachael, peering round the door. She had answered her own question.

Grunt was standing on the low table with its chess-board top, fingers fumbling with the end of a streamer. "Already looking," he mumbled. There was a brass tack gleaming in his teeth like a major metal filling.

"Spectacular," smiled Rachael. "Need some help?" Steam vapours rose from her hand-warming mug, while her face remained a little wry.

Grunt stuck the streamer to the ceiling, so it was easier to speak - or as easy as he ever found it. "Blow some balloons," he grunted, kicking a packet towards her.

Rachael took out a long, limp, floppy one. A short breath erected it to stiffness. Puffing, she expanded its length by slow degree as Grunt jumped down to the floor. He inflated a big round one - then another - letting them free to fly across the room. Grunt chuckled at the funny noise, like synchronized farts.

Rachael struggled to tie a knot in her own balloon, gripping the rubber and twisting tight. Content, she handed her effort to the grinning Grunt - who popped it with another tack.

"*Andy!*" cried Rachael. She never used his legal name. Or the legal name Cutter gave him.

"You didn't jump," said Grunt. "You're brave."

"Yeah?"

"Girls jump out of their knickers," said Grunt. "Scared of a sudden bang."

"Worse things in the world," said Rachael. She twirled another balloon.

Grunt took a stream of tinsel and draped it round his neck. It was just like a feather boa. "Look...Honolulu!" he grinned.

"Bang another balloon," sighed Rachael.

Grunt gyrated in a vaguely spasmodic manner. "Cutter should play Santa," he snorted. "Got the beard...and a workshop!"

"I'm not his elf," said Rachael. She sipped the rest of her tea. Grunt started mouthing heavy rock, inflating balloons between choo-choos.

Frowning ever so slightly, Rachael realized what was missing from these lavish arrangements. "Hey - where's the Christmas tree?" she asked. "Can't have Christmas without a tree."

The question threw Grunt a little. What had Cutter said that morning? Rachael would be happy *without* a tree. *Why?* Grunt was no nature lover, but he liked a slot-together conifer or greengrocer's reject. Traditional, weren't it? Like the good old days, with Mum.

Cutter had his facts in a twist. Grunt made a limp excuse. "Knifer's...weird," he blabbed. "Gets these purple blotches."

"Why not an artificial tree?" smiled Rachael. This stretched Grunt's brain to the outer limits.

"No," said Grunt. He slipped the tinsel from his neck and draped it round the window. "Spray stuff. Pine cones. Anything in a tin. It's weird! He goes blotchy all over."

"What a shame," said Rachael.

She gazed out over the bleak winter rooftops. Fairy light gems glimmered in a family window, near but equally far. Ought to get the gas fire going, she thought. Make it real homely. Home...?

Rachael found her finger rubbing the cold, wet glass. She traced a star in its condensation, then added a spiral. The shape appealed to her, somehow. Magical...

"I like trees," said Rachael. "Always have. Shame to cut them down, when you think..."

Cutter was just outside the door, listening with pin-sharp alertness. He stared at a tattered Rolling Stones poster, gripping his oily denim jacket. The passage was dark and narrow, linking this pokey selection of rooms.

Cutter's brow furrowed with deep concern. These were peculiar words. The girl was painting a nightmare forest. He had spotted the paint on her jumper. She had aroused his curiosity - and desire - the very second they met.

How could he solve this paradox? Cutter did not know. He had thought a Christmas tree would stir Rachael's worries, so he had done best to leave it. Mick Jagger and his ancient cronies had no answer.

"You like fairy lights?" asked Grunt. He opened a round metal tin, which had once held Quality Street chocolates. A set had been jammed inside these past twelve months, like the innards of some primitive robot.

"Never go first time," said Grunt. "It's mental." He untangled the plug from the coils of wire, shoving it in a socket. "Three, two, one. Bet they don't go..."

With a click, the lights came on.

"Lovely," gasped Rachael. "Magical." She took the tin from Grunt, noticing a lingering aroma of chocolate and toffee. Its curved interior reflected rainbow colours onto her pale, sensitive face. This was veiled by wispy fair hair. Rachael's skin was dabbed by an optical radiance, while her eyes widened in delight.

Lights, music, glamour and fun! Laughter, gasps and applause! Things strange, yet strangely familiar. But she could not define their source.

Even Grunt was silent for a moment. His figure had paused like a video freeze frame. Despite his oafish manner, Grunt was struck by a sense of nobility. The girl resembled a saint by a stained glass window, spiritual and pure. Her features blended with the tinted softness of wonderful illumination.

There was a moment. Then the moment had gone. Rachael blinked a tear from her eye, as she turned to the looming Cutter. “Feel at home, do you now?” asked Cutter. It was a dour line in kindness.

“I’ve always felt at home here,” said Rachael. She put the lights on the sideboard.

“Grunt - some coffee,” muttered Cutter. He pointed at the door.

Grunt raised his eyebrows. “But I’ve got to...”

“*Coffee!*” It was a growl. Clearly, coffee was not the agenda. The mechanic made his exit, pronto. With the room Grunt-free and private, Cutter turned to behold Rachael.

“Four days you’ve been here,” said Cutter. “The place...it’s changing for the better. How’d it be in a month, Rachael? How’d it be in a year?”

Rachael trembled.

“Said you were painting a nightmare,” said Cutter. “Thought you hated trees, I did. Thought you told me everything. Told me your secret heart.”

“I...haven’t told you my secret,” confessed Rachael. “I couldn’t, Cutter. I’m sorry.”

Cutter came forward. He placed his hands on her shoulders, the pressure gentle but firm. “You’ve never told *anyone?*” he asked.

“Not all of it,” she said. “No.”

“Never the girls back home?”

Rachael’s eyes closed with sadness and sorrow. “Home, Cutter. Where’s home? I like Sue...Laura...our little house. But I went there with worries, spoiled the vibes. That’s what my nightmare did for me. Could have been cosy, but it’s lost, Cutter, lost. Another bunch of friends down the drain...”

More tears glistened in Rachael’s eyes. These were no tears of pity, but the outcome of pain. Cutter pulled her towards him, and she did not resist. He nestled the fragile head in his creased denim. “You’re my Christmas angel,” he said.

Cutter had no need of a plastic substitute, like the wretched specimen in the downstairs lavatory. That was the work of Grunt. Only one true angel in this domain, and she would never get nearer to Hell. Rachael Stanwick of Cutter’s Yard? She would make his haven a Heaven.

* * * * *

Roberts seldom relished the dark winter evenings. True, he found diversion enough. But there was still an intermittent lassitude: the dull anticipation of long hours, all to be spent somehow. Roberts had the business motivation, and yearned for the fulfilment his success would bring. Yet brooding on the problems sapped his energy. It made him feel old and tired, with a near impossible task.

Self discipline, thought Roberts. That was the way. Pull yourself together, man! But it had not worked. Even made things worse, though he took a while to realize why. In truth, he resented its imposition - even by himself - and rebelled through bouts of sullen laziness. Drink was a frequent temptation, as was the attractive balm of nostalgia.

No, he realized. It was fine to relax, but only in contrast to stress. Effort was not always action. Sometimes, thinking was the hardest work.

Only through such understanding and analysis could Roberts ever calm his mind. Tonight, he had suffered another spell of anguished reminiscence while cooking a solo meal. Recollection of sociable dinners had suspended his sense of time, before acrid smoke from the kitchen signalled his meal would be deficient.

This small occurrence had disturbed Roberts. Along with other little twitches and failings, it betrayed his inner turbulence. Just like the waves, he thought, staring at the night-time sea. Their very state was a never-ending motion. There was something else, too: a speck of illumination. A ship. Roberts focused on it for some minutes, hardly knowing the reason for its attraction. Then he realized...yes, it possessed an independence. Resilience over turbulent forces. Roberts smiled, wishing luck to the sailors on board. He had gained clarity of mind once more.

Roberts still had to fill those hours. Should he stroll down the road for a quiet beer? Maybe a bus to Rottingdean, one of the snug old pubs? But he did not feel the energy tonight.

He had worked hard for the comforts of home. Best enjoy them to the full. Yes, tonight Roberts preferred his own domain. Some jazz on the hi-fi, perhaps a video. No...just jazz, a drink and a long relaxing soak. Flip through his diaries later, or that biography of Jelly Roll Morton? Roberts had started the book with fascinated zeal, keen to learn of the jazz pioneer. Enjoyment had been spoilt by business worries. Tonight, he resolved to relax.

With this new plan for a pleasurable evening, Roberts sipped a frothy cappuccino. He moved along the plush carpet of the hallway towards the bathroom, switching on the halogen bulbs. Their clean triangles of pure white light shone down on the picture frames.

Roberts froze, experiencing one of those peculiar flashes that lend an unexplained familiarity to a random moment. It was something about the light...the hallway. The way it extended away in perspective, prompting associative recall of a similar place. But where?

Roberts blinked.

The memory was just below the surface of conscious thought, like an elusive revelation. Not part of a home, but a theatre. The lobby, lit up at night. So close to reality that his mind was triggered with a flow of vivid images.

Rain in the foreground, the crowd spilling through the doors, their ripple of cheery laughter. "Come on, Harry!" he called. "We'll miss the party," and Harry had sauntered through the admiring throng. Watery droplets soaked his swooping cloak, pattering his silk topper.

Roberts knew he had travelled nowhere, but was stunned by a sense of novelty. He experienced a phase of transcendent mental clarity, in this moment of solitary silence, and turned to the pictures on the wall. Each was familiar, yet fresh to his eyes. Roberts glanced over a blotchy abstract like a wallpaper sample, back to the black and white photograph. The pull was irresistible.

1960! That party at the Goldmans' flat. Roberts remembered the rush to the taxi in the rain. Harry had sheltered Val beneath his bat-wing cloak, as Roberts grabbed the fallen topper. There they were! Roberts Junior grinning with Harry, Val and her beehive hairdo, the sombre lurking George. The division between image and memory blurred, then dissolved into fancy. Roberts could see the scene, not a paper snapshot. His hallway was a faint mirage.

* * * * *

"Just one more," said the short Scottish photographer, shuffling in for a close-up. He framed Roberts and Harry big in the viewfinder, their faces beaming with delight. The flash froze the moment for the future, then the two moved apart.

Despite his smile, Harry hated the manly hug his agent had forced upon him. Still, 'Defty' Danny had his funny ways. They would have to put up with each other. Harry put his doubts aside, and finished a buffet nibble.

"Thanks a million, gents," said the photographer in his gruff but genuine way. He fiddled with his camera case.

"Thanks to *you*," said Roberts. "When do we hit the streets? Buy a bag of chips, we're the wrapper!"

"Tomorrow's night final," said the Scotsman, "or the Saturday arts review."

"I want a print for the wall!" smiled Roberts. "Now, lad - help yourself to a drink. The buffet! *Everybody's* happy!"

The photographer knew a good solid scoff could fit his professional schedule. With scarcely a second's hesitation, he took a plate from the stack. The Scotsman retained a dour front, but glowed with an inner relish. His chin was chewing fast above a woollen bow-tie. News of Harry could wait.

"Nice chap," said Roberts, catching Valerie's eye. She nodded. George strolled to greet a buddy by the corner bookcase.

"I'd like a photo!" chirped Valerie, in her eager voice. She brushed a crumb from her dress. "George and I...we'd love it on the wall. Remember a great occasion!"

"No problem," smiled Roberts. "I'll order a dozen."

Harry spoke with the tone of an omniscient narrator. "You've done me proud tonight. Both of you. An excellent reception, Daniel...Mrs. Goldman."

"*Valerie*, please!" she giggled.

"Loosen up!" said Roberts. "Save the formalities."

"I'm sorry," said Harry. "It goes with the tuxedo."

But Roberts was not listening. "Champagne!" he cried, loving the sound of his voice. "Crack the bottles, pour it out - 'cos everybody's happy!"

The three moved to the beers, wines and spirits, displayed on a cloth-covered table. George was conversing with a tall, buck-toothed fellow who responded with frequent snorts.

Roberts popped corks in the background, while Valerie curled a slinky arm round her husband. "George, darling..." she purred. "Join the gang. Say hello to our clever Harry!"

George frowned behind his heavy, horn-rimmed spectacles, although the buck-toothed fellow was keen to chat. He juttied a hand out swift and sharp, shaking Harry's with lively undulation. "My name's *Adrian*," he said, with another snort. His tone implied a conversation might be based on the fact.

Harry gave one of his sly, sideways nods.

"Terrific show!" said Adrian. "Arrived a bit late! Crept along the aisle, real nuisance. That thing you did with the magical box? Jammed everything in! Awesome!"

"Forgive me if I may," offered the deadpan George. He was dressed in a dull and outdated suit, of 1940s austerity, which sobered the gaiety of the scene. George had come to despise the buoyancy of his wife, and their marriage suffered in silence.

"Oh, the show was very colourful," said George. "I wouldn't deny you that. But you made a claim, Mr. Hocus. 'I Guarantee Your ASTONISHMENT!!' I question that claim, Mr. Hocus."

Harry regarded the man, without challenge.

"I was surprised a couple of times, certainly," said George. "But that was pretty much all."

"*George...*" sighed Valerie.

"I could solve that hat trick a mile off," added George. "Surely it was done with concealed springs?"

Harry did not take the criticism badly. At least, that was how it appeared - unless emotional tact, for an illusionist, was just another skill. "That would be one technique," he reasoned. "But no, it would not be mine."

George glowered at the cocky magician, although Valerie intervened. "Darling, not tonight. Please. Harry's our guest, remember..."

"I *won't* be taken in. No way," huffed George, as Valerie tugged him aside. "Magic's all poppycock, we know that. We knew that going into the theatre!"

"Champers!" said a glowing Roberts, returning with a bouquet of glasses. There was definite risk of spillage, but his natural deftness prevailed.

"Ah!" gasped Harry, as if amazed at the offer. He took one of the bubbling drinks.

"Sir...?" asked Roberts, of the snorting fellow.

"Don't mind if I do," said Adrian.

"I propose a toast," beamed Roberts. "Ah - the lovely lady's back!"

Valerie took the last of the drinks from Roberts. "George had...one or two troubles at work," she explained. "Sorry he's a bit grouchy."

"Never mind the old misery," said Roberts, raising his glass. "To the future?"

This met with mutual approval.

"A handy thing to have," nodded Harry.

"To the future!" snorted Adrian. The glasses touched each other in a series of musical chimes.

"The *things* we can do," said Roberts, watching Valerie's slinky legs depart. It seemed he was speaking to Harry, though his stage whisper let anyone overhear. Adrian hovered a touch uneasily, looking for a break in the buffet scrum.

“Tonight was splendid,” added Roberts. “Your sparkling West End debut, and we couldn’t have wished for more. Harry, that’s just the beginning. We need a career that rises like a...levitated lady!”

“I wave the wand, you dial the phone,” said Harry. “That’s what an agent’s for.”

“Right,” nodded Roberts. He offered a broad smile to Adrian, hoping he would move. The fellow took the hint. Breaking his hesitant approach to the buffet, Adrian slid between Mr. Radcliffe and Mrs. Pike. They were two acquaintances of the Goldmans, ample in girth.

Roberts addressed Harry in a conspiratorial tone, across the rim of his champagne glass. “Harry - toast the future, because I’m planning it today. Music hall’s dead, so’s vaudeville. Your Marvels of Magic did the trick tonight, but variety’s the spice of life. There’s only one future. It’s that box over there. I’m talking *television*.”

The box was a surly model, selected by George. The screen was shielded by wooden shutters, so it resembled an antique cabinet. They would only part with reluctance, so Valerie could view her trivia. George preferred The Telegraph.

“Not so fast,” said Harry, with a note of caution. “I’m very happy with my stage work.”

Roberts hammered his point. “The world’s changing, Harry. It’s 1960! More than half the century gone. By 1980 we’ll have men on the moon. TV’s a kind of magic. *Scientific* magic! Why not use it, Harry? Broaden your scope. I...’Guarantee Your ASTONISHMENT!!’, eh?”

Roberts threatened another manly hug, although Harry dodged the worst. He considered the proposal, in a deeply skeptical mood. But Harry’s reply was left unspoken.

“Harry!” smiled Valerie, tapping the tall magician. She had none of Roberts’ tippy impact. “We haven’t had the chance for a chat! I really adored the performance.”

“Thank you, Valerie,” said Harry. He was relieved at her quick return. “And not just tonight, I hope. I’m sure we’ve plenty of tickets!”

Roberts forced a somewhat contrived chuckle. “Ha! Harry’s learning the commercial angle,” he said. “Hey, Val...I was just mentioning the power of the tube. Harry needs a TV show!”

Valerie’s eyes widened in further astonishment. “Why, yes! It’s a marvellous idea.”

Roberts’ became loud and enthusiastic. His voice rose above the general chit-chat. “Hey, everyone - Harry needs a TV show!”

Harry winced.

“You bet!” called Adrian, who was equally keen.

There was a chorus of ums, yeses, brilliants and a mumbled “Poppycock” from George.

Champagne and adrenalin had gone to Roberts’ head. Oscillating slightly, he sang a quirky tune to open this new spectacular. “Nah da-dee, da-dah! Nah da-dee, da-dum! Tune in, tune in today. It’s Harry’s Magical Hour...”

“Hip, hip, hip - hooray!” added Adrian.

Immune to giggling at this ridiculous scene, Val offered her constructive advice. “You think so?” she frowned, sipping the last of her champers. “Sounds like Hancock’s Half Hour to me.”

“The tune?” asked Roberts.

“No, the name,” said Valerie. “Might be a little confusing.”

“They’ll mistake *Harry* for the talented one!” laughed Roberts. He sobered with a dark look from the man.

“Indeed,” intoned Harry, in his urbane yet distant manner. “But playing devil’s advocate, I have one possible suggestion. I never had my own show on radio. Would have been rather pointless, as you could hardly see - or see through - the tricks.”

“Just guest spots,” nodded Roberts. “Like Wireless Wonders...”

“Quite,” nodded Harry. “So if - at any time in the future - I agree with your television scheme, how about The Hocus Pocus Showcase? The stress very much on ‘Show’.”

“I like it,” said Valerie, toying with her artificial pearls.

Roberts considered the possibilities, fathomed their potential pitfalls. “An excellent title,” he murmured. “But just one problem. It never mentions magic. We’ve got to mention magic!” Roberts tapped the magician lightly on the shoulder.

“Oh, but *Hocus Pocus*,” snorted Harry. “Obvious!”

“What’s all this I hear?” asked the Scottish photographer, waddling back from his epic gobble. “Showcase...magic? What’s it all about? Some kind of canny puzzle?”

“Thinking of titles, John,” said Roberts. “Harry’s *possible* TV show.”

“Television?” frowned John. “Aye, that’s quite a challenge. Cameras seldom lie, now, Harry. Focus on every trick.”

“*Focus!*” gasped Valerie. “Surely, that’s it?” All eyes were upon her. “Why not, Magic in *Focus*...with Harry Hocus and his Hocus Pocus Showcase!”

There was a moment of suspense - of realization - as the ring of these words sank in. “Valerie,” said Roberts very slowly, very low. Then he became faster and much more excited. “I can see it, girl, I can see it! The music, the titles, the lights! Millions watching, Harry on the box. The thrills, the climax, *ta-rrad!*”

* * * * *

How that catchy theme tune rang in Roberts’ ears. Not the slurred ditty composed in dizzy exultation, but a recognisable derivation. Roberts had hummed it to a friendly composer, so it became polished and sharp. He could see the irony now. Harry’s theme gave no clue to the strange dabbings concealed by his elegant demeanour. In retrospect, the tune had acquired a decidedly sinister ring.

But Harry had been a hit. Roberts could never deny that. Nor could Harry deny Roberts the value of his vision. Once converted to the medium of television, he had been grateful for the persuasive prod.

That was twenty or thirty years ago. What of now, what of tonight? More precisely, what of the devious plan brewing in Roberts’ mind? A plan that had hatched the last few days, formed the last few weeks and - perhaps subconsciously - evolved

through the last few years. Roberts tried to keep his mind calm and unbiased, allowing an objective weighing of the pros and cons to balance his angry ambitions.

True, Harry had betrayed him. Roberts had been badly tarnished, beyond a quick polish by the image-makers. The rumours had hurt, the mud had stuck. 'Oh - Danny Roberts, the agent? *Creepy Harry's* one of his...'

Gone was a showbiz career in any credible form without a top-line act like Harry. He had earned a great deal of money, enriching Roberts and himself. Yet Harry's share? Every penny wasted on aimless travels and dusty curios. Harry had lost himself in obscure pastimes: the charts, the mannequins, the chemical concoctions. All were of an occult nature, hateful to Roberts and his commercial mind. But their value, to a collector of specialized items? Roberts began to think money.

Clearly, Harry would never agree to leave his flat. He had refused the nursing home with a spit of his old venom. So if Harry would not give, Roberts would have to take. It was a simple business proposition.

Forgetting his bath for the moment, Roberts returned to the living-room. He placed the phone on his knee, breathing deeply to calm the tension. Then he dialled a local number.

There were several rings. Roberts sat waiting. Still time to stop, cut off the call. But a crackly murmur came down the line. "Hello. Nevill Smith," it said.

Roberts snapped back into his pushy, confident mode. "How's things with you?" he asked. "I'd like to come over. Talk a little business! How about Saturday, eight o'clock?"

To Sue, it was no surprise to learn by Saturday that Rachael would be leaving the house. It might be cosy, with a pleasant surprise. But the problems Rachael was tackling could find no solution there. The doorbell chimed around midday, and Sue opened the door. She was confronted by two solid bulks of biker.

“Come for the girl,” said Cutter. Sue stepped back without a word.

Soon, Rachael was carrying bags to the waiting Grunt, who sat astride the BSA Rocket 3. The bike-and-sidecar combination was functional, if not in perfect condition.

Cutter lounged in the hallway, eyeing Laura and Phil as they emerged together from the living-room. “Used to live in a place like this,” he said. “Indescribable.” There was nothing to say after that.

Rachael came back through the front door. Her skirt was short and tasselled beneath a battered leather jacket, which Grunt had given her from his workshop rubbish. “That’s the lot,” said Rachael, “except those.” She pointed at some large art folders by the telephone table.

“I’ll lug ’em back,” said Cutter. “Grab my helmet, Rachael. Join Grunt on the bike.”

Rachael nodded. She took two keys from her pocket, looped together with string. “Room’s yours,” said Rachael, tossing them at Phil. He caught them with a jingle, at the end of their curving arc. Rachael turned sharply to avoid the lingering looks, and any last words from Sue.

Cutter chuckled. He lifted the folders in a one-handed grip, tapping his homburg hat to Phil. Stepping out, Cutter watched the departing bike, with Rachael snuggled in the sidecar. Only when its engine purr echoed round the corner did Cutter move down the road.

Glad Grunt can have his moment with a beauty, thought Cutter. Bonded the two together. Maybe he would appreciate a real treasure: the beautiful BSA. As for Rachael? Cutter considered the quality. She wasn’t so bad either.

There was silence - stillness - in the house for a while. Another time had come, another phase. The place had seen many before. Sue pushed the front door closed, leaning back against the letter-box. She lifted the local freebie from the telephone table, and read its imaginary headline. “‘Wild Girl Flees House...Read All About It.’” There was no zest, no zip. No humour.

“I’ll...move in tonight,” said Phil. “Brilliant! Do a runner from the other dump.” Laura looked at Phil with happiness, nestling under his arm.

Sue sighed. She was sad, but satisfied. At least the conflict was over. Rachael had got what she wanted, although it seemed a crazy idea. As for Sue? She didn’t have a lot in life, even if no-one was chipping it away.

Rachael was a feather in the wind, drifting from here to there. How would these bikers be in a month or so? Would she regret this hasty move?

* * * * *

Roberts did not have much to do of a Saturday night, and neither did Nevill Smith. So the meeting was a welcome interlude in a long, predictable evening. Roberts had phoned an hour earlier, to confirm the visit. Now his stout figure stood wheezing by Nevill's terraced house, after a brisk walk beyond the bus.

"Evening, sir," said Nevill, with self-conscious courtesy. He kept the tone for anyone in authority, or anyone bigger who threatened a fight.

"Good to see you," said Roberts, between gasps for air. He stepped into the hall. Roberts brought out a blue periscope-shaped inhaler, and puffed a metered dose deep into his lungs. "Better," he said, pocketing the prescribed device. "Shouldn't have rushed, left late..."

Nevill shrugged. "I'm in all evening, Mr. Roberts. You could have called midnight, no hassle."

Roberts was out having fun at Nevill's age. But he stifled any comment. They needed each other.

Nevill showed Roberts to the seedy living-room. "Anything else you want nicked?" he asked. "Profits were crap last time."

"Sorry I couldn't get you more," said Roberts, sinking into one of Nevill's creaking armchairs. "Buyer knows junk when he sees it. Shame that's all we had."

"Yeah," said Nevill, musing for a while. "I don't mind. I know the game, sir. But Andrew was most disappointed. Doesn't know the ups and downs."

"He tries hard!" laughed Roberts. He appeared jovial, although his coat remained buttoned and belted. Nevill seldom heated this austere dwelling, and tonight was no exception. The host curled on a stool like a ragamuffin pixie, ponytail dangling, duffle coat open to reveal multi-patched dungarees.

Roberts groped in his pockets, looking for another inhaler - this time, of the nicotine variety. He lit the stubby cigar with a chromed Zippo, relishing the effect on his young acolyte. Never mind the health freaks with their moans and groans! Big bosses should have big cigars, and Roberts lived up to the image. He resembled the child's image of a businessman: big cigar, big moustache, big coat. Perhaps it was the child within Roberts, trying to satisfy its dream. All he lacked was the big shiny car.

Almost managing a smoke ring, Roberts fixed young Nevill with an inspirational gleam. Nevill knew that 'Defty' Danny look, and sat up straight to attention.

"I've got a serious proposition," said Roberts. "Feel awake? Feel ready to listen?"

"Just siphoned my earwax," said Nevill.

"Good," smiled Roberts. "Fancy a little job?"

"Always looking for work," said Nevill.

Roberts hunched a little closer. "I know a place that's...*accessible*, you might say. An old fellow who's usually asleep. But he's quite a hoarder, this fellow. Has a rare and valuable collection."

"Does he...?" murmured Nevill. His tone was non-committal, although his attention was riveted. Another job, and a lucrative one? Better keep saying 'sir'.

"I want no violence," said Roberts. "Guaranteed. That's part of our verbal contract."

“I understand, sir. Course I do. I’ll take every care and attention.” Nevill paused for a moment, and considered the drawbacks. “What if this geezer gets stroppey?”

Roberts shifted his face to a sterner expression. “Then your reaction will be, *no violence.*”

Nevill was not convinced. “He won’t like us calling, poking around. Understandable human reaction.”

“Let’s get this straight...” said Roberts.

“Yeah, but Danny...” said Nevill, lapsing into chat.

“I’m not arguing, Nevill!” snapped Roberts. The plan came to him then, clear and logical. It resolved the situation, although he would not tell Nevill everything. “Harr...I mean, ‘this geezer’, won’t get in your way. Don’t tell me my business and I won’t tell you yours.”

“All right,” said Nevill, raising a hand. “Relax, Mr. Roberts. Mellow *downnn.*”

Roberts took a long drag on his cigar, and addressed Nevill in a conciliatory tone. “Sorry. It’s a tense old business. This fellow’s got no use for his collection. The value’s going to waste. You know my situation...”

“Roberts Builders?” shrugged Nevill. “Who could forget? Crazy customers after your ‘innocent’ blood. Shame you stopped paying us, sir.”

This was meant to hurt Roberts, and it did. But Roberts did not react.

“Light the blue touch-paper!” smirked Nevill. “When?”

“Haven’t finalized the details,” said Roberts. “Need a buyer first. I’ll be making...inquiries.”

Nevill perked up. He had heard these words before.

“No messing around. No trouble,” added Roberts. “I’ll sell the lot straightaway. Do a neat job, Nevill. Keep your wits about you. I’ll pay five hundred on delivery, plus a quarter profits. Rest assured, you’ll be quids in. No mistake! More than the missing wages.”

Nevill rubbed his chin. It was still bristly from a blunt razor, and made an audible rasp. “Sounds enticing, sir. But what do we nick?”

“I’ll give you a list,” said Roberts.

“Know all about it,” murmured Nevill, with snide insinuation. “This fellow’s...a friend of yours?”

“Cut the questions!” sputtered Roberts, with a sudden wariness.

“Okay,” said Nevill. “Snip, snip.” He frowned a little deeper than his permanent frown. “Five hundred *each*...for me and Andy?”

Roberts considered the situation. He had something awkward to say. “Look, I know you like Andy...and I like Andy. But is he up to the job?”

“Can’t drop him now, Mr. Roberts. Might get a bit annoyed.”

Roberts snorted. He glanced at the window with its shady view. Someone kicked a can, further down the street, while music drifted from a pub. Someone else was having a life. Someone else was having fun.

“Not sure I like this,” said Roberts. “How about a solo spot?”

It sounded like an audition.

“Too much to carry,” said Nevill. “Andy drives the getaway bike...”

“...and I still owe him wages,” sighed Roberts. “Okay, five hundred *each*. You’re clearing me out!”

“We’re taking the risk,” said Nevill.

“But I’m the brain,” said Roberts. “Hey - talking to Mr. Big!” Roberts exhaled a great pall of smoke, rather pleased at the concept. “It’s a skill, Nevill, selling this stuff. You’d get zilch down the flea market or bric-a-brac store.”

“I’m happy enough, sir.”

“Good. Then everybody’s happy!”

“When, though?”

Roberts jabbed his cigar towards the hunched figure. “I’m aiming at the New Year. Leave the fellow a happy Christmas, least I can do. I’ll ring with the final arrangements. In the meantime, lay low, stay *mellow*. No more jobs, Nevill. Don’t want you in the clink.”

Nevill twiddled his ponytail. It would be a dull intermission. “Andrew won’t be happy, sir. Needs a Christmas bonus. Presents for Mummy and Medusa.”

“Who...?”

“Grandma.”

Roberts had feared such nonsense from his ex-labourer, the impatient Andy ‘Grunt’ Sloan. Groaning at the necessity, Roberts took four crumpled twenties and two tens from his wallet. “Here’s a ton. Keep him smooth, right? Advance against earnings.”

“Ta.”

“Lie low,” said Roberts, rising. He moved towards the door.

Nevill rolled off the stool, flopped on the sofa. Roberts saw himself out.

* * * * *

Christmas cheer brightened the corners of Cutter’s Yard. Realizing how it might please Rachael, Cutter had bought a straggly pine tree from a greengrocer’s. This had been decorated with colourful oddments, and metal scraps from the workshop. Grunt had threaded the fairy lights through an old hubcap, which he hung on the wall. It resembled a UFO impaled by some cosmic collector.

“What’s the music?” asked Grunt, slobbering over a Chinese takeaway: all the usual, with plastic holly. Made in Taiwan, very festive. He had cocked an ear to the choral harmony emanating from Cutter’s hi-fi. “Can’t we change it, Knifer? Where’s that Industrial Res-o-lution?”

“*Revolution’s* fine, but it’s dark,” said Cutter. “Need air and light tonight with my Christmas angel.” Rachael smiled through a mouthful of bean sprouts.

“Off out?” asked Cutter of his surly worker.

“No. Thought *you* was,” said Grunt.

Cutter checked him with a deadpan look. “We have better things to do, my Gruntling. Here. *Indoors*.” Cutter’s hand slid along the back of the sagging sofa, fingers walking onto Rachael’s shoulder. She playfully slapped them away.

Sensing his presence was awkward, Grunt considered the options. “Could give Barry a ring,” he murmured. “See Nev. No, *not* Nev. Dunno.”

“Take in a film?” suggested Cutter. “One of the big shows? Dancing chorus, Grunt? Tiller girls?” Cutter mimicked the high kicks with his nimble fingers, free of their previous diversion. “Tah da-dah! Just your cup of culture.”

“Shut it, Knifer. Got work on the Triumph. Needs that tender loving care.”

“Tune her and test her,” grinned Cutter. “Confined to the workshop, Grunt.”

Subdued by the intervention of a volume control, *The Industrial Revolution* played quietly. It was Cutter’s preferred choice with Grunt out the way, creating an air of moody ambience. Much had an electronic quality: a raw hum of power interspersed with fizzling climaxes, blending talk with a subtle tingle.

The hubcap UFO glowed on the wall, while the standard lamp flooded the floor with a cone of light. Cutter clasped his hands to the warm, curved shape of his most unusual treat: hot chocolate hit the spot tonight. Rachael had bought it, Rachael liked it - so the gentle giant had joined her.

“Your secret,” said Cutter. “You hadn’t told me all. Your nightmare about the forest.”

Rachael snuggled deep into the frayed cushions, her leg stretching out to rub Cutter’s.

Drinking chocolate finished, Cutter put the mug aside. His finger traced a line from Rachael’s fluffy slippers, over the decorative texture of her black tights, to the tassels of her short skirt. Rachael closed her eyes, enjoying the sensation, but fighting to keep tension from her face.

“Something the matter?” asked Cutter, ruffling her hair. He was planning his next manoeuvre.

“Nothing,” said Rachael. “I find it...hard to relax.”

“Then relax, girl,” said Cutter. His bulk rose suddenly, large against the ceiling as she gazed up from the sofa. The left hand moved further up Rachael’s leg, delving beneath the tassels, while the other moved down to her neck. Cutter’s beard bristled Rachael’s skin as his mouth opened, ready to sample her cheek.

“Cut...!” gasped Rachael, as if stopping an out-take: a bloop, a ridiculous error. The girl was shuddering, Cutter could see. She stared like a frightened animal.

“What’s the game?” growled Cutter. “I don’t need it. Tell me the problem, lady!”

“Don’t shout,” said Rachael. There was a sudden darkness in her eyes.

Cutter glared at her for a moment, breathing heavy. Then he tore his eyes away. “You’ve had a nightmare,” said Cutter, “and you’re frigid. Christ! You’re dripping icicles, girl.”

Rachael tried to say something, but the words froze in her mouth.

“What’s the problem?” said Cutter. “I don’t understand. I’ve read enough quack psychology. You say you hate this forest but you don’t hate trees. What the hell are you saying, girl? You’re flirting like Barbie in a flasher mac, but when I come you’re the shrinking Daisy. I’m not treating you like some sheepy slag. Want to give that warmth you’ve never had, bring that warmth to the Yard. I’m doing my thing, I’m motivated. What else are you dreaming, girl?”

Rachael looked hard into Cutter’s piercing eyes. He was a looming shadow in the dimness, able to kiss or crush on a whim. Maybe the choice was hers.

“My nightmare,” whispered Rachael. “The forest. It wasn’t real...”

“Not *real?*” scowled Cutter. “Course not. It’s a dream, Rachael. A fantasy.”

“No, Cutter,” said Rachael. “You don’t understand. Let me up. I’ll...tell you the reason.”

Cutter lifted himself from the sofa, and moved across the room. He stood by the glowing hubcap UFO, so the fairy lights created an aura. “Upstairs,” said Cutter, with no more ado. “Tell me everything there.”

* * * * *

Work was so different in the evenings, thought Grunt. Work could even be fun. No callers, no business, just fiddling around. He could wolf cakes, gulp lager, play what he liked. Rock or rude comedy, the choice was his.

How Grunt was absorbed this Saturday night, wheeling the Triumph Tiger to centre stage. Careful check of components, then down to the nitty-gritty. Hands on nuts, bolts, engine parts - out with this, out with that. Precision mechanical engineering. How he loved the sheen of metal, the heart of the machine. The smoothness, the hardness, the curves.

Grunt’s music was loud, and blocked any stray noise drifting from two floors above: the cries and sighs from Cutter and Rachael, up in Cutter’s cosy room.

Cutter was examining Rachael’s beautiful bodywork. Precision organic engineering. How he loved the sheen of her skin, the squeeze of her breasts. The smoothness, the softness, the curves. Nothing but the best, thought Cutter. Quality merchandise. He performed the full Cutter maintenance job for the sadly neglected female.

Neglected? That was barely the word. Abused was the tale she had told. Cutter put the sparkle back into her dented life, going on, on, on all the way.

Grunt popped his bubblegum with a sticky, voluptuous kiss. Time for the final touch. He uncapped the oilcan, aimed the nozzle - and squirted vital lubrication where vital lubrication should go.

Roberts had travelled up on the train, buying tea and standing till the London line crossed the Balcombe Viaduct. He was always thrilled to see the countryside from this great Victorian structure, as if looking from a low-flying aircraft. Roberts surveyed the fields and hedgerows before bushes swept across the scene. The train passed Gatwick Airport and East Croydon, before pulling into Victoria Station.

Roberts stepped off with an air of confidence. Best make a day of it, he thought. Trips to London were rarities now. He smiled to recall the old Singing Postman, whose day trip ended in a contented “Cheer-O!” Roberts left the tube at Oxford Circus, stopping for a pizza slice.

It was a harsher, filthier city than he remembered. While day-dreaming in his Peacehaven villa, Roberts pictured a composite London of his favourite moments. Most were long ago. The place was clogged with noisy traffic, its fumes filling the air. Everyone was pushy: always in a hurry, but without the charm of old. They charged along - busy, busy, busy - another appointment, another call to make. Weren't true professionals the most laid-back, always with time to spare? Nowadays, you had to *look* busy to *be* busy - and lose any sense of style. Roberts was disgusted by the flapping burger papers and domineering posters. A sense of innocence lost. Ads were super-slick comments for the well-informed, or a rehash of anything past.

Roberts realized what had urged him along this particular street, without any conscious intention. He emerged at the lower end of Tottenham Court Road, near the place of his first venture. Roberts paused in the urban bustle, becoming suddenly nostalgic. Before long, he spotted the high window of an attic office. It had once been his.

The dirty glass revealed nothing but a blur within: a faint movement, a fluorescent light. Probably some dodgy record label or whining telesales firm. Why, there was the doorway. Should he venture in, see where it all started?

Roberts stepped forward with a thrill in his heart. Then he stopped, just as suddenly. It wasn't much of an illusion, so why shatter the thin facade? Door was locked anyway. Security intercom. None of that in his day. What would they have said to Harry now? “Push off. Send us your C.V., love. Don't call us,” etc...?

Roberts tried to enjoy his meanders. But the effort of forcing happiness imposed a weary, disheartening duty. A headache made its sluggish manifestation, pounding like feet on a million pavements. After stopping for whisky in a Covent Garden pub, Roberts strolled to the British Museum. He felt revived by the alcohol, unlike the dry Egyptian mummies.

However, Roberts had come to London with a purpose. Following coffee and a spot of lunch, he took the tube to the west of the city. His destination was an antique shop in a certain quarter of London. Not one of the best-known establishments, or the biggest. Indeed, one of the most obscure.

* * * * *

Roberts had explored much of London after moving from Leicester, back in the late 1950s. He did so partly for amusement, partly to check out the shows and venues. Knowledge was an agent's weapon, and Roberts wanted to fight.

He reached Fulham once, with cash in his pocket. Roberts had shared the success of a popular melody. Why not splash out a bit? It was no fortune, but enough for a little luxury. Roberts had quite a liking for glassware, and had started his own collection.

Despite the relative dowdiness of Lynton's Parlour, Roberts had been attracted by a glimmer within. Opening the door with a jingle, he had found a cluttered interior devoid of any customer - or even Mr. Lynton.

Roberts rang an ancient bell on the counter, which tinkled with unexpected clarity. Taking the brief opportunity, he glanced around the place. There were vases, ornaments and assorted bottles, intriguing yet somehow undesirable. Furniture and clocks loomed in the corners, while shelves groaned with jumbled books. A ball gown graced an ugly dummy, with moulded art deco hair.

Then Roberts saw an item he was destined to own. A tall mirror, with a curve at the top. Its border panels were glazed in a copper tinge, so reflections glowed with a sunny warmth.

Roberts had gasped. He was struck by the flattering aura this border gave to his features. In a fleeting, almost clairvoyant glimpse, he could see that very pose - that very mirror - in a fabulous home of his own. It was a far cry from his Sydenham digs, as Harry had yet to appear. But Roberts still had an optimistic shine, enhanced by this very antique.

Mr. Lynton emerged from a back passage, announced by a hollow cough. His hands were busy polishing a brass candlestick, even as he offered to help.

Paying less than Lynton requested, although more than he could afford, Roberts had bought that marvellous mirror. He still had it in his Peacehaven villa. He still loved it all the same.

Roberts' collection of glass had increased with his income, for he needed expensive hobbies with money rolling in. There was no point earning it otherwise. Thomas Lynton had cared for his customer, as he had with other specialists. He kept selected items for their privileged scrutiny, and very infrequent refusal.

* * * * *

The bell jingled as Roberts pushed the heavy door, entering Lynton's Parlour once more. A wave of pleasure rolled over him at the rich, familiar aroma. It combined brass polish, wood and tobacco.

Only the smallest part of the shop was visible, although this was crammed to the ceiling. Other rooms ran above it, back and below, stuffed with anything miscellaneous. The proprietor was lost in his warren, fiddling with its many trinkets.

Yes, Roberts could hear the shuffle. The anticipatory cough. Then the figure of Thomas Lynton came pottering into view, as stooped as he ever had been. It would be wrong to think this was the same Thomas Lynton who had made Roberts' initial acquaintance. This was Thomas, son of Thomas: a near-identical proprietor who had

taken over from his father at some indeterminable point. There was a little more hair, and a few less wrinkles. But in the bold strokes of a cartoonist's outline, it was the very same Thomas Lynton. Was there an infinite supply of such sons-of-sons, keen to keep the business going? Roberts hoped so. He hoped the place would always be here, a fixed point in a changing world.

"How delightful," smiled Lynton. "Daniel..."

"Good to be back," said Roberts. "How are you, Thomas?"

"Oh, the same as ever," nodded Lynton.

Roberts smiled.

"Much slower," said Lynton. "I don't push the business much. Passing trade, Dan, and the old regulars. That's the secret of an easy life."

Roberts toyed with a set of Tibetan bells. "Envy you, Tom!" he said. "God, I love this place. Some of these things, they've been here forever. That stuffed animal..."

"Percy."

"I remember! Been growling since the late fifties."

Lynton chuckled. "Oh, a good deal longer than that. Father bought him. He used to live in a pub. Seen many a brawl, has Percy?"

Roberts peered at the stiff, furred creature. "Really...?" he murmured. "Not for sale, of course?"

"Everything's for sale," said Lynton. "Some things go, and some things don't. Destiny is the best salesman." Lynton moved closer to the animal, his finger stretching to tickle the head. But it stopped short of the brown, tufty fur. The creature was preserved with arsenic.

Roberts stood back a little, feeling somehow intrusive. There had been an air of mild surprise in Lynton's tone, as if Roberts had not understood his philosophy.

"There's a buyer for everything," said Lynton. "A place for everything, too."

Roberts thought of his mirror, and understood.

"Of course, I never sell everything," added Lynton. "Chance would never allow it. Too many variables, Daniel. Percy could be here forever."

"A patient little weasel," said Roberts. He glanced towards the latticed window, feeling a brief sense of claustrophobia.

Lynton studied Roberts for a moment. He appeared dark against the bright window. Perhaps Lynton could perceive Roberts Junior, as his father once had.

"I had an interesting crate delivered this morning," said Lynton. "Not much in your line, no glassware. But some attractive porcelain, and a selection of 78s. Jazz among them..."

At first, Roberts did not hear Lynton. He was happy to watch the blurred outlines of passers-by, strolling to and fro. The grey glass veiled them into ill-defined phantoms, so the outside world became a shadow. Only Lynton's Parlour had an authentic substance. Destiny, thought Roberts. The best salesman...

"Danny?" whispered Lynton. "You're drifting."

Roberts blinked hard, snapping back from the window. "Sorry, Tom," he said. "Loads on my mind."

"Problems?"

“It’s a constant struggle.”

Lynton frowned. He recalled the letter written by his old friend: pages of fountain pen longhand, alternating between the sincerely motivated and obsessively disturbed. The man looked pale, Lynton could see that. The fading day caught the side of his face in a frosty pallor.

The shop’s lighting was provided by decorative electrical lamps, each of which was for sale. Should Lynton ever sell the lot, he would be groping in the dark. If fate delivered such a curious day, maybe it would be time to retire.

“Would you like to see the crate?” repeated Lynton, hoping to twitch young Danny from this sullen mood.

There was no need. Roberts had shaken himself, resolved himself. He had a reason for his visit, after all. “Fascinating,” he said. “I’ll look later, Tom. But I need a little advice.”

Lynton nodded. “Advice is free, Daniel, to a select few. I’ll see we’ll not be disturbed.”

The shopkeeper moved to the doorway, his benevolent face peeking into the winter street. He relished the cosy glow of the other shops, as afternoon darkened to evening. Their windows glowed as an amber delight, bright against the cooler blue. Lynton turned the calligraphic ‘Open’ sign to indicate the reverse.

Soon, Roberts was sipping tea in one of Lynton’s many back rooms, warmed by a hissing gas stove. It was like an obscure lost property department, lit by Edison’s prototype bulb. “Now, how can I help?” asked Lynton. “Nothing here you’d like?”

Roberts’ eyes rolled over the cluttered shelves, with their suitcases, hats and teddy bears. This was something of a junk depository, even to Thomas Lynton. “Advice will do, Tom. Sorry to rob you.”

“Anything you like,” said Lynton.

Roberts sighed. Lynton was a decent old man, and his Parlour a wonderful establishment. This was his own place, his own domain. That was just what Roberts needed. Somewhere to call his own after all these years, to reflect his personality. Setting his mind on Defty Danny’s - the paradise ahead - Roberts swallowed his remaining scruples.

“Tom. There’s a chance - a good chance - I’ll have some artefacts soon. Very *unusual* artefacts. Useless to me, I must say. But something in the antique line.”

“You’re wanting a buyer?”

“Yes,” said Roberts.

“You want me to sell them in the shop?”

“No. It’s important these particular objects are sold...privately. To a specialist collector.”

“Hmm,” nodded Lynton. “I won’t ask awkward questions, Daniel. We’ve known each other long enough. Would this case have any similarity to the...*rocking horse* deal?”

Roberts straightened. Lynton was most perceptive, for all his bufferish charm. “Eddie Morgan? Not a million miles off. He was weak, blind, didn’t know what he had...”

Lynton raised a gentle hand. "We'll let it rest. Now, did you mention the word '*unusual*'?"

"I did."

"I have my share of such objects," smiled Lynton. "The specialists come to see."

"Like me, Thomas. Your regulars."

"Quite." Lynton stroked one of his silvery eyebrows. "You need one who appreciates the things you sell. One who would accept a true valuation and pay the proper price."

"Exactly," said Roberts. "You know the man?"

Lynton pondered the question. He knew the answer - a simple 'yes' - but allowed his anecdote to crystallize. He was keen for the best effect.

"Earlier this year," said Lynton, "I had something of the unusual in stock." Knowing Lynton, this might have been last year, or the year before, so languorous was his sense of time. "It was the saddest little thing," he added. "Broken, filthy...but touching. It was a porcelain doll like no other I'd seen. Purple dress, boots, a chequered shawl. Curly hair, ribbons..."

Roberts frowned in bewilderment. He was not interested in such soppiness.

"But can you guess the unusual aspect?" smiled Lynton, sensing his friend's impatience. "The truth of it was, Daniel...this little doll had two heads."

Roberts was genuinely astonished. The surprise came with an incongruous jolt. "*Two*?" he queried. "Why two?"

"I did a certain amount of delving," said Lynton. "My interest had been aroused. I consulted the public records, tracing the family back."

"Ah," said Roberts, with a sly Harry-ish nod.

"Four arms, too. Four legs." Lynton cleared his throat. "Fact is, the doll was made for a pair of Siamese twins, oh - roundabout 1880. Their mother kept them locked in the nursery, but they cried so much at their 'normal' dolls that she commissioned a special toy. I believe they lived little past childhood."

"Very sad," murmured Roberts.

Lynton pressed on. "The point of the story is this: I placed the doll in my window thinking little of its value, pricing it at two hundred pounds."

"For a *dolly*?" gasped Roberts.

"Dolly collectors love them," smiled Lynton. "Yet my door was battered one evening after closing time, while I was counting the week's takings. I paused to admit this extraordinary gentleman. He was huddled deep in his overcoat, with a very low hat. I barely caught a glimpse of his face. He said he must have the doll no matter what, and that its value was severely understated. As a sign of goodwill, he would pay me two thousand pounds. Offered cash on the spot."

Roberts was startled.

"He asked that anything of a strange or obscure nature might be brought to his early attention. Of course, I was most grateful. Wrapped the doll. He gave me his business card." Lynton stretched to a pile of papers that served as his office. The card was propped near the kettle.

“I have it here. ‘Mr. W.M. Rimmon, Collector’, with a number for outer London. I believe he would be worth trying. Here, you can keep the card.”

It had been a worthwhile journey. Roberts popped the plain, printed rectangle into his wallet. There were no thanks, but an offer of his own. “Look, Tom - if I get these objects - if I find Mr. Rimmon - if I get a good price, and make the sale - I’d like to pay you. For helping.”

Lynton shook his head, slowly. “Advice is free, Daniel.”

“I know,” said Roberts. “But...for old time’s sake.”

Lynton thought of his father. He felt very proud. “Glad to earn an honest bob,” he smiled.

Roberts arrived home towards midnight, with a real sense of achievement. He propped Rimmon’s card by the telephone, almost challenging himself to ring. But not yet. The details, the planning. All had to be arranged. He did not want trouble with Harry, but a clean operation. As smooth as a conjuror’s contrivance.

Harry - now you see ’em, now you don’t! All your treasures gone! Walk this way to the nursing home - but don’t worry, it’s not a prison. You can chat with the other crinkly folk, watch a nice big colour TV. Maybe they’ll take you on a Magical Mystery Tour. A day trip to Defty Danny’s!

* * * * *

Rachael’s time in the cubby-hole had become a solitary concentration. She might have been an aspiring nun, or a wretched prisoner of the bikers. However, Rachael only suffered a mental restraint: the duty that locked her to the swivel stool, working at the timber easel.

Cutter realized and respected this, for he knew Rachael’s inner torment. The deep, disturbing secret she had bottled up for so long - telling no-one, neither family nor friend. How Laura would have sympathized, how Sue would have given support. Yet the two girls, so similar in age, shared none of this outlaw’s insight.

Cutter was patient. There had been tears in the bedroom, but tenderness too. Rachael needed her freedom to paint. But the work would soon be over, and she would be his. The best Christmas angel he could wish.

So it was, one Saturday before Christmas - then a week and a day away. There was no snow. Nothing Dickensian. But it would prove a night to remember.

Cutter had donned his favourite combination of chains, belts and weapons, and given his folks a ring up north. Dad was keen to learn of his newfound acquisition, although Cutter confined their knowledge to hints. He prowled downstairs to the workshop, kissing the plastic angel in the grim W.C. Then he strolled past the workbench and panoramic window, with the concrete yard outside. There was a sooty brick column by the cubby-hole. Cutter knocked on the door-frame.

Rachael emerged through the plastic strips like a mermaid through rippling water. They swished back around her body, retaining the creative seclusion. “Cutter,” she smiled. She never used ‘Grunt’, but ‘Cutter’ was a proud designation.

“The lonesome Rachael,” said Cutter. “Part of the gang?”

“Not yet,” said Rachael. “Sorry.”

“Understood,” said Cutter. “How goes the work?”

Rachael flicked a lock of hair from her eyes. “Painting day and night.”

Cutter was sympathetic. “Night’s best for the keener stages,” he said. “The magic moments, the final flourish. There’s long labour in that painting. Your mind’s befuddled by its cause. Best kill the nightmare, Rachael. There are twenty-four hours in a day.”

Cutter sure liked his verbal finery. Must spend hours composing these speeches. “Thanks,” said Rachael, simply enough. She saved her passion for the canvas.

“I’m off,” said Cutter. “Pub first, then The Shady Souls. Number’s on the wall.” Cutter tapped a list taped to the column, surrounded by business cards. “I’ll drag Grunt along, you’ll have no disturbance. Keep the brushes busy.”

There was no kiss, for the time of casual intimacy had yet to be attained. Rachael needed her spirit for the draining work. She would share when she was ready. Hopping on their Harley and Kawasaki, the bikers rumbled into the night.

* * * * *

Nevill did not care much for night-life. Weekends were best for creeping into houses, pinching videos and jewellery. He worked while others were at play. Otherwise, Nevill preferred to stay in his scruffy home - watching films, playing solo board-games, delving through sensational books. Crime, UFOs, all his favourites - alongside the myths of King Arthur and Robin Hood. Nevill spurned the cults favoured by so many: the punks, mods, bikers or whoever. He was alienated from alienation, bored with outward revolt.

While very different from his old boss, Mr. Roberts, Nevill could sympathize with the man’s desires. Roberts wanted a leisure centre as his castle, to boost his own prestige. Nevill’s *home* was a more modest castle, sheltered from the mundane world. Games and videos served as jousts and dances, crime books the words of law, while legends and the paranormal brought an air of spirituality.

Nevill licked the flap of the envelope, labelling it ‘Andy’ in marker pen. He had been tempted to keep the money, but had been perfectly straight with Roberts. Andy had a volatile temperament, which had to be tamed. Cash up front would inspire patience, till all was ready to go. He had delayed the errand a week.

Nevill donned a college scarf, although he was hardly qualified to do so, and plopped a beret on his head. He closed the door to his terraced house, and ambled through the streets. It was a mile or so to Cutter’s Yard, in the eastern side of Brighton.

The cul-de-sac was an urban backwater. Nevill stood in the middle of the silent tarmac, surveying the scene before him. Nevill had worked in the yard, for Roberts, but things had been different then. He wanted to get the vibe of the situation, before making any wrong moves.

There was a corner newsagent’s and short row of houses. Cutter’s Yard was wedged between these and a graffiti-scrawled wall, part of an old factory. Nevill walked over to the double gates, where his quick eye checked the details. Closed, but not padlocked. Good: must be someone at home.

There was a cracked plastic button by the side of the gates, along with a typed label. Nevill read the words, 'For Attention', sealed beneath ageing Sellotape. He placed a finger on the button, hesitated, then pressed it.

16

All was lively at The Shady Souls nightclub. Usual queue winding down the basement steps, two heavies Cutter could have flattened with a feather. He followed the dark passage with its coloured spotlights into the throbbing, smoky interior.

Cutter always made an impression. Heads turned to acknowledge his coming, while Grunt gaped at the exotic crowd. "Real shady!" he shouted at Cutter, who was moving towards the bar. Grunt clocked a girl in a blue velvet dress, heels high enough to rival stilts.

"Beer?" asked Cutter, tugging him away.

"Beer!" said Grunt. "Look at that!" He pointed at a banner on the wall, glowing in ultra-violet light. There were screaming faces, with hands clutching their sides. The mouths were wide, gaping ovals.

"Very expressive," smiled Cutter. "Expressionistic."

"What...?" Grunt snorted. "They're pissed!"

Another girl approached, with purple lips. Grunt imitated one of the angst-ridden characters. He received a purple sneer.

"They let him out," said Cutter. "Weekends." He patted Grunt on the head.

* * * * *

No immediate response from the buzzer, although Nevill persevered. He could hear no sound within Cutter's Yard. Why not peek through the letter-box? This was part of the narrow street door, itself part of a larger gate. Prising open the stiff, heavy flap, Nevill was provided with a Vista Vision view. The security lamp defined the edges of bikes, crates and tyres, while a light in the workshop revealed its intricate details. Squatting, Nevill peered up to see the windows of the flat. All were blank, dull and lifeless.

Rachael had been transfixed by the emergence of her painting, but the buzzer jolted her like an electric shock. Now she sat static, wary, unblinking in the silence. Each pause seemed endless before the next ugly rasp. Should she go, or should she ignore it? Probably best to sit tight. Yet maybe it was friends of Cutter, wondering where he was.

Best settle the matter, get back to work, before she lost her inspiration. Irritated but resolved, Rachael wiped her brush and emerged through the plastic strips.

There *was* someone, thought Nevill. Just a silhouette, moving behind the workshop windows. He buzzed more, interpreting a popular tune like an urgent Morse code message.

The buzzer had been fixed under the staircase, to be heard beneath engine revs and power tools. But its raucous fit of rasping had spoilt the peace tonight. Rachael opened the workshop door, and stepped into the concrete yard. She approached the gates with some annoyance, as the noise grated in her ears. The letter-box flap was up as if ready for mail, although nothing had dropped through.

Bending, Rachael spoke a little away from the slit. "Hello. Who is it, please?"

Nevill's eyes widened in genuine surprise: a female was most unexpected. "Me," he said through the horizontal slit, peering at Rachael's outline.

“Who’s me?” asked Rachael.

“You should know,” said Nevill.

Rachael pulled back. “Sorry,” she mumbled. “I’m busy.” The girl had become dark against the workshop window. Her hair was rimmed white by the security lamp.

“Hey, wait. I’m a friend of Andy’s,” hissed Nevill. “Andy the Grunt! Cutter’s mate.”

“Afraid they’re out,” said Rachael.

“Drat!” spat Nevill. “Where?”

“Down The Shady Souls nightclub. Back late.”

“Shady Souls...?” murmured Nevill. “Not my cup o’tea. Cup o’charlie! Hey, Miss...what’s your name?”

“Why?”

“I’m Nevill.” The statement failed to elicit a response.

Nevill was unsure why he pursued the questions. True, he had business to settle with Andy - yet his curiosity had been stimulated, and maybe more. What’s a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?

“You know Cutter, then?” asked Nevill. Grunt had told him tales, for Cutter had quite a reputation.

“It’s his yard,” said Rachael. “Name’s on the sign.”

“What sign?”

“Outside. You can see it.”

Nevill glanced at the sign by the gates, then returned to his letter-box view. “Not always,” he said. “Used to be Roberts Builders.”

“Oh...?”

“Used to work here with Andy. Old mates.”

Rachael nodded.

“Can I pop in?” asked Nevill. “Leave Andy a note?”

“Drop it through the letter-box.”

“Haven’t written it yet.”

“Got a pen?”

“Can’t write in the dark.”

Rachael sighed. Maybe it was best to let Nevill in. He was a friend of Andy’s, who was a friend of Cutter. Surely no harm in that? Besides, Nevill had upset the flow of her painting. Might as well take a break.

“Okay,” said Rachael. “Be quick.” She turned the key in the Chubb lock, and pulled the narrow door.

Nevill entered the concrete yard, telling more of his memoirs. “Old Roberts! Bit of a rogue, right? Done this, done that, all bollocks. Thought he’d have a go at building. Trouble is, it all fell down.”

Rachael smiled.

“Ditched me and Andy, Cutter rents the yard, makes Andy the mean mechanic!”

“Wow,” said Rachael. “How long ago?”

“Couple of years...three, four,” said Nevill, as he crossed to the workshop door. “Used to work here. Carpentry. Anything made of wood.”

“So that’s how Andy met Cutter,” mused Rachael. “We still get funny letters for Mr. D.S. Roberts. Cutter chucks them in the bin.”

“Defty don’t want them,” said Nevill. “Ain’t fan mail. Just the opposite...”

Nevill entered the workshop, and gazed in fascination. Planks and timber had been replaced by the complex debris of motorcycle maintenance. It gleamed like a strange, metallic treasure. “Now, where can I leave this note?” he asked, aware of Rachael beside him.

“Don’t know. Anywhere,” she said. “Give it to me, I’ll give it to Andy.”

“Sounds a decent arrangement,” agreed Nevill. “Haven’t got a pencil, Miss?”

Rachael indicated a stub on the workbench. Nevill took it, chewed it like a cigarette and scrawled words on the envelope by ‘Andy’. Realizing she might as well pause for refreshment, Rachael moved to the grubby sink. “Coffee?” she asked, flipping the kettle on.

“White, three sugars,” said Nevill.

Rachael spooned cheap granules into a pair of chipped mugs. Maybe she shouldn’t encourage Nevill to linger. Yet she was intrigued by this new biker world, and the friends-of-friends it contained. Intrigued, too, by the history of the yard and the mysterious D.S. Roberts. As for her own secrets? Rachael told no-one but Cutter.

Nevill reached the end of his scribble, and popped the pencil behind his ear. The action belied his past as a builder, and his present as a thief. Then he asked a most awkward question. “So - what you up to, Miss?”

Trying to hide her uneasiness, Rachael trickled milk with delicate care.

“I’m...stopping here. Cutter lets me paint.” Her nod betrayed the cubby-hole.

“You’re stopping in *there*?” asked Nevill, glancing at the plastic strips. The lamp cast a pale fan of light from within, spread upon the floor.

“No, I *paint* in there,” explained Rachael, as she stirred the coffees. “Drink’s up. Where’s Andy’s note?”

“Here,” said Nevill, wafting it towards her.

“I won’t read it. Promise,” smiled Rachael. She slipped the note into the pocket of her baggy dungarees.

“I’ve done painting,” said Nevill, as he took his coffee. “Bedrooms, bathrooms. Hated it! Ever paint things like that?”

“It’s...not what I do,” said Rachael.

Nevill thought for a moment. “Pictures?”

Rachael nodded.

“So what you painting now?” he asked. Nevill’s interest had been aroused the more. An interest similar to Cutter’s at the Midnight Café.

“Just...something,” mumbled Rachael, warily. “Not finished. Can’t look at it yet.”

Nevill sipped his mug of coffee. “Can’t look?” he asked. “Why? It’s rubbish?”

“Not ready,” said Rachael.

“Not dry?” asked Nevill.

“No, the picture’s not ready,” said Rachael. “The image...it’s clear in my mind, but I must get it down. It needs peace, quiet, concentration. Working all the time...”

“Don’t sleep much? Crash on the sofa?”

“No.” Rachael was becoming irritated by Nevill’s relentless chatter.

Nevill gulped some more of his coffee. He thought about Rachael’s answer for a moment, and made some sly deductions. “Not on the sofa? In a bed...with Cutter!” he smirked.

“Does it matter?” said Rachael. “None of your business.”

Nevill tossed his head so his ponytail lashed like a bullwhip. “This Cutter! Quite a reputation. Chains and belts and buckles? Sounds a bit kinky to me.”

“*All right*. Finish your coffee,” scowled Rachael. “I’ve got to get on.”

“So Cutter keeps the picture, Miss? Dirty picture...?”

Rachael glared at Nevill. “It’s private. My own...personal project. So will you go? Please *go* now, Nevill.”

Nevill slammed the mug down. “Don’t burst your bra-straps, baby.”

Rachael ignored him.

“You want to watch that Cutter, Miss. He’s a slow-burning bastard, I’ve heard.”

Rachael snorted.

Nevill coiled himself, ready to spring. “Let’s see the painting!” he laughed. “Quick as a flash!” Nevill ran to the curtain in a jerky, Keystone Kops manner, hoping Rachael would see the funny side.

But Rachael did not see the funny side. The breath flowed from her body as she watched the visitor. She stood paralysed, unable to act. Who could be so stupidly ignorant, so brutally intrusive? Who - except an abuser of personal trust? An abuser of body and mind.

The memory hit Rachael in a burst of hallucination. It was the nightmare, the forest, but worse than before. Rachael sensed the hot breath, the words, the groping of her innocence. Shaking, she tried to grab Nevill - just inches from the curtain - and keep him from her private shame. “No, don’t!” she cried, clawing at his coat-sleeve. Nevill pulled away.

* * * * *

Grunt danced like a robotic toy on the verge of toppling over. He tossed tinned peanuts into his gaping mouth, and stomped with a surly punkish girl. Then he pushed students into the corner with a sudden cry of, “Bundles!”

Cutter stood placid by a speaker, feeling its bass vibration through one signet-ringed hand. His other hand grasped a beer. Cutter enjoyed being on the edge of things, surveying mad activity with an analytical eye. The kids were having their fun, including Grunt. Cutter felt cool and mature.

The students had survived the experience. It was daft rough-and-tumble, nothing worse. The velvet high-heeled girl spoke to a short, happy chap, with a T-shirt down to his knees. Cutter tried to lip-read some excerpts, catching snippets through the pounding beat. “He’s got a real problem. That’s their fault! You’ve never met Sally, have you?”

As Cutter stood there, hand tingling with the Marshall’s rumble, his mind seemed to open - to expand. He suddenly sensed how small a place The Shady Souls was: how

insignificant in the scheme of things. Just a dingy basement up London Road, lost in a maze of streets. The town was just another blip on the map, lost in all the other blips.

The town. Cutter could visualize its time and motion in a sharp, diagrammatic form. It became as clear as an engineering blueprint, with form and function combined. Yet the clarity displayed both good and bad. Cutter became conscious of something not quite right. A fault, an error, a malfunction. He became aware of some disturbance in the clarity. The sudden strain of distress.

Cutter's hand moved away from the vibrating speaker, touching his forehead in abstract meditation. The drink remained poised in mid-air. His eyes narrowed. What was it, this sudden unease? Where in the world around him? Cutter stared at the wall with the banner, and an ultra-violet screaming face: and past the face, wall, streets, buildings, gardens and roads, back to his hearth and home. Another face, another mouth, crying in distress. A face he recognized. Rachael.

Cutter's heart jumped as if electrified. He had to reach her, be with her, now. Cutter released his grip on the beer, and sliced through the writhing figures. The drink hit the floor with a smash of glass. Grunt turned his head, astonished.

Cutter ran straight up the stairs, mind fixated, caring nothing for who he hit. Shoving past some dawdling dandy in artificial fur, he charged through the passage like a frenzied bull. Cutter nearly tripped over two girls in the chill-zone, chatting over plastic wineglasses.

The main exit was blocked by sad bohemians, droning desperate drivel of no importance. "Fancy a milkshake," said one of the pair, "or a late show at the Duke's?"

That was all they said, because Cutter was there. He burst through the sad bohemians, who fell away like dummies. Their feeble voices whined and snapped, but he was deaf to any entreaty.

Cutter ran to his bike, mounted it, fired the engine with a roar. God bless his Harley-Davidson FXS: it swerved and sped on its way. Cutter knew he must fly, do his duty, and no-one was going to stop him. For he was Cutter, Rachael was in trouble - and Rachael was Cutter's girl.

* * * * *

"That's *wicked*," gasped Nevill. "That's *scary*!" He stretched a hand to touch Rachael's painting, although an impulse of guilt stopped him short.

Rachael glowered through the plastic strips. "Now get out," she said, demonically.

Nevill took one of Rachael's sketches. "Can I have one of these?"

Rachael narrowed her eyes. "Put it down."

"I'll buy it," said Nevill. "It's a good one. I'll give you five pounds sixty-five pence."

"It's mine. *Give it!*" cried Rachael. She grabbed one half of the sketch.

"All right, let go!" said Nevill. "I'll give...I'll fucking give it!" But with two opposing grips, the predictable happened. Rip! The sketch was in two.

Rachael did not shout. She did not complain. She just stood there, gasping, gazing in disbelief.

“Hey, I’m sorry,” said Nevill, easing his mood. What a ridiculous scene! Tears were trickling down her pretty cheeks, while she trembled like a lost child. Must be some loony on the verge of a breakdown. Cutter had tried to help.

Time to split, thought Nevill - but that picture? “I’ll fix it with tape,” he said. Nevill raised his hand to pacify the scene. His approach was gentle and unthreatening.

But Rachael moved backwards, away from him. She stumbled over a discarded fuel tank, falling onto the corner junk pile. There was a crash as she hit the angles and crevices, shrieking with the pain of impact. Christ! Might have broken something, thought Nevill. I don’t need hassle like this.

“You okay?” asked Nevill, bending over the girl. Her eyes showed terror and she kicked out hard, catching him on the leg. “Ouch!” gasped Nevill. “You’re a devious bitch!”

But Rachael had found a weapon. A bent exhaust. She jabbed it towards the stranger. Nevill’s first reaction was amusement, which became fury as she struck him on the knee. Nevill whirled back as if mortally wounded. His voice rose in a strange high-pitched whine, reminiscent of a car alarm. Nevill had felt the shock of humiliation, and lost his sonorous tones.

“You don’t do that!” he squealed. “You don’t do that! I used to work here. Don’t forget.”

Nevill came forward to grab the exhaust pipe. He tossed it away, and slapped Rachael with the back of his hand. She sprawled sideways towards the brick column, grabbing it for support.

“I used to work here,” said Nevill. “Don’t forget. Think you own the world, Miss Weirdy?”

Nevill felt calm for a moment. She knew who was boss. He smiled as she rose before him. Then a kick of pneumatic power rammed the pit of his stomach.

Rachael froze. She had broken a barrier. Surely this would be enough? Nevill was wheezing. He had tears in his eyes, as if grievously insulted.

“I offered to fix your picture,” he snarled. “It was an accident, right? An accident!” Nevill snatched the sketch from the concrete floor, and ripped it to smithereens. His eyes never left Rachael as he edged towards the workshop door.

Cutter did not bother with the Highway Code. Such niceties were not for tonight. He took advantage of the cycle lane round Victoria Gardens, smashing one poor pedalling citizen into the low railings. Passing the art college, Cutter turned left up St. James Street. It was a rough but vivid area of varied shops that rose east into the depths of Kemp Town. He swerved through roads and side streets, almost scraping cars, crossing kerbstone corners with a bump. Cutter hit the brakes at his dead end destination, front first, then the back. The Harley FXS twisted to an expert halt. It was the thinking man’s chopper, after all.

Cutter tried the door to the yard. It had been unlocked. There was something fishy about that. Cutter stepped through and saw a shady figure, stumbling from the workshop door. “I’m the boss,” said Cutter. “Want me?” But the figure did not say.

Cutter analysed the scene. His senses were quick. He wondered how to strike. Then he saw a trailing object, and made an easy move. Cutter’s arm whipped out with

spring-loaded speed, grabbing the ponytail. Nevill's head jerked to a mid-air stop, while his legs ran a little further. He slithered over with an agonized yelp, backside hitting the concrete.

Cutter grabbed the lapels of Nevill's duffle coat, and dragged him over to the workshop. Rachael was cowering in the corner. This stranger had been the cause.

Cutter shoved Nevill down onto a workbench. He pulled him up, then shoved him even harder. Nuts and bolts danced in the dust. Nevill thrashed, Cutter shoved him back. Steel tools fell to the floor. Cutter whipped Nevill round to smack the window. He punched him, hard and fast. It resembled a deranged puppet show. Blood smeared pink on the glass.

Rachael snapped to her senses, screaming at the violence. She wanted Cutter to stop. The biker complied reluctantly, by flinging Nevill to the floor.

"Upstairs," said Cutter. He took Rachael's arm and led her past the moaning heap.

"I got so scared, Cutter. So frightened," said Rachael. "The *intrusion*. I flipped, I couldn't face it."

"Calm yourself, girl," said Cutter. They were soon up in the living-room, where she settled on the sofa. Cutter offered his emergency hip-flask. Rachael sipped the Jack Daniels with gratitude.

Cutter welcomed the sudden peace. His heart had been pounding with unhealthy haste during the furious encounter. A burning pain tortured his body, and he turned away from the girl. Cutter did not want Rachael to see an expression of agony, drawn upon his hardened face. Soft inside, thought Cutter. Softer than she knows. His vital blood pump was not the best, although the twinge was over in seconds.

Grunt stepped out of The Shady Souls nightclub. Should he match the madness of Cutter, or keep extra-cool? The bouncers would ask tricky questions, but Grunt could handle them. The questions were another matter.

Grunt strolled aloof past the sad bohemians, chit-chatting by a corner lamp-post. "What a vulgar lad. Charmless!" said one. Grunt could agree with that. Best go home on his Kawasaki, for Cutter was still a friend. The lad needed sympathy, with or without the tea.

* * * * *

Nevill had been unable to stop Cutter dragging him away, and tying him to the chair. Only dim perceptions through a hazy brain kept his conscious mind informed. But the slosh of water snapped him to painful alertness. Nevill understood his vulnerable position.

Cutter stood before the figure, arms folded. His mouth had a trace of amusement. Cutter assessed Nevill like a comatose cabbage. Was he aware, would he listen? A groan confirmed life at least.

Hoping he had a receptive one-man audience, Cutter stated his opinion. "A vagabond. One who cheats an entrance to Cutter's Yard, with no respect for its ways. One who should be taught a lesson. Be persuaded never to return."

Nevill's eyes rolled towards Cutter. His lip had been split by the beating. "I...not again," he croaked. "Never again. You...Cutter? I know...friend o'yours, Andy."

"Andy?" queried Cutter.

"The one...you call him the Grunt."

Cutter laughed. "You came to see Grunt, our little pal? Why did innocence turn to pain?"

"Wasn't meant to, Cutter. Got talking," gasped Nevill. "Girl was moody, snappy. Secrets..."

"Secrets, you say?" spat Cutter. "Gosh, what jolly Enid Blyton fun. Secrets are secrets, they don't concern you or anyone else. *Understand?*"

"*Yushhh...*" hissed Nevill, as Cutter poked him in the ribs. "I...came to see Andy."

"How do I know?" asked Cutter. "Maybe you knocked, found Rachael. Took a fancy to my property."

"That's not...the way," gasped Nevill.

"Prove it."

"I can! The girl...an envelope. In her pocket."

Cutter looked towards the top of the stairs. "Excuse me," he said with offbeat courtesy, before stomping up to the flat. Nevill struggled with a wild fury, trying to free his bonds. But they were lashed with metal cable, so his efforts tightened them more. He was hardly Harry Houdini. No luck with the great escape.

Rachael lay asleep on the sofa, so Cutter could question her not. His hand ventured into her dungarees, finding the envelope. Extricating it with delicate care, Cutter trod downstairs to the workshop. There, he recited its written words in a deep, authoritative voice. "Andy. Here's something for Christmas. I've plans for the New Year. Patience is a virtue. Speak soon. The best. Nevill."

Cutter frowned. "Curious. Anything inside?" He ripped the envelope, revealing cash. "A ton," gasped Cutter, flipping through the banknotes. So why was Grunt getting paid?

Cutter brought his face close to Nevill's. Their breath mingled in an unpleasant respiratory cocktail. "Plans?" asked Cutter. "You and Gruntling have plans? Fun for the New Year?"

Nevill did not answer.

"You've known my Grunt awhile? Want to dance the Highland Fling?"

"Worked with him...here," said Nevill.

Cutter knew what this meant, in seconds. "Christ!" he spat. "Robby-Bobby Builders! If I had a quid for every screwball who's come sniffing for D.S. Roberts, I could gold-plate a fleet of Harleys. What's the plan?"

The next words came stupidly from Nevill's lips. "It's...a secret," he said.

Cutter leant back, pondering the required surgery. There would not be an anaesthetic. He moved away for a moment, and rummaged in a drawer. Nevill twitched at the rattling and scraping.

Cutter returned with a scary-looking object. It was something like a pistol, for electrical use. There was a thin probe on the end, and a wire trailing from the grip.

Cutter plugged this into a socket, switched the power on, and turned to his uninvited visitor. "Listen to me, er..."

"Nevill," mumbled Nevill. He had no energy to create an alias.

"See that room over there, young Nevill?" Cutter indicated the plastic curtain. "The room that hides Rachael's art. The room you should never have entered. Why, I've plans for that room. That cubby-hole." Cutter rubbed the cold probe against his bearded chin, creating a scratching sound. "When it's surplus to requirements - when dear Rachael has completed her task - my personal plan is this: a cosy, clever electrical den where I can fix all sorts of things. Televisions, videos, hi-fis. Another branch to the firm."

Nevill nodded. He was absorbed by this serene declaration.

"Special labour needs special tools," said Cutter, showing Nevill his device. "An instant heat soldering gun. Note the long probe, and trigger-switch."

Cutter pressed the trigger with a click. The gun began to buzz. Its bulb shone yellow, projecting a pale spot between Nevill's eyes. The probe warmed a speck of solder from a previous job. It began to smoke at the tip.

"Getting warmer, Nevill. Getting warmer. Behold!" Cutter took a silvery thread of solder, and held it to the gun. It fizzed and melted with a pungent aroma, leaving a pendulous blob to harden.

"Now, listen to me very carefully," said Cutter.

Nevill listened.

"If you do not tell me exactly why you came here - and why you brought this money for 'Andy' - I will cure your colds forever. One burning heat probe, straight up the hooter. Straight up the old schnozz."

Cutter emphasized the point graphically, swinging the gun to and fro with hypnotic rhythm. The spotlight fell upon Nevill's left eyeball, then his right, then back to his left, his right...

"I shall manoeuvre it to burn your nasal cartilage," added Cutter, "then down to blister the gums. I do not wish to perform these operations so, please Nevill, tell me the score."

Cutter brought the tip close, closer, even closer to Nevill's nose. Nevill tried speaking, but his mouth was dry. "Yuh...uh," was all he could manage. Hardly the Queen's English.

"Come on," said Cutter. He moved the heat gun back and released the trigger. The bulb went off.

"I'll tell," groaned Nevill. "It's Roberts. Said I'd do this job. Big money..."

"Our Roberts?" frowned Cutter. "What sort of job? Nothing against *me*, I hope?"

"No!" gasped Nevill, desperately afraid. "A job on this old git Roberts knows. That's all I know, Cutter, really!"

Cutter considered the situation cautiously. "You've been chatting with D.S. Roberts," he reasoned. "He's the man with the information. So tell me, Nevill, before our parting of the ways. Where can I find Mr. Roberts?"

The heat gun was on again. The blob of solder dripped free. So transfixed was Nevill by its tormenting approach, so relentless Cutter in his task, that neither heard the trundle of Grunt's motorbike or noticed his appearance at the door.

"*Nevill!*" cried Grunt, as he entered the workshop. He gawped at the dreadful scene.

"Over here!" gasped Nevill, hoping for help. He wrenched his head aside.

"That's not the answer," said Cutter.

Nevill turned back. The probe had inched closer, so he flinched from a sting to his cheek. Cutter's spare hand shot forward, clamping Nevill's head to a halt. He could not move, but the gun could. It was not getting further away.

"The final demand," said Cutter. "Where can I find Mr. Roberts?"

Grunt was paralysed with indecision. What could he do? Shove Cutter, grab the heat gun, rescue his friend? Nothing resolved in his mind.

Nevill could feel the heat from the burning tip, a sliver away from his skin. Cutter was losing patience. "I want that address," he said.

It had taken much to defeat Nevill, but he knew the game was up. No point arguing with medieval torture, with an electrical twist. Nevill's mouth opened, as dry as sawdust. He fumbled to form the words. Nevill looked Cutter dead in the eye, starting the sentence. "*It's...*"

Cutter flew east along the coast, past the sweeping arms of the Marina. He had decided to visit Roberts in one fast, intrusive swoop. Cutter would lose the edge of surprise if Roberts heard of the thrashing. Immediate action was best.

The cliffs dipped past the windmill on Beacon Hill, into the hollow of Rottingdean. Another rise led to Saltdean, with little to see in the dark. Sea and sky merged in the small hours, enveloping the South Coast Road. This ran through Telscombe into Peacehaven, where Cutter reached The Promenade. This was no pedestrian walkway, but a gravel track between the cliff-top villas and brink of chalk.

Cutter chugged past a row of wooden posts, trying to match reality with a remembered map. He brought the bike to a graceful halt and dismounted. It would be easier to pace the ground.

Cutter walked a short distance, surveying the villas before him. One matched Nevill's description. A continental look, with expansive windows and balustraded veranda. Pure pastiche, but effective.

Roberts had enjoyed his Wednesday in London despite a few depressive twinges. It had been good to see the old places again, and have a slap-up restaurant meal. Roberts was sick of skimping and saving. Why should he always struggle? Soon, all would spring into action. He would have money in the bank.

Roberts sat in an embracing armchair, with an antique valuation guide spread on his knees. A table lamp chipped a patch of brightness in this soft beige setting, illuminating the glossy pages. The book was a lavish catalogue of desirable heirlooms: Roberts had been looking up some of Harry's treasures, or those known to the connoisseurs. Cleo Laine sang quietly in the background, blending with a drop of brandy.

Soon, Roberts had fantasized a jazz band. Not Cleo's, but his own. There had been great times hitting the drums. What a release from his business woes! Roberts was not great, but he had a dogged determination. It was a career he could have followed.

This love of jazz had come late to Roberts. Having made its mark, it became akin to addiction. Must contact Frank and the lads, he thought. See how the swingers were bopping along, take that offer of saxophone lessons! Yet this divergence swung his mind to its central pivot: the Defty Danny's leisure centre. Where better for the band to play? Make the snazzy introductions, join them in a favourite set. Why - Defty Dan of Defty Danny's, playing the dapper host!

Such reverie was broken by musical chimes. Who on earth - what time was this? Might be a customer tracking him down. Ignore it? A tempting thought. But the living-room was a beacon, glowing through the curtains. Might be a neighbour in real distress. Might need *their* help someday.

Roberts sauntered to the front door, brandy in hand. He was keen to stay at ease with himself. The chimes rang again as he reached the hallway, where he peered through the fisheye peephole. Odd. All was dark. Security lamp blown? Must be *someone*. Better see who.

Cutter's hand flopped from the peephole as Roberts opened the door. A yellow rectangle of light fell upon the formidable figure. Cutter glared at the astonished Roberts, whose jaw dropped in farcical surprise. It was a most unlikely apparition.

Cutter tipped his homburg hat in respectful greeting. "May I make your acquaintance?" he offered. "Cutter of Cutter's Yard."

Roberts merely growled in reply. The drink was shaky in his hand.

"A friend of yours came calling," said Cutter, "who's also a friend of a friend of mine."

"Did he really," said Roberts, flatly. He wondered who the stranger meant.

"I believe I'd better step inside," said Cutter.

"I believe you'd better sod off," said Roberts.

"I believe you'll regret your verb," said Cutter. "I know enough to gain admission. This mutual acquaintance has greedy plans. A job, for financial gain. I only know this by rumour, of course. But I know the names of those involved - including *you*, Mr. D.S. Roberts. It would be simple to report the matter to some high authority." Cutter smiled. "*Evening, all.*"

Roberts' face collapsed in an ugly contortion, his cheeks hollowed by despair. Cutter noticed the brandy's meniscus shivering like a sick, convulsive membrane. Roberts slipped aside from the doorway, admitting the daunting stranger.

Cutter looked no less menacing in the brighter light, clad in his Saturday best. Roberts did the sensible thing and pacified the mood. Cutter took the embracing armchair, where he sipped a mug of percolated coffee. Roberts slouched on the sofa, scratching his bushy moustache. He was like a cringing commoner before the mighty sultan.

Cutter would never break the silence, but wait all night for Roberts. "Fool," mumbled Roberts, after quite some time. "The damn fool, Nevill. How'd he mess it up so bad...?"

"The rascal Nevill called for Grunt," said Cutter, "but didn't know of my Rachael. Her fear...alerted me like magic, Mr. Roberts. I knew something was amiss. As to Nevill leaking the story?" Cutter mocked a Germanic lilt. "*Ve have vays ov making zem talk!*"

Roberts gave a solemn nod. Yes - I bet you do, he thought.

"So, Roberts of Roberts Builders," said Cutter. "Tell me about the firm. I should have brought your letters round."

"*Letters,*" sighed Roberts. He slurped his coffee like a patent medicine. "You don't need telling! Place went bust."

"So Stanley let it so cheap," nodded Cutter. "Half the ceilings fell down. Can't put your house in order? No chance of running a firm."

"It was empty awhile..."

"...before I moved in," said Cutter. "Except a hippy-thick potter with a manky boyfriend. Sold a couple of flowerpots and fucked off to Glastonbury."

Roberts smiled, despite the grave situation. Cutter had appeared out of nowhere with his verbal dexterity, like another talent a long time ago.

"Nevill and Andy worked for me," said Roberts. "You know Andy...?"

“I do. The Gruntling.”

Roberts nodded. “Had to sack ’em when things turned bad.”

Cutter knocked back the coffee. “Grunt turned up curious when I rented the yard. Gave him both job and home. Surly, stropky, stupid, but I’m a soft-hearted bastard.” Cutter leant closer. “What about Nevill?”

Roberts squirmed on the sofa. “Not much to say...”

“It’s not a request,” said Cutter.

Resistance is useless, thought Roberts. “Nevill did woodwork,” he said. “Bit of painting, too. Handyman.”

Cutter yawned.

“He was my locksmith, too,” added Roberts. “When he’s broke, he opens them. Easy.”

“Thieving,” murmured Cutter, “and Grunt’s involved?”

“They’re friends,” said Roberts. “Mates.”

“News to me,” said Cutter. “Who’s the old man? Next job on the list?”

“I...”

“You’d better tell me,” urged Cutter.

“An old man of property,” said Roberts, “and nothing he needs it for.”

“How would you know?”

“We...go back a long way.”

“Friends, are you? Mates?”

“Look...it’s personal.”

Cutter rose from the embracing chair, and surveyed the contents of this spacious living-room. Smart metal frames displayed charts of the globe, while others held musical scores and jazz ephemera. “You’ve got ten seconds to start,” said Cutter.

The seconds passed. Roberts said nothing.

Cutter moved towards Roberts, raised one leather-gloved hand and locked it round his neck. “You will tell me,” said Cutter, lifting the man. Roberts gurgled for a moment, and rolled his eyes. The choking was terrible, but so was that gaze. Cutter let go, so Roberts flopped on the sofa.

Roberts felt neither anger nor fear. Just a dull acceptance, like a trapped prisoner. He moved to the sideboard and took out the portrait of Harry: it had become so infuriating on the wall.

“This is the man,” said Roberts.

Cutter’s eyes locked onto the soft, hazy photograph. There was a misty sparkle in the magician’s eyes, while the grin was wide to the point of inanity. His tie was a tiny twist of satin, and waistcoat buttoned with precision. It was a slick but rigid likeness, reminiscent of a dummy or mannequin. Indeed, a wax facsimile of the magician had featured in Louis Tussaud’s: a smaller kin to the great London waxworks, which had once graced the coast.

“I’ve *seen* him,” said Cutter.

Roberts felt a chill of surreal confusion. Then he realized what Cutter meant. “Maybe you have,” said Roberts. “Millions have.”

“Who is he?”

“The conjuror, Harry Hocus - late of Magic in Focus and other revues.”

Cutter took hold of the portrait. He was repelled by its treacherous depiction, but fascinated by the microscopic detail. Every stitch was as sharp as a razor, and every hair discernible. As a lover of symbols and emblems, Cutter scrutinized one little find. There was a tiny badge pinned to Harry's lapel, its spiral entwined with a five-pointed star.

“Lovely picture,” said Roberts. “But misleading. Shows the sugary surface, not the trouble inside.”

“Trouble?” frowned Cutter, resuming his seat. “I remember years back, something in the news. The show was taken off the air.” He had propped the portrait on the opposite chair. Harry was there, in spirit.

Despite his threatening listener, Roberts warmed to the role of raconteur. “I was an agent, you see. Deftly Danny! I could spot talent, and I spotted Harry. But things went sour round '72. We lost the television deal.”

“Explain.”

“The way he used his talents,” said Roberts. “He began to go...*bizarre*.”

Cutter snorted. “What - voodoo dollies, that sort of thing?”

“That sort of thing, no joke,” nodded Roberts. “Perhaps he always dabbled with the darker side. But I never had any suspicion.”

“Like finding your kid's on drugs.”

Roberts grabbed the brandy decanter, pouring glasses for Cutter and himself. The drink came totally unbidden, although Cutter accepted with grace.

“Perhaps I shouldn't say this,” said Roberts. “God knows, I'm no goody two-shoes.”

“What a surprise,” murmured Cutter.

“All that mumbo-jumbo? I wouldn't care, if Harry had kept it private. But it started to meddle with his act. Started to get complaints.”

“Sounds a big improvement,” said Cutter. “More detail, please, Mr. Roberts.”

* * * * *

Val had good seats in the front row. Roberts made sure of that. Nothing was too much trouble for Deftly, or his deft assistant Tara. She was vital now the agency phones were ringing like church bells on Sunday. Val deserved them, too, for George's departure for that posh bird had almost broken her spirit. Roberts had sat with her, long into the night - providing a solid shoulder to cry on. He might have done more without Sheila, but could not risk their marriage.

Now Val was eager and sparkling again, with sister Julia beside her. Tonight was a real treat! Harry's TV spectacular, a joy to young and old. A four year run since 1961. Not a bad little trick at all!

Leaving the warm-up comedian to break the ice, Roberts slipped out along a corridor. After several turns, he reached the obscure dressing room that Harry had selected as preferable. Roberts trod with less of a bounce tonight, although he enjoyed these regular chats. He had to impart something other than pure inspiration: a touch of criticism, and some timely advice. Knocking twice, he entered without pause.

“Great tonight, Harry!” beamed Roberts. “Bums on seats!” He cleared piles of periodicals from a tatty chaise longue, creating a patch sufficient to sit. “Give ’em the snazzy patter,” he added. “Nothing corny...but make it fun!”

“I’ll bear that in mind,” intoned Harry. His face was a jaundice yellow before the dim, fly-blown bulbs that framed the make-up mirror. “Too much preparation hinders my flow. I will speak as the moment suggests.”

“Perhaps,” said Roberts, smoothing his new moustache. It was beginning to sprout quite nicely, lending dignity to his early thirties. Best look mature in this line of work. Respectable. Dapper, even. “Remember - it’s not a fairground attraction, it’s top TV. They’ve got camera angles, lighting cues, all sorts of worry. You keep swinging things suddenly, it mucks them up. Director did his nut last week.”

“The audience reaction was fine,” said Harry. He chose an eyeliner pencil from a decorative tin, tracing it beneath his lashes.

“Shrieks, not laughs,” said Roberts. “And those sparks you threw in the lens, what were they? Wrecked camera two for a week.” Roberts shook his head in bewilderment, unable to grasp the motive behind his star’s behaviour. “You don’t need these stunts, Harry. You’re a pro! Give ’em a thrill and a giggle.”

“But no *shocks*?” inquired Harry, rotating on his stool. “An empty facade of glitter? A flash of illusion? I can’t do it, Daniel. The show must evolve.”

“Which means *improve*,” snorted Roberts. “Not scare off the punters. This is better coming from me, I promise. You should have heard Nigel in the dining-room! Groaning like he’d been poisoned. Production team’s not happy, nor’s...”

But Roberts’ flow was broken by a rap at the door. He glanced towards the source of the noise. “Should I...?”

“Open it,” sighed Harry. He was too busy with his cosmetic application.

Frankly, Roberts was glad of the interruption. Rising, he reached the door at the measured pace he had acquired with increasing girth. Rich food, probably, although he liked to enjoy his wealth. In truth, Roberts looked more forty than thirty.

“Dan...Harry,” said the director, as he slid round the door. “May I come in?” he asked, having done so.

“By all means,” said Harry. “It’s ‘all the rage’.”

“We’ve had a chat, Nigel,” said Roberts. “Harry’s listened to your advice.”

“Good, good,” nodded Nigel. He glanced down his clipboard, which bulged with technical notes. “Ah...this week’s finale. Better shorten the dolly shot. I’ve got the floor plan, most of it’s fine, but the cables...er, *what*? What’s all this!”

Nigel’s eyes had caught a glimpse of Harry’s. The magician had transformed them into slits of darkness, bold, spiky and sinister. “Isn’t that enough?” gasped the astonished director. It was the reaction Harry often guaranteed.

“Of what?” asked Harry, in mischievous denial. He raised an over-painted brow.

“Your eyeliner!” said Nigel. “What are you, an occult drag queen? These aren’t the days of the Baird Televisor. The modern tube camera is a subtle machine! Please wipe it off, Mr. Hocus.”

Roberts patted Harry's shoulder in a pally-pally way. "The old stage glamour, eh, Harry? Think you're playing to the Gods? I'll run and fetch Miranda, she'll tone you down with a powder puff. No need to worry, Nigel."

"She will not," said Harry. "I do not need toning down. Eyes are the windows of the soul, gentlemen. Are you afraid of a deeper truth?"

"Yes...but Harry," said Roberts, by way of appeal. "It's Magic in Focus! Family viewing. Don't want to frighten the kids. Look, let's..."

"Wipe it off," said the director. "*Now.*"

"I will not wipe it off," said Harry.

"Then forget your bloody close-ups," snapped Nigel. He glanced at his watch. "Damn. I've got to go..."

* * * * *

"That was Harry's way," said Roberts, as he topped up the brandies for Cutter and himself. Cutter had listened, spellbound, and said nothing to spoil the fluency.

"Harry liked to be dramatic," continued Roberts. "But it had a peculiar edge. Beyond what was acceptable in a conjuring show, certainly back in the sixties. We had complaints. All sorts of things. One lady said a prop Harry used - this weird bauble for a sleight-of-hand - well, it had satanic connections. Most viewers would never spot it, but these stories get in the papers! Anyhow, there was quite a row with the producer. He told me to sort things out. Nigel left, replaced by this new chap who'd made comedy shows in America. We started to bring in more guests. Edge Harry out of the limelight...slowly, so he wouldn't notice. Cramp his style a bit. But Harry was wise. Knew what we were up to. Resented it, and bottled up that resentment. Things came to a head quite suddenly, in 1972. There was a strange and savage occurrence, which has never been fully explained. It involved the death of a man I cherished as a friend, ironically through Harry's introduction. Hope I'm not boring you, Cutter?"

Cutter's eyes flickered as he snapped from a trance, fixing sharply on Roberts. The biker had not been dozing, as Roberts had implied. Cutter's trance had been one of the deepest concentration - as when he studied those diagrams of engine parts, and recalled their form and function. Cutter had been listening to every word, allowing his mind to absorb the slightest nuance, examine the tiniest flaw.

"Quite the contrary, Mr. Roberts," said Cutter, in answer to Roberts query. "I know another artist, troubled by the darker side. Your story is most enlightening. If I close my eyes, it is not through drowsiness. The imagery must flow. Continue."

Roberts was taken aback by the sincerity of Cutter's interest. He had started blabbing to pacify the guy, yet it was proving a cathartic experience. Cutter was a good listener, and Roberts welcomed the chance to unburden himself. He had a meagre range of friends, after all. Roberts could hardly tell them about Harry - or rather, his plans for the ex-client.

"Mind if I backtrack a moment?" asked Roberts. "The man is Dr. DeWulfe." He sipped his brandy in a private toast. "You'd have liked him, Cutter. There's some

resemblance. He was similar in build and height, but older. Grey hair, goatee beard. Could have been a biker!”

Cutter thought of the Classics Master: a grizzled mechanic of genius, with standards to emulate. The man became Cutter’s image of Dr. DeWulfe, clad in imaginary tweeds.

“I was Harry’s guest,” said Roberts. “SOME dinner...”

“*Some?*”

“Society Of Magical Entertainers! Wore a special badge...”

“...in the photo,” added Cutter, glancing at Harry’s portrait. It was still sitting on the opposite chair, like a spectre listening in.

“They had this big function,” explained Roberts. “Annual do! DeWulfe was toastmaster and bon viveur. I recognized the name from childhood, and Harry had mentioned him before. They shared a radio show just after the war. Wireless Wonders, it was called. Kiddies’ science, with Harry’s hi-jinks for light relief. Magic on the radio? Daft, I’d say...but it was always a real treat.”

“They got on?” asked Cutter.

“No! Science versus magic. All part of the act.” Even so, Roberts held his brow in a moment’s repose, testing the truth of his statement. “Were they bitter away from the microphone? I couldn’t really say...”

“The Doctor belonged to this society. How come? You told me he was a scientist.” Cutter was becoming evermore curious.

“He specialized in ‘scien-trickery,’” said Roberts. “Simple experiments to illustrate the laws of physics, which seemed magic to the average Joe. He amazed the society, they took a vote...the Doc. was allowed to join.”

“He explained his tricks...to the public?”

“Of course. The Doctor never deceived.”

“Perhaps Harry resented this?”

“In time...I think he did.” Roberts rifled through his memories. “The Doctor was a back-room boffin for the RAF, who got into showbiz as a sideline. Education with humour, popular stuff...but his chit-chat was overtaken by Gemini and the H-bomb. He decided to bow out. The Doctor never took showbiz very seriously, which was quite a contrast with Harry. One was a gentleman, one was tetchy. They’d swapped their wireless personalities.”

Roberts bent forwards, opening a box of cigars. There were only three left to enjoy. Cutter declined with a silent gesture, so Roberts flicked a lighter to his own.

“Lovely man, the Doctor,” he mused. “Genius, if ever there was. Got talking at this dinner, after the various speeches. I felt he’d let himself down. There’s potential there, I said, and I know talent. Why not work up a new act?”

Roberts puffed a slow stream of smoke, becoming lost in nostalgia. “He was scientifically skeptical, but invited us to stay. Me, Sheila...Harry too, though Harry zipped off on his travels. Spoke about this, that, plans for the future. Beautiful old cottage. Chocolate box...”

* * * * *

What would remain with Roberts on leaving Eureka, the quaintly-named cottage of Dr. DeWulfe, was an overriding sense of privilege. It had been a difficult year - though the pressures were of success, not failure. Having completed *Magic in Focus* for 1968, Harry had received top honours at the Society Of Magical Entertainers. This added another glorious photograph to the Roberts archive.

Delighted at meeting this vivid voice from childhood, Roberts had asked Dr. Edward DeWulfe to appear on *Magic in Focus*. Perhaps he had been a little rash. Perhaps he should have cleared the matter with Harry. Yet there seemed no reason why the star should refuse. He was used to having guests by now, and Roberts' trip to New York had tapped talent aplenty. They had an excellent director in Leonard Mann, bringing fresh pizzazz to the show.

Harry had neither refused the Doctor, nor welcomed him with any warmth. There was a glitzy summer special to contrive, and Harry needed a break. It would be time to refresh before the slog of rehearsals, and long run of the show. Roberts had agreed without hesitation, knowing Harry's fickle moods. The magician disappeared to Scotland one Friday night, leaving the shortest note. 'Daniel - See you in the Royal Box. Harry.' Roberts had chuckled at his own words.

The pause allowed Roberts time to unwind. He still had agency chores to deal with, but the other artistes were less demanding. So the Doctor's invitation had been a pleasure to receive, and Roberts confirmed in writing. 'Sheila and I need time out of London. Forget stars, producers, the whole madding crowd.'

"Eureka!" may have been DeWulfe's exclamation on finding his gem of a home. It was secluded to the point of dignity, but not to an excessive isolation. The low roof caught the shadows of undulating trees, while its beams appeared to relax in their structural exertions. The garden was filled with myriad details, though with no impression of clutter: ladders, barrels, cartwheels, logs, spread at intervals of visual harmony. The interior was antique in its furnishing, but told much of the Doctor's tale. Medals and photographs from his RAF days, plus gadgets of his own making. These either helped or hindered the housework.

The afternoon sun glanced across the conservatory tablecloth, creating a ripple of chiaroscuro. Dishes, plates and bowls were defined with inviting sparkles, holding a magnificent country spread. Sheila helped herself to a morsel here, a dollop there, while Roberts amassed a huge portion. They munched through chunky sandwiches, slabs of pie, cake and freshly baked scones. DeWulfe brewed a pot of earl grey tea, promising a drop of port as its sequel.

"Harry better watch his reputation!" smiled Roberts. "Can't conjure spreads like this!" The group laughed, including Rita - DeWulfe's disabled wife. She had challenged him to invent a few specialist aids, and the Doctor had succeeded with skill. Delighted by her delighted reaction, he had delighted her more by proposing. The Doctor was a good fellow, thought Roberts.

"Oh - Rita is the star," chortled DeWulfe. He nodded to the shy but appreciative lady. "Got one or two gadgets, of course."

"He's fibbing," said Rita. "Edward's the *wonder!*"

“No, no,” said DeWulfe. “I just invent them.”

But Rita was keen to impress Roberts. “The Air Force, Festival of Britain. Edward’s done marvellous things.”

A jam tart was poised in DeWulfe’s chubby hand. The tufty moustache twitched above his goatee beard, indicating a wry smile. “That was then,” he said, “and this is now.”

“Oh, I hope that’s not the end,” said Sheila, dabbing her mouth with a napkin. Roberts was proud of her intelligent prettiness, in the lime green dress and ribbon. Sheila’s face was lean and noble, the lipstick a pale shade.

“Hopefully not,” agreed DeWulfe, with a subtle nod to Roberts. He spoke in less ebullient tones. “But it’s felt like the end, at times.”

Sheila sighed.

“Daniel knows the gist of the story,” said Dr. DeWulfe. “Had some bright ideas in the war, yes, but to military specifications. With peace and the fifties, we wanted a brave new world. I had schemes: new transport, power sources. Clean energy, Sheila. Stop this pollution nonsense!” The Doctor slapped the table with passion, causing a musical chime in the crockery. “My theories were mocked by the Royal Society. I was unable to make the breakthrough.”

“We’re all...so much the worse,” said Rita, with a slight quaver. Roberts felt a momentary unease. Was she referring to society or the DeWulfes’ domestic situation?

Detecting the confused implication, Sheila made a lucid remark. “Such a pity for the world, don’t you think?”

“Ah, yes,” said Roberts. “The world.” He was grateful for the intervention.

“Teach in the college now,” said DeWulfe. “Engineering. Dabble in my spare time.”

“Don’t mention the shed,” smiled Rita, bringing a rosy glow to her cheeks.

“What shed?” asked Roberts, through a mouthful of cake.

“The graveyard of clumsy ideas,” said DeWulfe, “and the birthplace of new invention.”

“Sounds intriguing,” said Roberts. “Any chance of a peep?”

“Perhaps. Finish your tea,” said DeWulfe. “Oh, there’s more in the pot. Anyone care for an apple?”

Such distractions, and detours via the meandering paths, ensured arrival at the shed was not instant. Rita stopped by the pond to examine its teeming species. Feeling it polite, Sheila joined her, and the men strolled off together. Rita pointed her stick towards an ancient goldfish, lurking amongst the weed. The stick was held by an artificial arm, which DeWulfe had constructed for her.

In truth, DeWulfe was sadder about the outcome of his work than his Falstaffian aura suggested. But visitors’ curiosity was always infectious, and he reached a pitch of enthusiasm on opening the creaky door. It was hardly a shed, more a large outhouse. A tinge of dust, glue and electrics could be sniffed in the air. The dirty windows softened the sunlight like a thin net curtain, modelling the unique contraptions.

The interior resembled that of an old radio: wheels, antennae and bulbous valves - each as tall as a man - linked with wires, cables and tubes. There were metal boxes with

dials and knobs, dormant and still for now. Some betrayed their domestic origin with printed biscuit illustrations. Workbenches filled the remaining space, along with specialist tools and spare components. One arresting feature was a silver suit, with a tinted visor in the helmet. It seemed for a second like a guardian figure, although the suit was hanging on a hook.

“Eric from the village lends a hand,” said DeWulfe, “along with some of the students.”

“Wh...what do they do, these gadgets?” sputtered an incredulous Daniel Roberts.

“Ah,” said Dr. DeWulfe, stroking the tip of his goatee. “While I lack Harry’s presumption to ‘Guarantee Your ASTONISHMENT!!’, it’s my hope to achieve it some day.” With the tiniest hint of wariness, as if wishing to show no more, DeWulfe gently closed the door.

“Is that a serious offer?” asked Roberts, turning from the outhouse. “A deadline is a keen encouragement.”

DeWulfe restrained a chuckle with such discipline that only his moustachioed extremities rippled. “Your previous offer...the show?”

Roberts nodded. “Magic in Focus, no problem.”

The Doctor considered the ins and outs. “I’d welcome the chance, Danny, though I haven’t performed for years.”

“Oh, your speech at the club,” said Roberts. “*Marvellous!*”

DeWulfe smiled. “Not sure I want a deadline. Science doesn’t work that way. Except when there’s a war on, and who wants that?”

“Even so...”

“Yes, Danny,” murmured DeWulfe. “I’d like to accept. But don’t rush me. Don’t push me. I’m plodding at my own pace.”

The Doctor glanced across the garden at the two women. They had been denied his charms for too long. The sun was low on the fields now, and a dog barked in the east.

It was not the Doctor’s wish to instil disenchantment, as he was grateful for the offer. “You’ve dangled the carrot,” he added, with a twinkle in his eye. “Perhaps I’ll plod just a little faster.”

“Sheila was way ahead when it came to Harry,” said Roberts, exhaling a cloud of rolling smoke. “Had an almost...radar instinct for trouble. Should have listened, curse my stupid soul. They got on fine to start with, and she always kept a front for my sake. But when Harry went funny, she gave me some grief. ‘Why don’t you ditch him?’ Wish to God I had. Things reached a disastrous climax, Sheila vanished - as if Harry had spelled her away.”

Cutter was bored by this rambling monologue. “Tell me what happened,” he said.

Roberts squirmed. “The night of the tragedy? We’d finished taping the penultimate show for 1972. Despite Harry’s quirks, it had been a success. We were in colour, not that everyone had the sets - but the scenery and costumes could really glow. Opposite of what Harry wanted, perhaps, but we didn’t listen any more. Dr. DeWulfe had ‘plodded along’, as he put it, and developed various gizmos. He reprised his act from the forties, for novelty nostalgia, while perfecting something *astonishing*. The Doctor hadn’t guaranteed the reaction, lucky for him. His first effort was a whirling antigravity device, which shot off through the scenery. Harry was delighted! Crazy, yes...but a great hit with the audience.”

Roberts stubbed his cigar in the ashtray, quickly lighting the second. “After another year of plodding, the Doctor returned with this weird energy chamber. I’ve got to tell you, Cutter, it didn’t *astonish* us. It blew our bloody toupees off! Hovering rings of light, great flashes! Quite frankly, it made Harry’s wham-a-bam climax look decidedly feeble. Put him in a right old sulk, I can tell you. But the Doctor was the perfect gentleman...”

* * * * *

The lights had cooled, the audience departed. The television scenery was being dismantled, while two men stood in the shadows. “I’m not trying to eclipse our Harry,” said DeWulfe. “But he forgets, science *is* magic. A real power in the world. However skilful he is with those tricks and concealments, he’s dealing with the art of illusion - nothing more.”

“Don’t worry,” said Roberts. “He’s a moody old tart. Harry’s top of the bill, he knows it. If the show looks good, so does he!”

“Yes,” said DeWulfe. “But there’s less time for magic with this new variety format. A juggler here, plate spinner there. Harry’s little more than a presenter. The Ed Sullivan of conjuring!”

Roberts sighed. “Promise you’ll never repeat this?” he asked.

DeWulfe nodded in unbreakable confidence.

“The show’s...bigger than Harry,” said Roberts. “It would do us a favour if he left. I can’t sack him, Edward. He’s my client. But I wouldn’t cry if he jumped on a broomstick. Starting to give me the creeps.”

“Right,” said DeWulfe, with a heavy heart. “Still, I don’t want any hard feelings. I’ll pop in and see him. Praise the act! He was pretty good tonight, wasn’t he?”

“Pretty good,” said Roberts. “But he’s the star. You were very good indeed.”

DeWulfe snorted with a mixture of pride and self-effacement. He began to move across the studio floor.

Keep the ship afloat another week, thought Roberts, as his portly friend diminished before him. Do the Easter special, complete the series, and they would be off the air for months. Time to take stock, make a few changes. Perhaps there should be a new host for Magic in Focus. Someone like...*no!* But why not? Doctor DeWulfe!

It sounded like a plausible idea to Roberts. ‘Focus’ suggested rationality, after all. The Doctor could offer his scien-trickery, with conjuring for light relief. He could wind up the magicians rotten, just like the Wireless Wonders days. That was it! Update the old programme, fresh for the 1970s!

Of course, Harry would curse Roberts. His pride would be hurt. He would never wish to appear in such a lowly capacity. So where did Roberts’ loyalty lie? Perhaps Roberts was not the right agent for Harry anymore. But their severance should be made by mutual respect, and Roberts was willing to bide his time.

Sheila did not share this opinion, but Roberts had known Harry longer than her. They could take a holiday to think things over. Sheila needed the break. Back in Hampshire with the Doctor? No. Somewhere neutral, somewhere further afield. France...Italy? Money was no problem, although Defty had to keep it that way.

Harry was scraping cosmetics from his narrow features when there came a knock on the door. He froze for a second, resembling a camp Nosferatu. “Who’s there? Daniel?” he inquired.

The door opened a crack. “No. It’s me.”

“Edward?”

“Won’t be a minute,” said DeWulfe. He entered the room unbidden.

“I must apologize,” said Harry. “I am a touch preoccupied. Perhaps we can talk another time?”

“A few words, then I’m off,” said the Doctor. He sat on a stool with a heavy creak. The scene was illuminated by the pale, low-wattage bulbs of Harry’s make-up mirror.

“Marvellous night!” said DeWulfe. “A classic climax!”

“Old hat, you mean?” muttered Harry.

“Look forward to the Easter Special,” said DeWulfe. “New series in the works?”

“Maybe,” said Harry. “Nothing’s been confirmed.”

“Count me in!” said DeWulfe, with a chuckle. “Love to work with the master of...phantasmagorical flamboyance!” DeWulfe slapped his knees with excessive glee. “Be part of the magic again!”

“Quite,” said Harry. He flicked a wad of greasy cotton wool towards the bin. “To be honest, I have no control over the guest artistes. Perhaps you’d better speak to Daniel. He says little enough to me.”

Harry stood. His figure was tall and imposing in the small, square room. The mirror bulbs sent shadows onto the walls and ceiling, elongated and strange. For a second, a chill ran through Dr. DeWulfe. He understood - perhaps for the first time - the malignant aura Harry could evoke.

The magician regarded the scientific upstart, although neither he nor DeWulfe were young. Harry spread his arms wide, fingers claw-like, shadow huge and arachnid on the wall. Then he slipped off his fancy waistcoat.

“Is that all you came about?” asked Harry.

DeWulfe felt rather less comfortable. “I’m a real admirer,” he said.

Harry crossed to the wardrobe, where he slid the waistcoat onto a wooden hanger. “It’s in your *interests* to admire me,” he sneered. “My show provides an audience. Don’t think I’m so stupid, Doctor. You’ve wormed your way into Daniel’s loyalty. I know what’s going on. Think you’re oh-so-clever with those sparkling gadgets, but they’re toys for an overgrown child. Do you know the meaning of *real* magic? The mysteries of the astral plane...?”

DeWulfe fumbled for the pipe in his pocket, covering a momentary confusion. Then he knew the line to take. “You’re the great pretender, Harry! Confidence trickster of the cosmos. Analogous to the astral, but nothing more.” DeWulfe poked his briar towards the magician, then lit the shag within.

“That’s the rubbish Daniel believes,” said Harry, “but I tell you, it isn’t true. Magic is a power in the world. If I repel those forces at the rim of my knowledge, it is because I have something to fear. Their unconstrained freedom would blast the minds of an audience. They could never cope with the truth.”

The Doctor choked like a novice smoker. “Not sure I’m hearing this right. Harry, you’re a damned good conjuror. No-one denies it. But we’re both in the SOME, we know the answers. Both wear the special badge! Behind every vanishment - every sudden surprise - there’s a hidden string, a secret hatch, some little piece of gimmickry. We use science and invention, Harry. We’re both entertainers. We’re the same!”

Harry’s face cut a black silhouette against the pokey window, while the sky was a bluish spill of moonlight. “How little you understand,” he said, “for all your bluster and bluff. I’ve used those primitive devices, yes, but only at the start. Now I draw on...greater forces. The power of the universe! The Earth is awash with energy, which an acolyte might use.”

DeWulfe blinked. His mind was seething with indignation, although he retained his outward composure. Harry had touched a nerve. The Doctor recalled the words of the Royal Society, so painful in their castigation. “There’s more to science than the establishment would accept,” he murmured. “Also, a line between method and madness. Stop this morbid chatter, stick to your craft. Might get better results. Goodnight, sir.”

DeWulfe heaved himself from the stool. “Hold it,” said Harry, moving forward. “You don’t seem to understand...”

“Oh, I understand perfectly,” said the Doctor. “I thought Danny was paranoid, but I see what he means. All this gothic make-up and mumbo-jumbo! Who do you think you are, sir, because you don’t impress me. We know who hit the highs tonight, and it wasn’t the star of the show. What did you do? Shove a girl in a box, perform this long-winded ritual. Surprise, surprise - she’s vanished. Seen it a thousand times!”

“*Thought* you’d seen it a thousand times,” said Harry. “But this was the real thing.”
 “Balderdash!”

“Perhaps - for I am no master of the art. But neither did I use a trapdoor or similar contrivance. My will...clouded the perception of minds and cameras, creating an illusion of disappearance. A true illusion, Doctor. A magical illusion.”

“Rubbish,” said DeWulfe. “You’re barmy.”

“You do not know the powers you profane, Doctor.”

“I know the power of science. That’s enough.”

“Pah!” snorted Harry, with derision. “Nothing to the immortal mysteries beyond the edge of perception. The darkest shades of black! I delve, Doctor, not always in triumph. But when I succeed...the splendour! The majesty! Its power will blow you away!”

“Oh yes? Then shove a few shillings in the cosmic meter. I’ve heard enough, Harry. Goodnight.”

Harry slipped forward with a reptilian quickness, which belied his advancing years. Finding the doorway blocked by the mad magician, DeWulfe was obliged to listen.

“You forget what I mentioned earlier,” said Harry. “That I constrain the greater forces. I must become a master of their secrets before treating such power with conceit. A mere dabbling could unleash hell and fury, and bring grave terror to the world.”

“Master *what* forces?” shouted the Doctor. “There are none to master! It takes skill to be a conjuror and you’re losing it, sir. Danny knows it, I know it - now you know it, Harry.” DeWulfe tried to push past.

“Frightened of the truth?” challenged Harry, stepping aside. “There. The way is open. You may go.”

“I’ll go because I’ve heard enough twaddle,” said DeWulfe. “I’m not scared of your fairy tales.”

“Or stay,” said Harry, “as a man of science, to witness the evidence yourself. Harry reached to a shelf above the dressing table, where his fingers inched past a number of personal oddments. Apart from a few bottles and ledgers, there were two small, dusty statues of a bronze sheen. “Would you care to meet a character like this?” asked Harry. He took down one of the grotesque figures, and offered it to the Doctor.

While he found the suggestion a strange one, the Doctor’s curiosity overcame him. Harry might benefit from a skeptical opinion. DeWulfe took the statue and studied it with an archaeologist’s scrutiny. What a repulsive little gargoyle it was! The gnarled horny head topped a bat-like body, which tapered to a serpentine tail. The creature was dressed in a ragged robe, depicted by twists of metal, and armed with a sword and shield. The effect was fierce and lively.

This shield intrigued DeWulfe in particular, for it resembled a mechanical component. He touched the blade-like edges that projected from its rim. The centre was marked with a spike.

“It is the focus of a demonic entity,” said Harry. “The statue provides an access point into the world of material things. Thus it may absorb mortal energy through the eyes, or project its spirit from within.”

“Ugly little devil, certainly,” said DeWulfe. His tone was now one of genuine interest. “All mythologies create images and totems. Probably some...ritualistic significance. Where did you find the thing?”

“On my travels,” said Harry, with a wry smile. “You begin to believe, Doctor?”

“I’ve seen nothing,” said DeWulfe. “Just a knick-knack.”

“Would you wish me to...energize the demon?” asked Harry. “Invoke an earthly manifestation?” His voice was almost inviting.

“Make a fool of yourself?” growled the Doctor. “Go on.”

Harry’s lips moved in some obscure utterance, barely audible in the room. The sound had a strange quality, as if the speech had been reversed.

“Look into its eyes,” said Harry. “See their sparkle?”

DeWulfe peered deep into the demonic slits and, yes, beheld a flicker of orange no brighter than a candle. Then they were dull and lifeless once more. “No sparks,” said DeWulfe, drawing back from the statue. “A mere...reflection, that’s all.”

“You think so?” smiled Harry.

“Here, I’ll show you,” said the Doctor. He turned the demon towards the bulbs around the mirror. “Just jiggle it, get the angle...”

“Do you feel a sudden chill?” asked Harry. He marched across the room. “A draughty window? Let’s check...”

“Check your sanity, Harry,” said DeWulfe. He placed the statue on the dressing table and removed the pipe from his mouth. “Shame I’m not a medical doctor. I’d have the men in white coats down here. I’d...”

“No - the window’s fine,” said Harry. “Look behind you.”

“Wicked witch?” smiled the Doctor. “If seeing is believing...”

DeWulfe turned with a puff of tobacco smoke, to behold the terrible vision. There was the great gnarled head of a hideous creature, looming over him. It brandished a sword and bladed shield, glinting in the light. Foul breath fell like invisible liquid onto the Doctor’s upturned face.

DeWulfe’s tongue flapped as he tried to speak. “Wh...good God. What...oh *God!*” Harry observed in silence as the Doctor trembled. This vile debasement of nature’s purpose was visible only to him.

The Doctor’s eyes bulged, so close to the demon’s contorted features. The skin resembled an intricate landscape, the tail writhing in delight. The Doctor wheezed with a sudden breathlessness, collapsing to the floor. He cowered from the slaving entity as it poked its sword towards him. The shield spun back and forth with an insectile whirr. DeWulfe swatted in a state of frenzy.

The lesson had been learnt, thought Harry. He strolled to the dressing table, passed a hand across the statue, and muttered a further incantation. Then he turned to the Doctor with a triumphant air.

“There! A short but vivid demonstration,” said Harry, with a jovial lilt to his voice. But still the Doctor swatted at the oncoming horror, and stumbled gibbering to the door. He grabbed the handle, tore it open, and staggered into the passage.

The shock hit Harry with a malevolent blow. He had neither finished the trick, nor banished the demon. The magician slapped the statue in a fury, muttering quicker

and quicker - over and over - the obscure words of command. Then he shook the statue, tears flowing as he pleaded with the entity. Harry knew the spell was not working.

The demon had been disturbed by Harry's levity in speaking the incantation, and enraged by the Doctor's scrutiny. He had treated its sculptural likeness like a tawdry toy. Now it used these moments on earth to gain refreshment, through the spiritual theft its life demanded. The demon chased the hysterical DeWulfe down the narrow passage, where he collided with Miranda the pretty make-up girl. She was shocked by such rudeness from the ever-popular Doc, wondering if he was drunk.

But DeWulfe was past her, crashing through doors, knocking a tea tray flying. All the while his face was a rictus of fear, with the demon at his heels. He fell to the floor in a slithering mass, so the creature loomed above him. The Doctor could feel its hot, sticky breath on his neck.

There was commotion behind, someone calling - Miranda - and someone running towards him. It was Daniel Roberts. The agent knelt, and spoke in a distant voice. "Hey - we need a *doctor*, fast!"

But the demon lurched over Roberts with its eyes of flame, claws clicking like arthritic joints. DeWulfe pulled away from the gathering crowd, claws clacking on the floor behind him. Roberts scratched his head in disturbed bewilderment, while the tea lady moaned about the broken cups.

A doorman challenged DeWulfe as he dashed for the street, but the demon was even quicker. It had leapt ahead into shadows, unseen to either man. The Doctor ran to the tarmac with shining lights. The pairs of lights - headlamps - the eyes of flame. He screamed in a second of paralysed fear as the eyes streaked fast before him. Then the physical bulk of the vehicle struck, and DeWulfe shattered the windscreen like a rock through ice. The car swerved and crashed with a sickening smash, the driver jerking to die with DeWulfe.

Roberts burst into the dressing room to find Harry slumped on a chair. The magician's face was a picture of pain. He was holding a peculiar statue, taken from the shelf above. Roberts could have sworn to a glimmer in its eyes, although the effect was gone in an instant. It must have been the bulbs around the mirror, reflecting in the metal, for the statue was cold and dark.

Even in this moment of agony, Harry knew the outcome to be just. He had used the power of the demons, but they demanded a rightful return. Their power fed his magic, creating authentic miracles, but he did not get fame without paying. Nourished with energy from the Doctor's soul, the demon had returned to those hidden realms.

There was one consolation for the dead driver. Being unknown to its dabbling master, the demon let him rest in peace.

* * * * *

"I never fully understood what happened," said Roberts. "The doctors - the *medical* doctors - said Edward had suffered some kind of massive blood clot. A brain haemorrhage, which sent him into a fit."

Cutter sat transfixed with macabre fascination. "He gibbered about a demon..."

"Imagination," said Roberts. "The fit must have brought on hallucinations. He'd been looking at the statue, remember."

"Indeed," nodded Cutter. "Art can be...most disturbing."

"Arguing with Harry blows anyone's brain," said Roberts. "He's driven me crazy at times! Would we have broadcast that show despite the tragedy? Guess we'll never know. The master tape was nothing but static..."

"Another vanishing trick?"

"...so they cut the series short. Ditched the Easter special, Harry's contract was dropped. Apart from guest spots and an unsold pilot, it was back to the theatres of old. There was no direct link between the death and Harry, but it combined with other rumours. He became something of an outcast. A television jinx."

Roberts stubbed his second cigar. "I'd been stupid enough to ring up debts on the strength of Harry's earning power. Lost the Jag, the second home. Christ! Foreign holidays, goodbye! Anyway, Harry kept going with this twilight career. I stuck by him. Needed the cash. Sheila disagreed. She left me."

Roberts shook his head in a moment of personal regret. Then he lightened his tone a touch. "I've always liked the seaside, so I took a flat with Harry - down here, on the coast. Kept a low profile, tried to sort things out. I persuaded Harry to lighten the act, and he did with some resentment. Needed the money, like me. We did pantos, Butlin's, even a cruise. There's a funny story to *that*..."

Cutter tossed his head dismissively, quelling the anecdote. Roberts took the hint.

"Course, I tried other acts - other businesses - when Harry went strange again. I couldn't live with his loony notions, so I blew the last of my cash. Bought this lovely villa, went my own way. It wasn't before time. Sheila came back, stuck another five years. Then she left for good. I've started firms, shut them, had so many partners I could hold a ballroom dance. Never made the big time again, but I've kept the wolf from the door."

"Till now?" queried Cutter.

Roberts brightened his monologue with an inspirational gleam. "A man dreams in his youth, Cutter, and I dreamt of a career in show business. For a good fifteen years, I had it. Twenty if you count the late seventies, my final days with Harry, Dick Chance the comic...one or two wannabes. That's fifteen years outside the industry I love, and now I've hit sixty my time's running short. I want to retire in *triumph*, Cutter. Forget the troubles of the past. I've a bigger dream now. Defty Danny's! A casino, tavern, theatre - all rolled into one! Be the Las Vegas of England, my name up in neon!" Roberts mimed the sweep of the sign.

"An ambitious gravestone," murmured Cutter.

"Too right, ambitious!" grinned Roberts. He was oblivious to Cutter's sly insinuation. "Roberts Builders went bust, I've got new debts now. Need short-term money, fast. Pay 'em off, buy time, pay an architect for Defty's. Then it's back to the venture capital boys with an irresistible offer! I'll succeed, Cutter, I can assure you of that." Roberts wiped the sweat from his brow.

"Money from where?" asked Cutter.

“I think you know,” said Roberts.

“Nevill and Grunt snatch Harry’s trinkets, and pass the swag bag to you?”

“Yes - for a fee,” added Roberts.

“A fee?”

“Thousand pounds,” said Roberts. “Good for a night’s work.”

“And you make, how much? Ten or twenty?”

Roberts choked on his third cigar. “Maybe.”

“What does that mean?”

“I make whatever I make, Cutter. Whatever the stuff’s worth.”

Cutter stood slow, steady, with hydraulic precision. His bulk loomed in semi-silhouette against the long beige curtains. “Suppose I should be happy,” he murmured. “Grunt’s shown sense for once. Yet the task could end in prison. A thousand’s not very good.”

“Quarter profits, too. Between them.” Roberts squirmed in his seat.

“Only one problem,” said Cutter, edging to a darker mood. “I’ve dismissed Nevill, and Grunt takes orders from me.”

“Dismissed?” gasped Roberts. “What gives you the right...?”

“What gives you the right to *anything?*” snarled Cutter. “You’ve been employing a shrimp, Mr. Roberts. Nevill is no longer on the payroll. But Grunt and - *yes!* - another of my acquaintance, who needs to build her confidence in the world. As for the leader, he demands a half cut in profits - plus the fee - to share between him and his pals. Otherwise, he will cheerfully drag Defty Danny to the respectable authorities.”

“The police?” gasped Roberts, somewhat bemused.

“No, Deputy Dawg,” spat Cutter.

“So, this leader,” asked Roberts. “Who is he?”

“I am the man,” said Cutter.

Following the trauma of the previous weekend, Rachael found her creative spirit buzzing. It was the week before Christmas when, suddenly, the painting had a new urgency. Nevill had been an unwelcome guest, with his wretched inquisition. Nothing more could disrupt the artistic flow, or the curative act of creation.

The physical picture was less important than the truth it expressed. Rachael cared not what became of her work. Indeed, she never wished to see it again. But the last dab had to be added, the final touches made. Only then could she rest from its obsessive grip, purged of the haunting imagery.

So the work flowed with a new intensity within the cubby-hole. By Tuesday, the painting would have looked finished to a casual, objective eye. But Rachael's perfectionist touches took many hours to perform, often carried out in a squinting half-light. She blended the smallest subtleties, toned the tiniest blemish. Contrast was intensified with gentle glazes, shading hollows and lowlights to a deeper recession. The jagged trees had a gnarled impasto: Rachael added filigree cracks, wood-grain and twiggery to the clawed branches above.

There came a time when exhaustion swept over Rachael like an embracing tide, and she desired nothing but lethargy and sleep. Her hand moved downwards with a final dab, finding nowhere to alight itself. After signing her name in the lower right corner, Rachael jingled the brush to cleanliness in the jar of water. Then she placed it at rest with the others.

Rachael gazed at her forest for a silent interval, embraced by a lightness of spirit. Her nightmare was on canvas, expunged from her mind. Her dreams should be peaceful now.

It was the festive season. A time to enjoy! The snow swirled above the huddled rooftops, drifting into chilling mounds like rich trifle topping. Its loveliness was sampled by passing towns-folk, leaving a pattern of footprints and sledge tracks. Windows glowed behind lace curtains of snowdrop prettiness, casting yellow patches to the frosty ground. Children huddled in duffle coats, mittens and scarves. They warmed every heart with wonderful carols, by the light of flickering lanterns.

A tall, cheery man in top hat and cloak strolled across the road. "Bless you," he said to a musical cherub, stretching a hand behind the scallywag's ear.

What should pop-out but a coin of the realm? "Gor blimey," said the boy. "A sovereign!"

"Bright as a button for a very bright lad," quipped the elegant, dapper gentleman. He noticed a pretty young lady, in crinoline and bonnet. "A very merry Christmas!" he called.

She struggled with her bundle of gifts: their wrappings were vivid, with jaunty ribbons. "May I be of assistance?" he asked. "Carry your things, Madame?"

"Oh, Harry," she smiled. "Your vanishing tricks! I'd never see my gifts again!" The lady bustled to a bow-fronted window, filled with flowers and confectionery.

Her eyes were bigger than her belly, if not her entire family's. Choosing a selection of delightful candy, she entered the snug emporium. Harry watched by the

window, and clicked his fingers. A floral bouquet appeared in his hand, to give as a gentleman should.

“Oeer, that’s cute,” said Cutter. He watched the sugary scene with a good-humoured festive grin. “Jolly Christmas to you, Andrew Gruntling. May your ball bearings never seize.”

“Snap,” said Grunt. “Same to you, Knifer. Keep your scissors sharp.”

“Though goodwill notwithstanding,” murmured Cutter, “one can have an overload...”

Yes - Christmas came but once a year, along with all those soppy films. Grunt twisted the knob on Cutter’s crummy receiver, so the winter wonderland fizzed into television snow. White noise - the news - adverts - ah, hooray! A violent cartoon.

“We’re having the full works this year,” said Cutter, watching the stylized characters jumping around. It was one of those weird animations from the 1950s or ’60s. The characters were stubby triangles with beaky noses, in a world of avant-garde splodges.

“Full works?” grunted Grunt.

“Wilf’s here Christmas morning,” said Cutter. “Do us a special treat.”

“Wilf?” groaned Grunt.

“And Ken. He’s harmless enough.”

“Is he?” scowled Grunt. “Poncing around...”

“He’s *invited*,” said Cutter. “So are you, and Rachael.”

“Sure. I’ll ask ‘Bingo’ Barry!”

“He’s barred,” growled Cutter. “Unforgiven.”

Grunt snorted. “Time for sweets,” he said. “Matchmakers!” He took a box of the chocolate sticks.

“Drop it!” snapped Cutter. “Sweetmeats can wait. Save them for Christmas Eve.”

“Why d’you put them out?” whined Grunt. He made do with a cigarette.

“Suspense. Anticipation,” said Cutter. “A hint of marvels to come.”

“What?”

“I like Christmas, Grunt. Like my treats, my indulgence. Like to be tempted, and resist the temptation. Makes the final feast all the better.”

Cutter heard a scuffle as Rachael entered the living-room. “One of my treats,” he murmured.

“Hi,” said Rachael. She squeezed Cutter’s thick, fleshy arm. The girl’s outlook was buoyant - glowing - as if she had solved some tricky teaser with a transcendent brainwave. “Cutter,” she said, in a delighted whisper. “You can have your cubby-hole back.”

Cutter was speechless.

“It’s *done*,” said Rachael. “Painting’s finished!”

Cutter spoke with sincerity. “That’s class.”

Rachael smiled. “I darkened bits, lightened bits, had some coffee. As I sat there looking at the painting, my brush could no longer touch it. The picture was real, deep...a landscape, not a canvas. I knew my work was over.”

Cutter nodded.

“It sounds weird,” added Rachael, “but for a second...I swear it was more than a painting. It was real, 3-D, like you could just walk in. I wanted to walk away.”

Cutter stared at Rachael with a new respect.

“Got to see this,” said Grunt, half-rising.

“You’ll see *nothing!*” snapped Cutter. “Turn that garbage down.”

The cartoon shrieks, clangs and clatters had formed an incongruous backing. Grunt twisted the TV volume with a sulky pout. Then he shuffled off to the kitchen, feeling surplus to requirements. He wasn’t so dim-witted after all.

Cutter took Rachael aside, to the fairy light hubcap. It cast shafts of coloured radiance on the grubby wall. Rachael stooped slightly like a humble saint. Cutter’s face was softened by sympathy, suggesting a devoted monk.

“I’d be privileged to see the painting,” said Cutter.

“You may see it when you wish,” said Rachael in a low, confessional tone. “The work is over, Cutter. I know I can rest in peace.”

“When I wish...?” mused Cutter. “Sometime special. Christmas?”

“You can have it,” said Rachael, “with all my love. My mind is clear, the picture doesn’t matter.”

“It does to me,” said Cutter. “Your wonderful art. Magic on the mantelpiece.”

Rachael gasped. “To you, it’s...nothing but a picture. To me, the killing of my nightmare. The *killing*. The end, at last...”

Rachael’s tears glistened with fairy light sparkles, so Cutter’s great hand pressed her to his chest. Yes - he could wait till Christmas, and what a gift this would be. Beat the insipid pack of lager Grunt would no doubt buy, or dreary comedy books fit for the downstairs toilet. A masterwork by Rachael Stanwick - the start of a collection, perhaps. The private collection of Paul ‘Cutter’ Graves, seen only by those he chose.

* * * * *

Rachael had not felt so girlish and carefree for ages. She helped Cutter fetch drinks from the off-licence, snug in her scarf and floppy hat. “Give her the heavy stuff!” grinned Cutter to the manager, who piled bottles into the bags. He was helped by his temporary assistant, a morose teenager in shirt and tie.

“Happy Christmas, Mr. Graves,” said the manager. “There you go, love. Tons!” Rachael struggled with the bulging bag, bending like Quasimodo.

“Too heavy,” said Cutter. “C’mere...”

“Fooled ya!” said Rachael, lifting it.

A trip to the cinema before the great festive box-watch, not that Cutter’s monochrome model beat an arcade peepshow. Burgers kept warm beneath winter coats, bulging like unborn babies, to be scoffed along the promenade. Next morning, Rachael’s head dozing on Cutter’s chest as they breathed in alternation. His hand stroked her hair as sunlight brightened the pokey attic bedroom.

Cutter wanted to clear his desk on Friday, before shutting the gates for a long weekend. It was only a brief intermission. There might be work between Boxing Day and New Year’s Eve: dodgy bikes bought for Christmas, needing a re-tune or

adjustment. Things would be slack - the slacker, the better - so Cutter's Yard would cope. Even slacker if Cutter could lounge around, paperwork out the way.

Besides, Cutter had one important call to make - and he preferred to use the office telephone, away from Rachael and Grunt. Settling down in privacy, Cutter readied himself and dialled.

Just a couple of rings at the other end. Then a voice said a bleary, "Morning."

"Good morning to *you*, Mr. Roberts," said Cutter. "Glad we can talk again."

"Ah," said Roberts. He became more lucid, forcing himself awake. "Sorry...had a late night. Jazz club! Things got lively, didn't get back till three."

Cutter cleared his throat. "We need to discuss our arrangements, with regard to the matter in hand."

"We do, Cutter, we do..."

For a moment, Cutter fancied Roberts was trying to convince himself. Was the scheme a wild speculation, which he had never meant to carry through? But Roberts continued:

"Here's what I think, Cutter. Get the festive season out the way. I know Mrs. Bracewell in the flat below. She's bound to see Harry, keep him happy. Don't want to spoil the fun."

"Or spoil the fun at Cutter's Yard," said Cutter. "Better than the slammer, should things go wrong."

"No chance of that!" chuckled Roberts. "Think I've sussed the job. I'll pop round early, leave the back window open, make a sleepy drink. Harry won't know a dicky-bird! You go up the fire escape, climb inside. No breakage, Cutter. No noise."

"Glad we're on the same side," said Cutter. He was disgusted by the deceit in Roberts' scheme, despite his own involvement.

"Piece of cake," said Roberts. "Don't get spotted on the steps..."

"An obvious point," said Cutter. "Stick to your side, Mr. Roberts. I'll stick to mine."

Roberts breathed deeply. "Sure. I'll find a trendy wine bar, play the fool. Get drunk, fall over, get remembered."

"Sounds a great evening," said Cutter. "Shame I've got a clash. Who names the day?"

"When you're ready...?" mused Roberts.

"I'll let you know," replied Cutter.

"All right," agreed Roberts. "Give me a week's notice. I can time my trip to Harry's..."

"Where do you sell the goods?" asked Cutter.

"That's between me and *them*," said Roberts. "Don't want hot stuff hanging around. I'll need to alert the buyer."

"Buyer, beware..." murmured Cutter.

Roberts began warming to Cutter, as he had to Nevill. One rogue was as good as another. "Hey, Cutter! Help me now, I'll build a golden future. You're asking more than Nevill, but maybe fate sent you. Maybe you'll do a better job."

Roberts gushed with so much heartiness, Cutter drew the receiver away from his ear.

“A dream is no dream without power,” said Roberts. “You are the power to make my dream! I won’t forget what you’ve done, Cutter. Trouble with the Yard, business, need a job? Bike over to Defty Danny’s!”

Cutter sneered in repugnance at the very concept. He would never waddle about in some daft uniform, head full of ‘customer service’. But he listened patiently to the rousing climax, with Roberts at full pitch:

“Hey - bring your friends over, anytime! Say the drinks are on me! No stinginess at Defty Dan’s, because at Defty’s - *everybody’s happy!*”

* * * * *

As Roberts put down the telephone, he was virtually convinced. The glittering leisure centre was open! But a calmer reality returned as he gazed at the winter morning. The cool sea rippled before a distant horizon. The work still lay ahead.

There were Christmas cards dotted along the mantelpiece. Far fewer than the old days, although some showbiz friends kept in touch. His business associates didn’t, which was just as well. Few owed him any season’s greetings.

Feeling a twinge of nostalgia, Roberts moved to the sideboard where the portrait of Harry was concealed once more. Opening a drawer, he regarded an album of photographs - large and modern, in contrast to the pictures it contained.

There were snapshots from the 1950s and ’60s: Harry, Mary Lee - his one-time assistant - Roberts laughing in a casino, various forgotten faces, Val. While Roberts found the album engrossing, this virtue prevented his frequent perusal. It was an odd paradox, but true. Roberts knew the distractive danger of wallowing in the past. He skipped a few pages, not with impatience, but the need to see one particular photo. One particular face...

There it was! That favourite picture of Dr. DeWulfe, cheery in Regent’s Park, waving his umbrella like a baton. The chemical eyes of the image beamed at the organic eyes of Roberts, as they had just then in life. Roberts had snapped the Doctor through the glass eye of his camera, after a lazy springtime picnic.

Sheila had joked about DeWulfe’s umbrella, saying he would visit the Sahara expecting sudden drizzle. The Doctor had put up a belligerent defence, quoting the times he had been saved from a downpour. Of course, it had drizzled minutes later - and Roberts smiled at the memory. The Doctor had tempered victory with amiable charm, bundling them into a pub. A Guinness each had cured the damp. Those were the days, thought Roberts, with a tear in his eye. He was a sentimental old showman at heart.

“We never did that Easter special,” murmured Roberts, to himself and the happy photograph. “I’d have been *more* than astonished, Doctor. Your science...your science *was* magic.”

If only Harry had contained his anger. If only he hadn’t argued and argued, disturbing the Doctor so. The poor fellow had stormed out in a fury, lost his mind, and

blundered into the road. Yet what about this occult business? Roberts had never believed its power, only its dismal effect on the show. Superstitious rubbish, that's all it was, wasting Harry's time and talent.

Sheila had been less certain. Too open-minded. Believed some of the hocus pocus. Roberts had told her, again and again. Harry was a conjuror, a trickster, nothing more. Hidden springs, sleight-of-hand, misdirection.

But what if she had been right?

No. That was impossible. Ideas could prey on the mind in this cliff-top villa, and Roberts felt a shiver. He had better turn the heating up. Still, it was a good hypothetical question. What had she said? The sorcery, the conjuring...perhaps the two had mingled slowly, inadvertently, the one contaminating the other. The dark polluted the light, perhaps, and the light polluted the dark. Was the darkness insulted by Harry's use, in boosting a stale career? Resentment might have grown on the other side, slowly encroaching, then corrupting his magic.

That was all academic, thought Roberts. He twisted the wall thermostat to its highest setting. Real or not, Harry's strangeness had become all too apparent - costing himself and others dear. The psychological effects were undeniable: the Doctor's madness, Roberts' frustration, Sheila's depression and confused divorce. What about Harry's assistants? Mary Lee, who he brainwashed with incantations. She became a walking, talking, semi-living doll. Susie? What happened to her? The police never uncovered the truth.

Roberts moved to the drinks cabinet and opened a bottle of port. It was always the Doctor's favourite tippie. Smiling at the photo in the album, Roberts offered a private toast. "Won't fail your memory, Dr. DeWulfe. Defty's still got the old spark."

* * * * *

The Christmas feast at Cutter's Yard had been spread upon a makeshift table: metal struts and planks clamped together, with a pure white dust-sheet to hide the joins. Once the crackers, candles and plates were in place, it might have been a family heirloom.

Wilf had been busy all morning with pots and pans, winding up Ken rotten. Cutter had laughed, Grunt sneered and gone for a walk. Meanwhile, Rachael browsed through the bargain book that Cutter had bought for her. It was filled with images of propaganda, wrought by many an artist.

Now, the table was covered with dirty plates, with the turkey chopped and gobbled. Ken, being awkward, had insisted on a nut roast. He began to clear the crockery, as Cutter poured the brandy. Ken preferred his Coke, of course.

Wilf brought in a huge plum pudding. "Who's got a match?" he asked.

Cutter sloshed on a dash more brandy, and flicked his chunky Harley-Davidson lighter. "Behold, the fires of hell!" he grinned, igniting the rich pudding.

Rachael looked deep into the flickering flame - for a second seeing faces, a castle, a stalking creature. Then Wilf dropped the lid with a metallic clang, sending these pyrovisions to oblivion. Ken distributed the china bowls, Wilf scooped the pudding.

Grunt waved a final cracker, and Rachael grabbed the chance. Her brow was half-covered by a purple paper crown, slipping slowly to her eyes. Wilf wore a green one, Cutter none, while Grunt had scrunched his yellow specimen. Ken preferred the little felt hat, which matched his decorative waistcoat.

He was a funny lad, thought Cutter. Quiet, withdrawn - like that kid down the off-licence. He bore Wilf's aggravating humour with tolerant grace, so perhaps the two were a pair.

Bang! went the cracker in Grunt's favour, earning him a plastic ring. "Give it to Rachael," said Wilf. "Marry her!"

"Give it to Ken!" yelled Grunt, tossing it. Wilf retrieved the ring with dignity, his moustache drooping in a wry manner.

"Where's the joke?" asked Cutter, ripping the cracker's corpse and finding a strip of paper. "What has no legs, no arms, one wheel and two heads?" Cutter glanced at his companions.

There was heavy thinking round the table. Wilf became trance-like, Rachael smirked, while Grunt's brain was about to burst. Ken did not worry, however. He was admiring his lovely ring.

"Nobody?" asked Cutter. "Rachael?"

"Um..."

Grunt had a theory, and tapped his head. "One of those cyborgs," he said. "Half-monster, half wheelie-thing."

"You're far too modest," said Cutter.

"Oh - I know!" said Wilf, brightly. "A nasty unicycle smash."

"Clever but wrong," said Cutter. "It's no joke...only smoke." He ignited the slip of paper.

"*Knifer!*" groaned Grunt. Even Rachael sighed.

Cutter repented. "Two snails in a wheelbarrow."

On the street, Grunt's dumbstruck expression would have called for community care. "That's bollocks!" he snarled. "Give it..."

Cutter crumbled the ashes like an Oxo Cube. "Who cares?" he said. "Cheap crackers."

After drowning his pudding in luxuriant custard, Cutter gave Rachael a sly sideways nod. "Like to make me smile, Rachael? Earn a few pennies for yourself?"

Rachael blinked. "How?"

"Crash-helmet," said Cutter. "Needs colour. I'm sick of its mortal grey. Graphics like your book, Rachael. I bought that book for a purpose." Cutter glanced at the volume of propaganda art, left on the grubby futon.

Rachael stared impassively at her steaming pudding. "You haven't seen your painting," she said. "Maybe you won't like it..."

"Know soon enough," replied Cutter. "I'll unwrap it tonight, in private."

"Oh, we want a look!" smiled Wilf.

"All in good time," said Cutter. "Deserves a private view."

Darkness came as ever on Christmas, descending slowly through an afternoon film. Soon, the festival was denied its daylight for another year. After dismantling the

improvised table, Grunt stuffed himself full of chocolates. Then he knocked back some whisky and collapsed on the sofa. Wilf played a daft game of Scrabble with Cutter and Rachael, relating to biking, sex and alcohol only. Ken had retreated to the kitchen, where he washed the dishes with devotion. The cassette machine chewed his story tape.

“Your place next year?” asked Cutter, as the visitors mounted Wilf’s Fastback Commando.

“Revenge of the Demon Scrabbler!” cried Wilf. He rumbled through the gates of Cutter’s Yard, Ken hanging on tight and contented. Cutter pulled Rachael close to him, taking her back inside.

The canvas was wrapped in a paper shroud, tied with shiny ribbon. This was curly and colourful, unlike the practical string from the art school. “I’d rather not watch,” said Rachael, turning away. Her long purple skirt became a swirling cone, before settling around her legs. Cutter let her go without a word, for he appreciated the etiquette. A gift should speak for itself.

Cutter’s fingers slid carefully along the strands of ribbon, loosening the bow with respectful delicacy. The ribbon fell away unbroken, and Cutter sensed a billowing of the paper: a minute slackening of tension as the air found the space within. A tug, and the wrapping started to come away. Again, but gently, so it would not be torn. The paper slipped whole from the painting, and Rachael’s vision lay before him. Face down.

Cutter lifted the canvas, and turned it slowly. But a sudden fear of disappointment enveloped him. Cutter stopped dead, eyes rolling over the recumbent Grunt. His mind ticked with indecision.

What had he said, way back, when the girl first came? ‘My privilege must wait till the finish. Only your final vision will do.’

This was it, then. The final vision. Cutter knew he must face the painting, as Rachael had faced her nightmare. He whirled the canvas round.

Rachael’s forest. A frenzy of dynamic detail, where the roots and branches crossed in a claustrophobic web. The ground was churned to impasto by the twisted trees, poised at sinister angles. Hollows glimmered with pools of varnished scum, littered with flaking leaves. There was an overwhelming sense of depth in the picture. A startling contrast between foreground and background, conjuring a vertiginous distance.

Even as he held the painting, Cutter felt a tingle of dizziness - then a thrilling rush - as the shock of appreciation hit him. It was incredible how mere artwork had caused such a tangible, physical sensation.

The forest sucked the viewer forwards with a malignant gravity - and looking closer, Cutter could see why. Although the effect had never been determined from the outset, Rachael’s many, many flickering brushstrokes had taken on a convergent aspect towards the centre. While retaining the clarity of every crack and crevice, she had caught the essence of motion. A flight both suggested and frozen, vibrant yet paralysed.

The colours, too, were subtle to a fanatical degree. Every inch of brown, on inspection, was a blending of textured shades. In depicting the nightmare with such vision and tact, Rachael had captured the forest’s influence. She had destroyed the force of her sleeping obsession, reducing its disturbance to art.

“Rachael,” said Cutter, and the girl returned. She regarded him with shy trepidation. “More than a painting,” he told her. “A...*phenomenon*.”

Rachael gave Cutter a sly sideways nod. “You know the story,” she said.

Cutter cleared the mantelpiece of Christmas cards, and shoved the metal badges aside. Ripping down the screaming rock star poster, he propped the painting in place.

“Pride of the Yard,” said Cutter. “I’m truly honoured.”

“So am I,” said Rachael.

Grunt snored, and they smiled.

The radio buzzed in the corner of the daytime workshop, as company for Rachael. She was sitting on a wooden box, with Cutter's crash-helmet on her knees. Dabbing splashes of red and black, Rachael was building a texture of close-knit grain. This would form the backing for symbols and emblems, copied from the bargain book. The imagery of revolution turned to decorative ends.

A power drill whined from deeper within. Cutter was hard at work in the cubby-hole - his own at last - fixing brackets for metal shelves. Cutter's Den, he would call it. The inner sanctum. 'Repairs to Tape Decks, Turntables, Tuners and Amps. Renovated Systems Available.'

Cutter emerged through the curtain of plastic strips, and bent to rummage in a toolbox. But he caught sight of something important. It was in the corner of the workshop, half-hidden by the pile of junk. Cutter's mind stalled as he tried to recall, then the thought played in his head. Hadn't he mentioned it to Rachael? His very own party piece?

Leaving the tools, Cutter took hold of the object. It was a strip of wood, teeming with shiny blades. Each had been fixed in an upright position, like a row of pointed teeth.

Rachael glanced up, her features wary.

"Never shown you this," said Cutter. He placed the board between two workbenches, so it bridged the gap. "I'm no artist, Rachael. No star attraction. This is the one performance I do."

"Looks lethal..." she gasped.

"Sharp as your eyes?" grinned Cutter. He stood at the centre of the board and leant sideways, so Rachael feared he might fall. One hand rose, oscillating gently to find the perfect starting point. Cutter's eyes closed, leaving him sightless in a Zen-like meditation.

There was no tense, suspenseful wait. With a speed - with a fury spontaneously unleashed - Cutter exploded into action. His hand moved swiftly, violently - *chop! chop! chop!* - between every one of the blades. Not a millimetre to spare, thought Rachael, as she watched through trembling fingers. Yet Cutter continued without injury till the final blade. He missed it with a final chop, switching to a calm salute.

Breathless, Rachael shook herself and skipped forward. "Your *hand!*" she gasped, examining it closely.

"No cuts, no blood, no hassle," said Cutter. He wriggled his fingers in proof. "My...party piece, Miss Stanwick. Shows I've got a touch of class."

Rachael looked squeamishly at the serrated edge, formed by the many blades. Each had been screwed into position with meticulous alignment. Her finger descended to touch one, resting with zero pressure on its very tip. "I could never do that," she whispered.

"So how can I?" asked Cutter. "Because I trust myself, Rachael. I've mastered the danger and never flinch." He brought his face close to her delicate features, the beard

almost brushing her chin. "It's vital to trust oneself," said Cutter. "Trust in others around you. We can trust each other, surely, in times of trouble and woe?"

"Trouble?" asked Rachael.

"'Be prepared', Rachael. The scouting motto. There's a lot of sense in that. Be prepared for trouble. Anguish to come. Shades of black, darker shades...ultimate dark."

Her eyes fell. "I've killed my nightmare, Cutter."

"But what about future shock? It's a brain-screwed, deadhead world out there. Got to be strong at heart."

"Why?" sighed Rachael. "I feel fine, Cutter, really - "

"Not what I meant, girl. You know it!"

Cutter had sliced her sentence with a slash of fury, but tempered this with calm. "You were scared of the darkness. The forest. Now it's time to show me you're brave. I can test you, Rachael. Give you that strength. Join me, trust me...trust *yourself*. Know you've mastered the danger."

"How?" she asked, with very good reason.

"Here's how," said Cutter at last. "You can participate in a little excursion. An evening with Grunt and myself. A journey to a strange and unknown place, yet a place not far from here."

"What's it all about?" asked Rachael.

"No clumsy questions," smiled Cutter. "I'd think little of your newfound confidence. Do not decline the invitation. I trust...you shall not disappoint."

Rachael gazed at her lover, bemused yet willing. Cutter tapped her neatly on the nose.

* * * * *

Roberts loved the coming of the New Year. It was something he could always celebrate, whatever his personal circumstances: rags, responsibilities or riches. Christmas glitter implied families or close-knit friends, but neither had seen his villa awhile. Roberts had not bothered with festive trivia, just cards to a few old pals. Following his accustomed habit, he had even sent one to Harry.

The radio warbled low in the corner. Roberts turned up the volume after checking his watch, seeing it was nearly midnight. There was a moment of tense, atmospheric silence. Roberts raised his glass, before the resonant tones of the Westminster chimes. He smiled at the distant shrieks of delight, as the first of the hour sounded.

"To Defty Danny," said Roberts, "and the future of Defty Danny's!" He touched imaginary glasses, each "*Ching!*" supplied by his mouth.

Roberts knocked back the warming brandy, while dwelling on his hopes and fears. But there was little time to ponder the next twelve months, as the phone began to warble. Roberts moved at a bouncy gait, glad of the January cheer. "Happy New Year!" he said by reflex, the caller's identity unknown.

But the caller neglected a greeting for Roberts. There was a voice on the end: deep, incisive, with a definite northern lilt. “Mr. Roberts. Let’s start things rolling. You said wait till the New Year.”

“My - you’re *keen*,” said Roberts. “Only one minute gone.”

“No time to waste,” said Cutter. “Next Saturday.”

Cutter was not mucking around.

“Okay,” said Roberts. “I’ll leave Harry’s by seven...”

“We won’t come till late,” said Cutter. “Harry needs his sleep and so do we. Give him plenty of pills.”

“Don’t worry,” said Roberts. “I’ll sort it.”

“Delivery?” asked Cutter. He was so succinct, Roberts took a second to realize the meaning.

“The goods? Sunday, secret location,” said Roberts. “Ring me, I’ll think of somewhere.”

“All seems in order,” murmured Cutter.

“It...certainly does.”

“Goodnight to you then, Mr. Roberts.”

Cutter hung up, leaving Roberts in a daze. The course of action was irrevocable. Harry would give up his riches. Despite these smooth preparations, Roberts felt less than elated. Cutter never wished him a happy New Year.

* * * * *

The week passed quickly in planning, and the everyday chores of life. To show confidence in the task ahead, Grunt painted ‘SWAG’ on the canvas mail sack from the Nevill jobs. Cutter gave Rachael a final pep talk, while Roberts stirred dopey tablets into Harry’s evening Horlicks.

Rachael had not finished Cutter’s helmet, although it still looked impressive enough. He strapped it on and mounted the BSA Rocket 3. Rachael sat in the sidecar, and they chugged out of the Yard. Grunt followed on his scruffy Kawasaki Z650, pausing only to lock the gates. Then they rode together through the damp, misty streets towards the terraces of Hove.

Stopping the bikes a short way from Harry’s, the three dismounted. Leaving their helmets, they found the alley round the back. Negotiating its narrow passage, Cutter arrived at a battered wooden gate. He pulled it with a scraping sound, and a creak of rusty hinges. This was lost under the hiss of rain.

“Time for your thrill,” said Cutter.

Rachael huddled for warmth in her corduroy jacket. She passed through this uninviting portal, and crossed the cracked wet concrete. Sagging bin bags blocked the black metal steps. Rachael stepped over this dripping obstacle, and began her lone ascent. Frightened, though lithe in her movements, the girl slinked past the lower windows. Some were dark, others lit beyond hazy net curtains to reveal a peek of furnishings within.

Rachael passed one landing, then another, to reach Harry's place at the top. Ignoring the rooftops around her, she spotted a slit beneath a sash window: it had been left a little open, as arranged. Pushing with all her might, Rachael slid the stiff window upwards. A flake of paint flicked free like a tiny moth. Breathing fast, she peered in at the murky flat. There was a passage with patterned wallpaper, and doors to other rooms.

Were Cutter and Grunt behind her? Rachael had no idea. Glancing back, she could see only the hard outlines of wrought iron railings. The town had been obliterated by the cold sea mist. They must be watching her, thought Rachael. Keeping track from below, ready to follow any moment. There was no choice now. Better do the job. Time to master the danger.

Rachael brought one leg up over the window ledge. Her black woollen tights scratched the splintering wood, as her short tasselled skirt brushed the sill. A jump took her boots down to the polished floor with a soft, barely audible impact. Rachael flipped on her torch, defining a circle of the purple patterned wallpaper. She slid the beam onto one door, then another, then onto the very last. Rachael had heard Cutter's version of Roberts' descriptive words. Must be the room, she thought.

Sneaking forwards, Rachael passed an imposing clock. It rumbled like a grandfather with indigestion. Her torch gleamed on the glass of some framed photographs: black and white characters from years before. She trod the thick rug towards the final door, with the silence of a mime artiste. Rachael took hold of the brass knob, and turned it very gently.

The creeping bikers had reached the top of the metal steps. Cutter looked through the window, seeing Rachael enter Harry's inner sanctum. The door swung back behind her, hiding the room and its uninvited guest. Only then did Cutter climb into the flat. Grunt followed, shortly after.

To an imaginary observer, the recumbent figure of Harry would have been motionless - inert - as it lay within the bedroom. The sleep was so deep, so profound in its departure from consciousness, it might have been mistaken for death. Yet that hollow face hid an inner alertness of mind: Harry's psyche was stubborn beyond the power of a sleeping draught. He was monitoring the room, and the rooms around it. Behind the grey lids of Harry's elderly eyes, his mind could detect energy...life...emotion. The coming of other bodies, and the spirits within.

A female had ventured into his place of secrets: personal trinkets and occultist's trove. She was sensitive yet strong, thought Harry - for she had cleansed herself of darkness, surely. Harry's mind perused Rachael's as if leafing through a book, and felt a glow of exultation.

She was a fitting recipient for those powers vested in his weak and failing body. Perhaps she would be a *better* recipient, he realized. Harry had used the powers with too little wisdom, resulting in much trouble and pain. The girl had pluck and determination, but also a cool and rational temperament. Harry sensed how she had been crushed into sadness, yet possessed a fresh vitality. Having expelled the nightmares that plagued her soul, she was ready for growth and discovery.

Harry had twisted the tendrils of fate through ritual after ritual, to bring about this very circumstance. Unknown to him - yet prompted by his incantations - the girl

had been drawn into dubious circles, resulting in her presence tonight. It was a cruel but necessary trick. Harry's body had been pushed past expiry date, and functioned only to complete his final duty. The act of magical transference.

For this to happen, Harry's mortal form must pass away. This would filter his power into the chosen one. Yet the girl must show her willingness to receive the gift, or the transference would fail to occur. She needed to show her affinity. She must be put to the test.

The males were approaching his bedroom. Harry's psyche shivered at their presence, yet kept its focus sharp. One paused, curious at what lay within. His intelligence was brighter than the other's, thought Harry. Surely the female's partner?

They moved on towards the final door, which the girl had already entered. Harry detected her sudden shock as the males burst in behind. Then, muffled tones from the curious one. He knew the coast was clear.

Harry's face smiled very slightly, at last reflecting his inner energy. He allowed the men to have their fun awhile, much as he despised them. How dare they despoil his relics and mementos? They would pay the price before long.

The girl approached the gas-lit alcove, its desk piled high with the dreadful and arcane. Here, she confronted the mesmerizing manuscript of a hideous lightning devil. But the girl managed to break from its malefic influence. Harry sensed her genuine pleasure as she found his photographic album, and perused those nostalgic pictures. The power of good.

Now the test. Harry allowed her image to join his own, in a lavish art deco foyer. She considered the photograph with astonishment, but never a hint of fear. Harry glowed with happiness. This girl...this *Rachael*. She was certainly the one.

The magician turned his attention to the male intruders, who had found the little demon statues. Time to make an appearance, he thought. Harry's eyes opened slowly, with the stiffness of a zombie, as he beat the influence of the somnolent drink.

Harry stared at the tight, intricate pattern of the wallpaper. His eyes focused with a vast intensity on its interwoven design - visualizing the paper fibres, the plaster, the brickwork. All were vapour to the power of magical thought. Nor should a drugged and feeble body be a hindrance.

The empty blankets settled upon the warm, cotton sheets. The door remained closed at all times. Harry stood before Rachael in the trinket room, dressed in his dapper best!

Ashamed, Rachael closed the album and placed it on the stool. She stood, meeting Harry's eyes with a nervous but direct gaze. Rachael felt unsure, for a deep loyalty bound her to Cutter and his mission of the night. Was she really in the photo? No...it was a freak resemblance, nothing more. Rachael tried to believe so, but knew this could not be true.

"How perfectly pleasant," said Harry. "I have not received visitors for some little time. In particular those...uninvited."

* * * * *

Thus, Rachael had dreamt of her recent adventures. Her frequent nightmare of the forest, the shared house with Laura and Sue. Her meeting with Cutter in the Midnight Café, and the move to his motorbike yard. Thus, she could visualize her forest painting and the intrusive Nevill, who had tried to probe her secrets. Cutter had reacted violently, before riding into the night.

Where had he gone? She did not know. But Rachael had agreed to the plan he hatched, of the visit to Harry's tonight. The dream became clearer as she saw the outcome, and her body trembled in fear. The way Cutter flicked a knife at Harry, who turned it into a flower. Then the fight, when she tried to save Harry. The biker reacted with violence, once more.

Cutter tore Rachael's grip from his dark, chequered shirt. He held her flailing, then pushed her with the power of a piston. Rachael shot straight back onto the dressing table, so her head struck the edge with force. The album fell to the floor beside her, along with cosmetics sent flying by the impact.

Then all she recalled was a swirl of light. Of dizziness and glitter, to an ethereal harmony. The perceptual illusions of concussion. Perhaps Harry had influenced these effects, to ease her pain and distress. They faded like theatrical tricks, once the show was done. She was left in a peaceful silence.

Both Harry and Rachael had fallen that night, after the briefest of encounters. Neither knew of the other's fate. As they lay together, the clock ticked in the hallway. The earth revolved towards dawn.

The first light of Sunday fell upon brickwork, tiles and corrugated iron. Wheels, chrome and glass were touched by reflection, with little stir of activity. Cutter's Yard was much the same each seventh day, anytime before noon. Grunt would usually suffer a hangover after lashings of lager, and lie in a foetal state. Cutter would doze after a session down The Shady Souls - after which, he might fiddle with electronics in his cubby-hole. They were a lot quieter than bikes.

The place was certainly calm in the breaking dawn, yet life was beginning to stir. Grunt had arisen from his workshop bed like a child eager for Christmas. Climbing the stairs to the flat above, he found something rather special: the last object taken in the raid. Grunt examined the rich silk fabric, and placed the top hat on his head.

A night's sleep had dulled the immediacy of drama: the robbery, the fight, the fall of Rachael and Harry. The events seemed vague and choppy, as if challenging Grunt's recollection. The night ride was a sharper image, and their safe return to the Yard. Cutter had been triumphant, as if savouring a battle of honour.

The remains of their fry-up was congealing in the kitchen, and Grunt had been lumbered with the washing up chores. Still, he could enjoy this moment of privacy. Grunt approached the canvas mailbag with mild trepidation, despite its crude 'SWAG' lettering. Unbuckling the thick leather straps, he peered at the jumble inside.

There were boxes carved with baroque ornamentation, a peculiar camera of outmoded design; glimmering brooches pinned to a cushion, that knackered kaleidoscope thing. Then Grunt found something spiky, wrapped in a silk veil, and pulled the bundle free of the bag. The wispy wrap flopped aside to reveal a metallic demon. He dipped again, and found another.

Grunt had never examined the statues in detail, as Cutter had deftly concealed their features: the spiteful faces, twisted horns, claws and bladed weapons. Horrid souvenirs, yet with an evil charm. Perfect mascots for the Devil's Rolls Royce.

Look good on the mantelpiece, thought Grunt. Shifting his automobile badges, he placed a demon each side of the forest painting. *There!* It was great, like an altar of fear. For once, Cutter would be pleased with his worker.

Grunt took the brim of his topper and raised it like a gentleman. He peered deep into the silky interior. Where was the magic? He could see none. No white rabbits, ribbons or floral bouquets. Grunt placed the hat brim-up on the coffee table, where it sat stark against the chess-board squares.

Despite the drama of the previous night, Cutter's dreams had been unaffected. He had slept in peace, with only music and motorbikes mingling in his mind. But as his biological clock ticked towards the time of waking, Cutter's subconscious assumed the presence of his partner: of Rachael. His arm probed the other side of the mattress, oblivious to any knowledge of her absence. It found only a cold patch of bedding. The arm groped upwards, downwards, but touched nothing more.

Cutter's eyes opened to the narrowest slits, registering the gloom of his attic bedroom. The walls were rendered a straw yellow by sticky, translucent sleep-glue.

Memory flowed brimful with vivid flashes: old posters, trinkets, demons. Then Harry's mysterious appearance, and Rachael's unforeseen despatch.

Cutter sat upright, wiping his eyes to clarity. He noticed Rachael's bag on the corner chair, with a bra-strap dangling from an unzipped corner. Trainers lay on the floor like dead woodlice. The girl was gone - struck by his own hand - leaving only material remains.

Cutter heaved the heavy blankets aside, standing cold and pallid in khaki shorts. A medallion dangled round his neck. Cutter tucked Rachael's bra out of sight, and kicked the trainers under the chair. There were other things: her books, a hat, some sketches. He would pack them away, in case she wanted them.

Dressed in chequered shirt, jeans and denim jacket, Cutter clomped downstairs in his heavy boots. Grunt's hands were deep in the kitchen sink: a soupy liquid enveloped the plates and pans, bobbing with particles of fat. Cutter granted a nod of approval, with no further word. Grunt grinned, but there was no grin back. After pouring a small whisky, Cutter moved to the living-room.

Cutter stared across the rooftops of Kemp Town, which diminished in pale recession. Normal homes, he thought, if *anything* was normal. But he was Cutter of Cutter's Yard.

The big biker turned to the mantelpiece, averting his eyes from the painting. It provoked emotions too complex for a Sunday morning. Instead, he examined the surprise additions that flanked the picture: those two little demon statues. For the first time since waking, Cutter's mood lightened a tone. Nothing but a joke the night before, but now...he was impressed. The early sun lit the grotesque figures, revealing details and patina. Repulsive yet fascinating, thought Cutter. Ideal ornaments for the home.

Ignoring Harry's top hat on the table, Cutter turned to open the swag bag. It was a pretty reasonable haul, although Cutter was unable to place a value on such eccentric items. He was most impressed by that hexagonal wooden tube, stained the deepest brown and varnished to a crackled glaze. Cutter allowed himself a patient scrutiny, studying its sturdy yet decorative craftsmanship: the smooth rotation of the lower barrel, along with its jewelled lens. The other end possessed a crystal eyepiece, so the object resembled an antiquated kaleidoscope.

Cutter held the wooden tube to the window, and gave the lens an experimental twist. No rotating pattern could be discerned within, only a deep and dimensionless void. Cutter could swear it floated *beyond* the end of the object, drifting further away. The blankness gave the illusion of night, beneath a starless sky. Cutter held his free hand before the lens, so his fingers wriggled beyond infinity. Must be mirrors, he thought. Internal reflections, creating a sense of depth.

In any case, the object was not his to keep. Cutter slipped it back in the bag.

"Breakfast, Knifer?" called Grunt from the kitchen. No word could have sounded more welcome. Fastening the straps of the swag bag, Cutter accepted the invitation.

* * * * *

Daniel Roberts had been true to his word. He had lived the high life on Saturday night, leading to lethargy on Sunday morning. He lay spread-eagled in his large double bed, its pink duvet lending a feminine touch. There was nothing feminine about Roberts, however. His head snored hoarsely on the pillow, cheeks ruddy, moustache bushy and grey.

It took some time for the phone's warble to wake him - and when it did, Roberts hardly leapt up. He stretched a lazy arm to the bedside table, knocking over a small alarm clock. While the call was not unexpected, his wine bar antics of the previous night had erased the business at hand. How Roberts had enjoyed the evening! A *classic* Danny Boy rave-up! Laugh with the blokes, the birds, bit of karaoke - pull your trousers down! He had been thrown out, of course, but that was the plan. Best be barred from a bar than blamed for a burglary. There were plenty of other nightspots.

More seconds passed till Roberts, with a kick of sobriety, understood the words he heard. "Morning, Mr. Roberts," said Cutter on the phone. "All okay and on schedule."

"On sched...? You mean the j-job?" stammered Roberts.

"Job you gave me," said Cutter, "with no referee."

"Sure." Roberts shifted to an upright position, snapping himself awake. He still wore the shirt from his great night out, having slumped straight into bed. The pattern was at odds with serious talk.

"Sorry I'm droopy," added Roberts. "Rough night."

"Same with us," said Cutter. "Real rough."

"Get the stuff?" asked Roberts, sipping his bedside water.

"In the swag bag," said Cutter.

Roberts clicked his tongue a moment, so Cutter recoiled from the irritating noise. "Meet me," said Roberts. "With the bag."

"That would be logical," said Cutter. "Where?"

"Not here. Not your place," murmured Roberts. "Somewhere secluded."

"Why not a park?" asked Cutter.

Roberts growled in approval. "I come in a taxi. So do you. Dress sober, act calm, no worry."

"Parks are busy on Sunday," said Cutter. "Monday morning's good."

"Fine," said Roberts. "What...?"

"Time?"

"No - park?"

"*Ab*. Preston?"

There was silence for a moment, before Roberts spoke. "What...?"

"I said *Preston*," snapped Cutter.

"No, what *bit*?"

Cutter snorted. "Clock tower, ten o'clock?"

"Like it," said Roberts. "We'll even *know* it's ten."

"Sure," said Cutter. "How will I know you?"

Roberts frowned at the query. "Because we've already met."

"Just testing," said Cutter, with an unseen smile. He put the receiver down.

* * * * *

There had been a period towards the end of Rachael's dream when she had almost not been dreaming. In truth, her vivid recollection of the past few weeks had merged with the stirrings of consciousness. The translucency of her eyelids allowed the spectre of daylight to impinge on the later moments. They had fogged the sensations of the robbery into a muffled shadow show: abstract shapes, becoming static and calm. Slowly, they resolved into a series of parallel streaks, passing diagonally before her vision. Sunlight fell through the window, casting its shadow on the old purple carpet.

Rachael blinked.

She began to rise with a stiff and painful motion. As she did, her shadow stretched across the room to touch upon another. It was the shape of another person, but motionless. The body of Harry Hocus.

Rachael did not go any closer. She knew Harry was dead. His face was white, with an air of frozen shock. A grim astonishment. The eyes stared at the ceiling, with dust already settling on their glassy spheres. The arms were flung wide as if in performance, although devoid of an entertainer's litheness. Their angles were awkward - contorted - as if crushed by a falling weight.

Rachael took in the disruption wrought upon Harry's private room: the rifled drawers and cupboards, the scattered papers and oddments. The silver curtain sparkled along its torn edge, catching the light of dawn. She had seen enough of this inner sanctum, and did not care to look further. Its interior was rendered a silhouette against the window's pearly glow, while the huddled rooftops appeared welcoming now the storms of the night had passed.

Rachael became mesmerized by her overview of Harry's room. It was like one of those murder mysteries: the antique setting with a dead body, dressed in its dapper best. Where was the surly butler? The great detective?

For once, there was no mystery in the murder. Rachael knew who the culprits were. In a sense, she was another victim - although her thoughts on Cutter's actions were confused. She could neither condemn him outright, for he had helped her in the past, nor defend such a violent man.

Rachael could not linger. Harry would be missed. Someone might have heard the commotion. Yet she found it difficult to make her departure. The posters, the props - all were fascinating. Rachael walked past the mantelpiece to the costume wardrobe, with a faint stirring of childhood fun. Some had been tossed to the floor, where she noticed velvet jackets, a harlequin outfit and the spangled tu tu Cutter had pictured her in.

Rachael stepped over this mound of crumpled glamour, to peer inside the wardrobe. Other clothes lurked in its deep recess, inviting curiosity. She was startled by a snazzy blue suit that looked, for a moment, like a headless man.

Probing deep, Rachael's eyes adjusted to the gloom. The wardrobe was a room within a room. She noticed a variety of boxes and bags, each inviting a peek. Rachael opened a striped cylindrical container, but there was nothing much inside: safety pins, marbles, cigarette cards. Those little oddments the elderly hoard.

But there was something that might be of interest. Rachael found a small bag with a shoulder-strap, made of a stout embroidered material. A label read 'H. Hocus' in blurred sepia ink. Taking a wary glance at its lifeless owner, Rachael knew he could not object. In any case, this was respectful scrutiny - not a greedy, driven plunder.

Rachael tugged the bag towards her, unbuckling its upper flap. A bubble of air greeted her with a pungent mustiness, as if trapped for many a year. There was little enough inside: clearly, Cutter had selected wisely. Yet the notebook, compass and tin box offered some utility. Whatever the final outcome, Rachael had made herself homeless. A travelling bag would be handy, so she slung it over her shoulder.

Rachael was about to leave when she spotted Harry's photo album, which had fallen open on the floor. *Last night*, she recalled. That photo of the art deco foyer. What strangeness had affected her? As Rachael located the appropriate page, she learnt she had not been deluded. Whether by a coincidence of likeness or the magic of projection, she stood beside Harry in the picture. A feathered headpiece curled daintily from her hair, and she wore that spangled tu tu.

What did it mean, wondered Rachael. She had seen marvels the night before: Harry's sudden appearance, the transformation of Cutter's knife. Sorcery or trickery, admirably done.

Peeling the photograph from the album, Rachael slipped it between the pages of Harry's notebook. She was enthralled by every photograph, but could not rob Harry of memories even in the state of death. Rachael hoped his things would be cared for, and find others to treasure them in turn. She buckled the shoulder bag.

Taking her leave, Rachael sneaked along the hallway with its grandfather clock. The door to Harry's bedroom was closed, and she respected his privacy. While the window was still open, Rachael did not clamber through. The iron steps could be seen in daylight. Best not to be seen at all.

Finding the main entrance, Rachael nipped out of the flat. The door closed with a squeak and a click, leaving her vulnerable on the silent landing. The place was lit by miniscule chandeliers, with fading floral wallpaper. It was clean, but had been decorated in decades past and maintained in aspic ever since. An ornamental bowl sat on a small table, with plastic flowers twisted into an eternal posy. Rachael noticed a plastic tulip, like the one Cutter's knife had become.

Gripping the wooden banister, Rachael peered down the many stairs. The lower landings lapsed into darkness as if filled with a grey, murky gas. For a second, the perspective seemed to shift - to shimmer - and Rachael felt a wave of nausea overcome her. Her sight was grainy with dizziness, but she took a deep, cool breath. Everything returned to normal.

Rachael scampered downstairs in a stealthy manner, past several other flats. Her boots scrunched scattered envelopes as she grasped the doorknob, down in the main hallway. The place had a dull grandiosity, but Rachael had seen enough. She opened the door and skipped outside.

A roost of pigeons flapped away, startled, as the door closed with a bang. A thought startled Rachael to an equal degree, as she ran along the street. The envelopes

she had walked upon? There was no post on Sunday. How long did I lay there, she wondered. Must be...over twenty-four hours.

* * * * *

Cutter had arrived ten minutes early for his rendezvous with Roberts, by the clock tower in the park. He stood on the raised dais that supported the redbrick tower, admiring its decorative touches of dolphins and urns. A rhyme was inscribed in pink marble under an arched cupola:

‘HERE I STAND, WITH ALL MY MIGHT TO TELL THE HOURS BY DAY
AND NIGHT, THEREFORE EXAMPLE TAKE BY ME AND SERVE THY GOD
AS I SERVE THEE.’

Below, a block had been laid by ‘EDWARD WHITE ESQ. (THE DONOR OF THIS TOWER) AUGUST 13th 1891.’ Would he have condemned Cutter’s shady transaction, as an insult to his pride and joy? Yet the clock had seen many visitors to the park. It would have many a tale to tell.

Cutter gazed across the grassy expanse, past a cafeteria in a quaint chalet. A sloping rockery lay beyond, with an electric waterfall. The trees displayed their bare winter branches, and he wondered if Roberts would appear.

The question was solved as Cutter took a glance to the south, where a man plodded towards him in a long brown mac. The man’s eyes remained fixed on the clock tower, as if worried it might edge away. Noticing Cutter, he sidled the last few steps in an obtrusively furtive manner.

“I said wear something *sober!*” hissed Roberts, glaring at Cutter’s biker garb. It was hardly the anonymous look he had specified.

“This is sober,” sneered Cutter. “Left my knives at home.”

Roberts tried to make a sarcastic reply, but was unable to find the words.

“Where’s the stuff?” he snapped.

“Some bastard nicked it,” said Cutter.

“*What!*”

“I’m the bastard,” said Cutter. He dragged the bag round the corner of the tower.

Roberts took hold of the thick shoulder strap. “At last...I have the future,” he gasped. “The future of Defty Danny’s!” The bag swung round to show the word ‘SWAG’.

“Said it was a swag bag,” said Cutter. “Don’t want to disappoint.”

Roberts seethed. “Should have phoned the fuzz, they could follow me home!”

“Easy,” said Cutter, with a heavy calm. “No thief could ever be so brainless. You are way above suspicion, Mr. Roberts.”

“You come in a taxi?” growled Roberts. He was worried by Cutter’s carefree approach.

“Came on me bike!” chirped Cutter, like one of the Famous Five.

Roberts glared. “I said taxi, Cutter! What if they saw you?”

“Who?”

“Someone who’d seen you near Harry’s.” Roberts wiped sweat from his brow. “You’re living dangerously, Cutter. Stick us both in the clink!”

“Yes.” Cutter’s word brimmed with menace, and his eyes turned to ice.

“What do you mean...?” murmured Roberts. “Hey, it’s a fucking stitch-up!” Roberts tensed, ready for an asthmatic sprint. Cutter’s hand clamped him to the spot.

“We’re both living dangerously,” said Cutter. “How does it feel?”

Roberts glared at Cutter, and resolved to close the deal without fists. He would hire bouncers for that, one day. “Here’s your thousand,” he said, producing a fat envelope. “Rest as agreed, on sale.”

“I’ll be waiting,” said Cutter. He took the cash.

Roberts twisted the swag bag to mask the offending letters, and slung the strap over his shoulder. Then he found a flash of his old spirit. “What a performance!” he said, slyly.

Cutter nodded a silent farewell.

Roberts turned away and walked across the park, never looking back. He was covering his tracks carefully. There was no taxi waiting: he would hail another from another street. Why all the intrigue, thought Cutter. The guy acted like a seedy gangster. But that’s what he was.

Cutter strolled towards an avenue of smart houses, where he had parked the BSA Rocket 3. Its sidecar had been useful to bring the swag, although the rig was a little distinctive. No matter. It would soon be under wraps at Cutter’s Yard, awaiting the full restoration job.

Cutter took a lingering look at Roberts as he receded towards the rockery. Soon, he was nothing but a brown dot of gabardine carrying a smaller dot of canvas. Where would they meet again, mused Cutter. What would the outcome be? Would he ever ride to Defty Danny’s, sipping drinks at liberty?

* * * * *

It was lucky Rachael had some coins in her pocket. A small purse was tucked safely within her corduroy jacket, buying medicinal tea at a seafront kiosk. The man eyed her forehead bruise with concern, not knowing whether to ignore it. “Nasty bump, love,” he managed after some hesitation, handing Rachael her drink.

“Sure,” she nodded. “Could have been worse. Tripped over a dog.”

The sea relaxed her vision with its ripples as she sat alone at a promenade table. Harry might have come here, she pondered. Pottering down with a walking stick to breathe the refreshing air. But Harry had a home to go back to. What would she do tonight?

While the magician’s home was silent, it was not being ignored. The very silence had perturbed a most frequent visitor. Mrs. Bracewell had lived in the building a good two decades, and her flat matched the frozen style of the hallways. Not surprising, since it was Mrs. Bracewell’s task to maintain their condition. She had seen no need to update it.

Her sister had danced in musicals under a somewhat fluffy stage name, and those memoirs prompted the spinning of many a yarn. So Mrs. Bracewell had become acquainted with Harry, swapping stories over the years. Since the death of her husband in the mid-1980s, she had joined Harry for outings on a monthly basis - although the friendship was purely Platonic. As Harry's health deteriorated in the early 1990s, these trips had been replaced by mutual visits. Harry usually descended to his neighbour, who loved to cook for two or more. The wine was provided by Harry, as part of Danny's shopping list.

It had been Mrs. Bracewell who rang the doctor the previous winter, following Harry's fall. She also welcomed Harry each Christmas Day. This time, brother Tony had joined them from Australia - along with his wife, Susan. Not quite a rave-up, but better than the old folks' home. While Roberts stood toasting the Westminster chimes, welcoming the New Year, Harry and Mrs. Bracewell had shared a kiss beneath the mistletoe. It had been very prim and proper.

Mrs. Bracewell stood in the passage by Harry's door, with a puzzled look on her face. It was strange that Harry should miss his Sunday supper without telling her in advance. She recognized his need for privacy, of course, and seldom probed that peculiar hobby. Chemistry, wasn't it? How *clever*. It was good he still had an interest. But privacy was one thing, discourtesy another - and Harry was never discourteous.

Now it was Monday. Had he eaten? Was everything all right? "Mr. Hocus," called Mrs. Bracewell, gently knocking. "Harry?" There had been no response the previous night, and there was no response now.

Mrs. Bracewell turned away, unsure of the best course of action. That chap who called round, Daniel Roberts. He had a key to the flat. Still, it was silly to trouble him unless she had to. Harry had said how busy he was.

Maybe she was worried over nothing. Maybe Harry was tired, and taking a rest in bed. She would try later, knock louder. Maybe he was asleep. Harry would open the door with a twinkle in his eye, keen for her cakes, her tea and sympathy.

Roberts arrived back in Peacehaven a little after twelve. He could barely wait to unbuckle the swag bag and examine its fantastic contents. So he *would* wait, smiled Roberts with a puritanical glow. Dusk came early this time of year: the right mood for such a revelation.

No messages on the answerphone: his usual popular self. He would change all that before long! Roberts threw off his overcoat, leaving the bag by the armchair, and decided to run a bath. Despite the smooth operation of the plan till now, he felt the tingle of dirty doings on his skin. A long soak would initiate the new era, and allow time to consider the future.

Cutter, too, had decided on a thorough cleansing, after his jubilant return to the Yard. Grunt was crouching on the concrete, fiddling with Rodney Barrett's Suzuki. A flash of money told of successful dealings. Grunt had gaped in awe.

Keeping his opening hours till six o'clock, Cutter had closed the gates with the promptness of a medieval city warder. Now he scrubbed himself with a mangy loofah, while plastic monsters bobbed in the water. His voice sang out in pleased exultation, echoing round the grubby tiles.

The reverberation made the song into an almost abstract acoustic. Scary, thought Cutter, like a sorcerer's cry. "*Grunt!*" he called, unmusically. "Where be the surly Grunt?"

"What? What's it?" asked Grunt. His voice was muffled through the door.

"Want a few beers tonight? Down town?"

"Splash it all over!" smiled Grunt.

"Guess that's a yes," murmured Cutter. He flicked a plastic beast. "Oh - Grunt?"

"Yeah?"

"Wilf's coming. Life's a bitch, my son."

* * * * *

As the afternoon faded to a winter dusk, Rachael had decided a patch of stony beach would suffice for the night. She might have tried the landlocked stump of the West Pier, and huddled beneath its planks. But, no. Rachael preferred to stay here, near Harry's, till she had adjusted to this new existence.

Rachael wandered along the shoreline, with her jacket buttoned against the chill. She reached the solid bulk of a stone groyne, jutting into the sea. This was a thick wall like a jetty, to stop the beach sliding with the tidal wash. Following it up towards the promenade wall, Rachael scraped a shallow dip in the pebbles.

Here, she rolled herself into a protective ball and turned her thoughts within. Rachael visualized a crackling fire and hot, nourishing meal. Somehow, she felt the pangs of hunger subside and a warm glow envelop her body. It may have been a comforting illusion, but the comfort was no less real. Finding a peaceful sleep at last, Rachael lay unknown to the world.

While Rachael's heartbeat brought life to the wintry beach, only death was represented at Harry's. The sun's departure had left the flat in darkness, with no soul to behold its return. Only the grandfather clock's mechanical rhythm disturbed the still, silent air. Then came a series of frantic knocks, and a woman's muffled call.

"Mr. Hocus! Mr. Hocus!" There was a pause of several seconds, during which Mrs. Bracewell yearned for Harry's appearance. There had been no response the previous night, and there was no response now. "*Harry*...I'm worried," she gasped. "I'm going to ring Daniel Roberts."

* * * * *

Roberts prised the cork from a bottle of red wine, feeling relaxed in his shirtsleeves. He moved from the drinks cabinet to his soft, enveloping armchair. This was emphasized by a circle of beige lamplight, while a gentle saxophone improvised in the background. It was a great session by Frank and the lads, taped for private enjoyment. The early moments featured clowning and chatter, but the style soon settled to the free techniques that Roberts loved so much. He saved the recording for special moments, when he could treasure its mellow tones.

Placing his wineglass on the coffee table, Roberts lit a large cigar. His face became fogged by a pall of rich, curling smoke as he visualized a prosperous future. Matching a cool beat in the music, Roberts heaved the swag bag onto his lap. The contents were chunky and solid, suggesting his desires might well come true.

Relishing the moment, Roberts unbuckled the leather straps. The first exhibit for the police court, he imagined with a wry smile. But what was it? A hexagonal wooden tube, carved in a swirling Celtic style. Roberts turned it this way and that, as the cigar burnt between his fingers. Every crevice was fascinating, and deserved his examination. Roberts followed Cutter's actions in peering through the eyepiece, and slowly twisting the lens.

But the outcome was quite dissimilar. Roberts beheld a speckle of light within the receding depths: a speckle that flared into a brilliant star, with a glittering tracery of optical geometry. Roberts gasped, and jerked his head aside. A pattern floated in his vision like a phantom lace doily. Then it faded away.

At first, Roberts could only tremble. Then he began to chuckle with a newfound buoyancy. There was money to be made all right! The effect had been short, vivid but stimulating. He knew he could do the business.

Roberts placed the kaleidoscope on the table, and glanced through the rest of the haul. The swag bag was full of intriguing stuff, although the kaleidoscope was the premium prize. Roberts placed the bag on the floor, and breathed deeply to steady his nerves.

Roberts stubbed his smouldering cigar, although the ashtray had another use. It weighed down a plain-looking card, with a number for outer London. The phone sat ready on the coffee table, so Roberts wasted no more time. He lifted the receiver and dialled 'Mr. W. M. Rimmon, Collector.'

A few rings, then a click as an answerphone woke. “You have reached Mr. William Rimmon,” said a resonant voice. “Please leave a message after the tone. I shall call whenever I can.”

There were several beeps, then a longer tone. Better get this right, thought Roberts. Don’t give too much away. “Good evening, Mr. Rimmon,” he began. “I was given your card by Thomas Lynton of Lynton’s Parlour. We’ve known each other for years, and...he said you were keen on the unusual. My name’s Roberts. Mr. Daniel Roberts. I’d be grateful if you called me back.” Adding his own number, Roberts put down the phone.

There! The ball was rolling. But what next? Roberts tried to think logical. The swag bag was useless. Better burn it. Put the things in a suitcase. Roberts went up to his bedroom, and reached for the top of the wardrobe. Holidays were a thing of the past, so the case had been buried in old magazines. They slipped as Roberts pulled the handle, creating a paper cascade. He slapped the case onto the pink duvet like a honeymooning Casanova.

Roberts rolled on the bed, laughing as the last few magazines descended. He whacked them away in a playful romp, caring not for their contents. Roberts imagined a dolly-bird beside him, and gave her an imaginary tickle. “That old black magic’s got me in its spell!” he sang.

The phone rang.

Instant service! Mr. Rimmon! Roberts clapped his hands in glee. He crawled across the duvet, lifting the bedside phone. Lucky the caller couldn’t see him. “Mr. Roberts!” he smirked.

“Oh...Danny,” came a quavering voice. “It’s Mrs. Bracewell.”

“Evening,” mumbled Roberts. What a let down.

“Sorry to trouble you, Danny. I’m worried about Harry.”

“Oh,” sighed Roberts. “What’s up?”

“He missed his Sunday supper, and I’ve knocked several times. No response at all.”

Roberts remembered the pills he had slipped into the old man’s night-cap. They must be doing their job rather well. “Don’t worry yourself, Peggy,” he said. “Harry’s a heavy sleeper.”

“He’s a quiet gentleman,” she replied. “Even so...”

“Yes - and thanks for your concern,” added Roberts. “Don’t worry. I’ll see Harry tomorrow, first thing.”

But Roberts had not placated Harry’s charitable neighbour. “What if he’s fallen, Daniel? What if he’s *hurt*? Can’t you come any sooner?”

Roberts faltered. “I...that is, I’m expecting a phone call. Business. It isn’t the best time.”

“Oh - money means *more* than Harry?” she snapped. “I’m worried sick! Come now, or I’ll call an ambulance. They’ll have to kick in the door.”

Roberts sighed. Despite the dreariness of an unforeseen trip, he could hardly ignore the request. Harry might have woken, discovered the robbery, be too upset to

speak. Roberts could play the sympathetic friend: it was all part of the act. "Very well, Peggy," he murmured. "If it worries you that much."

"It does. Thank you, Daniel," she said. "Sorry to drag you out. Sleep on my sofa tonight."

"Give me an hour," said Roberts, ending the call.

The sounds of Frank's taped saxophone wafted from the lounge, distant and almost inaudible. But Roberts was dead to the rhythm. He remained frozen, recumbent, awhile.

A speech by Cutter echoed in his head. *We're both living dangerously. How does it feel?* Roberts heaved himself into a sitting position, gripping the handle of the suitcase. His heart thumped a passage of blues percussion. The words were chilling and relevant.

Roberts had been living in a dream world since the robbery. His head was so full of fantasy and bright ideas that he had forgotten the element of risk. Those wine bar antics had addled his brain, creating an alibi just too believable. Roberts had blocked all memory of his involvement with a crime, denying the origin of Harry's trinkets. Perhaps Cutter had done him a service: there was nothing hypocritical about the swag bag's wording or cowardly in Cutter's boldness.

Roberts could never take a similar chance, but its knowledge sharpened his wits. Risk - even *danger*, he shuddered. For what if Cutter had disobeyed his instructions? What if he had gone too far, and done something...*bad* to his old friend?

Snapping from his reverie, Roberts jumped off the bed. There was urgent work to be done. He took the suitcase downstairs and transferred the loot into its satin-lined interior. Then he made a tight bundle of the swag bag. But his fingers hovered over the kaleidoscope as he recalled the sparkle within. Surely I can enjoy its wonders, thought Roberts. I deserve some trickery and fun. Roberts left the kaleidoscope on the table, and kicked the suitcase closed.

* * * * *

Cutter could only flinch as he tried to align the pool cue. What did Grunt's tedious monologue signify? A total lack of integrity. A total lack of loyalty to the outlaw lifestyle.

"That's what I'd have - with money," said Grunt. "Big house. Big telly. Smash all the garden gnomes! New bike - top of the range job. Ride to the edge of the world!"

"Where...Littlehampton?" asked Cutter, who failed to pot the red. He tapped Grunt's chest with the cue.

"Nah," said Grunt. "Where d'you get that idea?"

Cutter snorted. "*Worthing*. That's your limit, Grunt. Owe Medusa a visit."

"Give her a nice surprise," said Grunt.

Cutter made a suggestion. "Some exotic delicacy from the far east?"

"Where?" asked Grunt.

"Here," said Cutter. "Stick of Brighton Rock!"

"Crack her teeth," smiled Grunt. "Nice one! Nah - don't want her daughter moaning." Grunt rammed the cue-ball with a wild jab, failing to hit a yellow. "Edge of the world," he murmured. "Sor the Savage..."

“The *who?*” frowned Cutter.

“My book,” replied Grunt. “A desert. Somewhere like that.”

Cutter smiled. The image of Grunt’s skeleton ripped by vultures was a delightfully endearing one. “Go there,” he said. “Send a postcard. Find a pretty mirage.”

Grunt snorted.

“Still playing?” asked Wilf, a touch bemused. He loved a game of pool, and would shove coins into the slot as if cash was being abolished. Wilf approached the game with a dancer’s poise, slinking round the table in his leather jacket. Wilf’s cropped head gleamed under the low-slung lights, while his bushy moustache stiffened over a firm, bridged hand. Whether he won hardly mattered, not that Wilf was a bad player. It was the movement he liked - the choreography, the sporting try - before the stroll to his lager and a cool, refreshing sip. Boyfriend Ken, sitting at a corner table, was happy with a lime cordial.

“Two against one?” frowned Cutter. “Grunt’s handed me a penalty shot...”

Cutter nudged his rival aside. He decided to stick a red in the top pocket, and rammed the cue like a piston. But the gulf between desire and achievement was a gaping chasm. The red bounced wildly off the cushions, while the cue-ball plopped into the pocket.

“Oh...*wicked*,” laughed Grunt, demolishing his bitter. “Not drunk enough, Cutter. More beers!”

Cutter half-sneered, half-smiled in concession. He took another tenner from his wallet, fat with notes. “More beers, my Gruntling - and a squash for Kenny-boy.”

Wilf met Ken’s eyes for a moment, his moustache twitching in amusement. “Won the Lottery, Cutter? We haven’t spent a penny!”

“My treat,” said Cutter. “I’ve earned it.” He gulped the last of his bottled brew.

Wilf grinned with a twinkle of silver filling as Cutter lined up his shot. Some youngsters watched meekly from the public bar, sipping their half pints.

* * * * *

The bus left Roberts at the concrete blandness of Brighton’s artificial heart. Modern stores had been built in the early 1970s, replacing a maze of quirky old streets. Another bus might have taken him straight into Hove, but Roberts welcomed the burst of exercise. It was something he could do with, for he spent too many hours in his Peacehaven villa. Call it philosophical, call it therapeutical, he could seldom claim it was active.

He reached Harry’s building in twenty minutes: it was part of a Regency terrace, just over the Brighton border. Climbing the somewhat neglected steps, Roberts jingled his keys, entered, and closed the door behind him. He hit the light-switch, activating an electric timer: this would plunge the bulbs into darkness once their two-minute ration was up. Taking a deep breath of musty air, Roberts climbed the twisting stairs.

Passing several homes on several landings, he reached the well-kept door to Mrs. Bracewell’s. While all the flowers lacked authenticity, hers were a better class of simulation. Roberts knocked, before wondering if he should have pressed the street bell.

But the lady was expecting him. At least he had time to adjust his composure, and settle a nervous soul.

There was a rattle as the door opened. Mrs. Bracewell stood in her usual mix-and-match clothing: one of an extensive series of floral cardigans, undermined by sloppy jogging pants. Frizzy grey hair framed an unpainted face. Her glasses had a rusty tint.

“Danny!” she said. “Thank goodness! I knocked again, but there’s still no response.”

Roberts nodded. “Leave this to me, Peggy, please.”

“I’d rather come up,” she said. “Really...”

Roberts masked his disapproval with a scowling nod. She may have taken it for sympathy. “Very well,” he said, rattling his charm-like keys. Roberts selected the correct Yale.

The chandeliers plunged them into darkness. Roberts hit a switch, providing another ration of light.

Mrs. Bracewell left her door on the latch, and joined Roberts on the landing. Without further comment, they climbed the stairs. While aware of her neighbourly efforts, Roberts felt unable to burst straight in. He rapped the door with a bailiff’s firmness - shouting through the keyhole, “*Harry!*”

They waited in silence.

“He isn’t coming,” whispered Mrs. Bracewell.

“I *know*,” muttered Roberts, snidely. Then he checked himself. Harry was a friend, despite their disagreements. Perhaps he really *had* fallen down.

Roberts gripped the handle, inserted his key and unlocked the door. The timer killed the glow of chandeliers, so Roberts groped inside the flat. He found the light-switch, illuminating the inner hallway. They entered together.

Wary of Mrs. Bracewell, Roberts stayed calm and unsuspecting. He must feign ignorance of any crime. She had to believe his alibi, on seeing the robbery. He would be just as shocked as she.

“I’ll check the kitchen,” said Mrs. Bracewell. But no-one was there.

Roberts moved to the bedroom, where the lady joined him. “Must be here, Peggy,” he reasoned. Roberts opened the door and flicked the light-switch. The bed was empty.

* * * * *

“Excuse me,” asked the lad, as Wilf struck a yellow. “When’s the table free? Wouldn’t mind a game.”

Cutter turned. “You were free to arrive, whenever.”

The lad blushed a little. “Been busy.”

“Busy,” intoned Cutter, with a scowl. Ken was observing from the corner table, so it was good to make a stir. “You know what *busy* means?” spat Cutter. “Busy means work, means risk, means danger!”

Cutter’s fist swiped like a hammer, stopping short of the lad’s nose. The lad jerked back into the arms of his friend, some sappy curly-haired girl.

Wilf broke his lucky run and bounced the yellow. He had been thrown by this discordant exchange. The lad reared up, staring straight at Cutter. He was plucky, if hardly sensible.

“It’s a pub,” said the lad. “You don’t own the table.”

“Got the cash, we play till closing,” said Cutter. The two locked eyes, unmoving.

“Leave it, Terry,” murmured the plucky lad’s pal. “Thinks he’s great. He’s a twat.”

Terry sighed, speaking wearily. “Okay, John. Let’s...”

“What did you say?” asked Cutter.

“Just leave it,” said Terry.

“No, your mate,” replied Cutter. “Who is he?”

“Come on, boys,” said the girl. She tugged the pair.

Cutter nudged Terry and the girl aside. “Call me something?”

“No,” said John.

“Call me something?” growled Cutter. He loomed over the slim youngster.

“Leave it, Knifer,” said Wilf, disturbed.

Cutter did not budge from the lippy John. “You called me a twat.”

To his credit, John did not flinch.

Cutter’s fist came so sharp - so furious - that John staggered into the adjoining bar. He smacked against the oncoming Grunt, and up went the beers. The mechanic let forth with a cheery “Weh-hey!” Cutter was paying, after all.

Drinkers shrieked as they were drenched in alcohol, while the floor was smacked by descending glass. John slithered to his feet, but was kicked by Cutter straight to the main door. “ROAR,” growled Cutter to himself. Right Of Admission Reserved.

This was a signal to Grunt, if unintended. It flipped a switch in his brain.

“Bundles!” he cried, wanting far more fun. Grunt grabbed Terry and the curly girl, whirled them round and let go. They shot off both ways, like floppy dolls. Terry collided with a fruit machine, while the girl knocked a bloke off a barstool.

John was back, wanting to help his friends. Cutter rammed him against the wall, ready for retribution. Wilf saw what was about to happen, and leapt between the pair. “For Christ’s sake, chop it Cutter! Slice it, man. There’s no battle, no fight, no gain.” Only Wilf could say this. Wilf knew Cutter and his past.

Wilf saw the calm return to Cutter’s eyes, watched by a dumbstruck pub. He also saw the flick-knife returned to its sheath, unknown to the threatened victim. Grunt’s mind flipped into blankness with the sudden peace. He grabbed someone’s pint and decked it. The someone did not object.

“They’ll walk out of here,” said Wilf, in a deadpan tone. “No police, no trouble. I’ll pay for the glasses. Just let ’em walk out of here.”

The landlord’s head rose above the beer pumps. “Very fair, sir,” he said. Cutter walked boldly, Grunt shuffled, Wilf watched them go. Ken finished his lime cordial.

* * * * *

No Harry, thought Roberts. No Harry in bed. Try as he did, he could not believe it. Mrs. Bracewell moved down the passage, past the rumbling grandfather clock. Roberts followed her to the final door, knowing Harry must be around.

Roberts noticed the open window with mock surprise, and glanced at the metal steps outside. They ran down the building to the alley below. "Closed when I left," he said in a stage-murmur, keen Mrs. Bracewell should hear. "I've told Harry before. Security..."

Roberts struggled to lower the window as Mrs. Bracewell opened the door, oblivious to his dull blabber. But he did not succeed before a hysterical scream pierced the January night.

The sound echoed off the opposite tenements, making the moment public. Roberts quivered with a sickening chill. His head snapped round, but he could not see Mrs. Bracewell. She had entered the trinket room.

Rachael had slept soundly on the seafront despite the winter chill, for her inner glow had repelled its cold encroachment. She awoke early on Tuesday morning, and stretched her arms in the breeze. Her waking state felt more cramped and bleary than hours of outdoor repose. Crunching a short way along the pebbles, Rachael allowed the sea air to filter deep into her lungs. She felt like the sole survivor of a shipwreck, stumbling towards civilization.

Everything seemed more distant now: the painting, the bikers, the fight. She had dreamt in the night, but of nothing familiar. They were dreams she had not understood.

A seagull screeched, then dived to grab some fragment of food. Rachael wished she could feed herself so easily. Haven't eaten for a good two days, she thought. Better sort herself out. Her mind had been preoccupied by recent events, dulling all sense of physical deprivation.

Yes, those dreams. They came back to her now, as she regarded the grey waters of the English Channel. The images were vivid, yet their source was inexplicable. A lifetime of jumbled memories, gained without experience.

What a glamorous girl! Sequined robe, feathers in her spangled head-dress. A reflection in a mirror? No. It is not Rachael's likeness, for she performs in another body. An arm rises into view - her own arm - clad in a dark jacket. Her voice sounds deeper as she speaks. There is pattering and the shuffling of cards, before the tap of a magic wand. These are memories, but those of the dead magician. He bows to his scattered applause.

The reflection, when it comes, is hardly glamorous. A face in a mirror - gaunt, chalky - applying streaks of eyeliner to grotesque excess. It is Harry Hocus, receding through the years. There is a knock on the door. A murmur. The reflection turns away.

Mountains seen through a train's window, while clouds roll overhead. The sounds of a Scots piper before a lonely, barren castle. A twisty staircase, drips of water, a vault of cobwebbed remains. Flashes! Lightning - no, an eerie glow, pulsing in a great glass sphere. A bearded fellow pulls the levers, and the glow begins to dance.

More applause! A television camera! A party full of smiles! A real celebration, the night of Harry's success. Shake hands with a portly young man. Bang, crash, wallop, what a picture! Flowers out of nowhere, scarves, rabbits, a long demanding contract. "Sign here, please," smiles the keen impresario, waving a fountain pen.

Swinging London before it starts to swing, suitcases piled at the dock. A rolling trip on a steamer, a gleaming foreign sea. Deserts, swamps, jungles, binoculars - a distant, wary tribe. Spears, fire - chanting dancers, veiled by demonic masks. A helpless sacrificial victim, the slicing of lethal blades.

Another ship, trains, distant explosions. "We'll meet again," sings Vera. Soldiers watch Harry on a makeshift stage, Winston Churchill walks by. Harry does a sleight with the fat man's cigar, prompting a 'V' for Victory. Business as usual in a London theatre. Bang, crash, wallop, what a bomb! Debris falling on the upturned faces, carpets covered in dust. A crushed girl lays in a spangled tu tu.

A moment of pain. Such pain...

A sea voyage, swastikas, jackboots marching up and down. Depression, inflation, Zeppelins. Gothic mime on the silent screen, playing villains and visionaries. Machine guns, trenches, the music hall days. Back to his family, his childhood...

Father's efforts with the motion picture camera, a primitive yet wonderful fad. Men who can fly on homemade wings, horses and carts, gas-lamps. A brother's bloody coughing, and his tragic bed-bound death. Harry's wishes cannot save him. The trip to Switzerland, the clocks, the kaleidoscopes: captivating wonders for a child. "You can have it one day," says the aged craftsman. Harry sees the glimmer inside.

Mother's face. She holds him in a lacy gown, as Harry gazes at the ceiling. The first stirrings of consciousness as he enters the world, perhaps an echo of earlier lives. Then the image ripples into winter waves, seething on the shore.

Such had been her dreams, blinked Rachael, as she stared at the January sea. It was strange how she could recall them so readily, and catch glimpses of a lengthy tale. Rachael had tried to save Harry, not through friendship, but the desire to protect the weak. Yet his personality had joined her, allowing her to sample his past. Had he granted the gift of knowledge, in return for the gift of life? A gift snatched by the violent bikers, despite her brave attempts?

Whatever the truth, Rachael had time to ponder. After suffering the forest nightmare, she knew dreams - if powerful - would always recur. Turning towards the promenade, Rachael switched to more pressing matters. A bite to eat and somewhere to sleep. Certainly not Cutter's Yard.

* * * * *

Earnest persuasion had built his career. Now, it might save his neck. Roberts had stopped Mrs. Bracewell phoning the police, despite her hysterical state. A night of intrusion would jangle their nerves. They could wait till the Tuesday morning.

Rational conversation had only been possible downstairs. Roberts poured brandy and hugged Mrs. Bracewell, as she cried on her sofa with convulsive sobs. All the while, Roberts had wrestled with his own feelings: pity, yes, and sadness too. But mostly a seething anger at the thuggish bikers. He had paid for a robbery, not a murder. Just wait till he spoke to Cutter.

Eventually, the pills so effective with Harry had proved equally so with Mrs. Bracewell. At least Roberts took the courtesy of asking. She had slept in her clothes under the duvet, while Roberts stayed in the living-room. Lumpy cushions would have stolen his sleep, although sleep was no sensible option. These were the last few hours till the story broke. It was best to use them wisely.

Roberts reinforced his insomnia with numerous coffees. He paced Mrs. Bracewell's carpet till five o'clock, before collapsing for a couple of hours. However, Roberts only dialled 999 once Mrs. Bracewell had arisen. It seemed churlish to break her rest, and the police could not bring back Harry. But if the delay hampered their investigation, Roberts would not complain.

Scattered onlookers watched the cars draw up, with sirens wailing and doors slamming. Roberts peered through the net curtains of Mrs. Bracewell's kitchen, and jumped as her doorbell rang a single long note.

Mrs. Bracewell looked up from the small table. She had only toyed with the cereal, while her face was pallid and worn. "I'd better go down," said Roberts. Mrs. Bracewell did not react.

Roberts' eight-thirty call had set the wheels in motion. With the word 'murder' mentioned in horrified anguish, it brought more than the local bobby. Roberts kicked aside the usual letters and opened the door: the cast of Z-Cars loomed on the threshold.

"Morning, Roberts?" came two words from a man in a mac. The phrase was so succinct, Roberts was taken aback. Did the inquirer need his identity or an obvious time check?

"That's me," said Roberts, after a brief hesitation. "I phoned you just now."

"Took your name," said the mac-man, stepping in. "I'm Chief Inspector Braintree of CID. This is Detective Sergeant Leeds."

"Right," said Roberts. "If you'd like to come up..."

"Mrs. Bracewell found the body?" asked Leeds. He wore a similar mac.

"She opened the door," said Roberts. "I can't tell you..."

"Where is Mrs. Bracewell now, Mr. Roberts?" asked Braintree.

"My God, it's a terrible business..."

"Where is Mrs. Bracewell now, Mr. Roberts?" asked Leeds.

"Up in her flat. That's..."

"The bell here?" asked Braintree, indicating the button.

"That's right. She's..."

"Do you have keys to the Hocus flat?" asked Leeds.

"Yes. No," mumbled Roberts, fumbling in his pockets. "Not on me. Left them upstairs."

Braintree turned away to the officers, buzzing near the cars. His mouth opened as if to speak, but cried "Constable Johnson!" at startling volume.

A young policewoman mounted the steps with a keen skipping motion.

"Inspector," she nodded. "I'm..."

"Johnson, that's Roberts," said Braintree. "Go to Bracewell's, get the keys, wait there. Hear two knocks? Hand them over. Then stick with the situation."

"I go with Mr. Roberts...?" frowned W.P.C. Johnson.

"Go with Roberts to Mrs. Bracewell's," explained Sgt. Leeds. "Find the keys to the victim's flat. We'll knock on the door - twice, for clarity. Hand us the keys, then stay."

"Sir," nodded W.P.C. Johnson. "Mr. Roberts?" She nudged him towards the stairs.

Roberts had been confused by the flurry of commands. He frowned at Chief Inspector Braintree. "I'll...show you the body?"

"We can find the body," said Braintree. "We've found bodies before." Failing to form a suitable answer, Roberts went up with the policewoman.

Striped tape stretched across the pavement, keeping the public at bay. A guy from the paper was buzzing around, surely the first of many. Nothing impaired the functioning of the two detectives.

“Forensics?” frowned Leeds.

Braintree snorted. “Hate getting the rats early. Sniff the place first.”

Leeds nodded.

“I want two men on the door,” said Braintree. “You - you!” He snapped his fingers twice in the crisp winter air. Two constables took up the posts.

Soon, the detectives arrived on the landing outside Mrs. Bracewell’s flat. They resembled a pair of sepia-toned undertakers. Braintree was the younger of the two - late forties - with a face strained to a hollow solemnity. Leeds resembled a survivor from the gangster era, although he was actually fifty-two. His dental filling sparkled, and grey hair glimmered with gel.

Braintree gave the promised knocks. W.P.C. Johnson answered with a jingle of keys. They belonged to Daniel Roberts, whose photo grinned from the personalized fob. Most incongruous.

“Big bunch,” said Braintree. “Which are relevant?”

“Here, sir,” said the policewoman, “and one for the house.”

“Very handy,” said Leeds.

The detectives stepped heavily up the staircase, and turned the final flight to Harry’s flat. The pair slipped into brown leather gloves, then Braintree chose the appropriate key.

“Wait, sir,” hissed Leeds, before examining the door with meticulous attention. He peered at the hinges, the lock and the grain of the wood. “Nothing at all,” he added.

Braintree gave a solemn nod. He inserted the key and turned it.

* * * * *

Hunger provided sufficient motivation, and Rachael’s moves were nimble. She swiped bananas and pears from the greengrocer’s with dexterous, undetected skill. Rachael had concentrated on the shopkeeper’s movements as his head turned this way and that, sensing the safety of each moment. Somehow, Rachael knew the precise second to snatch and grab, or when to duck aside. She enjoyed the fruit in St. Anne’s Well Garden, a pleasant park nearby. Refreshed by water from a tap in the public toilets, Rachael headed for the town centre.

While she had not taken the path through conscious choice, fate had a subtle influence. Soon, Rachael stood opposite the home she had shared - not with Cutter, but Laura and Sue. Would they care to see her now, even if they were in? What about Phil, who had taken her room? ‘Says you’ve got a lot of insight.’

Too much, maybe.

It felt so long ago. Another era, although it was only a couple of months. Rachael had argued, broken friends, left in a frenzy. Now she realized what she had lost. Deciding not to linger and trouble herself, Rachael continued on her way.

* * * * *

Braintree and Leeds stood in Harry's hallway, examining the scene with no hint of hurry. Pale sunlight cast a pearly patch on the carpet, while the grandfather clock rumbled near the trinket room. Braintree turned right, opening the door to the kitchen. "Kitchen," he reported with droll precision. Leeds tried another, reporting the toilet with a similar simple statement.

The bedroom was next on the must-see list. Leeds turned the handle and entered. The place was stuffed with papers and books, creating an air of scholastic obsession. Harry's blankets were ruffled but empty. Leeds moved forward, sitting on the creaky bed in a silent, reflective manner. However, Braintree was happy to remain in the hallway. He glanced through the window at the metal steps outside, and tried to raise the stiff pane.

Leeds frowned at a scrap of paper, which protruded from a bundle of documents. He stretched to reach it, and peered at the copperplate lines:

My Dear Daniel,

While I fully understand your difficulties concerning the visits here, I must confirm my unwillingness to enter a nursing home - even those quality establishments you mention. While I do not wish to impose unduly on Mrs. Bracewell, it is fair to say she enjoys my company given her widowed state, and feels quite able to see to my needs. I suggest...'

At this point in its prose, however, the letter both ended and flapped. It wriggled in Leeds' fingers like a living thing, and he released it in idle experiment. The letter took advantage of this momentary freedom to glide across the bed - nimbly caught by his other hand.

Leeds glanced up. Braintree had managed to open the window, letting in some fresh air. Slipping the note in his pocket, Leeds rejoined his superior. "The body?" he inquired bluntly.

"Worth a look," nodded Braintree.

The two walked to the end of the hallway, and entered the trinket room. Moments passed before they reappeared, faces united in gravity.

* * * * *

Roberts smoked like a furtive porno merchant. The policewoman had reassured Mrs. Bracewell over a large pot of tea. It stood stewing under a cosy, its mere presence a relief.

There were two knocks. W.P.C. Johnson admitted Braintree and Leeds. "Get Allen," said Braintree, "and the rats."

"Forensics, sir?" she queried.

"Whole caboodle," said Leeds.

The policewoman left.

“Dreadful business,” said Roberts, shaking his head. “Tea?”

“Didn’t call for beverages,” said Braintree. He settled on a high stool near the window, while Leeds stood by the kitchen sink.

“Poor Harry,” said Mrs. Bracewell. She slurped her tea like the Elixir of Life. Leeds began toying with the kitchen utensils.

“I agree,” said Braintree. “Appalling. But we need details, Mrs. Braintree...Mr. Roberts. Rats sift the site, not the story.”

“Which is...?” Leeds spoke with a soft curiosity, while turning the handle of an egg-whisk.

“Um...” began Roberts. “Told the lady when I rang.”

“Told the emergency operator,” said Leeds.

“Didn’t tell us,” added Braintree.

“I’ll take notes,” said Leeds. He replaced the egg-whisk, and whipped out a spiral-bound pad.

“Or a statement down the station?” murmured Braintree.

“See how it goes,” offered Leeds.

Braintree snapped straight into a question. “When did you last see Harry?”

Roberts took a phenomenal intake of breath, as if sucking his asthma inhaler.

“Right...it was Saturday. Popped in around five, five-thirty. Gave him a sandwich, paper, whatever.”

“How do you define ‘whatever?’” asked Braintree.

“Oh - Horlicks, you know.”

“We don’t know,” replied Braintree. “That’s why we’re asking.”

Roberts continued with his story. “Put him to bed, went out. Quite an evening!”

Roberts shook his head in shame. “Christ! Got drunk, got singing, did some stupid things. They slung me out on the pavement!”

“Fast forward to Tuesday morning,” said Braintree.

“Today,” added Leeds.

“Sure.”

“You came to help Harry this morning?” asked Braintree.

“Um - no. I came yesterday night.”

Braintree looked startled. “You came *yesterday*?”

Leeds underlined a word.

“Yes. Peggy - ah, Mrs. Bracewell - phoned. She’d knocked Harry’s door. No answer.”

“Missed his tea,” added Mrs. Bracewell. “His Sunday tea...”

Roberts nodded, slowly. “We were worried. Harry could have fallen. Hurt his ankle last year. Might have bashed his head or something. Smack on the floor!” Roberts slapped a fist into his hand.

Braintree was a touch bemused by the vivid imagery. Leeds jotted it down. “I rushed over,” continued Roberts.

“I *insisted*,” chirped Mrs. Bracewell, much to Roberts’ irritation.

“I’m glad you did,” said Braintree. “Very glad. But you only rang us this morning.”

“Oh - I hope that’s not a problem, Inspector,” blurted Roberts. “It was late, we were upset. Christ, we’ve known the man for years. He was dead. There was nothing we could do.”

“Danny’s right,” said Mrs. Bracewell. “I was crying. He was so kind, so comforting. Gave me a sleeping pill.”

“He *what?*” frowned Braintree. Leeds underlined it twice.

“Just a pill,” said Roberts, “for insomnia.”

“You take them often?” asked Braintree.

“No. Just this once,” said Mrs. Bracewell.

“They were your pills?”

“No. Danny had them in his pocket.”

“Please, Inspector,” said Roberts, with a touch of distress. “There’s nothing very odd about that. I suffer insomnia myself. God, my business worries! Always keep a few handy.”

“You have them now, Mr. Roberts?” asked Braintree.

“Yes.”

“Could you put them on the table, please?”

“Certainly.” Roberts fumbled in his jacket, and placed a plastic cylinder on the Formica surface.

“You ever give these pills to Harry?” asked Leeds.

“Sometimes,” said Roberts. “He’s got arthritis. Plays murder.”

Leeds underlined the word. “Did you on Saturday night?”

“Um...yes.”

“When?”

“I’d...planned my evening out,” said Roberts. “Went around seven o’clock.”

“You haven’t answered the Sergeant’s question,” said Braintree. “What dose did you give Mr. Hocus?”

“Oh - the usual.”

“The dose you gave Mrs. Bracewell?” asked Leeds.

“Yes.”

“What time did you wake, Mrs. Bracewell?” asked Braintree.

“Just before I called,” said Roberts.

“I didn’t ask you, Mr. Roberts!” snapped Braintree. “What time did you wake, Mrs. Bracewell?”

“Oh - maybe eight,” she replied. “Eight-fifteen.”

“Didn’t want her disturbed,” said Roberts.

Braintree frowned. “She went to bed late on Monday?”

“Fairly late,” said Roberts. “We weren’t...conscious of the time. Probably around midnight.”

Braintree nodded. “You gave Mr. Hocus these pills, yet he’s up and around - while Mrs. Bracewell sleeps like a log?”

“I can explain...” sighed Roberts.

“You’ll have to,” said Leeds. He left an uneasy silence.

“What do you think happened?” asked Braintree, projecting a softer lilt.

“What, the murder?”

“The robbery. All of it.”

“Uh...well, Harry went to bed. I left, they got in. He heard them, got up, challenged them. A fight, they killed him, got out fast. That’s about it, really.”

Braintree frowned. “Harry did this full of your un-pep pills?”

“Not...full of them,” said Roberts.

Braintree picked up the cylinder, rattling it. “Nearly empty.”

“He couldn’t have taken them,” mused Roberts.

“You said he had,” murmured Leeds.

“Didn’t shove them down his throat, did I? Left them with a glass of water.”

“Autopsy can prove that,” said Leeds.

“Then why did you put him to bed so early?” asked Braintree. “He seemed quite capable of taking his pills.”

“Could have taken them anytime,” said Leeds.

“Could have taken them midnight,” said Braintree.

“Autopsy can prove that,” said Leeds.

“How do I know?” cried Roberts. “You’re grilling me - Christ, I reported the crime! You should be out there getting the bastards, not fussing over tiny details.”

Mrs. Bracewell rose slowly. “Please...I’d like to lie down.”

“Won’t be long, madam,” said Leeds.

“It’s all right, Sergeant. We’ll question her later.” Braintree touched Mrs. Bracewell’s arm, and she shuffled gratefully from the kitchen.

Leeds sat at the table while Braintree moved to the sink, taking his turn with the utensils. “You must understand, Mr. Roberts, this is a very serious crime. We need to see every angle.”

“How do you think the raiders got in?” asked Leeds.

“God, yes!” said Roberts, slapping his forehead. “Because when me and Mrs. Bracewell went up, we found a window open. It leads to the fire escape.”

“It does?” mused Braintree.

“Harry...forgot to close it,” sniffled Roberts. “I’ve told him, you know. I’ve *told* him.”

“You may have told him,” said Braintree, emphasizing the point with the tap of a wooden spoon. “But no-one needed to tell *you*, Mr. Roberts. You were the last to leave the flat.”

“Apart from the...raiders,” said Leeds. “You never noticed the open window?”

Roberts wiped his brow. “No. You see...I took Harry to bed, sat him down, helped with his pyjamas. Took out his pills, talked a bit. We always liked to chat! The old days...”

“Sure,” nodded Leeds.

“Then I got up and left for the wine bar.”

“Never noticing the window in your rush?” asked Braintree.

“No.”

“So what you’re saying is this: Harry never took his pills even though he was in pain and needed them. He got up, got dressed when the burglars sneaked in, went and confronted them?”

“Well...what else?” stuttered Roberts.

Braintree sighed. “Leeds?” he asked.

“Your story seems clear,” said Leeds, “but I am troubled by a particular point. As you know, Inspector Braintree and myself have just examined the flat in question. Inspector Braintree opened the window by the fire escape while I sat in the victim’s bedroom. Yet a paper I retrieved from the bureau was caught by a breeze from outside.”

“Right,” nodded Roberts, scratching his bushy moustache.

“So if the window had been open,” added Braintree, “surely you would have felt the chill? Why didn’t you close the window, Mr. Roberts?”

“I did.”

“Not on Saturday night,” said Leeds, “but afterwards.”

“Okay...” murmured Roberts, thinking feverishly. “You’re right. I remember now. It’s always hard to remember, isn’t it?”

The detectives retained their stony expressions.

“We sat down, me and Harry. I didn’t notice the window, but it *did* seem a little draughty. So I closed the door, gave him the pills, had a bit of a chat. Then I went out, closed the door, dashed off to the wine bar.”

“Never seeking the source of the draught?” asked Leeds.

“I was in a rush,” said Roberts. “Big night! Got drunk, fell over, got remembered.”

“We’ll check all that,” said Braintree, standing. “We’re sorry to grill you like this, Mr. Roberts, but we just wish to clarify the facts. Only then do we have a chance of finding the perpetrator.”

“Or *perpetrators*,” added Leeds.

“Damn right!” snorted Roberts. “What do you take me for, a villain? Why would I kill Harry? Why would I report it?”

“Rest assured, this is all procedure,” said Braintree. “You can make a full statement at the station this afternoon, and offer a set of prints. All for your own interests, of course. Eliminate you from the inquiry. And if you could give me a recent photograph, I’d like to visit this wine bar. Purely to confirm your story.”

“Haven’t got a photo,” said Roberts.

“Oh, we’ll take one,” smiled Leeds. “Nice mug-shot.”

Grunt had not forgotten Medusa, his dear old gran. Off to fair Worthing he rode that day, bearing the gifts of a loving grandson. Not much, of course, despite his recent earnings. A Hello Dolly! video she could watch next door, plus a box of unspectacular chocolates. Grunt said goodbye with a toffee stuck to his teeth, dodging her quivering embrace.

He returned east along the coast road past Shoreham-by-Sea on his faithful Kawasaki Z650. The old brick chimney loomed across the harbour's calm water, although the calm did not last for long. Grunt approached a narrow outcrop of pavement, where Wharf Road slipped past the boating lagoon. It was the harbour's eastern end, at Portslade. Police were everywhere, with barriers lining the road. These were manned by determined protestors.

"Tossers!" yelled Grunt, raising his helmet visor. So much for eager faces and idealistic banners: 'End to Live Exports' - 'Stop this Cruel Trade'. The words were shouted, too.

Grunt sneered, keeping one eye on the road, another on the crowd. "Get some B.S.E!" he shouted, receiving a 'V' sign from a hippy girl who stood on a traffic island. Like to give her some live exports, thought Grunt. A billion, straight between the legs. Missing a sight of the meat trucks, Grunt raced past the Brighton piers to good old Cutter's Yard.

There was another home to be found, if a short-term one. A place for Rachael to sleep. She had walked through bustling Brighton observing passers-by as she might strange fish in a tank. Shop names seemed to be weird hieroglyphics, with no apparent meaning. It must be this new awareness, she thought, playing tricks with her mind.

But there were also less frequented quarters. Rachael walked past the boarded windows of a terraced street, and stopped by one particular house. It was like a gingerbread cottage in a gloomy forest. Rachael perished the thought.

The front was daubed with sloppy yet endearing pictures of rainbows, animals and children, while the door was ajar and inviting. She could smell food cooking within.

Rachael peeped at the modest interior: there was peeling wallpaper, and floorboards deprived of carpet or polish. Yet she could hear speech, chatter - not accusation or argument - drifting from deeper inside. Rachael sensed this was a happy place, although she did not wish to intrude.

Better go, she thought, before someone comes. But someone already had. Blond beard, ponytail and calm blue eyes, meeting her curious gaze. "Oh...I'm sorry," said Rachael, heart thumping. "Don't want to pry."

"Don't say sorry," he said. "I'm Olly. Care for a squat?"

* * * * *

The atmosphere in the cubby-hole was beginning to emerge. Its specification had formed in Cutter's mind, as precise as any technical plan. It was partly visual, partly audible, partly an intellectual treat. External stimulation became a mental balm.

As with a stage play, its mood was a mix of properties and lighting. Tarnished hi-fi units were stacked like cars on the scrap heap. A bare bulb burnt with a harsh, unshaded glare. There was a miniature fridge crammed with strong bottled lagers, for Cutter's personal refreshment. Snapshots evoked moments from the previous year: Grunt larking on the French trip, Cutter and Rachael in the Yard. These were collaged over blueprints and snatches of text. A superior kind of pin-up.

But most of all, music. The Industrial Revolution, Black Malice, The Against. Their sounds pulsed and vibrated every wire and screw. Cutter's own hi-fi reigned supreme upstairs, but the stack of units needed a trial run: amplifiers, tape-decks, turntables. Sound poured through speakers in various stages of dismantlement. One lay flat on the floor displaying its bare membrane: this shook iron filings into patterns of audio wavelength.

Cutter sat on a swivel stool stripping wires with his teeth. Spitting shredded insulation towards a corner bin, he twirled the inner copper to a forked tongue. Then he took a deep swig a beer.

Grunt had taken inspiration from Cutter's Monday performance, deciding to have a bath. He played with a plastic aeroplane, dive-bombing with explosive splashes.

The standard lamp glowed in the living-room, although nobody was there. Harry's hat was still on the coffee table, next to an ashtray spilling cigarette butts. Dusk fell blue through the window, softened by the misty effects of grime. Kemp Town became a silhouette of rooftops and chimneys, dotted with yellow patches.

The two bronze demons stood on the mantelpiece, locked in their sculptured poses. One waved a sword high above its head, poised to strike the killing chop. The other held the weapon near its multi-bladed shield, as if waiting for further orders. Rachael's painting loomed behind them, its depiction of the forest equally malign. The branches jiggled and jagged before a tangled distance, painted with lively stokes. The colours might appear murky at a casual glance, but held subtle variations. Every brown was a dozen browns, every grey a spectrum.

The telephone's warble broke the wintry silence. This was a battered specimen on the sideboard, by the standard lamp in the corner. However, few calls were taken in the flat. Cutter's office was locked, so its phone rasped unheeded - but there was another in the cubby-hole. Cutter had rigged a light to flash with every ring, as if Batman were being summoned. He turned the music down a notch. "Cutter," he said simply.

"Why, you...*why*?" came a garbled voice on the line. "Got the Bill on my back, the lot. You're a maniac! God, you're a psychopath. I said rob the place, not kill."

Cutter dropped the music another notch. "Mr. D.S. Roberts?" he inquired.

"Don't get clever with me!" spat Roberts. "Why I'm talking to you, God knows. Should go down the cop-shop, say what you've done. I'd grass if they couldn't touch me."

"Roberts the fair-weather friend?" sneered Cutter. "Show the loyalty you've shown Harry?"

"You're a bastard, Cutter. Scum of Satan's arse."

"You gave me the job."

"You threatened me..."

“I’m no service industry,” replied Cutter.

“Nevill wouldn’t kill,” said Roberts. “He knows where to stop.”

“Don’t get righteous, Mr. Defty!” snarled Cutter. “Your snuff-ball Nevill stuck his cock round here, so I made a business plan.”

“A robbery, not *murder*! Steal a few things. You killed Harry. Smashed his head!”

“Listen, Roberts: I had to survive. He pulled a trick with the knife. You said he’d be crashed full of dozy drugs. So we meet him in best tie and tails.”

“I know,” whined Roberts. “I don’t understand. I gave him the pills, I swear it. He must have woken...heard you were there. His magic, Cutter! I told you...”

“Send in the killer rabbit?” sighed Cutter. “The old man’s dead. Unfortunate. But we got the stuff, we’re clear.”

Roberts gasped on the line for a moment, as if troubled by his breathing. It was a mild attack of asthma, but he soldiered on. “You’ve blown the whole thing. Disaster!”

“What’s a disaster?” asked Cutter. He was enjoying himself at the expense of this dubious colleague. “Who called the police?”

“I did,” said Roberts. “No option.”

“Why?”

“His neighbour, Mrs. Bracewell. Might smell a rat.”

“Moan to the landlord,” smiled Cutter. “Hygiene.”

“No joke,” murmured Roberts, with a coldness that quelled even Cutter.

“So look at it straight,” said Cutter, after a pause. “The crooks got in, killed Harry, stole his stuff. Stick to the story, you’re clear.”

“But I was the last one there,” said Roberts. “A suspect!”

“Why? You had it all planned?”

“A *robbery*, not murder!” snapped Roberts.

“Your alibi?” asked Cutter.

“They’re checking. Took my photo, prints, the lot.”

Cutter assessed the news. “Yesss...you could have killed, robbed, fled to the wine bar. Pass the handcuffs, please, Andrew Gruntling.”

“Not funny,” said Roberts, considering the score. “Harry’s done it, Cutter. Screwed me again. I walked straight in like a mug.”

“Friends again, are we?”

“Not friends at all. Harry must have sensed what was going on, tricked me good and proper. Old gut took those pills, I know it. Mixed them in his Horlicks! If he made them vanish from his bloodstream, will they show on the autopsy?”

“Probably not,” murmured Cutter.

Roberts wheezed for another moment, gathering his troubled thoughts. “They could fix me up, easy. I’ve no defence!”

“It’s all circumstantial,” said Cutter.

“You didn’t see these cops,” said Roberts. “Desiccated pair of zombies, but their brains were sharp. Nearly tripped me up on the dose. Harry got more than Mrs. Bracewell.”

“You on a spree?” snorted Cutter.

“Slit your throat,” said Roberts. “Do us both a favour.”

Again, there was that edge of darkness. Cutter switched tack. "Police need evidence. Where is it?"

"Well, I've got the swag!" whined Roberts.

"Tch, tch. Very naughty. Get down the car boot sale."

"Why d'you kill Harry?" snarled Roberts. "*Why?*"

"Why d'you start the whole damn scheme in the first place? You're blaming me, blaming Harry. Blame *yourself*."

"Y-you were paid," sobbed Roberts. "Paid to take the risk."

"Keep your dainty hands clean?" asked Cutter, examining his oily fingers. "We took the risk," he added. "Harry's a slippery customer. Should have been crashed, remember? Should have slept like a babe."

"It's a disaster!" gasped Roberts. "I'm an *innocent man*! Need cash for the...paradise ahead."

"Defty's?" asked Cutter. "Promised me a job."

"You'll get a job all right," said Roberts. "Breaking me out of jail!"

* * * * *

Roberts slammed down the phone in his Peacehaven villa. However, the livid mood gave way to medical need. He took the blue asthma inhaler and sent a puff down his throat. Breathing steadily, Roberts tried to calm his troubled mind. His eyes fell upon the antique kaleidoscope, which lay on the coffee table. When had he tried it? The previous evening - Monday - around eight o'clock. That had been the last hope before the nightmare: the last moment of elation between the dream and this bitter truth. Despite the slyness of his own betrayal, Roberts felt pain at Harry's death.

Cutter was right. Roberts was the real coward, lacking the courage to confront Harry and say the situation was no longer viable. But he could never forget the great days: the days when Harry had made him thousands. That lack of a truly devious insight - a truly meticulous, unemotional plan - had been the downfall of his whole scheme. Roberts should never have involved the bikers, or even Nevill. He should have done the job himself, and run the risks.

Would the police accuse him? Maybe. Roberts could have bluffed his way out of robbery, but murder was unforeseen. It strained the credibility of his preparations, demanding far closer scrutiny.

Say Harry lived? He would never see the bikers, but wake to find the chaos they had caused. What would happen next? Harry blunders down to Mrs. Bracewell, who rings the cops and himself. The police do their plodding - pure routine, of course - while Roberts consoles poor old Harry. He could even write stormy letters to the papers: *'Jail the culprits, melt down the keys!'*

But on the quiet, Roberts suggests - oh so sweetly - that Harry should not live on his own. He would be better off in that nursing home, and Harry could only agree. The sale of the swag, plus Harry's furniture and possessions, clears the stage for good. Roberts would give a little to Harry, of course, but a fraction of the true worth. Harry is old, weak, doddering. He does not understand.

But Harry had known more than expected, and been ready for the uninvited.

Roberts had always denied the supernatural, apart from a bit of showbiz habit: chucking a pinch of salt over his shoulder or saying, "Break a leg!" at a preview. Only, this was different. This was a riddle he could not solve without acknowledging the power of magic.

Knowing a good night's kip was required, Roberts resolved to sample those sleeping pills and awake with a rational head. But first, he lifted the kaleidoscope and pondered its origins. It was still his, after all.

Perhaps there was no real danger. Maybe he was becoming paranoid. The police wouldn't blame him, he would make his fortune and reach the desired goal. Harry, let's face it, had been old enough. He wouldn't have lived much longer. Roberts had the legacy now, and shouldn't let it go to waste.

The kaleidoscope might soothe his worries. Offer some inspiration. Roberts peered inside with an eager eye, pointing the object at the nearby lamp. Then he began to rotate the lens.

No sudden flashes this time. Only a pattern of facets, which curled in a smooth display. There was a spiral, too, of purest blue - which twist, twist, twisted towards him. Roberts smiled, all else forgotten as the shapes engulfed his vision. Sounds, too: an emerging rumble, with an undertone of choral harmonics. The facets cracked, then splintered in a dawn of purest rosy light.

Cutter had cleared Rachael's stuff from the attic bedroom on Tuesday night, following his telephone conversation with Roberts. This reinforced the presence of his own personality. Satisfied, Cutter had settled into a pensive distraction. The crime book made fascinating reading, although its choice was not related to the robbery. Cutter had a long-term interest. He did not read for hints and tips on the next caper, but to understand the psychology of those who broke the law.

Leaving the thick paperback around two o'clock, Cutter was awake by seven on Wednesday morning. Surprised that he had not slept any longer, Cutter lolled for another few minutes, dressed and descended for breakfast. He poured cornflakes into a bowl, made toast and coffee, but noticed the incessant *beep-beep-beep* of an alarm. Realizing it must be Grunt's wake-up call, Cutter expected it to end soon. However, the sound pierced his sensitive ears as he munched through the toast. It showed no signs of abating.

Cutter stomped down to the workshop, where Grunt lay snarled in his blankets - ignorant of the constant din. Cutter hit the button of the noisy clock, bringing peace to the Yard.

Should he wake Grunt? No...not yet. Enjoy the momentary hush. Cutter walked past his recumbent colleague towards the cubby-hole, but paused before going in. He regarded the pile of junk in the corner and, more closely, one particular object. It was leaning against the wall behind cast-off bike wheels. Cutter took it, and toyed with it in deep introspection. He allowed the long row of silvery blades to reflect the cool morning light. It was something special: his very own chopping-board. Best keep it in the cubby-hole. His inner domain.

Cutter slipped through the dangling strips of the cubby-hole's curtain, flicking on the light as he did so. Intending to place the chopping-board on one of the shelves, Cutter paused, then placed it on the workbench. The blades pointed up at his face.

Rachael had been the last to see his party piece. Why, it seemed an age ago. He should do it once more, to clear the air. Prove he had lost none of the skill.

Cutter breathed deep, preparing himself in a ritualistic manner. He held his right hand poised above the first two blades, aligning it by keenest instinct. It was ready to descend with razor-sharp accuracy between the equally sharp razors. All was quiet in the Yard. Cutter could hear his heart beating gently, and the faintest hum of traffic. So be it.

There was never a moment when Cutter chose to snap into action. His conscious mind was never aware of the decision, nor why any particular moment was better than the last. His hand moved of its own volition - chopping down, up, down again. Cutter's eyes did not follow its movement, since deliberate aiming of the hand would be disastrous. As with any such act of practised verve, the feat came from a mind tuned to meditative blankness. The skill must flow by itself.

But Cutter's ears pricked up at a sudden noise, so his eyes twitched aside. It was the *beep-beep-beep* of Grunt's alarm clock. A flash of bewilderment shot through Cutter's mind, and a sting of pain shot through his hand. He winced, palm gashed by a silver blade.

“Ffff...” hissed Cutter, as if ready to swear. The word dissolved in a sizzle of anger as Cutter lifted his hand - slowly, gently, so the blade slipped clear of the skin. It was like a tiny pocket, where the metal tip had delved. Droplets of blood plopped onto the wooden strip. Cutter grabbed a rag and pressed it over the wound.

Still that *beep-beep-beep* continued. Cutter burst through the curtain, grabbed the clock and dashed it against the floor. He glowered at its shattered remains, knowing he had switched off the alarm. Yet minutes later, it was beeping again. How could this be true?

Strangely, the clatter - then silence - of the clock’s demise were the only things to wake Grunt. His head rotated with a bleary realization. “Killed my *clock*,” he groaned. “What’s the time?”

“The time?” snarled Cutter, leaning low over Grunt. “Better ask a policeman.”

* * * * *

At first, the texture of the ceiling had been startling to Rachael. The feeling was soon dispelled. She was becoming used to waking in a strange place each day, and the squat was hardly the strangest. Rachael emerged from her blankets on the living-room sofa, where she had been given a place to rest.

Despite its renegade nature, the house had enough battered furniture, curtains and books to resemble a genuine home. Neither did the torn wallpaper, patchy carpet and peeling paintwork spoil the domestic illusion. Rachael felt the squat to be a good place, and herself to be welcome here.

She soon found Olly frying veggie-sausages. New Age music played softly on a radio-cassette, blending with birdsong from outside. “Where you from?” asked Rachael, sitting at a small Formica table. She cupped her hands round a cracked mug of tea.

There was no immediate response from Olly. He forked the sausages from sizzling sunflower oil, and popped them onto slices of bread. “Here and there,” he replied.

“I’m from Brighton,” said Rachael.

“That’s rare,” said Olly.

Rachael smiled.

“Worked on a farm,” he added, handing Rachael a hot dog. “Boss pissed me off so I did a runner. Got sucked into the anti-roads lark. Twyford, Wanstead, holding the line. Wreckers made a wreck of me!”

“Know the feeling,” said Rachael.

“Need time to chill,” said Olly. “Been here since November.”

“Nice house,” said Rachael.

“Crime to keep it empty,” agreed Olly. “Crime to stay here, too.”

Rachael took an unladylike bite. The snack was delicious, and she chomped away. Olly leant against the shabby worktop as if eating in a swish diner. He wore baggy shorts despite the wintry month, with a rough-knit top fastened by strings. Rachael could easily imagine him in a kilt. Olly was a little medieval in appearance - although in a refined, somewhat knightly manner.

“How long have you got?” asked Rachael: a question both curious and pragmatic, for she had nowhere else to go.

“Could be days,” said Olly. “We’ll stay to the last.”

Someone else wanted to savour the taste of breakfast, so Olly made the introductions. “This is Steve - and Rachael.”

Rachael’s mouth was too full to speak. But she waved a greeting at the newcomer. He was a dark-haired lad in a Dennis the Menace jumper.

“Howdy,” said Steve. “Where’s my sausage?”

“Doing my best,” said Olly.

“Good cook,” said Steve, sitting with Rachael. “Burns anything you like.”

Rachael choked with amusement. She took a glug of tea.

“Fresh air,” said Olly. “Can’t burn that.”

“Funny. You can have *hot* air,” said Steve, “but not burnt.”

“I’m taking a breather,” smiled Rachael. “Like it nice and cool.”

Rachael passed through the back door into a miniscule concrete yard. A few potted plants grew here and there, while a weathered old armchair made for modest garden furniture. Music drifted without as the birds had within, seeking gentle collaboration. Tibetan bells tinkled in the breeze. Rachael found herself turning a slow panorama, enchanted by the atmosphere. Her tasselled skirt rose in a billowing cone, while her hair created a golden fan. Rachael’s arms spread wide and graceful, like a jewellery box ballerina.

Rachael was in a dishevelled state. She had not changed for days and needed a bath. But the girl felt an astonishing lightness, as if levitating on stage. Her mind perceived everything with incredible clarity, sensing details as never before.

As she turned, Rachael thought of the future and what it might bring. Since concluding her struggle with the forest painting, she had never made any plans. Cutter’s Yard had filled her weeks - but with all that over, she needed a life. Rachael had no direction, like the spinning view - which turned round and round her body. She never became dizzy, however fast she spun. The world was spinning around her.

* * * * *

While Grunt fiddled in the workshop, Cutter began work on his classic BSA. He planned serious progress in the coming weeks, for the Rocket 3 had a bad karma given its involvement in the robbery. Restoration to pristine glory would be a curative process, both technical and psychological. It would also hide the bike’s identity from prying eyes. Cutter had held off the project, not through laziness, but a fear of becoming obsessive. Once started, the job would continue whatever the demands on his time.

The cubby-hole was a novelty, but Cutter had not yet advertised its electrical services. His expectation of fulfilment had been tempered by an unexpected factor: Rachael’s memory remained strong. Perhaps her spirit had seeped into the walls, tingeing the place with a lingering intensity. It was unable to be lost so soon. The morning’s mishap with the chopping-board had reinforced this impression. Cutter felt grateful he could work outside, leaving office and cubby-hole empty.

Cutter approached the BSA job with meticulous preparation. He had obtained hints, tips and an original manual from the Classics Master: an obscure maestro of the biking world who worked wonders with any old wreck. Scrutinizing the sleek sidecar, Cutter considered his first move. Should he split the combination, or leave that to a later stage? Shame to upset the stability. But he had felt the torque on a couple of bends, and knew the trim was not right.

Squatting low on the concrete, Cutter examined the bolts - although his task had no chance of obsession. A grinding chug-chug could be heard at the gates, heralding a new customer.

Cutter rose to see a girl on a bright yellow scooter. "Morning!" she called through an open visor. "Somebody here called Cutter?"

"Think I've heard the name," said Cutter, still gripping a greasy spanner.

"It's Cheryl," said the girl. She stopped the scooter and nudged down the stand.

"Hi, Cheryl," nodded Cutter. He liked the look of her software.

"No!" she sniggered, stepping off. "You should be drooling at *this!* Me Vespa." The girl tapped the scooter's fairing, which was plastered in wacky stickers. "She's Cheryl, I'm Mandy. Hear that grinding?"

"Did," said Cutter. He was more interested in the fleshy Mandy. The girl was in her late twenties, he guessed, wearing high-heeled knee boots, jeans and a leather jacket. Removing her helmet, Mandy freed a shock of curly blonde hair. It settled round her beaming features. "Could you look?" she asked. "Know you're busy...but she means a lot to me."

"Not really a scooter man," said Cutter. That was putting it pretty mild.

"You can fix 'em, though?" asked Mandy. She spat a blob of chewing gum into silver paper. "Where can I put this?"

"Where you got it?" suggested Cutter.

"Ha, ha," sneered Mandy. "Sweet shop'd love it, sure." She stuck the paper in her pocket.

Cutter strolled over to Cheryl and stared at the headlamp, like a doctor examining a patient's eye. "Keep her a day or two..."

"Serious?"

"Life and death," said Cutter. "Bad case of *choking chug.*"

"Really?" sighed Mandy, her eyes wide open.

"Mmm," said Cutter. "*Oily osmosis...*"

"Nah! Get serious," gasped Mandy. "Fix it or not?"

"Need a day or two," said Cutter. "Best in the district."

"Oh. Best is best for Cheryl," said Mandy, spotting the BSA. "That's old, innit?" she chirped. "Vintage."

"Classic," said Cutter. "But down in the world. Time I fixed her, sprayed her, polished her like new."

Mandy smiled. "You know how to treat a lady."

"Like a guided tour?" asked Cutter. "There's my Harley FXS. Decent chrome. Gives the sun a reason to shine. Or Grunt's Kawasaki, but who wants to know?"

Mandy sniggered. "I do! Who's Grunt?"

“That thing in the window,” said Cutter. “I do the tough stuff. He’s the lackey.”

Mandy strutted over to the workshop and pushed her nose to the glass. Grunt glanced up like a zoo specimen, surprised by a keen visitor. “Hello there!” said Mandy, wiggling a leather-gloved hand. Grunt scowled in bemusement while scratching himself.

“He looks fun,” smiled Mandy, turning aside.

“Have our laffs,” said Cutter. He stroked the fabulous FXS. “Ever ride a real bike, Mandy?”

She looked quizzical.

“Bike like this?” asked Cutter. “One of the best. Built by Willie G. Harley and the Davison boys.”

“No...not quite,” she said. “Bloke’s Yamaha. Bombed up to London. Ace!”

“A Jap-rig?”

“Yeah...”

Cutter spat. “You’re a virgin to the creed.”

“Well, I love my scooter...”

Cutter was not impressed. “I’m a blunt speaker, Miss.”

“I’m learning fast.”

“Busy tonight or fluffing around?”

“Nothing. Watching telly with Sal.”

“Who?”

“Girlfriend.”

Cutter scowled. “Snog on the sofa?”

Mandy snorted. “*What?* Sally’s my flatmate.”

Cutter rubbed his bristly beard. “Girl talk. What a mystery. I’d gut anyone who’d say Grunt’s a boyfriend of mine, with all respect to Wilf.”

Mandy regarded the biker with amusement. “You’ve got a funny way of talk, Mr. Cutter.”

“Gets lonely round here, Miss Mandy. Sally short of a man?”

Mandy shuffled. “You want *Sal?*”

“Gruntling might.”

“Yeah - but would she want *him?*”

“Somebody must. Be merciful.”

Mandy was more shy than Cutter knew. But she was fascinated by this mordant biker, with his chains, buckles and badges. She addressed him rather primly. “I’m not, as it happens, doing anything tonight. So I suppose...we could meet.”

“Grand,” said Cutter. “Innocence lost.”

“Sal’s not into bikes,” said Mandy. “Prefers ponies. She hasn’t got one, though.”

“Tragic.”

“Meet for a drink down the Palace Pier?”

“Could be fun,” mused Cutter.

“Live next door, but we never go.”

“Mmm...? Then I’ll be your Prince tonight.”

Roberts had never been one for gardens. He had never felt an urge to plant decorative flowers, bushes or baby trees. He liked the clarity of a simple line: the sea's cool blue horizon, the geometry of a patio. The villa's setting remained a featureless expanse, walled by ornamental breeze-blocks.

Roberts emerged from the back door, clasping the crumpled swag bag. He dropped it on a small pile of ashes and wood. Then he struck a match ferociously and lit the thick material. It smouldered. Roberts struck another match, lighting another corner. He nudged in lengths of kindling to speed the incineration. Roberts wiped the sweat from his brow as the painted letters crackled and curled. Then the cloth darkened and collapsed.

The soft winter daylight felt painful to Roberts, for his left eye was bloodshot and sore. His gaze fell upon the little swing hanging in the neighbours' garden. Their household was a contrast to his solo existence, with family chatter and social events. Mick and Sandra had been there a good five years, although Roberts encouraged just a mild acquaintance. Previous neighbours had become too nose-y about his somewhat chequered past.

Roberts had seldom spoken of Harry, for there was a limit to his lack of tact. But new ideas fuelled his ebullience, and what ideas he had: package tours, the bargain warehouse, a hundred different schemes! Roberts bragged when things were going well, and felt foolish when they crumbled. Roberts' Builders had been the final straw, with creditors on his tail. Now he avoided gossip and rumour.

Mike and Sandra were pleasant enough. He was some sort of specialist engineer, she helped run a health food store. Two children - typical really - always laughing, running around. Roberts had battled them with a water pistol, and helped Mike fix his car. Sandra liked an occasional party, and would ask Roberts along. Otherwise, they respected each other's privacy.

So Roberts' scrutiny of their garden was hardly typical. He stood breathless, silent, studying each and every aspect. There was no-one around, no sound from the house. His bonfire smoke drifted through the breeze-blocks, diluted to the palest grey. No-one to see him and his furtive manoeuvres. No-one to ask awkward questions.

Roberts felt it best to spend little time in the open, for the villa reflected his ambitions over the years. Lacking the desired leisure centre, this smaller shrine served his meditation well. Roberts moved back into the kitchen, locked the door, and decided to make a snack.

Omelette, he thought. Chuck everything in! Real working man's lunch. Roberts had broken the eggs, sliced some mushrooms, when the telephone began to warble. Leaving the food, he strutted down the passage to his beige-coloured lounge. Roberts clenched the receiver as if seeking security, his left eye beady and sore. "Danny Roberts!" he said with a burst of brightness. Best give a good impression.

"Glad to find you," came a resonant voice. "Name's Rimmon. Back from a trip."

"G-good morning, Mr. Rimmon," said Roberts. "Thanks for calling me. I have..."

“...a bundle of goods.” The voice was almost mechanical. “Said you needed a buyer.”

Roberts eased himself into the armchair, twirling the telephone cord. Pull yourself together, he thought. Here’s the man with the money! Do the business, Defty Dan.

“It’s...rather confidential,” said Roberts.

“I understand,” said Rimmon. “What do you have?”

“Lynton told me you like the unusual.”

“I’ll be the judge,” said Rimmon. “Give me details.”

“I’ve got allsorts, really. Magical stuff...and this twisty thing. Antique.”

There was a pause. “*Twisty* thing?” asked Rimmon.

Roberts’ mind had gone blank. “Oh, you know. A kiddies’ thing. Patterns!”

“A kaleidoscope?” murmured Rimmon. “I need a description.”

“Sure. It goes swirly-whirl. Flashes! Amazing...”

“You’ve *tried* it?” asked Rimmon, with caution in his voice. But he checked this with an easy nonchalance. “I meant the object,” he clarified. “The exterior. What is the object like?”

Roberts looked at the coffee table, where he had left the ornate plaything. Despite this close proximity, he found it hard to paint a verbal picture. “It’s...wooden,” he said, “with gold bits. Sparkly jewels on the end.”

Rimmon offered a slow, heavy breathing as a minimal reply. Taken out of context, it would have suggested a filthy phone call. “Fine,” he said. “I’ve seen something similar. You have an interesting collection, Mr. Roberts. Of course, I would need to examine the objects.”

“Right,” said Roberts. He fingered his bushy moustache in a nervous, trembling manner. “Where?” he asked. “Whereabouts?”

“I’m happy to come down,” said Rimmon.

Roberts faltered. “Maybe...I should find somewhere to meet. Somewhere private. I’ll call as soon as I can.”

“*Soon*,” stressed Rimmon, at the end of the line. “You’ve aroused my curiosity.”

“That’s my business!” smiled Roberts.

“I’m happy to come down,” said Rimmon. “Total discretion. Come today if you like.”

“Hmm...”

“Very well, Mr. Roberts. I’ll leave you to think. Call as soon as you can.”

“I will, sir. Thank you - and goodbye.” Roberts cut him off with a finger to the rest, and stood gripping the dead receiver. Perhaps he needed a guaranteed silence, unlikely though another call might be. The ball had been set rolling. The deal was underway.

As he returned the phone to a receptive state, Roberts found his gaze drawn to the kaleidoscope. He shuddered in tangible distress, knowing he should lock it safely in the suitcase, yet mesmerized by the thought of those wondrous visions. Why deny himself the pleasure?

Independent of voluntary co-ordination, Roberts lifted the kaleidoscope to his reddened eye. Tingling with a thrill of anticipation, he began to rotate the lens.

The colours raced in a blur of vivid abstraction. Their hexagonal tunnel was latticed with pulsating lines. These wriggled in a vivid pattern, black against blue, as cool as a distant void. A star formed with twinkles of purple and red, among diamonds of gleaming yellow, while scythe-like curves rotated from the centre. The star popped into a hovering ring, glowing like a neon zero. This stretched to make a maw of shimmering tendrils. They dazzled the eye. Roberts blinked.

Spirals of pink lashed from the spinning hub, becoming a tunnel of purple on steely grey. Green petals, as fresh as a lime, unfurled in synchronous counter-rotation. A golden centre sparkled in triangular fractals, peeling with geometric precision. Its inner embers dazzled the eye. They engulfed the mind. Roberts blinked.

The tunnel became stripes of streaky gold, warm against a distant blue. Black shadows broke into myriad fragments, twirling like ash in the void. Fractals formed a magnificent snowflake, floating in cool detachment. It shattered into delicate shards. Roberts blinked.

Bolts of light streaked like lasers, their colours red, green and blue. Rings of crystalline mosaic turned in graceful motion, while the hub extruded blade-like curves. These slid aside to reveal a harmonious spectrum, spinning as a wheel. The centre ruptured in a blossom of clear white light. It burnt the eye. Roberts stared.

As his sight adjusted to the sudden glare, it resolved into physical forms. The simple tones of desert and sky. He tumbled onto the sand.

Roberts lay for a few seconds, spitting grit from his mouth. Then he rose to survey the scene. All was plain and featureless around him: an infinite desert with infinite sky. Yet a glimmer betrayed *something* a little way ahead, beckoning him to explore. Roberts walked over, and stooped to retrieve the object. It was a silver locket and chain. He pressed the catch to reveal his grandfather, surly in sepia tone. The bushy moustache was a match for his own. Roberts pocketed the tiny treasure.

He walked on to find a bedraggled teddy bear, then a toy train he remembered from childhood. The cover of a 1940s annual beamed with cheery animal friends, while sand drifted through the miniature proscenium of a cardboard theatre. All these memories, thought Roberts. *Very* strange.

Papers fluttered. What were they? Roberts grabbed a few. Programmes from the Leicester Playhouse, many a great show. His eyes followed a trail of objects writhing to the horizon: the more distant were nothing but miniscule dots, vanishing out of sight.

Roberts knew he would have to follow them, however long it took. If the sequence began with birth and childhood, it must surely reach the future. Such a trail would clarify his path in life. The path to the paradise ahead. Determined to find enlightenment, Roberts began the trek.

* * * * *

Rimmon had moved from the telephone to his library shelves, where books displayed their rich, antique bindings. Locating one particular volume, he placed it on a wooden table and consulted the pages in deep concentration. It was a small book - and hardly the most impressive - yet its contents were truly startling. Quaintly titled 'A Rainbow of

Optical Perceptions', it delved the workings of obscure kinetic-optical instruments. Some were toys of a superior kind, while others could see beyond the laws of physics. It was rare to find such a device in workable condition - and of those, the Swiss kaleidoscopes were the most jealously sought. The book offered much conjecture, with engravings to illustrate what was known of their inner principles. As the anonymous author wrote:

'My depictions have been taken from a broken example held in a private collection. Such particulars must remain unmentioned, although the object may be sought in Germany by the diligent student. The mechanics had been partially dismantled, and several components lost. Only rumour and hearsay tell of its mesmerizing influence.'

The makers had produced twelve operational versions, of which three had been destroyed. Five had been notably inferior, and the rest were scattered throughout Europe. 'The greatest - thought lost forever - was the Kaleidoscope of Inner Reflection. A premium distillation of its maker's skill, before turmoil destroyed the secret craft.'

Could this be what Roberts was offering? A collector might search a lifetime and find no greater clue. It was surely too much to hope. However, Rimmon felt awed by even the faintest chance. His broad face looked down at the little book, with a hand shading his eyes.

'This model encapsulated the final powers of its maker, and was able to probe the very soul. Only those trained in techniques of the mental trance could proceed with any safety. While it might picture the heart's desire, its price was a treacherous suction of the spirit. As with each of the kaleidoscopes, initial use allowed the mechanism to captivate the Viewer, who was held transfixed by the colours within. Hence, further use would throw the Viewer beyond the physical world.'

Rimmon took a slow breath, and read on:

'The non-physical became manifest, while the earth-plane faded away. Lacking correct preparation, the Viewer would be overwhelmed with a fantastic, even fatal dose of visionary hallucinism. The Kaleidoscope of Inner Reflection lacked the ornate detailing of the Stellar and Elemental kaleidoscopes, possessing a wooden case of the Celtic manner embellished in filigree of gold leaf.'

Rimmon closed the book, expelling the faintest pall of dust. Roberts had already tried the thing; he had mentioned swirls and flashes, but those were to be expected. They were part of the spiritual lock-on, which enabled the kaleidoscope to function. If Roberts had merely dabbled, there would be little danger. But prolonged use without the correct mental discipline, as described in the informative volume? The prospects were exceedingly bleak. If Roberts used the kaleidoscope again and again, he was certain to be in jeopardy.

Rimmon would have to play this carefully. Roberts must be given a chance, for he had initiated the deal. But if things went wrong, Rimmon would call uninvited.

* * * * *

Even as Rimmon sat making these patient deductions, Roberts found Harry's hat in the sand. He lifted it, placed it on his head - and the landscape was swept away. Roberts shuddered in his armchair, and dropped the kaleidoscope on his lap. He gasped, stunned by the experience. Roberts' left eye was twitching and sore.

* * * * *

Rachael's new insight enhanced her appreciation of the town and all it had to offer. She had little money, so her activities were modest: a browse in the bookshops, tea and a sandwich, enjoyed with lingering pleasure. Strange thoughts and memories bubbled in her mind, but she kept them strongly suppressed.

However, Rachael's stability was threatened by an inevitable moment. Glimpsing the papers in a newsagent's rack, the word 'THUGS' stood out bold on The Sun. She pulled it free to read the other three - 'KILL MR. MAGIC'. There was a photo of Harry in his heyday, performing with linking rings before a scarlet curtain. 'Sick Death Sickens Seaside' ran the by-line. Rachael shoved it back in the rack.

The local Evening Argus was more restrained, and Rachael bought a copy. She held the paper tightly rolled till she reached an isolated spot. Rachael crossed to the green island of Victoria Gardens, and stepped over the low boundary fence. Peace, apart from the ceaseless traffic, but away from prying eyes. Sitting on the grass, Rachael studied the paper.

'SHOWBIZ MURDER: MAN QUIZZED', it announced. 'Police are investigating the death of an elderly man after a violent struggle in his flat. A spokesman confirmed his identity as retired stage conjuror Harry Hocus, a local resident for many years. Officers have questioned Daniel Roberts, 61, of The Promenade, Peacehaven, who reported the crime yesterday morning.' Must be D.S. Roberts, thought Rachael. The guy Cutter had gone to see.

'Today, Chief Inspector Braintree issued the following statement: "It seems Mr. Hocus was the victim of robbery with violent intent. Anyone who saw anything Saturday night should contact the incident room."'

A final paragraph gave a brief insight into the magician's previous career. 'Harry Hocus was a popular entertainer in the fifties and sixties, best known for his Magic in Focus television series which ended in 1972. He had performed several times in Brighton, both at the West Pier and Hippodrome.'

Rachael felt nauseous. Her stomach churned at the possible implications. She imagined her face on a 'WANTED' poster, printed as a special supplement. But detection and arrest were pretty unlikely. She had tried to save Harry, after all, and felt his influence had been guarding her these past few days. What of Cutter? What of Grunt? She knew *who* they were, and *where* they were. She should be reporting their identities, getting them jailed. The acts of an honest citizen.

Yet Rachael could not do this, despite the horror she felt at their actions. She had joined the expedition willingly, if under some duress. Whether or not the magician died, Rachael had still been part of the gang. In truth, the dividing line between the outcomes was very narrow indeed.

Glancing across the green expanse, Rachael's eyes met the modern white frontage of the art school. It provided happy memories of her visit to the workshop, where that bloke had made the canvas for her painting. His name escaped her.

As she looked, Rachael became aware of another girl tracing a diagonal route from the north. A fancy hat flopped on her head, while her ginger hair was bright and distinct. The long skirt suggested a robe, edged by a tasselled fringe. Rachael felt a tingle of nervous pleasure: it was her old house sharer, Sue. Perhaps fate had brought them together, although Sue was receding fast. Unsure whether to intercept her friend, Rachael left the paper and followed. A breeze rustled the pages. The pigeons ignored Harry's tale.

Sue was obviously heading for college, keen to get down to work. Her knitted scarf flapped like a heraldic banner, and her patchwork bag was crammed to the brim. So crammed, indeed, that something fell to the grass. Rachael skipped ahead without a sound, retrieving a roll of gold lace. The perfect excuse to speak, she thought. It was almost...*meant* to be. Perhaps the item's fall was more than a twitch of coincidence. Her mind had altered since the trip to Harry's.

Rachael scampered forward, and pounced in front of the girl. Sue stopped with a startled gasp. "You dropped this!" said Rachael. "Lucky I'm here."

"R-Rachael!" stammered Sue. Her eyes were fixed on those of her friend, but missed what Rachael was holding.

"Here. Tuck it in your bag," said Rachael. She placed the lace in the palm of Sue's hand.

Sue smiled in simple gratitude. "How *are* you?" she asked. "We've been wondering..."

"Adventures, Sue. Ups and downs."

Sue sat on the grass, spreading her skirt like a picnic cloth. Rachael welcomed the moment to talk, and slouched on the grass beside her. "Still with those blokes...those bikers?" asked Sue. Her tone was both curious and wary.

"No. All over," said Rachael. "My painting too."

"Get some sleep at last?"

"Yeah. How's the house?"

"Fine," smiled Sue. "Better than ever..."

"Without me?"

"No, Rachael. I didn't mean that."

Rachael sighed. "Phil still there?"

"Very much so - and Laura. Quite a twosome."

"Really?" asked Rachael. "How's your art?"

"I never threw my soul into it," said Sue. "Not like you. But I'm planning more collages, semi 3-D. Bits sticking out the wall."

"Great," nodded Rachael. "Why the lace?"

"Not for me, Rachael. One of Phil's little projects. Bought the frilly bits in the North Laine."

"What's it for?" asked Rachael. "Come on, tell me! I'm terribly intrigued."

Sue twiddled with a blade of grass. "Do you want to come round, Rachael?" she asked, twisting the conversation.

"Round the house?"

"You're not barred, are you? We had a disagreement. Love to see you, Rach. Come for dinner tonight."

Rachael looked perplexed for a moment. "I could..."

"Is everything okay?" asked Sue.

Rachael brightened. "I'm staying somewhere...cosy."

"Good. But come round, have a proper chat. Phil and Laura would love it."

"I'll...think about it," said Rachael. "Thanks."

Rachael stood. The brief encounter was over. Sue matched the move, and faced her with a real sincerity.

"See you later?" asked Sue.

Rachael hesitated. She was unable to hurt Sue by declining the kind offer. "Yes," she murmured. "See me later, Sue." Rachael turned away and walked north across the lawn.

Sue watched her friend for a moment more. She was glad to see Rachael, yet equally troubled by a hint of darkness. Perhaps I'm in the wrong course, she pondered. Should have been a social worker. But it's too late now, I've chosen the path. Paint and paper, not life. Sue continued over the boundary fence, and crossed the road to the art school.

Rachael was glad to arrive at her old shared house, although she still felt something of a stranger. The living-room was familiar despite a few additions: a pot plant evoked the Congo in a tub, while bright cushions clashed with the landlord's upholstery.

"Cute candle," said Rachael.

"Oh, it's Laura's," said Sue.

"Too good to burn?" asked Rachael. It was a gnome with a wick on its head.

"Pass the matches," said Sue. "Ghastly!"

Rachael smiled. "How's Phil?"

"Not bad," said Sue. "Better, even." Rachael sensed a wry note in her friend's voice, as if something had changed. "Now - how about the food?"

"Can't move," said Rachael. "This cushion's a dream!"

"Paralysed or knackered?"

Rachael sighed. "Just knackered."

"So relax," said Sue. "I'll get dinner."

"Thanks, Mum." Rachael snuggled up on the sofa, taking advantage like a stray cat.

Sue moved to the kitchen, lit the oven and took the dish from the fridge. The pasta bake was a delicious combination of cauliflower, peppers, cheese and mushrooms layered with swirly spaghetti shapes. She slid it onto the wire rack, closing the oven door.

Someone else was moving through the house. Phil entered the living-room, and was startled by what he saw. The girl he had once desired lay curled and asleep, with her tea cooling on the floor. The tassels of her skirt trailed like water over the brink of the sofa, while her woolly black tights had been roughened by adventure.

Phil bent low, allowing his floppy fringe to tingle Rachael's delicately pulsing cheek. Then he blew gently to wake her, whispering "Rachael."

"Who...?" she murmured.

"Open your eyes."

"Too lazy, Phil. Seen everything."

Phil moved back a little. "You haven't seen me...for a while."

Rachael wriggled in comfort. "Snug..."

"Open your eyes," said Phil. "Go on."

There was a pause - then Rachael did so. Her mood changed to mirth at Phil's ludicrous outfit. "Putting on a show," he said. "Fringe theatre. One of my satirical costumes."

Rachael studied the details in admiration. It was an overall, but plastered with decorative spangles: ribbons, sequins, rhinestones and painted stars. Phil resembled a psychedelic court jester. "What does it mean?" asked Rachael.

"Glamour," said Phil. "The sparkle of success. Trish helped me finish it today."

"Gosh." Rachael spotted the gold lace, trimming the cuffs.

"Laura plays the world of business," said Phil. "A nasty, money-grabbing tycoon."

“*Laura?*”

“She’s covered with computer discs and Monopoly money. Make a great double act! It’s really cheered her up, Rachael. She can kick back at the system.”

“Brilliant, Phil.”

“It’s a play, not a monologue. I’m this famous star, but business wrecks my morals. There’s a twist at the end. We swap costumes...”

“Very gender-bendy!”

“...and I start with the camp one!”

Rachael giggled. “I’ve been missing all the fun.”

“Maybe.” Suddenly, Phil lost his flow.

Rachael slid her legs onto the carpet, narrowly missing the tea. Lifting it, she swigged the warmish remains and patted the cushion beside her.

Phil sat with a touch of nerves. “Laura and me...make a team.”

“Sure,” nodded Rachael. “She’s good.”

“She’s more than good, Rachael. She’s outstanding.”

Rachael stared down at her lap. “I must have been terrible to live with. My problems, my painting...”

Phil put a hand on her shoulder. “I know the pain you went through. Something you had to do, Rachael. Something you couldn’t give up.”

Rachael nodded. “It’s over now.”

“A shame we...never got together,” murmured Phil.

“All make our mistakes,” said Rachael.

* * * * *

Orange stripes hung above the slate-blue sea, overshadowed by mountainous clouds. The Palace Pier offered an experience of limbo between the elements of earth, air and water. Fire had no representation, although the pier had a modern alternative. Gleaming lights along its Victorian structure brought an equal luminosity. These were dull compared to the flickers in the amusement halls - where money could be won but mostly lost, and games of skilful reaction played.

Grunt loved battling computer foes, but Cutter preferred the older entertainments. He admired the mechanical charm of their movements, the crudity of their thrills. Piles of coins were multiplied by mirrors into fortunes, pushed forwards by a bar: a well-timed coin could be critical, sending a cascade of cash to the winner. There were fruit machines, pinball, shooting galleries and a racetrack with motorized horses. This was Mandy’s favourite, and she cheered several mini-derbies while Cutter considered the form.

Grunt whacked the buttons of a gaudy combat console. “Decked ya,” he snorted. “The killer!”

Sal withdrew, wincing slightly. “Give us a chance,” she sighed. “How d’you play it...?”

Grunt wasn’t giving any clues.

Sal was a quirky mixture of the prim and punky: pink pinafore, Doc. Marten boots, stripy red and black tights. She was nestled in a huge old parka coat, while her hair was streaked with blue.

“Let the lady win,” said Cutter, looming over her shoulder.

“Yeah, the *lady!*” chirped Sal, poking Grunt. He blushed at such tender teasing.

“Evil fight,” said Grunt. “Sal’s wasted.”

Cutter nodded like a patient father humouring a tiresome brat. How would Grunt fare in a real situation, confronted by a living threat? No multiple lives with a sword-swinging crazy or karate-chopping maniac. Easy to be a hero under an onslaught of pain-free attack.

“Win a bit on the gee-gees?” asked Sal. “I love horses. Wish I’d done that!”

Mandy counted her very small change. “Talking pennies,” she said. “Let’s go.”

The group called into an off-licence and stocked up on cans. The girls’ flat was not far from the seafront, a short way to the west. Bundling into the hallway, they barged upstairs and settled in the tiny lounge. After pulling ring-pulls, they swigged like a pirate crew.

Grunt suggested a pizza - wise words, for once - and a huge tray was biked round. Cutter brandished one of his trusty blades and sliced the pizza into quarters. Each took a plate with a giant piece - hot, spicy and tempting.

“Thanks, Cutter,” said Mandy. “Beats cooking tonight.”

“What’s on the box?” asked Grunt.

“Shut it, Grunt,” said Cutter. “TV’s dead and deceased. Stuff your food down, stay social.”

“Fixing Cheryl?” asked Mandy.

“Cute as her owner,” said Cutter.

“Stick to the scooter!” chirped Sal.

The four began their slices, with Grunt and Sal on the floor. Mandy munched, Cutter chomped, Sal nibbled and Grunt stuffed. Cutter knocked back another beer.

“What’s up there?” asked Grunt. “Cowboys?” He picked a china pony from the sideboard and jiggled it across the carpet. This was accompanied by mouthed music, Wild West-style.

“Oi, don’t,” said Sal. “Not in the pizza.”

“Swampy!” said Grunt, squelching the hooves.

“Mandy...tell him,” sighed Sal.

“*Don’t*,” stated Cutter.

“All right, Knifer. I...”

Cutter snatched the pony from the pizza and wiped it with a handkerchief. “No respecter of property, Grunt. Mind your Ps and Qs.”

“Rescued!” chirped Sal. Grunt banged the floor in mock rage, but knocked Sally’s cider over. “Bollocks!” she whined. “Mind me dress!” Grunt raised the glugging can, so it *almost* spilt in his mouth.

“Lovely manners,” sighed Mandy.

“Give it!” said Sal. She wrenched the can off Grunt, but lost her balance and rolled onto her plate. The pizza stuck to her stripy knee. Sal peeled it off like a gruesome plaster.

“Kids are having fun,” nodded Cutter, opening more cans. Grunt made a lunge for one.

“Mind the carpet,” groaned Mandy.

“Yeah. There’s a clean bit left,” said Sal.

“Wipe it with this,” said Grunt. He tugged the corner of Sal’s pinafore and scrubbed it on the cider stain.

“Oi!” snapped Sal. “That’s ‘designer’, not a dishcloth.” She slapped her pizza in his face.

Grunt whacked his hand over the squelchy slice, cramming it into his mouth.

“Whank...you...wery mchhh,” he said, through bulging cheeks. “Mr. Blubby-Blobby!”

“I’ll have...to get changed,” said Sal, with a tremor of distress. “Excuse me, everyone.” She skipped over Grunt’s body, almost running from the room.

“Look what you’ve done,” said Mandy, in a voice without mirth. “Poor Sally. She’s shy, you know.”

Cutter touched a hefty hand to Mandy’s cheek, inclining her head towards his.

“Mandy. I apologize for my colleague. He’s defective to the core. He’ll scrub the Cutter’s Yard bog till Doomsday, and I’ll fill it first.”

Mandy’s stony face lapsed into a reluctant smirk. “Use his head as a brush,” she whispered.

“What’s that?” muttered Grunt. “You talking about me?”

“Don’t apologize, Grunt,” said Cutter. “Nature can’t help her rejects.”

Grunt lowered his lager. “Yeah?” he replied, in little more than a hum. Grunt rose with a surprising quickness. “Don’t like the look of your voice.”

Cutter snorted. “Be seated. You’re as scary as the toytown ghost train.” Mandy’s laugh was short and sharp, as if to relieve the tension.

Grunt, however, was not amused. “You want to watch that, Knifer. You want to watch that tongue.”

“Said calm yourself. Ladies present. Sit down and suck your thumb.”

A variety of non-committal expressions lit upon Grunt’s face. Anger collided with the deadpan approach, bemusement undermining both. But Grunt’s eyes glowered behind his modern steel spectacles. “Work together, Cuts. Don’t forget. In the Yard...or outside.”

“Don’t forget who’s the boss,” said Cutter, “or ride a pizza bike.” He enjoyed a long slurp of bitter, ignoring what Grunt had to say.

“We had the tricky stuff sorted before you barged in. Nevill taught me to stay *mellowww*.” Grunt took a deep, restorative breath. He looked dark and threatening above the seated Cutter, against a backdrop of quaint ornaments.

“Let’s call it a night,” said Mandy. She was upset by this unpleasant turn, and had heard Grunt plain and clear.

Cutter burped. This would usually have provoked a joke from Grunt, but resounded without a giggle.

“My scooter?” asked Mandy.

Cutter sighed. “Do the best I can.”

“Thanks,” said Mandy. “You’d better.” She stood, prompting Cutter to move.

“Yours,” said Cutter. He tossed four remaining cans, keeping the last pack.

“You paid,” said Mandy. “I’m grateful. We’ll have a girls’ night in. Goodbye.”

Cutter glanced at his sulky colleague, hoping his mood might improve. “We’ll swig these later. Cheer up, Gruntling! It’s grimmer up north, I’ll tell thee.”

* * * * *

Laura was back from her evening class, and sat with Rachael in the kitchen. “Those costumes,” smiled Rachael. “What a performance!”

“On the fringe,” said Laura, “or beyond the fringe. Come and see it, Rachael. Take care!” Laura clicked her fingers with a new idea, leaving to join Phil.

Rachael was snug in a blue dressing gown, as Sue had shoved her clothes in the washing machine. The girl would have to stay the night. “Stay a few days, if you like,” said Sue.

“No,” said Rachael. “Don’t want to impose. I was stupid enough to walk out of here. Can’t change what I’ve done.”

Sue offered Rachael another biscuit. “If you need us, Rach, you’re welcome.”

Rachael was moved by the statement, yet pushed it from her mind. She felt sorry to have left this caring household, and brooding on the fact wouldn’t help. “Glad your art’s going well,” said Rachael, hoping to change the subject.

“Ha! Do loads, but the quality?” Sue made an endearing frown, imagining a harsh critique.

“Cutter’s got my painting,” said Rachael. “Never want to see it again.”

“What? After all that work...?”

“Best thing,” said Rachael, nibbling the biscuit. “The picture’s finished so the nightmare’s gone. Don’t want to be reminded.”

“Cutter likes it?” asked Sue. “Give *him* nightmares!”

“Got some of his own,” said Rachael.

“Don’t talk about it, Rach, if it upsets you.”

Rachael shook her head. “I don’t mind talking about things.”

Sue remained quiet for a while, awaiting silence or confession.

* * * * *

Cutter did not know whether pink elephants had any factual basis. Maybe the concept was a whim of folklore, providing a metaphorical definition of ‘plastered’. Either way, he deserved more than a few pink elephants dancing beside him. A herd of mammoths would do for starters, flashing neon colours from tail to tusk.

The bikers approached the shabby dead-end which led to Cutter’s Yard. The mood was sullen between them, although this was hardly a remarkable phenomenon. Grunt almost collided with a lamp-post, and paused to steady himself. Cutter belched,

number thirty-two in a series of fifty. Then he spotted a huddled shape in the shadows. What was it?

Cutter approached the soft mass in a slinking motion, despite his drunken state. Then he kicked with a focused fury, as if revenging a grievous insult. How his powers had increased since the robbery! Cutter was inflamed with superhuman strength! The upper portion flopped aside with a soft, crackling impact, while the lower disgorged strange entrails: cylinders of tin, crushed cardboard, vegetable peelings. The skin was black polythene.

“Killing rubbish,” sneered Grunt.

“Sorry,” said Cutter. “Thought it was a homeless person.”

But the bikers were not homeless. Cutter stomped upstairs, his movements becoming more clumsy. “You’re a corpse that hasn’t stopped twitching,” said Grunt.

Cutter bumped the low coffee table, so Harry’s hat wobbled on its chess-board top. He scratched his beard, oscillating slightly. The room appeared to be spinning. Cutter staggered to his armchair, and slumped onto the cushions.

Grunt donned the top hat once more, and mimed the gestures of the late magician. He remembered these from the fancy posters displayed in the old man’s flat. “Da-nah! Harry the Git!” said Grunt, with an inspired touch of wit.

“Seen the headlines, Harry?” spat Cutter, snatching a paper from the floor.

“‘THUGS KILL MR. MAGIC’. Hardly a polite description.”

“Harry wants a look,” said Grunt. He reached for the paper.

“Owe you nothing,” said Cutter. “Buy your own.”

“Just a look,” said Grunt, making a grab.

Cutter lashed out with a vicious kick. “Harry’s dead,” he sneered. “Drop it.”

Grunt edged back. He removed the hat, and stared Cutter in the eye. Grunt’s manner was cool and sober. “You don’t kick me,” he said.

“Why kick a corpse?” asked Cutter. “He can’t feel it.”

“You don’t kick me,” replied Grunt.

Cutter hardened his tone through the alcoholic haze, dropping the funny games. “I’ll use a knife,” he said. “Real class.” Cutter mimed the flicking action, with a sound effect from his mouth.

“Knife me?” spat Grunt. “After all I’ve done?”

Cutter snorted. “Loaf, fart and screw old Medusa?”

“You’re garbled, Cutter. Don’t push it too far.”

“Eh?” Cutter raised his eyebrows, intrigued by this feeble revolt.

Grunt replaced Harry’s hat on the table. It was brim-up, as before. “Did the robbery together, don’t forget. Ought to be grateful, Knifer.”

“I’m ecstatic, Grunt. Orgasm time. Give you a Brownie point.”

Grunt gazed at Cutter with a new contempt. “No money if it wasn’t for me. Nevill got that job, remember?”

“You’ll get your cut, what’s the problem? Got a psychological defect?”

Grunt bared his teeth in tempered rage, the show more dangerous for its subtlety. “Ain’t so stupid, Knifer. Not like you think.”

“Write the script for Mastermind, do you?”

“Stuff it, Knifer. I’m sick of ‘Grunt’. I’m a proper worker, proper lodger. Want a bit more respect.”

Cutter regarded Grunt with a dumbfounded expression. But he voiced a true opinion despite his stupefied state. Standing a touch unsteadily, Cutter told the mechanic what he thought. The tones would befit a tyrant.

“This is my Yard. *Cutter’s*, not Grunt’s. But I gave the Grunt a chance. Say you’re equal or better, by God, I’ll show who’s master here. Yard’s the focus of my life and labours. Rachael came, she failed. I had to shove her, Grunt. I’m not past shoving you.”

Grunt’s face was unchanged. “Shove me?” he murmured. “Like the Manchester lot?”

“Cut it, Grunt.”

“I’ll cut *you*,” said Grunt. His manner was no longer cool, but cold. “That scrap in Manchester when push came to shove, then shove came to flicking knives. You were there with The Blades against the wall - but what did you do, Cutter? When they asked you to cut the Weasel’s throat, you turned, you ran chicken-shit scared.”

“Slice it, Grunt.”

“Told me your story, Cutter. Your coward’s heart, when it’s one-to-one on the level.”

“I’m warning you,” said Cutter. He raised a leather-gloved fist, gleaming with signet rings.

“You’ve warned me enough,” said Grunt. “I’ve played my part. Want equal shares in the firm. I’m not Grunt anymore, I’m Andrew - or think of a better name.”

“You’re *Greasy Grunty Git*,” snarled Cutter. “Son of Medusa’s Daughter, Madame Slut-Gut.”

Cutter was unable to finish this slanderous family tree. While Grunt possessed a leaner figure than his leader, he was well able to deliver. The punch came precise, low, winding Cutter in the stomach. Then a gentle kick toppled him into the chair. Cutter groaned. His head flopped aside, dribbling alcoholic saliva.

Grunt stretched himself in aerobic exultation. Yes, he had changed since the robbery. He was a sharper, keener man. Grunt regarded the mantelpiece with its new acquisitions: the demon statues, standing guard. He studied their razored shields with centre spikes, and swords poised to attack.

What a challenge they would make, thought Grunt. Love to fight one of those.

As Rachael spoke, she shared her secret distress for only the second time. Yet Cutter's betrayal of their partnership had spoiled this confidence. Now it was Sue's turn to provide the listening ear as they sat in the midnight kitchen.

"The forest wasn't real," said Rachael. "It was...My Enchanted Forest. A scene from a storybook."

"You hated the story?" asked Sue.

"No - I *loved* the story," said Rachael. She cleared her throat and spoke in a clear, rational voice. "I was...playing with my friend Kathy. We must have been eight or nine. A council house, big garden at the back. Mum had lived there for years. We played these fantasy games. Make-believe. Best party frocks like two princesses. The boy next door - Jonathan - he slayed pretend dragons and stuff."

Sue smiled. "Sounds fun."

"It was. Johnny had this plastic sword and helmet. Looked like a proper knight."

"But something happened...?"

Rachael nodded. "Mum met a flash bloke down the bingo hall. Dad had left, you see. Always arguing. Divorce, the usual story."

"Right."

"So it's Mum's big night. They're going out, off to some do - fuck knows. Anyway, she's all dolled up. Ton of mascara, lipstick. Kathy's dad fetches her, Jonathan's gone home. Uncle Dave comes to baby-sit. 'Sleep on the sofa,' says Mum."

The surroundings blurred to an ill-defined mist as Sue focused on the young, saddened face. "There's dinner in the oven, we play with toys. Then a programme he wants to watch."

"Usual stuff," murmured Sue. "I've sat babies."

"I build a Lego dolls' house, forget about Uncle Dave. The programme ends, he yawns, puts the television off. Sees me on the floor and smiles."

Rachael paused a moment. She squeezed a biscuit, making no effort to eat. "He asks...if I want a drink. I say yes. Then we sit on the sofa with books to read. Enid Blyton, Rupert, My Enchanted Forest. That was a huge book with panoramas. Castles, lakes, trees. Loads of detail in the pictures..."

Sue knew the sort of thing. "Sounds marvellous."

"It was, Sue. My best of all time. Don't know who the artist was. There's a girl lost in this forest, which never seems to end. Some sort of villain, I can't remember what he's like. A knight comes to save her, on horseback. The book's spread on my lap, over my dress. Uncle Dave reads aloud. I'm there enjoying the story, but I feel this hand creeping up. Crawling under my dress, my petticoat..."

"Christ, Rachael."

"Uncle Dave whispers, closer and closer. Hot breath in my ear. He says, 'It doesn't matter, it's only a game.' He reads more of the story. So I hear about Jessica in the forest, finding the magic path. But his hand tickles, then squeezes me in this nasty way. He keeps reading, smiles and squeezes harder. I sniff, and nearly start to cry. He says, 'No whining. You mustn't tell Mum,' and reads more of the story. His finger goes

in my knickers and starts wriggling - inside. He still reads the story, but I start to cry. He says, 'A Princess shouldn't be upset.' He pushes hard, harder, deep inside. 'It's your special treat,' he says. Kisses my face and neck, his disgusting spit on my skin. So my eyes fix on My Enchanted Forest, into the distant woods. I wish I was running there, away, away, running from Uncle Dave."

Rachael's voice lapsed into a trembling sob. Sue gently hugged her friend. "God, Rachael. I'm so sorry. You could have told me...told Laura, anytime."

Rachael wiped her eyes. "I just kept thinking of that storybook. It made everything...disappear. Then I started dreaming of this fictional land, My Enchanted Forest. It was somewhere I would be safe. But the place I loved had turned dark and evil, decaying all around. That's why I had to paint it, Susie. To get it out of my head. It wasn't the forest I was painting, but my screwed-up innocence lost."

* * * * *

Grunt had prowled down to the workshop and crashed on his collapsible cot. Only the hall light shone in the flat above, so the living-room brimmed with darkness. Despite such uninviting murk, there were pale glimmers in the night. Stars dabbed weak blotches through the grimy glass, above the jagged outline of rooftops. Enough light to define the coffee table, Harry's top hat, and the bulk of Cutter's body.

Cutter groaned, but remained unconscious. His state was stupor rather than sleep. The biker had been hit by drink and Grunt's fast-flying fist. His clothes made for cumbersome nightwear.

Something had passed from Cutter's life. Something he had once treasured. He saw Rachael in his mind, reading a storybook. Her party frock floated like a flower. Closing the book, Rachael turned away and skipped through the sunlit woods. There were no shadows to threaten her now. Only the purity of nature, and innocence.

Cutter felt pain as she vanished, like a stab in his heart. An agony of terrible loss. He tried to scream sorry, but his throat was dry. It formed nothing but a faint croak.

Cutter found himself choking on rising smoke. The swag bag lay at his feet, with flames licking its creases. The letters curled with the heat, before the cloth darkened and collapsed. Danny Roberts glanced this way and that, looking the worse for wear. He never noticed 'Cutter' Graves as he mopped his sweaty brow.

Grunt was laughing at Cutter. Mocking him. Then he turned his back to reveal the emblem of The Blades: three down-thrust daggers on his leather jacket, stencilled in graphic style. Grunt was a Blade? Maybe...*but look again*. The face was no longer Grunt's. It was someone Cutter knew from his life in the north. One of the Manchester gang.

The chapter! All present and correct. Harlan, Spasmo, Royce. Each held a knife to the Weasel's throat: the sad-act who had told of the Bradford run, then squealed to the victim's father. "You're new," said Harlan to a keen recruit: Cutter in his early twenties, the beard a fuzz of potential. "Earn the name 'Blade'. Cross the one-percent line. We're below the decimal point."

"Please, boys!" snivelled the Weasel. He wriggled on the wooden post. His arms were lashed with barbed wire, while his neck was secured by a length of chain. "I've

thought better! You're outlaws! Pillage like the Vikings. Have my mother, my daughter - not *me!*"

"Can't make that kind of prediction," said Harlan. His head remained an obscure void against the country stars. "My blade says...maybe I'll take pity and let you go. I've cut a man before."

Royce nestled closer, adding his ritualistic threat. "My blade says...maybe you should bleed and nourish the earth. I've cut a man before."

"Spasmo?" asked Harlan.

"I've been cut...and I've cut before," said Spasmo. "The Weasel's blood lacks novelty for me. Yet our so-called 'Cutter' is a virgin Blade. He needs to participate."

All eyes were upon him. Six - or eight, counting the terrified peepers of the Weasel. How those eyes met Cutter's and bore into him - so wide, so totally helpless.

Harlan offered Cutter a blade. He took it, and weighed the weapon in his hand. Its tip was tinged by a sliver of moonlight, the rest invisibly lethal. "I'm Paul 'Cutter' Graves," he murmured.

Cutter edged the knife towards the Weasel's neck. The man's face became a quivering gargoyle. "Meet his gaze," said Royce. "See his terror. Be at one with the blade."

Cutter listened. He looked deep into those bulging eyes - and beheld fitful, shuddering fear. "We don't hear the scream," said Spasmo. "We don't smell the blood."

"Please, boys!" gasped the Weasel. "I'll shut up, I never saw nothing." He coughed like Cutter's father, when infection had put him to bed.

"Blade's sharp," said Spasmo. "Blade's wicked."

"You've never cut before," said Royce.

Yet Cutter withdrew the blade an inch or two. "He's too old," he said. "Just leave him."

Harlan mortified Cutter with an evil stare. "No need for kindness," he said. Harlan snatched the blade with a sudden move, slashing the Weasel's throat. The head jerked back, striking the wooden post. The tongue writhed like a maggot. Spasmo screeched in pleasure at the splatter of blood, the hideous thrashing form.

"You're no *Cutter*," said Royce, "but we'll cut *you!*"

Cutter ran. Ran to his banger of a bike, the best he could afford in those days. He revved it and raced away, as if the devil were on his tail. The chapter flashed their maddened knives, choosing not to pursue. But a note arrived on part of the Weasel's shirt, written in Weasel blood: *No witness. Get your carcass south. Seven days to comply.'*

Cutter had complied. He left his digs without notice and bombed down to London that night. After skulking in cafés and on the streets, he found a shabby room. Jobs were easier to find in the 1970s, and Cutter looked smart out of biker gear. All sorts: petrol attendant at an Acton garage, taking stock in a Clapham warehouse. Hackney had work, cleaning flats of the dear deceased, which provided more independence. Cutter began to take an interest in society, reading chunky paperbacks amid the debris. His intelligence led to better grades, and the drudge of increasing paperwork.

Cutter's soul had grown restless, for he missed the biker world. No more lust for gangs and the open road, but mechanical steeds and their inner workings. A chance sighting of Spasmo at a Watford garage suggested greater distance would be best: London could form a buffer between Cutter and the north, rather than a fortress to confront his enemies.

So Cutter had moved to Brighton, like Harry once before. A town of wasted wanderers and desperate dreams. The usual crummy jobs transpired, although real friends like Wilf had been made. Cutter had saved, bought the Harley FXS, and rented a lock-up garage. It was there he had started bike repairs as an initial sideline, before merging home and workplace in Cutter's Yard. A pragmatic form of perfection, but Cutter felt happy enough. It had taken three years of graft.

Cutter had laboured to fix the place, employing Grunt, and honed his engineering skills. Just the French trip as reward this August, then back to the demanding grind. Not that Cutter forgot the concept of danger, or the threatening nature of knives. While he rode with no gang, joined no chapter, he liked to take personal risks. His party-piece, the chopping-board, had captivated many a guest.

What of the strange events this winter? What of their messy aftermath? Cutter's dream shifted back to Roberts, who gabbled on the phone. Then a policeman collared him from behind. Roberts gasped. "Please, boys! I'll shut up, I never saw nothing." But handcuffs clicked round his cuff-linked wrists. The man's face became a quivering gargoyle.

Cutter groaned. His tongue lolled over his lower lip, and the dribble dried on his beard.

The moon was waxing from the first quarter, saving its full glory for a few more days. But its crescent had edged round the window, offering a helping of pale, milky light. It picked out objects in the darkness, dusting the brim of Harry's hat. This appeared to hover like Saturn's ring, as if the planet had mysteriously vanished.

The silk-lined interior had a rich, shining curvature, which faded to an indefinable depth. There were no limits in space or time: just an infinite void of shadow.

Silver shapes spiralled through the darkness and came to a graceful pause. They were letters from a bygone television show, 'HOCUS POCUS'. The music, the titles, the lights!

A dapper figure stepped into view. The one and only - Harry Hocus! He was youngish, dressed in a sharp lounge suit, with a blue tie embroidered with stars. The audience clapped, so Harry responded with a cheery, welcoming smile.

Harry fanned a pack of playing cards, and shuffled them through various slick manoeuvres. He displayed three - King of Blades, Jack of Trades, Queen of Broken Hearts - picturing Cutter, Grunt and Rachael. A fourth popped into his other hand. Harry the Joker, of course.

The cards were gone. Harry manipulated his fingers to extend a wand from nowhere. He tugged the scarlet kerchief from his pocket, crumpled it in his fist and tapped his fist with the wand. The kerchief became a bright royal blue. Harry tucked it back in his pocket.

Turning, Harry dipped his hand into the 'O' of 'POCUS' - producing a red billiard ball. Claspng it tight, he tapped his fist with the wand and displayed an empty palm.

Stretching, Harry tossed a galaxy high into the air. The stars were tinsel, but glittered as they twirled - sending the audience into rapture. Harry's suit was sprinkled by this shiny confetti. He returned to the silver letters and waved his wand. This was the final flourish. Harry stepped aside.

The darkness was no longer a stage. The letters spiralled forwards, larger, larger, and swept out of view. Only the void remained.

A sigh rushed up from Harry's top hat, through the floating ring of the rim. A chill gust reached the butts in the ashtray, prompting them into convulsions. Then it explored the room in a stream of atmospheric disturbance. Dust billowed on the floor, magazines rustled in the corner, badges tinkled on the mantelpiece.

The forest painting vibrated like an audio speaker. The disturbance could sense the emotion wrought in the canvas, and created a resonance of empathy. Rachael's signature had been neatly lettered with an underline swish, as if greeting this new energy. It stood bold behind dancing dust.

The disturbance recognized the statues standing guard, for it had shared their previous home. The demons possessed a greenish hue in the moonlight. The disturbance entered their dark, slitty eyes, and roused the forces within. The innards of the creatures ignited, so orange coronas oozed forth. These licked the rim of the sockets. The eyes were alive with flame.

A voice murmured words of incantation. It must have been Harry. The flame was reflected in the contours of these cruel, hunched figures. It edged their weapons with a war-like glow.

The disturbance had done its work, and left with a distant sigh. The demonic eyes flickered into darkness. The moon became obscured by clouds, while Cutter lay snoring in the night.

Leaving the kaleidoscope on the table, Roberts moved to his patio and stared at the sea. He wore a pair of dark glasses to shield him from the day, for even the winter sky stung his eyes with its soft, diffused light. Still - the view brought comfort, as it always had. The slow undulation of the diminishing waters, the cool freshness of the air.

Roberts no longer felt part of his surroundings. The sea and patio were elements in a distant image, as clear as a picture postcard yet equally unreal. Yes - I am here, he reasoned. Yes - I have stood here before. But it has no relevance to my being, for my being is elsewhere. I move towards the paradise ahead.

His shirt had been worn since the previous morning, and bore stains of both food and drink. Physical appearance did not matter any more: nothing mattered but the revelations conjured by his optical toy. All time, all concentration, must be spent on its vivid imagery. Forget the hobby of wishful thinking. He had the hobby of wishful *seeing*.

Still, Roberts felt a small pang of inner regret. He had hoped to achieve wisdom through meditation, without stimulus or aid from outside. The kaleidoscope denied him this freedom by offering a definite path. Roberts could only follow.

He had fought languor since the building firm went bust, focusing his mind on the leisure centre. But it was all theory, all in the mind. Without deals to make, staff to boss, Roberts had lacked detail to underpin his scheme. It was nothing but a mental concept: an abstract but determined day-dream. Believing its false reality had become an increasingly tough discipline.

The past was all words and waffle. Roberts had braved the kaleidoscope with his old vigour, enjoying its spectacular fireworks, coming down with a bump. A mental landscape - the desert, a parade of familiar objects - tracing the path ahead. Roberts would see the future and see it work! His path was right, he would show 'em! Roberts gasped in anticipative awe, knowing each session with the kaleidoscope was more absorbing than the last. Who needed the real world - this villa, the cliffs? He could do without it for a while. Roberts must reach the end of his illusory journey, trace his earthly plans. The kaleidoscope was a passing phase. A cute executive toy.

Roberts bolted the villa's door and moved to the lounge. But he staggered at the threshold, sagging as he walked. His progress resembled evolution drawn in reverse, with man turning back to an ape. Ending on his knees, Roberts stretched his arms in bestial support. Their fingers clenched the smooth beige texture of the carpet, clawing its crisp geometric design. He froze, poised and animalistic, yet with no shame at this low situation. For had he not crawled these last few years, metaphorically? Had he not found every transaction difficult, every proposal a bar? I *deserve* to crawl, thought Roberts. I've earned it. An outer manifestation of my inner failure. Roberts Junior feels sick at his senior.

Edging forward, Roberts arrived at the coffee table. He fumbled to remove his glasses. Their dark lenses had masked his ravaged looks: the left eye was swollen yellow and crazed with red. Its lid was a ribbon of flesh, surrounded by pink puffs of fluid-filled tissue. Some of the kaleidoscope's shine had singed the nose, which peeled as if

badly sunburnt. His brow was set in a distorted frown, while the cheek was splashed with a purple rash.

Diving his face into a bowl of peanuts, Roberts scoffed like a dog. He spilt some on the carpet before grabbing his treasured object. The motions were becoming automatic: up to his eye with the queer antique, so the colours came spinning towards him. Distracted from disturbance by other woes, Roberts grinned with inane devotion. He was fixated by the initial pyrotechnics - a rainbow chandelier - before the patterns split asunder.

Roberts dropped back into the desert and stumbled forward with a faint, asthmatic wheeze. Each dune was a slithering challenge, while the heat beat down on his head. The objects still snaked ahead: there had been mementos of London, the stage, Harry - and now this barren stretch through the later years. A desk was piled with telephones and paperwork, all demanding attention. Roberts crept on, past a bouquet of withering flowers: a surprise that had failed to delight Sheila, failed to put things right. Bricks lay scattered from his building firm, and working tools projected from the sand.

This would be the toughest part, thought Roberts. Nothing could be more painful. He must confront the recent sadness of his bleak situation. Empty bottles lay like the media of unwritten messages, a reminder of his alcoholic state. Bills fluttered across the flat-line landscape, as if strange predatory birds.

But there was hope, too, in the instruments gleaming on the horizon. A saxophone and drum-kit. Frank and the lads! Encouraged by this reminder of happy times, Roberts marched with unbending resolve.

* * * * *

Cutter had felt unsettled in the Yard this Thursday morning. Last night's row with Grunt still buzzed through his mind, yet no clear philosophy had crystallized. While he had not brooded on its contents, the nightmare had disturbed Cutter. Its essence simmered beneath his conscious, waking thoughts.

But worse, the cold light of logic. Cutter had begun to make an objective judgement of recent events: his intense relationship with Rachael, the robbery, his loss of the girl. She had trusted him with her secret, yet one flaw - one moment of betrayal - and he had cast her aside. It had been a decision fitting the moment and his purist stance, yet the losses had outweighed the gains. What did he have? The promise of dirty money, with a runt like Grunt to spend it with. Now that runt had a taste of power, and was pushing for rights of his own.

So Cutter wandered Brighton, hardly registering the streets he took. The North Laine bustled with alternative styles, intermingled with more sober residents. Perhaps they had been alternative, once. Cutter looked at various kitsch, second-hand books, and stuffed himself with chips. Then a beer at midday, although the chatter in the pub set his nerves on edge. Cutter slipped out unusually fast, and slouched back towards the bohemian shops. There, next to a hippy weaving Celtic hair-wraps, he found Rachael drawing on the pavement.

Sue had given her some brilliant chalks, which made vibrant streaks on the ground. Rachael had created an expansive pattern of abstract forms, so rays curved from a central point. They crossed each other and crossed again, forming a complex mandala. The effect resembled the inner swirls of a great kaleidoscope, and Cutter found his neck twisting round, round, in simulated revolution. For a second, the pattern appeared to have a greater depth. It was a tunnel of magical light, burrowing deep beneath the pavement. Cutter blinked, denying the dizzy influence. The light was only chalk, after all. This visionary work beat the botched Old Masters that often stood for a streetwise aesthetic.

Cutter's boots trod heavily, and stopped by Rachael's upturned hat. He dropped a few coins with precise alignment. The chinks alerted the girl from her labour, and she glanced upwards with a smile of gratitude. It was meant for someone unknown but impressed. Rachael's eyes met Cutter's - narrow, distant, as if seeing her through a veil of mist.

There was no sneer in his expression. No hint of righteous provocation, or veiled gratuitous cruelty. Neither did he beam a quality of redemptive warmth, nor relapse into earlier affection. Rachael tried to form the nickname she had found so fitting, but the word 'Cutter' was beyond her. The initial "C..." was the faintest croak, before her throat turned coarse and dry.

Cutter's heart strained in sympathy for this downtrodden girl - yet his head made the rules of life and love, and would admit no error to its quarter. He could neither love Rachael, nor forgive her. She would have to understand. Cutter had made the decision and the decision stood. The biker turned away.

* * * * *

Grunt had listened to Cutter's departure with the sneaky reticence of a child. He knew Cutter would avoid waking him after their drunken row. Cutter thought Grunt had been oversleeping, and was glad of his privacy: in fact, Grunt had been bright enough under the oily duvet. He had grinned at Cutter's murmured insults, and blinked at the slam of the door. Following a burst of masturbation under the ceiling pin-up girl, Grunt rose at an unidentifiable hour (due to the shattered alarm clock). It was actually half-past eleven.

Big breakfast, thought Grunt. Nice and greasy. It wasn't his fault Cutter was sulky. Grunt had spoken his mind the night before - and if Cutter didn't like it, he could sod the job. Climbing the stairs, Grunt pondered a new nickname. Anything was better than 'Grunt'. Something cool...*mellonww*. Something with style. 'Waster', or 'Basker' from the Basker Trilogy. His favourite fantasy books! Yeah - and the Master of the Yard? 'Blunter'!

Grunt heated various scraps in a dodgy simulation of cooking. Munching bacon on burnt, ketchup-smearred toast, he wandered into the living-room. All was silent, with a definite air of chill. Grunt settled into Cutter's armchair and stared at the mantelpiece.

The display was sombre in the window's pallid daylight. Rachael's painting had always displeased him, yet it was the perfect backing for the metallic demons. Chewing the final crust of his breakfast, Grunt rose and approached the mantelpiece.

Grunt was a shady figure in a dark sweatshirt, jeans and denim jacket. His modern steel spectacles reflected the grid of the window. Grunt tickled the right demon under the chin, delighted by its unpleasant visage. Then his gaze passed up to the painting. In a moment of awestruck silence, Grunt realized its quality of mesmerizing depth. He was compelled to raise a hand: to feel the knobbly bark of a painted tree. He traced its pockmarked ripples, the cracks and distortions. The textures of...another reality. Grunt stepped back upon the cold, dank earth, for the forest loomed all around.

Dumbfounded, yet somehow unafraid, Grunt moved a short distance across the muddy ground. Roots formed a constant hazard, furled with claw-like intensity, while the trees diminished into a crowded distance. Each was a virtually leafless silhouette of jagged branches. Their angles were sharp and unnatural, their bark an ashen hue. Grunt adjusted his spectacles with a restrained gesture. They reflected the tangled setting.

* * * * *

Rachael had been understandably distressed by the surprise appearance of Cutter. Having completed most of her pavement art, she retreated to a nearby café. Coffee hit the spot, and the cash was hers to spend. Rachael had a corner to herself, once another girl left. Should get her head straight.

It was a place Rachael came to often. A dumb waiter brought orders from a basement kitchen, and the yard was popular in summer. The walls were plastered with the usual gig-show-meeting posters, often overlapping. She studied their graphic lettering while slowly sipping her drink. Its steam rose like an early mist on the brown, liquid surface.

Grunt emerged from a dense thicket, glancing to and fro. A foggy expanse of swamp filled a clearing in the forest. The trees tilted to block the sky. He proceeded through a drifting trail of vapour, making his way along the squelching shore.

The substance of the swamp comprised a vile, muddy solution. Across this pool of darkness was an area of web-like density, where dead trees lay rotting half-submerged. Their bark had been encroached by adhesive fungus and suffocating, twisted creepers. Insects both large and misshapen fluttered and crawled without pause.

Beneath the undulating surface of the corrupted waters, a mass stirred in the lower sediments. It sent a seething effervescence of putrid gas to pop in momentary, stinking bubbles. There was a groaning gurgle as a sloppy meniscus rose, concealing an organic bulge. It burst to reveal the dirty texture of a dripping material, clinging to bat-like limbs. These unfolded with lithe, anatomical precision. The garment was a translucent film over wrinkled, leathery skin, decorated with crude swirls of black and gold. Knobbled vertebrae hunched upwards in a smooth motion, their writhing length tipped by a forked tail. Then the neck uncurled to lift the heavy, spiked head - a living likeness of the statues. The outline was sleek, yet the details intricate. Twisted horns swept back from a flattened skull, while the mouth gaped open to reveal a mesh of wriggling tendrils. The chin had grown to a bony, beard-like protuberance.

Looking up, the creature beheld the network of branches that criss-crossed the clouds. It waded through the filthy water, stepped ashore, and hunched in momentary

introspection. The creature hid its eyes: then a sparkle fizzed behind the sharp talons. It stretched its arms asunder so the eyes were revealed. They were blazing, and ready to seek.

The creature reached for the sky, catching two vicious weapons that fell from nowhere: a heavy sword with a killer edge, and a spiked shield rimmed with blades.

Rachael drew back from the coffee, her head throbbing with a sudden pain. She felt drained as if a battery put to the test, loaded with tough demands. Nausea made her grasp her forehead, while her vision was grainy and blurred. Every sound in the café - in the street outside - boomed with a resounding acoustic. Rachael heard an ethereal voice inside her head, speaking strange persuasive commands.

Grunt made his way along the mud flats, leaving a trail of soggy footprints. Roots curled from the edge of the land, sinking deep into the swamp. He was aware of the teeming insect life, with its various rasps and chirrups.

Grunt stopped, questioning his experience with a new concern: where the hell am I, why am I here? He kicked a foul, deformed mushroom at the waterside. It smashed into pulpy fragments. Everything felt solid, yet nothing *real*. He regarded the trees with their jagged outlines, like those in Rachael's doom-laden picture. The textures were true, but the shapes were false. It was the setting of Rachael's nightmare, given some illusory physical substance. Had she imagined it or remembered it, and if so...from *where*?

Grunt was confused by the forest. Its novelty was wearing thin. He sniffed a curved sliver of mushroom, wondering whether to try a bite. Might be lovely, might be lethal. Was it worth the risk?

Grunt spat the sliver into the depths of the swamp, having braved its exotic temptation. Might be nutritious, he thought, but it tasted the way vomit smelt. The place seemed physically tangible, but it must be a dream. He was dozing in the armchair, snoring his time away. Yet he could think his thoughts, make his moves. It was not a passive experience.

Try shouting, thought Grunt. Must be able. "Nice place!" he yelled. "Where's the café?" The final word resounded from the opposite bank, diminishing into silence. "Bollocks," he added, in a murmur.

Grunt sat on a damp log below a splintered rocky outcrop. A piece of the brink had given way, taking the tree with it. He remembered something in his pocket: a roll of American hard gums. Just three left, so go easy. Grunt gnashed a red one, the flavour a welcome distraction, and regarded the brown stretch of murky liquid. An overgrown island loomed through the drifting mist, distinctly unwelcoming.

Grunt blinked hard. "Wake up," he said, slapping himself on the face. "Wake up, Grunt - I mean, *Andy!*"

It was impossible to tell when he detected the motion of something nearby. The dry, crackling leaves rustled all around, and the wind moaned through the crevices of this contorted wilderness. Then there was an underlying, repetitive strand of disturbance - a scraping here, a scratching there - that Grunt interpreted as movement. He stood, and started to clamber over a causeway of crumpled roots. This led to a slope above the swamp's shoreline, forming a low cliff.

Grunt heard a thrashing agitation behind him, and spotted a flicker in the forest fringe. Something had dodged behind a thick, diseased trunk. He walked on - increasing his pace now - but caught another sound ahead. It was a high-pitched variation of atmospheric velocity: the wind wailing through the trees. Grunt cocked his head, listening hard and alert. The sound began to alter, to modulate. "*Raura...wbandi...Andy. Danger. Dannnger behind.*" It was a voice calling faintly, with the quality of a musical instrument. It was neither male nor female, old nor young. "*Mmmmove faster, Andy. Move ssswiftly. Run, Andy. Ssstart running fassst!*"

Grunt did not want to be a coward, and was reluctant to obey. A glance over his shoulder revealed nothing but gloom, but a rasp sent a tingle of dread through his soul. This was enough to prompt him. Grunt marched at a much sharper rate, jumping over a tangle of fallen branches, speeding to a jog. The wind was stronger, so fragments of crackly brown leaves billowed like a locust swarm. The nettles and thorns encroached closer, ripping his jeans. Grunt finally started to run.

It was difficult to negotiate this labyrinth of tight, hostile vegetation. Grunt slithered on the upward rise, snatching at a dangling creeper. Barely behind came the sour rattle of the unknown thing, in pursuit.

The voice again, nearer, stronger - urging him to carry on. "*Almmmost there, Andy. Almmmost there nnnow.*" Grunt heaved himself past the treacherous mud, using the gnarled protuberances of tree roots. Quickly, he scrambled to the top.

Grunt was on a high rocky outcrop, above a panoramic view of the swamp. He was awed by the sight before him: the forest spread forever, meeting a bleak horizon of crooked mountains. Yet there was something peculiar about this sweeping vista. A sense of the artificial. The scope was epic, but the distance lacked depth. The clouds hung heavy and unmoving. It was just like a painted backdrop.

Puzzled, Grunt peered over the edge of the brink. His heart leapt at the drop. Nothing deceptive there, he realized, struggling to maintain balance. "*Go onnn,*" said the voice. "*Or go back. You have nnnno other choice. Goodbye.*" It faded with a diminishing laugh, and Grunt knew he had been conned.

Forward or back? No option, so Grunt turned on his heel. He beheld the bony demon, which had crept up behind with the skill of an expert stalker. The mouth drooled vile saliva, while the eyes burnt the innards of their hollow sockets.

Grunt did not scream. He did not yell. He just met the gaze of the creature, his face blank with a customary alienation. Fear would be a stupid reaction, since it meant cowardice in the face of a fight. Grunt preferred to defy such emotion, although he was unable to defy fate. His only choice was to jump from the cliff or confront the thing to the last. Grunt had known enough subservience. He would not know any more.

So he stood, with a calm dignity, studying the mosaic of detail: *Medusa* would be sweet next to that warty complexion. The orange light on his face became brighter as the demon gasped, inches away. The breath filled Grunt's lungs with pungent fumes, causing a choking fit. He wobbled on the rocky edge, accepting the inevitable.

Then Grunt became stabilized as an inner warmth began to glow in his stomach. He glanced down to see the central spike of the demon's shield, embedding itself in his flesh. Spouts of blood gurgled as Grunt was lifted clear of the outcrop, flailing high

above the misty shore. He saw the demon's eyes gleam between the rotary blades, reflected in brilliant streaks. Then he felt a smooth, jellyish sensation as it tilted the shield downwards. Grunt's body slid clear of the spike. Smaller barbs pointed back along the silvery length, tearing worm-like slivers free.

There was a blur - an impression of speed and tumbling - with sharp rocks racing past. Then something stabbed through the flesh of Grunt's neck, and impact smashed his mind to darkness.

The pain in Rachael's head became a silent numbness, fading in a few seconds. She rubbed her temples and stared at the table's wood-grain, as the texture sharpened back to clarity. Little time had passed in the café, for the customers were unchanged. Rachael held her head in her hands to calm herself, with the coffee still warm on the table.

Cutter had kept away from the Yard all day, hoping to escape frustration. He threw himself into another mood through immersion in vibrant activity. Cutter had calmed his mind to a passive state, then opened the floodgates to input. Information could drown his sorrows, and he had plenty to drown.

Cutter had bought a tatty politics book in a backstreet shop, reading hard over lunch. Then a film watched solo through the afternoon, beers and a ride out of town. He headed deep into the countryside, down roads and undiscovered lanes.

Cutter stopped his faithful Harley in an obscure rural backwater. He munched pies in the winter night, listening to the sounds of nature. The moon frosted the chrome of the FXS, standing ready to go. Cutter studied the stars turning in the blackness above, with the field a darker shade beneath: and he, too, was a shade - a spirit - questioning the depths of his soul.

Cutter had known regret would hit him, even while trying to forget Rachael. It had taken a glimpse of her face that morning to send his brain into turmoil. The day's distraction had muffled the shock, but he was threatened by a lurking despair.

Yes, he had made the decision over Rachael. But the decision - if it stood - meant the killing of his love. Cutter could trace the circuits of his own psychology: analyse the chips of logic, the resistors of prejudice. The batteries of passion had blown the fuse of fury. Yet he was unable to quell the growing sadness he tried so hard to repress. The sadness of a life with Gormless Grunt, without an angel about the Yard.

Cutter took the trip back at a faster rate. He reached the Yard past one o'clock, with his bike echoing through the silent streets. Cutter entered the workshop, switching on the main fluorescent light. It flickered a sickly glow over the cluttered interior.

He regarded the curtain of plastic strips. Maybe the cubby-hole would bring happiness. But the place held too many memories of Rachael, and he felt unable to enter. She had been superseded by boxes of hi-fi tricks, excluded from his inner domain. Cutter felt ashamed by the fact.

The cubby-hole, for all its wonders, was now a pathetic place. Not a patch on its incarnation as the focus of Rachael's trauma, allowing her to purge herself through art. Cutter decided not to enter, or even to peer inside, till he had eased the darkness of his current mood. The run had not been enough.

There was Mandy's scooter. It provoked differing reactions. On the one hand, Cutter felt like dousing it with petrol and setting it ablaze. On the other, he could return her trust with meticulous attention. Perhaps they would form a more lasting relationship. Mandy was second best next to Rachael, but had much to commend her in the personality stakes. Sal, he realized with a wry smile, was unlikely to stick with Grunt.

Cutter patted the scooter with genuine affection, wondering if late-night labour might offer reward. But he had slept badly the night before, and did not wish to bodge the job. Best start tomorrow, Friday, bright and alert. Cutter needed his kip. He hooked his helmet on the lower banister, yawning loudly as he mounted the stairs. Cutter killed the light with its upper switch, and clomped high to his attic bedroom.

The helmet's graphics were another aspect of Rachael's art: the symbols of revolution, red and black, over a backing of spattered grain. The form was empty without Cutter's head, so its visor gazed blank and transparent. This reflected a view of the yard outside, curved through optical distortion. Nothing but a gleaming splash of purest white from the external security lamp.

* * * * *

The saxophone shone gold in the desert. Its brass reflected the yellow sand with an intensified glow of colour. Roberts put the reed to his lips, sounding a hesitant note, then a short riff Frank had taught him. Lessons! That's what he needed, when life was rosy again.

The saxophone must be a sign of hope. Roberts resumed his trudge across the flat, simple landscape. He could see something else: a motorbike combination, in need of restoration. What was that in the sidecar? It looked like the swag bag, bulging with stolen goods.

Roberts heaved the bag onto the sandy ground and unbuckled the thick straps. He was curious to compare illusion with reality - and indeed, the same objects were there. But, not *quite*. Roberts pulled two metallic demons from their silky wraps, holding one in each hand. Their features sneered in frozen derision, while the chunky weight implied worth. "Strange," murmured Roberts. "I never got *these*." With a flash of annoyance, he realized how Cutter had not been straight. While relinquishing most of the takings, the biker had kept this pair for himself.

Replacing the statues, Roberts found the kaleidoscope with a knowing smile of delight. He brought it up to his eye, which remained healthy in this world of illusion, and twisted the lens as before. A vortex surrounded him with a pulsing, energized spectrum. Then the kaleidoscope jerked away.

Roberts twitched with nervous disturbance in his armchair. His throat felt as coarse as sandstone. His left eye - far from healthy - streamed tears from its raw, meaty socket. The kaleidoscope lay on his lap.

He became aware of the telephone's warble, and let the answerphone crackle into life. "Hello. You've reached Daniel Roberts. I'm a busy man, but I'll listen after the beep."

A deep voice spoke on the rasping speaker, familiar from previous contact. "Mr. Rimmon. I'd like to do business. You have just what I need. I'll come if it's more convenient. Ring me soon, Mr. Roberts. Goodnight."

Roberts rocked gently back and forth, hugging the kaleidoscope. Damn Rimmon, he thought. He could have the bric-a-brac, but he wasn't getting *this*. How could any price equal its magnificent visions? How could money rival those vivid insights, with the prospect of glory to come? But Rimmon sounded keen. Desperate, even, below the controlled precision of his voice. Would he wait till Roberts telephoned, or forget the nice formalities? Would he try to steal the kaleidoscope?

A stream of rationality flowed through Roberts' mind as he remembered the situation. He was the one who had phoned Rimmon in the first place. Yes, he must sell

the goods, make money, pay debts, buy time. Then, commission a plan of Defty Danny's. Why was he consumed by these inner reflections, instead of objective reality?

Stumbling to his feet, Roberts placed the kaleidoscope on the coffee table. He took several deep recuperative breaths, and fingered the soreness around his eye. The flesh was red, the eye stinging. These were the side effects of the toy. Shuddering, Roberts swigged the dregs of the red wine he had neglected since Monday. Some splashed down his grimy shirt, adding a series of purple blotches.

Roberts slouched past the black and white photo of Harry and himself, then the abstract art reproductions. He was half-blinded by the light of the bathroom as he examined himself in the mirror. Roberts splashed cold water onto his weary face, dabbing the raw patches with a flannel. "Christ," he murmured. "Going crazy. Stop this crazy scene." He held the flannel as a cold compress, and moved to make a drink. Hot chocolate or a Horlicks. Something to calm the nerves.

The kitchen light revealed more craziness: the place was a careless tip. Food from improvised meals lay strewn on the table, with the dishes unwashed, scattered or broken. Cornflakes spilt from a shredded box, crunching underfoot. Roberts gripped the furniture like an unsteady pensioner, switching on the electric kettle. Then he stumbled over to a cupboard, and searched roughly through the groceries inside.

Roberts knocked a jar of coffee so it smashed on the mucky floor. He found the Horlicks, and tipped it straight into a mug. Adding sour milk, Roberts poured boiling water past the brim. He stirred the liquid with a jammy knife, and shuffled out of the kitchen. A frothy trail marked his progress.

Have to phone Rimmon, thought Roberts. Tell him to take the damn kaleidoscope, *everything!* Roberts could recover without temptation. Relax, see a doctor, make future plans. The kaleidoscope was a glittering prize, but held nothing but escapist fantasy.

Dropping his drink, Roberts knelt by the coffee table and lifted the telephone receiver. He tried to dial the number on the business card, in a state of clumsy confusion. His fingers were a trembling mass. Roberts bashed the wrong code for outer London, while Rimmon's number - clearly printed - proved equally beyond his ability. There were three escalating tones, then a woman spoke. "The number you have tried has not been recognized. Please check and try again." She repeated this cautionary mantra in a prim, recorded voice.

However, Roberts spouted forth as if he had dialled correctly. "Mr. Rimmon...you *help!* Come, take the stuff. I want to *sell!* Do the business, sir." He waved the kaleidoscope with his other arm, before throwing it on the floor.

Roberts growled into the mouthpiece, coating it with foamy dribble. He felt a pain of withdrawal from his inner world, not a hostile spite towards Rimmon. He released the receiver, which fell to the carpet and lay like a dry bone.

The Telecom voice was silent.

Roberts rolled over into a foetal position, clenching at his grey hair. "Harry," he hissed. "Magic in Focus - out of focus - blurred, battered and busted. You've done it now, Harry. You've got me. Got to keep everything *straight*. Keep my mind on the

world. Solid things! Forget these crazy illusions!” He bashed the floor with his frenzied fists, like a cartoon baby in a tantrum.

* * * * *

Chief Inspector Braintree liked the view from his office. In particular, he liked to peer through the slits of its half-closed blinds while observing the lights outside. True, Hove was no Gotham City - but his imagination was stirred by the nocturnal atmosphere.

Braintree sat behind his desk, with one leg propped against the radiator. The pose had all the lithe grace of a Gerry Anderson puppet. He munched a digestive biscuit with patient deliberation, each morsel matching some new deduction. His long brown mac hung on a wall hook, resembling an officer ready for action.

Braintree leafed through a sheaf of papers: various statements on Harry’s murder. His study was broken by the entry of Detective Sergeant Leeds, whose face was pale after a punishing shift. “Sir,” he nodded, removing his own mac and hanging it to partner his superior’s.

Braintree swallowed a lump of biscuit, at what seemed a conclusion reached. “How’s tricks, Sergeant?” he asked.

“So-so, sir,” shrugged Leeds, pouring coffee from a lukewarm pot. “Sackville Road mugging’s got a suspect, he’s sitting in the cells right now. Couple of yobs down Shoreham...”

“Forget it,” said Braintree. He closed his chunky dossier, tapping the uppermost sheet. “I hoped the word ‘trick’ might have prompted you. Recall our stiff magician?”

“Mr. Hocus?” frowned Leeds. “Hasn’t sprung back to life?”

“Afraid not,” said Braintree, with skeptical deliberation. “Been down forensics. Rats did a thorough job. We’ve got unidentified prints on the furniture - maybe relevant, maybe not - plus something rather peculiar.”

“Sir?” queried Leeds. He sat on a squeaky swivel chair, superseded by Braintree’s more comfortable acquisition.

“Roberts’ prints in Harry’s bedroom,” said Braintree, “clear on the inside handle. Said he’d shut Harry in his bedroom, but Harry must have opened the door.”

“So...Harry left no prints of his own?”

“Nothing recent,” replied Braintree. “Roberts closed the door behind him. That’s the story, anyhow. So what about Harry’s prints?”

Leeds pondered the point. “Wore gloves?”

“His stiff wasn’t wearing them,” snapped Braintree. “Roberts never shut Harry in the bedroom - unless the guy walked through the *wall*!”

Leeds sipped his coffee, chuckling at the thought. “What about those sleeping pills?”

“Harry suspected something,” said Braintree. “Never took ’em. There was no trace in his bloodstream. Remember that yarn about the window? It never rang true. Roberts went to close it, left the door open. Harry came out, so they had a row.”

“Then...Roberts decks Harry?”

Braintree nodded. "The old man goes down, and Roberts panics. Tries to fake a robbery, with murder. Dumps Harry in the trinket room, grabs a few things. Bet they're in that villa of his."

Leeds clicked his tongue, suggestively. "Take him in, sir?"

"Not yet," said Braintree. "I'm not accusing Roberts." He adopted a less relentless tone. "Let's watch him. See his movements. Learn a bit more."

"Sounds good to me, sir," nodded Leeds. "I never liked the guy."

The yellow morning light illuminated the squat's dusty windows. Rachael was wrapped in her blankets on the living-room floor, although her mind was awake and active. She had opened Harry's travelling bag to examine the photograph. It was still no delusion: still the image looked real. There were Harry and herself in the lavish foyer, her fashion quintessential for the period. It might have been a theatre, it might have been a club: Rachael found it difficult to tell. Either way, the scene had the silvery sharpness of a genuine old print.

Olly appeared through the orange curtain, which served as the living-room door. He was startled to find Rachael awake. "Sorry," he said. "Intruding..."

Rachael smiled. "Don't be sorry." She lowered the photograph.

"Just want my book," said Olly. "Down there." He retrieved a warped hardback from the side of a tatty armchair.

Hesitating, then thinking it best, Rachael slipped the photograph back into the travelling bag. The stealthy move went unnoticed. "Got the time?" she asked.

"Eight-fifteen," said Olly. "Get your beauty sleep, don't worry."

"Hope I don't *need* it," smirked Rachael.

"Course you don't," said Olly. His tone implied a degree of admiration.

Rachael yawned. "Up soon," she said. "But it's so homely, now I'm used to the place."

"Got the vibes," said Olly, quietly. He fingered the spine of his book. "Enjoy it while you can. How's your friend?"

"Sue? Fine, Olly, thanks. I could have stayed there, but...it's awkward going back."

Olly's blond beard was tinged gold with the rising sun. "You're a rover, ma'am!" he said, wryly. "A minute here, minute there. Ever settle down?"

"Course," said Rachael. "When I'm ready."

Olly began to turn, but remembered something he had almost forgotten. "Look - you want something different? Come to the seafront tonight."

"What's going on?" asked Rachael.

"A torchlit parade," said Olly. "Meet at the West Pier."

Rachael considered the invitation. Why not? Her social engagements were nil. "What time?" she asked.

"Starts seven," replied Olly. "Go together, if you like...?"

He was a charmer, but Rachael had work of her own. "I'll see you *there*," she said, glancing at the travelling bag. "The library's open till seven. Want to look up some books."

"Plenty of books," said Olly. He nodded to the mildewed selection jammed on a corner shelf. "Novels, cookery, the lot."

"Not what I'm after," said Rachael. "It's...personal. But I'll keep an eye on the clock."

Cutter peered at his typewriter paper like a patient scrutinizing an eye chart. He had combined the words, he had typed them - and there they were on the page. The letters formed a simple enough phrase, but conveyed no workable meaning. Just a chain of random shapes, angular motifs on white. 'Brakes, Tuning, Labour. FAST PAYMENT BEST.'

Been trying too hard, thought Cutter. Been fighting logic, fighting lethargy, might finish by fighting myself. He touched his heart with a gentle pressure, hoping it was up to the job. Did the blood reach the parts it was meant to reach? *Of course*. Danger, if it came, would be sudden and disastrous. A crushing pain, collapse, an agonizing death. All or nothing, he reasoned.

Health was not the only worry. Cutter's life had become an anticlimax. He had a thousand quid off Roberts, and the promise of plenty more. So where was the feel-good factor? Cutter was straining to work after barely an hour, finding any excuse to stop. Make another coffee, take another leak. He had even started smoking again.

Cutter knew the heart should never rule the head. But the head was a hard master and the heart an unwilling slave. Cutter's head wanted to work, but his heart rebelled. It hated the tough regime. So why not ease down? What was urgent? Mandy's scooter could wait. Why not string her along, see more of her? Keep the connection going. She might be the next Rachael, and Sal would grow to like Grunt.

Anyway, paperwork? Sod it, thought Cutter. He slid the chair back with a sudden jerk, as if repelled by some venomous insect. Just a bundle of bills for minor customers. It could wait another day, no hassle.

Cutter banged out of the office, kicking a can across the concrete. It hit the BSA combination with a clatter of tin. The rig was mechanically sound but cosmetically unfinished. It should be a labour of love. Shamed by his disrespectful treatment of the Rocket 3, Cutter forced calm into his turbulent mind. Maybe a stretch in the cubby-hole would do some good.

The workshop faced north, away from any direct sunshine. Indeed, it was best revealed by the external security lamp and its artificial moonbeams. But there was enough bounced daylight to delineate every detail, while the tools and components by the window made a jagged silhouette.

Cutter did not switch on the overhead light. He disliked the way it tinged daytime with an unhealthy, greenish hue. The biker regarded his motorcycle helmet, still poised on the banister post. He saw no reason to move it.

Turning, Cutter walked past the sooty brick column to the curtain of coloured strips. Once more, he was unable to proceed. The cubby-hole sparked no feelings of pleasure. He cared zero for its hoard of hi-fi. Cutter felt he had reached a wall of ice. There was no way he could enter the room.

Cutter's Den? It was no longer special. A pathetic escape, in fact. No-one else would be allowed such an opinion. Even a lesser insult would find them flat against the floor. Yet the incredible was inescapable.

In a sense, Cutter understood the reason. The cubby-hole meant a chilled-out mind: the fascination of electrical repairs, the wonder of an inspiring soundscape. His

present mood was dampened by depression, which could only spoil the show. Better to regain his vitality, and save the cubby-hole till later.

Then another question struck Cutter. Where on earth was Grunt? Sick of uncertain wage and certain abuse, had he finally quit his post? But the workshop suggested otherwise: Grunt's collapsible bed remained uncollapsed, with the blankets tossed to one side. His rucksack of clothes lay on the floor, by a box of personal items.

Must be staying round a mate's, thought Cutter. Probably that wanker Nevill again. They both had feelings against him: maybe Nevill was planning a comeback, hoping for Cutter's share of the loot. Let him try, thought Cutter. See what he got. No more Mr. Nice Guy next time. Next time, his head would go in a vice. Squeeze some sense from the scum.

Amused by this brutal image, Cutter stomped his way up the stairs. The helmet wobbled with each step. The visor reflected the window as a bluish streak, as if watching with inscrutable patience.

* * * * *

Roberts had resolved to deny the kaleidoscope's influence through a shivering, sleepless night. He had moaned and thrashed in his large double bed, finding no moment of comfort. Now his head rang with a hollow, unnatural clarity - the kind that follows a bad bout of flu.

Roberts consumed a scrappy breakfast, shaking cornflakes into a bowl. It had held baked beans the day before, and the rim was still smeared with sauce. Nevertheless, Roberts had some precarious grip on reality. He drank a refreshing pint of water, and decided on a short cliff-top walk. Roberts had been stuck inside for most of the week. Maybe the air would do him good.

After lurching against the gatepost, Roberts crossed the rough track that formed The Promenade. He reached the wire fence along the cliff edge and gazed at the view below. The rocky beach was blotchy with hardy, rampant seaweed.

Roberts turned west to descend a low dip, then rose up a crooked path. His left eye was squeezed in a perpetual wince, although dark glasses masked its appearance. Peacehaven was peaceful, if hardly exciting. Roberts was glad to go unobserved.

His aim was to reach the pale monument on the next cliff-top. It was about fifteen feet high, surmounted by a copper sphere: this represented a globe of the world. The sphere had reacted with the air, turning an oxidized green.

Roberts stood by the southern, seaward side. The Prime Meridian was marked in pinkish tiles, cutting through the grey paving slabs. The inscription should have been clear in its explanation, but Roberts saw only a mass of indecipherable lines.

Roberts had one foot each side of zero degrees longitude, but something moved a fraction to the east. An avenue lay between his villa and the monument, where a car prowled along with a tangible wariness. It was an old 1970s car, dark-painted and well-maintained. It was the car Chief Inspector Braintree used for his more anonymous missions.

Detective Sergeant Leeds had the passenger window open, and examined the passing scene. Peacehaven had a peculiar atmosphere, evoking somewhere other than England. The road surface was a warm beige colour, suggesting sand to an imaginative eye, while the sky was pierced with telephone poles like the blight of some new invention. The houses were low, with dormer windows and sloping tiles. Many had an almost panoramic feel. The place resembled suburbia from the classic American films.

The avenue led straight towards the sea, which formed a visual band above the land's termination. The car crunched across the track into a small, deserted car park. The surface was gravel, embedded in mud. Braintree switched off the engine, which fell suddenly silent.

Roberts started back along the crooked path. He glanced at the car park, sensing a watchful presence. Roberts was startled by the sight of Chief Inspector Braintree, his figure brown against a distance of liquid blue. Braintree offered neither greeting nor explanation. He just met Daniel Roberts' stare. Then he took an expansive handkerchief and snorted through his nose, twice.

Roberts looked away, glad his eye was hidden - although skin peeled from his nose. While he continued to walk at the same steady pace, his soul cried out to run. But Roberts doubted he could do so: he was already stretching a physique punished by unearthly demands. In any case, running would look suspicious. Best move slow, casual, normal. Roberts hoped this would suggest an air of confidence, and thus a vindication of his character.

Roberts arrived home in a quivering heap. He closed the front door, bolted it, then took refuge in the living-room. Roberts regarded the stray receiver, but left it where it was. He did not care for callers any more. Roberts flopped onto the sofa, panting like the prey of an approaching hunt. Outside, the figure of Chief Inspector Braintree stood opposite the front gate.

Braintree leant back upon the cliff-top fence and lit a hand-rolled cigarette. He was unable to gain much information, however hard he stared. The curtains of Roberts' villa remained tightly closed. Perhaps the man had become allergic to daylight.

What was so great about reality, thought Roberts. What was so wonderfully *fab*? It was clear his plans had gone wildly amiss. 'The show must go on!' school of showbiz banter no longer provided the answers. But, damn it! What about Defty Danny's? He must see the paradise ahead...

Roberts had misjudged the power of the kaleidoscope. He had used it with an initial carelessness, but now? Perhaps he had mastered those searing energies. Once the potential was unlocked, he could learn the truth. Why should he doubt its visions? Harry had guarded the thing for decades. Harry knew its value, sure enough.

The kaleidoscope still lay on the floor. It had displayed some marvellous sights: the vortex of colour, the scattered objects. So why miss the next revelation? It was not for Roberts to question this miraculous device, possessed of a stunning power.

Roberts had belittled the supernatural in his early years, but had been transfixed by these recent visions. He now accepted the occult. The future lay along the symbolic path, contrived from remnants of his three score years. To miss the final instalment would be the act of a dunce. To miss the wonder it would bring him: the *paradise* ahead.

It was all or nothing, thought Roberts. Condemn the visions as a crazy delusion, and sell the kaleidoscope - or delve into its inner realm, whatever the risk. Yet what did he have to lose? A failed career, a possible murder charge. Where would his ambitions lie now? The kaleidoscope might be the instrument of his own salvation, to enlighten a heart of darkness.

With this, Roberts made the decision. He would continue to use the kaleidoscope, and trust the wisdom of its insights. Just then, a chilling thought struck him. So what, if the visions were false? Were delusions not better than the truth? Maybe he could never build Defty Danny's, his haven on earth. Maybe things had gone too badly wrong. If Roberts could not have his dream in the physical world, he cared for the world no more. Journey on, on, through the inner reflections, on to the paradise ahead.

Obsessed by this daunting prospect, Roberts slumped onto the carpet and wriggled towards the object. He breathed deeply, quietly, having made the decision but braving himself to act. Then quickly, without thinking, he took the wooden device and lifted it to his eye.

* * * * *

Rimmon sat in his London home, dialling Daniel Roberts' number. He heard nothing but a stream of constant pips. Although Rimmon did not know it, Roberts' receiver lay dead on the carpet. The man was entering a dream world again.

Rimmon lowered his own receiver. The face was a study of gravity. Rimmon analysed the situation in a sombre mood. He bore in mind the kaleidoscope's power, and how it could grab the psyche of an ignorant user; traced Roberts' declining manners since the initial phone call; calculated the likelihood of Roberts having lost control, and the gain - for himself - of the treasure. Sizing up all the elements, Rimmon made a decision. He would not wait for an invitation.

* * * * *

Rachael sat at a long table in the Brighton Reference Library, with a variety of volumes beside her. It was planned to relocate the library, although funding was delicately balanced and the building had not been agreed. As it was, the library was part of the Museum and Art Gallery, just by the Royal Pavilion.

The place had a delightful aura of the antiquated, with solid wooden bookshelves and furniture. Other corners held the modern implements of computer and microfiche. Rachael had two books from the entertainment section, plus a few she had called from the stacks. As with many such establishments, much of the collection was hidden from view.

Harry had pursued the odd sideline in his years of activity. 'Hocus', she read in a table-creaking film guide, 'appeared in several British films of the period. One such was the colourful *Mr. Trickster* in 1964: a Dickensian pastiche resembling *A Christmas Carol*. Hocus features as unlucky actor Harry Pollock, inheriting magic powers in his uncle's will. A cheery piece of period fancy.' The author gave it three stars.

‘Harry steps into the role with relish’, added a book on popular cinema, written by an expert on comics and film. ‘Sprightly in the musical numbers, delightful in his quick-fire patter. The studio settings, created at Shepperton, evoke a quirky Victoriana.’

The expert was less impressed by a second outing, of somewhat dubious quality. ‘The same cannot be said of the low-budget *Flash Harry*, released in 1965. Producer Dan Roberts was responsible for this poor children’s vehicle, shot in black and white on a hasty schedule as a cheap showcase for his star turn. Harry seems uncomfortable as ingenious Dr. Presto, a scientist who can jump into the future. The child actors are pleasing, but the production limps under the direction of first-timer Bruce Browning. Unskilled process photography reduces Harry’s jaunts to wobbles by a home movie screen.’

‘A tiresome film’, recalled a volume of recollections by a respected Fleet Street critic. She had been writing since the silent cinema, and had the misfortune to attend a preview. Roberts had apparently hyped his project, resulting in real disappointment. ‘Simple tricks cannot suffice for a compelling storyline, and the constant slapstick grows dull. The adventures, when they come, are predictable. Harry appears in a world of pepper-pot buildings, with one long chase after another. His pompous lecture to the captured villains has the audience booing the hero.’

Rachael read more as the sky darkened. She became distracted from her line of study, as can happen with reference books. Other avenues of interest appealed to her: big musicals, Laurel and Hardy, rival conjurers of the music hall era. But she returned to the various indexes, finding anything she could.

One hefty tome of stage biography summarized Harry’s later life: ‘Hocus performed successfully in London between the two world wars, joining the Society Of Magical Entertainers. Leaving his native Germany with the rise of Hitler, his shows reached British troops overseas. Hocus featured on radio during the late forties and fifties - most notably *Wireless Wonders* and *That’s My Trick!* - and pursued a minor film career.’

Another mention intrigued Rachael with its details, as part of a wartime memoir: ‘Some performers, of course, risked the London Blitz and would stage their shows for an eager audience while the sirens wailed outside. Tragedy could strike, and sometimes did. The Croydon Variety, for example, was hit by bombs during a performance by conjuror Harry Hocus - whose active efforts in helping the emergency services saved several injured patrons. But the raid claimed the life of Miss Susan Starr, his assistant of many years. Hocus later set sail with the Entertainments National Service Association - playing in many a makeshift theatre, in both jungle and desert settings.’

A tear dropped from the corner of Rachael’s eye, dampening the page with a pulpy circle. This was the defenceless man who had been so hurt, through intrusion and physical violence. His image beamed up at her, beside the late assistant. The caption ran: ‘Harry with Susan Starr, circa 1929.’ They were standing in a lavish art deco foyer.

Rachael was astonished by Susan’s resemblance to herself, although the photograph was not identical to the one from the album. If Susan was a true assistant, was Rachael a true replacement? She noticed the details of Susan’s dress with an involuntary shudder. The same spangled number featured in either photograph.

Too stunned - too moved to dwell upon the story - Rachael closed the book. Opposite, a middle-aged man read a broadsheet newspaper with relentless application. A girl scribbled in a jotter pad, probably a student. Rachael envied such innocent work.

“Closing in fifteen minutes,” called a woman from the desk. Rachael glanced up at the clock. Quarter to seven? Time to go. Join that torchlit parade.

Rimmon arrived in Brighton on an early evening train, this chilly Friday the thirteenth. He ate at a burger joint by the station, smart in his dark suit, hat and mac. Not that he minded less formal surroundings: Rimmon was curious about every by-way, and would eat in the dimmest cafés.

Finishing the coffee, he regarded the various posters adorning the walls. Gigs, clubs, shows - the public life of this busy seaside resort. *Roberts*, he thought. It is time to leave. I have lingered long enough.

Rimmon bashed the door of the café closed, and passed the bus stops at the top of Queen's Road. An empty office was inhabited by a security guard, minding space on his own. A bespectacled woman bustled past in a long, tight coat. Rimmon saw the blood-red neon of a casino sign, which might have drawn him at another time, and his reflection in the mirror of an optician's window. Little could be glimpsed of the face under the low, shady hat. Rimmon was a shady character.

Someone mumbled about being homeless, but Rimmon did not react. He retained a cold psychology. The opposite paving was raised behind railings, with a shop for collectors of stamps. Beside this stood a sturdy Masonic Centre, glowing with an inner mystery.

Rimmon paused by the clock tower to avoid a cyclist. Then he proceeded down West Street, past the Parish Church of St. Paul and glittering penny arcades. An underpass took him beneath the coast road, opening through an archway onto the lower promenade. Rimmon breathed the salty air and turned left, east, towards Roberts.

Rimmon felt a sorrow within himself. A sorrow at such a regrettable task, since early rapport had been good. Roberts had traced him through a mutual contact, and offered the strange and obscure. The approach had been most sincere. Rimmon would appreciate the objects, and pay the proper price. Such things were his passion. Roberts had nothing to fear.

Yet it was unlikely mere wariness could account for Roberts' behaviour. Approaching the man by slow degree, Rimmon sensed the true situation. Roberts was no longer Roberts. He had lost all self-control. He was a puppet of the kaleidoscope, and unable to resist. His soul was feeding the mechanism with vital force, in exchange for flashy illusions.

* * * * *

At least Cutter was honest with himself. The dinner he had cooked was inadequate. There had been no thought in its preparation: no flicker of skill. The ingredients had lurked in the fridge for too long. Cutter had bunged them in the frying-pan, burnt them black, then served up the dripping mound. A dash of HP Sauce made a slight improvement, but Cutter winced at the greasy slop he consumed that night.

Yet his enthusiasm had been lacking all day. Cutter had hoped the evening shades would complement these feelings, lending the austerity of dusk to his inner pain. But

they had chilled him with an encroaching void, transforming the workshop and flat into an emotive setting. Cutter felt trapped by the narrow walls of life's theatrical gloom.

It was certainly wrong for a Friday night: the time to drop stress after work. No Grunt, for whatever reason - and of course, no Rachael Stanwick. She felt like part of another story now: a heroine lost to another play. Was it conscience, pricking him for striking her down? No. It couldn't be. It *wouldn't* be. He had made the decision, and the decision stood.

Cutter found a new hardness of attitude. He began to suppress those deep regrets that had troubled him so. The biker had followed his code of honour: Rachael had known the score, but disobeyed. Cutter respected her misguided courage, even as he crushed his love. For she had trusted him. Told him her secrets. But when it came to the test, such *loyalty*.

Cutter dropped the fork with a metallic clatter. What was it, this frustration? Even denying Rachael his sympathy, Cutter was forced to acknowledge its effect. Age? Loneliness? A disappointment with life in general? This last rammed home most firmly. His eyes rolled to the sky beyond the undrawn curtains. The clouds were blocking the stars.

Cutter pulled the curtains to block the clouds, for the view held no inspiration. Even the thought of money from Mr. Roberts failed to warm his heart. That was it, he realized. *Disappointment*.

Take those girls the other night: a couple of airheads. Fun, yes. Pretty, yes. Maybe damn obedient, too. Cutter might burgle a whole pantomime cast and keep either one in tow. But fear would be the motivation. They would be frightened, not of crime, but of Cutter himself. They would do his bidding and tag along, just to keep safe and sound. They lacked curiosity and insight. Their hearts would never be true.

Rachael had been misguided, sure, but she also *respected* him. Made her choice, then regretted it - but Cutter had never forced her. "Rachael..." he murmured, feeling a real twinge of guilt. What was he left with? A gormless mechanic and some giggling cosmetic groupies.

Ever since the robbery, Cutter had averted his eyes from Rachael's art. He had never thought to dispose of it, but wished to avoid a flood of anguished recall. It was time to break the habit. Cutter approached the mantelpiece, and stared deep into the forest painting.

It was remarkable how Rachael had managed to impart such depth: each brushstroke was precise in the delineation of detail, but held a vibrancy of expression. Cutter let his eyes follow the trail of a twisted root, across one way, then back. It zigzagged wildly towards the centre of the picture.

As he tried to look away, Cutter's eyes met another zig, another zag. They moved in, in, into the artwork. He perceived depth and space within the picture. It opened out - it expanded to the rim of his vision - so the air of the room became the air of the forest. Cutter moved towards the vista of tangled branches, into the infinite maze. He bashed against the mantelpiece.

Cutter snorted, and took two strides back. If this was how Rachael felt in her nightmares, no wonder she had been disturbed. Cutter experienced a whirling sensation

- as if he had spun himself round, then stopped. Rachael would have been the hit of the 1960s, beating every ‘-ism’ there was. She could have made a new one, Cutter thought. Rachael’s ‘Hallucinism’.

‘I guarantee your astonishment!’ That catchphrase of Harry Hocus. Rachael had astonished Cutter. But the words became slurred in a throbbing head, their relevance lost to the biker. Aspirins and an early bed were enough this Friday night.

* * * * *

Rimmon walked calmly along the lower promenade. He moved past the beachfront pubs and clubs, huddled in their redbrick archways, and a row of cafés shuttered for the night. A ramp took him back to the level of the coastal road, where he passed an interesting statue: a metal monolith drilled with precision holes, to create images of couples kissing. A few youths lolled on its circular bench, although Rimmon heeded them not.

He arrived at the glittering Palace Pier, just by the aquarium. Nearby, the Volks Electric Railway began its trail to the east. No trains ran at night. Marine Parade rose to further heights, upon an overgrown wall. Regency windows shone above its railings.

Rimmon took the low road, Madeira Drive, which lay deserted before him. He passed the relic of a cargo ship, beached a decade or so before. Its anchor had become a monument. Cast iron columns receded to infinity, accompanied by the glow of electric lanterns.

Rimmon crossed the tarmac to examine this underbelly, and strolled beneath the arches. The place resembled the far end of a forgotten tube line. Beyond lay Daniel Roberts. He noticed a fun fair by the beach, with no flicker of amusement. All was closed and deserted.

Rimmon quickened his pace past the various attractions: a spindly roundabout, a Big Apple roller coaster. The canopy of a ‘Pay Here’ kiosk flapped in the wind. Of course, there was nobody there to pay.

The arches were broken by a tavern, which incorporated a lift from above. Stepping around this obstacle, Rimmon noticed the arches were no longer infinite. A staircase rose ahead, so he moved back onto the road.

Rimmon became distracted, despite his grim resolution. There was something on the beach, glowing. A welcome flicker of flame. Rimmon loved fire. He loved its movement, its dance, its elemental life. Relishing the brief intermission, he decided to take a look.

Rimmon followed the Volks Electric Railway for a short distance. It was overgrown, like the railroad of a Wild West frontier. The fence gave way to a small level crossing, and Rimmon stepped over the narrow track. ‘LOOK BOTH WAYS. STOP WHEN LIGHTS SHOW.’ But the lights did not show.

Trudging onto the pebbles, he approached the silhouetted figures. The crackling fire shone like a warning beacon. Rimmon merged imperceptibly with the crowd. He observed an object engulfed by the conflagration, blending elements of bulldozer and

dragon. The paper shell flaked away and curled gracefully to ash, revealing a chicken-wire skeleton.

Rimmon warmed his hands, examining the others. They were mostly young, alternative types. So that was it. Burn the demonic road dragon, a ceremony for the new pagans. The more lively took torches from their recent parade and whirled them around. Rachael and Olly joined in. They drew circles of pulsating luminosity, alongside transient serpents of flame. A beautiful girl beheld the scene, filled with wonder and mirth. Her semi-oriental features were gold in the light. She had made the road dragon, to burn.

Suddenly, Rimmon found himself staring at a bizarre character: the face was hidden behind a rubber gas mask, its filter drooping like an outsize nose. The round glass eyes met his own, impassively, although the eyeballs were lost in shadow. Who was inside, thought Rimmon. What could motivate such a man?

Turning away, Rimmon crunched to the edge of the sea. He listened to the hiss of the seething waves, and sensed the teeming contents of the water. Fish, swimming. Small fish, bigger fish. Rimmon could feel the squids and whales, deeper down. Mysteries of the sea.

The bass beat of a sound system broke his reverie: the kids were having fun. Rimmon also felt the first spit of rain. Time to go, he thought, crunching back across the pebbles. Rimmon tilted his hat to the crowd. He admired rituals and pageants in all their forms, especially those in the dark.

Rimmon diverted up a bushy slope, past several gloomy benches. There were a couple of figures, slumped in stupor or sleep. He emerged on the windswept pavement near the French Convalescent Home, built with a turreted grandeur.

Before long, Rimmon found himself on the cliff-top path. It was bleak for a winter walker. He followed the coast road past the outskirts of Brighton, above a huge yachting marina. The shrubbery ended in a clear-cut line, revealing the modern vista below. Perhaps the earth's top layer had been chiselled aside to display its inner workings. Flyovers glowed like computer graphics over an expanse of sprinkled lights, enclosed by great concrete arms. Everything shone with an ethereal softness, blurred by the cold drizzle.

Rimmon strummed the cliff-top fence like a big guitar. There was nobody else to hear the notes, for he was quite alone. Rimmon reached the edge of the marina, where the shore reverted to rocky beaches. There was a starkness lacking in the town, with its tourist vision of a seaside. The gabled facade of Roedean School overlooked the scene, enclosed by wrought iron gates.

Then, Rimmon entered a zone of utter darkness. No street lamp shone along this stretch of road, while oncoming traffic dazzled his sensitive night sight. He was proceeding through an obscure void, where only the cliff-top fence reflected an occasional gleam. For a time, Rimmon felt an atmosphere of sheer detachment: this place - this very moment - was wholly indefinable, connected to no previous or coming experience.

Ironically, it was the lights of St. Dunstan's School for the Blind that shone half a mile ahead. Its art deco lines evoked a science fiction laboratory, working long at strange

experiments. Street lamps appeared once more, while the road cut through a rising brow of land. A windmill stood sentry on Beacon Hill, above the village of Rottingdean.

Rimmon projected his thoughts along the route ahead. He still had two miles before his destination, and time to concentrate his mind. A man in his late fifties, Rimmon relished this six-mile walk. He neither paused for rest nor refreshment, never heeding the January chill. Rimmon glowed with an inner snugness, and brimmed with relentless energy. Psychic navigation was a special gift, so the seeker would become the finder. He was an adept - a magician in his own right - but not one who performed on stage.

The cliff fell towards Saltdean with its neglected Lido, another art deco monument. The South Coast Road passed a second stretch of bleakness, where town allowed countryside the final say. Rimmon was greeted by the sprawl of Peacehaven. Sensing Roberts lived on its coastal strip, he sharpened his instincts for the final approach.

Rimmon's mind detected two observers, who had been lulled into silence by a long vigil. He relieved the boredom by wishing a dreamless sleep. Braintree and Leeds slumped in their cliff-top car, and never saw Rimmon walk past.

Rimmon glanced at several homes, but knew they did not hold his man. As can often happen with desired goals, there was no flash of revelation. Rimmon merely stopped by one particular house along The Promenade. It was a swish, panoramic villa. He knew he had found the place.

Mounting some steps, Rimmon stood at the gate. The curved windows were draped in long beige curtains, but emitted a faint glow. Rimmon crossed the slippery veranda and arrived on the doorstep. He pressed the electric bell.

Rimmon waited for twenty seconds, glancing between the frosted window of the doorway and concealed, curtained interior. There was no response. He pressed again. The bell rang long and harsh.

Inside, Roberts was hunched on the carpet near his favourite armchair. He was curled in a semi-foetal position. The kaleidoscope was clenched tightly by clammy fingers, while his eyes stared superstitiously wide. Roberts was unable to resolve into definite action as the doorbell rang again. His last attempt at shaving had been a brutal, slovenly farce: the cuts had become linear scabs, while the stubble remained grey on his chin. Dried food encrusted his lips as a foul, uglifying cosmetic.

There came a loud rat-a-tat as the caller lost patience, banging the letter-box hard. Roberts made an involuntary whine, letting his head flop forward. His brow tapped the eyepiece of the kaleidoscope in a gentle but obsessive motion, up and down, over and over. Outside, there was a scuffle as the figure moved away. Everything's okay, thought Roberts.

Rimmon strolled to the side of the house, past bins and straggly bushes. There was another door, leading to the kitchen. He donned a pair of tough leather gloves and punched a pane of glass. Shards fell with a tinkling sound. A hand crept in like a tarantula spider, wriggling to find the key. Twisting it to open the door, Rimmon grasped the handle and entered.

The kitchen was a total tip. Ripped packets lay all around, with their contents spilling out. Tins had been slopped into bowls to eat - presumably - unheated. You've been living like a dog, thought Rimmon. An animal. Indeed, the symptoms meant just one thing: the rotting of brain cells and psyche, a steep addictive decline. No plaything. No novelty. *The Kaleidoscope of Inner Reflection*.

Rimmon entered the hallway, where he regarded the framed photographs and abstract prints lit by halogen bulbs. The soles of his shoes squelched the consumable debris Roberts had spilt on the carpet. Even Rimmon's cold heart felt a pang of pity for the wreck of a man he encountered. Roberts was sprawled in the lounge, clenching something *most* desirable.

Business was business, and no pleasure tonight. Rimmon got on with the job. He approached the man on the carpet. Roberts reacted with an asthmatic snarl, fearing the loss of his toy. Rimmon examined the suitcase with a solemn nod. A decent haul, as promised.

"Sorry to intrude," said Rimmon. "You wish to make a sale. I have travelled long to be here, and do not like to waste my time."

Roberts stared at Mr. Rimmon. "Get...the c-case," he spluttered, "Go, go..."

"The case is something I came for," said Rimmon, "but it is not the only thing. You mentioned the object you have in your hand. The one I most desire."

Roberts pulled the kaleidoscope tight against his chest. "Not me," he hissed. "Not give!"

Rimmon beheld the man's condition, and saw that condition to be wanting. Roberts was hardly conducive to rational speech, let alone professional transactions. Rimmon wanted to close the deal. "When I do business," he intoned, "I like to make each meeting...a *conversation*. I have tried to have a conversation, Mr. Roberts, but my efforts are in vain."

Roberts scuttled back with the movement of an insect, nestling in the cushions of his armchair. "Not the colours," he muttered. "Mine...mine! Show me the paradise ahead..."

"I must demand the promised goods *in full*," said Rimmon, stalking towards Daniel Roberts. "Including the Kaleidoscope of Inner Reflection. Give the object to *me*."

Roberts reared back with a fierce hiss, and stroked the magical toy. "My paradise!" he snarled, baring his teeth. "*Everybody's happy...*"

Rimmon watched these actions with dispassionate calm. He reached an inner resolve. Softening his manner to the wasted man, Rimmon spoke in a soothing voice. "Very well, Mr. Roberts. I'll show you the paradise ahead." Moving gently, Rimmon guided the kaleidoscope to Roberts' eye. He gave the lens a manipulative twist.

Roberts gasped as he beheld a whirring pattern. The lens was rotating by itself. Its shimmering aura crackled a tenfold increase, so his face became tinged with a throbbing glow. The lens whirled round and round - faster and faster - its colours a spinning chaos. It sucked Roberts through a tunnel of light, conjuring another world.

"How do you feel?" asked Rimmon. "How do you feel?"

Roberts felt fine. He was running, without wheezing, to the edge of the golden sand. The sun was shining, the air was fresh and his heart beat with sheer exuberance. Yes, there was something ahead. Something he had long desired. Something he had to see. Up the steps of the seaside prom, he could barely contain his glee. The panoramic glass facade, the clean white sweeping lines. The leisure centre he had planned so long. He had reached the paradise ahead!

His name up huge - 'Defty Danny's' - silver by daylight, neon by night. The old tricks worked, that business know-how. Roberts had done it all in the end. How do I feel? So happy. Yes, *everybody's happy!*

Yes, everybody! Waving madly, cheering to welcome the boss. Boys in Harlequin costumes, girls in ballet dresses - rolling crazy cartwheels, spinning pirouettes. Pantomime horses, outrageous dames, strongmen, acrobats, midgets! How Roberts laughed at the fantastic sight, how he gasped to see Sheila's smile. Sheila was back again - young again - in a yellow ball gown as bright as the sun, as bright as Roberts' heart. He took her hand and they twirled together, *mellow* to the music of Frank and the lads! Roberts wore a tuxedo just like them. Yes, *everybody's happy!*

But Lawson? That runt who had denied him backing, scowled at his business plan? There he was, poor and pathetic, a stupid circus clown. Look at him! White face, droopy lips and big red nose. Look at him! Weeping sadly, cap in hand, asking Roberts for money. How Roberts laughed. No way, no luck chum! I'm one of the *big boys* now!

No shadow boxing, but the real stuff - and Roberts had giant gloves. THWACK! you fucker. BIFF! on the nose. Blood on Lawson's pasty make-up. How Sheila laughed. How everybody laughed. Yes, *everybody's happy!* How they giggled and mocked as Lawson fell, counting "One! Two! Three!"

He did not get up.

"It's a knockout!" smiled Roberts. Hooray!

Harry laughed too, as Roberts shook his hand. All was forgiven and forgotten. Yes, Harry understood. He shared Roberts' vision, and was proud to play a part. They posed for photos in the foyer, snapped by Scottish John. FLASH! FLASH! FLASH! went his flashgun. Yes, *everybody's happy!* Got to smile at Defty's or he'll box your ears, like that bleeding little snot-ball Lawson.

Harry performed on stage with miraculous wonders, his guarantee of astonishment kept. He finished with a shower of shimmering stars, just like the music hall days. How everyone clapped in their beautiful clothes, their colourful gay costumes. Roberts skipped to join Harry and hugged him, proud of this fabulous act. They shared the warmth, the applause as the streamers fell. Balloons floated up from the crowd.

Roberts laughed, Roberts grinned, Roberts chortled. His mouth gaped wide, then wider in pain. The agony seared his body as the kaleidoscope whirled, scorching both eye and brain. His hand dropped to reveal a bubbling mess, oozing from the burnt socket. Roberts' face had been fried like bacon. His jaw was locked in a silent scream.

Rimmon beheld the sorry spectacle, then slid the kaleidoscope from the dead man's hand. Roberts had paid the price. Misused the object. Found his future paradise in fatal ecstasy. Rimmon placed the kaleidoscope in the suitcase with his other trinkets, snapping the lid closed.

He walked casually to the front door, and paused briefly by the fancy mirror. Nice piece of work, thought Rimmon, adjusting the tilt of his hat. He was impressed by the mirror's border, glazed with a copper tint. This gave his image a sepia tone. Shame he could not take it.

Outside, Rimmon beheld the villa: another puzzle for the law. A body in a home full of memories, just like Harry's had been. Braintree and Leeds would awake in time, and conduct their investigations. The visitor would be long gone.

Rimmon began to head back along the gravel track. But he noticed the meridian monument, with its many inscriptions: the distances to various cities. How incredible it was to stand here by this marker. How remarkable to know his alignment on the world, while the stars drifted overhead.

Rimmon allowed his mind to dwell upon the outer cosmos, and a quotation from his esoteric bookshelves. 'Some, too,' as he recalled, 'believe that each star may also be called a world, and regard this earth as a dark star over which the least of gods presides.'

Rimmon's eyes gleamed with an orange light as he turned away into darkness.

Cutter confronted his own likeness on Saturday morning, reflected in the bathroom mirror. His mood was neither depressed nor inspired. While Cutter searched his features for any hint of bias, the visage remained a stony one.

Slapping water into his sticky eyes, Cutter rubbed his face with a towel. Then he oozed a fat maggot of toothpaste onto a brush. Licking his teeth, Cutter studied their pearly ranks with an almost medical interest. He had neglected them in his younger days, and broken one in a tumble from a bike. Cutter had found a new regard for these valuable assets, so his dentist seldom offered any treatment. Daily flossing - and brushing morn, noon and night - kept Cutter's mouth fresh and minty.

Cutter took especial care *this* morning, after a few rough nights the previous week. He knew filthiness should not become entrenched in his habits, for a groggy body meant a groggy mind. It only made things worse.

Closing his eyes, Cutter opened his mouth. The reflection did the same. The toothbrush had been transformed into the very blade he had waved in Harry's face. Cutter pushed it straight behind his molars, so the tip slipped smoothly through the flesh. His cheek stretched, then popped as the blade broke through. It appeared as a silvery gleam.

Cutter could feel nothing at first. Fluid filled his mouth like an instant beverage. Blood, he realized, as the pain hit him. Cutter tore the blade free before his eyes had opened, splashing it into the basin.

Cutter coughed, so a great spray hit the mirror. He stooped to gargle the water. Opening his eyes, Cutter expected a pool of pink as the blood became diluted. He was wrong. There was nothing but minty foam, floating on the surface. Cutter inspected his cheek in the mirror, but the skin bore no sign of puncture. He looked at the blade in the basin's water. There was nothing but a toothbrush.

Breathing deeply, Cutter tried to recover his senses. A hallucination. A mental illusion. Harmless, if frightening - like his recent nightmare. However, something uncanny had occurred.

Cutter had heard Roberts tell the story of Dr. DeWulfe, and doubted not a word. Indeed, Roberts had been the skeptic. What about Harry's sudden appearance in the trinket room, his knife-into-flower trick? This toothbrush caper was a variation, which implied a disturbing theory. Harry's influence continued after death.

Cutter pulled the plug from the basin and retrieved the troublesome toothbrush. It was the same one he had smeared with paste. Snorting with indignation, Cutter slammed it back in the rack. He donned his blue denim jacket.

Making toast in the kitchen, Cutter flipped on the radio-cassette. A local station, usual gossip, a few bits of news. Cutter smeared fish paste over the darkened slices, settling down to munch.

One snippet caught his attention, told in bright female tones: "Police are investigating the death of a Peacehaven man, found in the early hours of this morning. Officers burst into the house on The Promenade after discovering evidence of a

previous break-in. A body with facial burns was identified, although the name has not been released.”

Cutter sat frozen, with the toast cooling before him. He pictured a victim in a villa, while the news prattled on. “A man charged with bigamy has walked free from a Guildford court. Forty year-old Alan Pearce told magistrates...”

* * * * *

Rachael and Olly sat in their borrowed home, regarding the morning drizzle. Steve was still asleep, and the place was silent. Olly touched Rachael lightly on the shoulder, regretting his next words. “Not long. Expecting the bailiffs. I’m gonna stick it to the last.”

“So will I,” replied Rachael.

“Best not,” said Olly. “You’ve had a rough ride.” He felt the bruise on her forehead, from the bashing at Harry’s. Rachael had invented a drunken boyfriend, withholding the truth.

“Don’t want to leave,” said Rachael. “I like it here.” Her eyes strayed away from Olly’s, to the streaming window and sketchy view beyond.

“They want us out,” said Olly. “Let the place rot.” He tried a slightly lighter tone. “Quit while you’re ahead, Rachael. You don’t need an ugly scene. There’s a hostel, not far. I’ll meet you. Come as soon as I can.”

Rachael remained silent.

“Bailiff’s due Monday,” explained Olly. “I’m meeting him.”

Rachael nodded. “It was such a...*nice* home. For a while.” She looked away from the grey window. Olly was a good friend to find. She stroked his fair goatee beard.

“You like beards?” asked Olly.

“Some,” said Rachael. “It’s the man behind who counts.”

* * * * *

The pavements were silver with a misty sheen of rain. Rachael’s reflection was a shimmering blur, as vague as an ectoplasmic spirit. She wandered by the edge of the Level, a tiny local park. Rachael was aiming for the place Olly had mentioned, where she could sleep for a while.

The girl walked slowly, huddled in a shawl from the house. Harry’s travelling bag was slung over her shoulder. It was best to go, she tried to believe, but sad to miss the squat’s last stand.

As Rachael reached this pragmatic conclusion, Wilf had finished his washing up chores. Leaving greasy plates aside, he left the Midnight Café. Wilf was striding in his leathers towards the basement flat, which he shared with boyfriend Ken. The rhythm of his motion was broken by a startled recognition. Rachael had reached the north-east corner of the Level, before crossing one lane of Union Road. Now she was stuck on a concrete island before a busy flow of traffic.

Rachael. *Cutter's girl*. But how Cutter had changed. Wilf remembered their friendship through thick and thin, when nothing could ever harm it. Times had been strange more lately, with tension and wariness.

Christmas Day had been fun at Cutter's Yard. Wilf had asked Cutter & Co. to his New Year's do, although Cutter declined for all three. Ken was disappointed, but they still had a pleasant time. Wilf had expected better of 'Cutter' Graves. He knew the difficulty of keeping the Yard afloat, even if Cutter's brooding ways had become irksome.

Cutter had rung on Monday afternoon, with the high-pressure tactics of a timeshare salesman. He had offered a night on the town. It was good that Cutter was feeling sociable again, even if the snap from surly was unnaturally abrupt. Things had gone well till that scene with the youngsters, and the sudden threat of conflict. Wilf knew how edgy his friend had been: how a veneer of restraint concealed a bitter rage.

Wilf had phoned Cutter for a chat on Wednesday, but found casual conversation hard. Cutter had things on his mind. His off-hand use of 'Wilfred' lacked its usual flippancy. Wilf was left with a sour taste. He had mentioned Rachael during the conversation, yet Cutter had not praised his 'angel' to the skies. He had switched subjects as if the words could hurt: now here she was upon the rainy streets, hardly a model of happiness. Where was the big biker? The comfort he could give? Was she another victim of his anger, another reject on the pile?

This was certainly the question bothering Wilf as he neared the bundled girl. The moustache enhanced his down-turned mouth, drooping in synchronization. Wilf could see the mark on Rachael's forehead and it worried him very much. How could he intervene? Should he ask Rachael about the bruising, and have his faith in Cutter smashed?

Paradoxically, the *strength* of their friendship made the situation worse. To learn the truth might hurt Wilf, but how could he believe a lie? Wilf watched Rachael cross the road, although he made no effort to follow.

Wilf had seen an injury caused by chance or malice, and would have to discover which. He felt unable to question Rachael before seeing Cutter, for the bikers shared years of loyalty. While he hardly relished the prospect, Wilf knew there was only one option. He would have to ask Cutter upfront.

Rachael opened a large bar of chocolate, nibbling it for energy and distraction. She passed a corner pub and several shops, before reaching the church of St. Martin with St. Wilfred. It was a solid, respectable mass.

Rachael crossed the rainy tarmac of Lewes Road, to the terrace Olly had described. A bridge ran over a puddled basement to a tall, narrow house. It had never been converted into flats, unlike Harry's old home. There was just a single doorbell beneath a weather-beaten plaque. It read: 'Mrs. Palgrave's Shelter for the Vulnerable and Homeless. Food, Lodgings and Advice.' Not quite the workhouse, but not far off.

Rachael hesitated. She wanted to turn, risk life at the squat, or even go back to Sue's. Neither option would do. Olly had been sincere in his dread of the bailiffs, whilst self-respect kept Rachael from her old housemate. She pressed a gloved finger to the button, eliciting a distant rasp.

Waiting for some kind of response, Rachael stared at the arched porch-way. It matched the curvature of the sash windows, which were shrouded by grey net curtains. Even those on the lower floors gave no view of the rooms within. A broken milk bottle stood to the left, with most of its contents intact. Weeds grew through crevices in the short flight of steps, lending an aura of ruin. Moss filled gaps in a decorative mosaic, which formed the garden path.

There were footsteps, then a sudden clunk as the door was unlocked from within. A woman emerged from the shadows, her eyes blinking in the light. A grim-set mouth tightened the hollowing features into a mask of unyielding gauntness. So much so, it took a closer look to realize her true gender. The hair was short and steely grey, with make-up long abandoned. Only the folds of a faded dress confirmed the lack of a 'Y' chromosome. "Mrs. Palgrave," she said, in an unmodulated voice. "We've two beds vacant if you're wanting."

Mrs. Palgrave was used to such callers, and wasted no time on chat. Rachael felt grateful, if a little taken aback. "Shall I come in?" she asked, rather primly.

"The obvious thing," said Mrs. Palgrave. "I don't keep the beds out here." She opened the door wider so Rachael could view the gloom, albeit with no revelation of detail.

The place would do for a week or so, despite the lack of a warm welcome. Rachael could sort herself out in peace. She stepped past the woman, and vanished within.

Mrs. Palgrave scowled at the rainy street, finding nothing of interest. She spat phlegm into a puddle and closed the door on the world. The sky continued to drizzle. The pavement remained silvery-grey.

* * * * *

Cutter needed a quiet Saturday night. It would make a welcome contrast to the previous weekend, and the stealthy criminal raid. He felt the need to unwind: to see these troubled times within a wider perspective. Something was stored in the bedroom.

After carrying it down to the living-room, Cutter opened a large cardboard box. There was a grey metal instrument inside. Tossing Harry's hat onto the sofa, Cutter placed the instrument on the coffee table. He removed the outer casing to reveal various knobs, and unfolded two motorized arms. There! A Super-8 cine-projector of fine pedigree.

Inserting the power cable, Cutter listened as the inner flywheel spun. This would stabilize the correct speed. It always took longer in winter, with the mechanism cold and inert. Cine was to video what typewriters were to computers. It was an older, clunky alternative that had fallen from popular use. The gear averted boredom, once every month or so.

Cutter poked inside the cardboard box, which contained a variety of spools. This little collection ran for two or three hours: some were ready-made snippets from professional films - Japanese monsters, Charlie Chaplin - while others had been shot by

Cutter and his father. None were less than five years old, so excluded Cutter's Yard. This was quite a relief to Cutter. He could forget his troubles for a while.

Mr. Graves had become too shaky with the camera, and passed the outfit to his son. It would have fetched little in the second-hand market, despite perfectly clear results. Cutter had shot eight or nine rolls before losing the bug, each about three minutes long. He had spliced them together onto larger spools, making a worthwhile duration.

Cutter had his own approach to imagery: a deadpan look at textures, surfaces and shapes. One roll, for example, showed nothing but waves crashing onto the shore. Another had been shot from the front of a motorbike, wheeling in and out of traffic. These simple scenes made a living poster, flickering on the wall. Cutter would add music to create a vivid show.

The hobby lapsed as the founding of Cutter's Yard engrossed him in engineering. One particular spool, which he loaded now, held the greatest shots by far. Cutter had taken several rolls at a Harley-Davidson rally, held at Brighton Race Course. This was well before he had moved to the seaside, on a day's run from London.

Having slotted the spool onto the feeder arm, Cutter set the projector chugging. He poked the film through a tiny maw, which - should all go well - would not chew it. Once everything was ready, Cutter switched the lamp to full.

A blurred white rectangle appeared on the wall, giving way to a picture: there was a bit of dust, a few scratches, but colour as clear as day. A bike made a dramatic turn, streaking past the camera. Then a series of choppers looped a forecourt, with passengers riding pillion. Some of the bikers resembled Cutter with beards and shades. Their jackets bristled with badges and emblems. Many had abandoned helmets and wore bandannas, colourful or dark. Some bikes were decorative to a grotesque degree: multi-mirrors, reflectors, bulbous sidecars. All gleamed in the weekend sun. One inspired pair had strapped a stars and stripes to the back of their machine.

A more studied sequence examined pure mechanics, using the camera's close-up facility: polished instruments, nuts and bolts, chromium exhausts. Then a splice cut to scenes of a London scrap heap, where mortal metal must go.

Cutter switched off the projector, feeling empty inside. He remembered the words Grunt had daubed on his Kawasaki in a moment of untypical wisdom: 'Innocence Lost'. It was a sentiment Cutter could share. His love of this film was tempered by current sadness. He had been bored by the thought of Mandy's scooter, despite his usual satisfaction in work. Tonight's nostalgic distraction brought another wave of depression. Recollection of brighter times cast his current bleakness harsh.

Cutter stared at the blank space where the projected image had been. Had it left a faint trace behind? He considered the news on the radio, and understood the ramifications. While Daniel Roberts had not been named, Cutter knew he was the dead man.

Cutter would be unable to check without arousing suspicion. Despite all the bluff and bluster, he feared a possible conviction. Mandy and Sal were unlikely to grant a further invitation. But their company had been a lesson that - sometimes, at least - life

might go well again. This would hardly be the case with a guilty verdict, and gruelling sentence to serve.

Cutter began to realize an obvious fact: he would never see the rest of his money. What had happened to the stolen goods? Were they still in the villa, or had Roberts sold them first? Maybe he had been topped by a shady buyer, even more shady than he. Were some weird, unearthly forces at work: more of Harry's tricks?

Perhaps the truth did not really matter. All that mattered was Cutter's own situation, and it was looking pretty bleak. He glanced at the painting on the mantelpiece, with its mass of twisted trees. As ever, the claustrophobic rendering threatened to obsess the eye. Cutter averted his gaze.

Leaning forward in the armchair, he gently massaged his forehead. *Rachael*. She had been the answer once - when Grunt's antics wore too thin, and he had stormed out into the night. Cutter had never returned to the Midnight Café since the time he met Rachael there. Its link with that moment of destiny had been sacrosanct. Perhaps, now, was the time to go back. He loved the place, after all.

Cutter was not enjoying his evening. The truth was hurting a lot. Take that scene in the pub and Wilf's earnest phone call, before the trip to the pier. Cutter winced at the memory of these incidents. His exultation had led to vicious behaviour, and the spiteful rejection of his friend.

Wilf had not deserved this treatment, although he could bear it better than most. Cutter had known him longer than Rachael or Grunt, or anyone else in town. Now he had lost Rachael, and Grunt had mysteriously gone. Cutter could not afford a hat trick. Firm in his resolution, he stomped down the wooden stairs.

Cutter was intrigued to find his crash-helmet, still hanging on the banister post. Rachael's graphics were as bold as ever, the shapes and colours stark. The hollow shell and transparent visor matched his psychological condition: tough, empty and faceless.

Cutter felt no enthusiasm to wear the helmet. He was dull, heavy, lacking instinct and spirit. A true biker no more. Like a dreaming kid or an aspiring beginner, he lacked the ease to blend with his machine. To meld with solid steel, to mount a metal steed. To ride a motorbike.

Unlike last time, Cutter found the Midnight Café buzzing with hungry customers. It was Saturday, the pubs were closing and food was much in demand. Wilf Mitchell was behind the counter, pouring mugs of tea. No option but to join the queue.

Wilf served two lads with a girl in between. “Two number threes, toast and mushrooms,” he called. One lad gave him the money. As the group moved aside with their steaming mugs, Cutter approached the till.

“Give me a Number One fry-up,” said Cutter.

Wilf was dumbstruck. Both Cutter and his order were the cause. Wilf queried Cutter’s choice with amazement, but his tone lacked its previous sparkle. “You want the...*Number One* fry-up?”

“*Grievous need*,” said Cutter.

Wilf could see the truth of this statement in Cutter’s deadpan stare. He turned towards the kitchen door. “Jeff!” called Wilf. “You ready?”

“Why?” came the cook’s muffled voice.

“Guy needs a Number One fry-up!”

“Fuck...*what?*” coughed Jeff.

“Just do it,” added Wilf. “Genuine.”

Several of the regulars paused in their eating. Forks were poised in the air, displaying semi-chewed mouthfuls. One man dabbed his lips with a napkin, his eyes boggling at Cutter. All snapped back to normal as the biker glanced round. “Plus a tea,” he added.

“Tea’s easy,” said Wilf. He grabbed a mug.

Cutter spoke after some hesitation, like a surly child saying sorry. “I was glad you rang Wednesday,” he began. “Know I didn’t make that...obvious.”

Wilf stirred the tea with a wry smile. “Know you well, Cutter. Know your rants. Never take them to heart.”

Cutter found a tenner, and Wilf counted the change. “Apologies aren’t my code,” said Cutter. “Don’t find them easy or don’t find them right. You know what you deserve.”

“I have it,” said Wilf, calmly. He nodded to another regular.

“We need to talk,” said Cutter. He wrapped his hands round the mug. “Thought I had it all, Wilf. But the Yards feels like a tomb.”

Despite Cutter’s implied apology, Wilf remembered the snide rebuttal. “I tried to talk on Wednesday,” he said. “It didn’t help at all.”

“That was me,” said Cutter. “That was different. I’ve thought things over since.” Cutter gazed at the tea, his face softening to an image of gentle regret. Wilf had a fleeting glimpse of a sensitive man, who lay deep beneath the outer shell.

“I’ll break at twelve,” said Wilf. “We can talk round the back.”

Cutter nodded, while still staring down. He moved to a place in the corner.

Jeff emerged from the kitchen, bearing a seriously loaded tray. Many eyes - even those of well-fed patrons - gawped at the mighty meal. An expansive plate held a landscape of sizzled offerings: chips, onion rings, mushrooms, liver, eggs, sausages,

streaky bacon. Baked beans slithered between a dollop of mushy peas, fried bread and tomatoes. Immaculate in his white coat and hat, Jeff placed the Number One fry-up before Cutter. There were also two slices of bread on the side, cut into pasty triangles.

“We’re open all night,” sighed Jeff. “You’ll be here all night.”

However, Jeff had vastly underrated Cutter’s abilities in the food disposal stakes. Suddenly, all worries concerning Rachael, Grunt or the Yard were replaced by a basic instinct: the simple, steady, straightforward task of turning the food into fart-fuel. Other customers neglected their own dishes, watching with a mixture of awe and disgust. Cutter ransacked the oily fry-up in the way Vikings ransacked Europe. Bulging kebabs were composed on his fork, then chomped like cars in a crusher. Sauces were applied with a lavish, dripping excess. Cutter wiped the plate with his pasty bread, creating swirls of colour. Burping with seismic resonance, he looked at the clock. The clock said one minute to twelve.

The light was off in the narrow passage where Cutter and Wilf soon met. They stood as silhouettes against the misty movements of the kitchen. Shelves provided storage for catering supplies, such as giant tins and jars. Cutter lit a sinful cigarette while Wilf munched a Twix.

“I’ve always lived by a creed,” said Cutter. “Built the Yard on that basis, but the creed has failed.”

“You can’t ask for perfection,” said Wilf.

Cutter shook his head. “I make a decision and the decision stands. That’s the way I run things. Yard’s the pivot of my life and labour. Middle of my private road.”

Wilf used the calm tones of counselling which Cutter had rashly condemned. “Yard’s an inspiration, Cutter. To all of us. I don’t let *anyone* tinker with my old soldier. We’ll need a new Classics Master one day.”

“Classic? I’m no antiquity,” said Cutter. “Can’t let the bastards kick me down. Right Of Admission Reserved...”

Troubled by this rambling turn, Wilf raised a more definite subject. “I saw Rachael,” he said. “This morning.”

Cutter’s face was unchanged. The orange dot of his smouldering tobacco hovered before clenched teeth.

“Did you lose her,” asked Wilf, “like Jane ‘Jackie’ Kennedy? Lose her the same way?”

“Lost her,” said Cutter. “Made the right move. Stuck to the words of the creed.”

Wilf stroked the gold chain around his neck, needing solid reassurance. “The creed can’t deal with every situation. It’s not a subtle tool.”

“I did the tricky business,” murmured Cutter. “Did everything fine.”

Wilf frowned. “Not sure what you mean...”

“Saturday nights? Never the same,” said Cutter. “Wasn’t here last week, was I? Out with the uninvited.”

Wilf did not care for this peculiar tone. He crumpled the wrapper of his chocolate snack, attempting some common sense. “Rachael. You know where she’s living?”

“No,” intoned Cutter.

“I’m bound to see her again,” said Wilf. “I’ll tell her you’re sorry, say you’d like to be friends.”

Cutter merely shook his head.

Wilf pictured that bruise on Rachael’s forehead, and regretted the suggestion. Cutter could barely control his rage, as Wilf had learnt on Monday night. It was there, ready for ignition. Better not strike any sparks.

“Cutter,” said Wilf. “We’ve been friends a long time.”

“My oldest in town,” replied Cutter.

“Then don’t be insulted,” said Wilf. “Just listen. I’m worried about your mental state. I don’t know the details, don’t know the trouble, but I want you to get a good night’s sleep. I want you to see a doctor.”

“*What?*” snarled Cutter.

“You’re a nervous wreck, mate, and it’s harming others. When the next Rachael, when some kid on the street? Could be a friend of mine.”

“So that’s how you stand,” sneered Cutter. “Think I’m a raving psycho? Think I’ll smack Ken round the skull?”

“That’s enough,” snapped Wilf.

“You’re no bastard help!” screamed Cutter, pushing Wilf against the shelves. The tins and jars rattled like parts of a rickety xylophone. “I need better creeds, not whining. Build the future firm.”

“*Enough.*” Wilf spoke with surprising restraint, yet an equal degree of conviction. Cutter let go of Wilf’s apron, suddenly quelled. He offered no apology.

“The future?” frowned Wilf. “It’s not an abstract concept. It’s only built on the *present*. You want this perfect Yard with lovers and workers, but you treat them with contempt.”

“I’ve got my motivation,” said Cutter.

“Fine if they obey,” said Wilf. “Waver for a second, you’re the judge, jury...”

“...*executioner?*” smiled Cutter. The word had dried in Wilf’s throat.

“That’s harsh,” said Wilf, losing some of his fire. The big biker looked on blankly. His emotions had hit a neutral note.

Cutter left the Midnight Café with a jingle of chains, on his way to the Yard. Wilf leant against the doorway to the back passage, taking deep recuperative breaths. His eyes fell upon the stack of newspapers, saved to wrap takeaway chips. The Sun featured Harry Hocus on the front page. It read, “THUGS KILL MR. MAGIC”.

* * * * *

Rachael lay sleeping in a narrow bed, provided by Mrs. Palgrave. Net curtains shrouded the outside world, as they had the inner view. Just a pearly tinge of daylight entered.

Sunday mornings were lazy for Cutter, but this was an exception. Having slouched introspectively from the Midnight Café, he had crashed onto his mattress in a semi-clothed state. Cutter awoke at seven-thirty to empty his bladder, but never went back to bed. Cutter donned boots, homburg and mirror-shades. At least he felt in character again.

Spurning fruit juice, Cutter took a short shot of whisky before potent coffee made with three spoons of instant. Food, for the moment, was no worry. The Number One fry-up was digesting in his stomach.

Cutter took his Jack Daniels into the silent living-room, and lit a cigarette. It was becoming a habit again. He opened the curtains to greet a grey, early sky. Cutter beheld the black-eyed cine-projector on the coffee table, with the bike rally preserved on its plastic spool. Harry's hat still lay on the sofa. Cutter examined the silky lining before returning it, brim down, to the table's chess-board top. Then he sat in his customary armchair.

While he liked his liquor, Cutter maintained strict control over the time of its consumption. Except in trying circumstances, such as wrangling with accounts, it was purely a social pleasure. Such discipline matched the work of the Yard: an addled brain could not deal with motorcycle mechanics.

As with many things, the rules were changing. Cutter was no longer sure of the personal code that had served him for so long. He swigged clumsily, dripping a measure of whisky onto his dark chequered shirt. Cutter flipped through one or two biking magazines, but none offered inspiration.

Rachael's painting. What would he do with it? The culmination of her efforts, and a reminder of his own folly. It would be the easiest thing, thought Cutter, to slash the canvas to shreds. Who would care? Rachael never wished to see it again, for process had mattered more than product. She was cured of her forest nightmare, whatever became of this physical object.

But that would be a coward's way out. Cutter edged towards the mantelpiece, observing the painting and metallic demons. Tipping the homburg hat away from his eyes, Cutter lifted the statue to his right. He felt the bronze edges of its bladed shield, and touched the tip of its sword. Memories of Harry, as grim as the painting, although they lacked the connotation of personal loss. Cutter replaced the demon and stared at the centre of the painting. He allowed its vista to fill his vision.

Evil, thought Cutter. Rachael's dark disturbance, rendered onto canvas. I have wronged her, yet I cannot admit it. Need to stick to the creed. She should never have crossed me - yet she joined me on the path, and without the need for threats. I asked her to enter my darkness: to come on the fateful robbery. So I should behold *her* troubles, and conquer them. Let her nightmare fill my mind.

I cannot bear the truth, thought Cutter. I cannot bear the bleakness my life has become. I would rather confront a visionary disturbance than the muddled dilemma of friends betrayed. Give me the nightmare, he wished with all his heart. I *guarantee* my astonishment. Let me share it, be part of it, enter it.

Cutter raised his hand to the canvas surface, touching the texture of a painted tree. He felt the knobbls, the blisters, the tendrils of moss that grew between cracks and crevices. Examining a shred of leaf between leather-gloved fingers, Cutter beheld the view. The forest loomed all around.

There was no fear in Cutter. Nor was there any great surprise. He felt a dark delight at the novel setting, and began his exploration. Cutter pushed his way through the tangled branches, which drooped from the stout, gnarled trunks.

Unlike Grunt, Cutter was quick to realize the truth. There was a close correspondence between the look of the forest and Rachael's art. This was not just *any* forest, but the realization of a nightmare. Cutter had studied the painting intently, and had memorized its pattern of interlocking trees like any motorcycle blueprint. He glanced back at his place of arrival, through this identical setting - although reversed in perspective from his viewpoint. If this was the entrance to Rachael's world, it must be the exit too. Cutter noted the obvious landmarks before venturing on his way.

The place must be alive with insects, for there was a constant soundtrack of clicks and chirrups below the low, moaning wind. Something would occasionally scuttle across Cutter's path, although he could never identify the creature. The movement was defined by a linear twitching of dry, flaky leaves.

Cutter sat on a log for a cigarette, lit with his Harley-Davidson Zippo. The forest was veiled in bluish mist, so the trees diminished in shades of grey till they were nothing but tall shadows. Yet Cutter became aware of a curious flatness: the nearby objects were solid enough, but the distance was a mere impression. While he failed to discern a definite boundary, the extremes were obvious when compared.

Rachael ate her thick porridge under the roof of Mrs. Palgrave. The dining-room displayed engravings of inspiring saints, and colourful pictures of Jesus. All had thanked Jesus for their Sunday breakfast, although grace had not been deserved. Jesus would have dismissed the lumpy dollops offered in his name.

The place was a merger of guest house and orphanage, with mini-dormitories for three or four. Guests were 'expected' to muck in with chores, or become tiresome chores to evict.

"Finish up, finish up, clear the kitchen!" It was Mrs. Palgrave, in sneering mode. "You - Miss Stanwick! Collect the bowls. *Volunteers* for washing up?"

There was little interest in this thrilling task. Mrs. Palgrave glared around the gloomy room, dropping her claw-like hands onto two young heads: a long-haired boy and spiky-haired girl, both in their teens. They grimaced with exaggerated horror at the task before them. Like Rachael, they could only obey.

Cutter felt no sense of time in the depths of the forest. Dry leaves crunched as he trod them underfoot, and flaked to reveal skeletal forms. He was aiming to cover a circular path, gradually returning to his point of origin. Progress was slow, with decaying logs and choking undergrowth. Each obstacle meant another detour.

The fuel of the Number One fry-up was burning fast. Cutter knew the first pangs of hunger. He saw a bush with berries the size of apples. Might they serve as desert? Cutter picked one, reflected in its purple skin. He opened his mouth wide. Cutter's tongue made tentative contact with the berry, his teeth ready to bite. Then he felt a sudden wariness and chucked it like a grenade. The berry burst in a flower of black fluid, producing a nauseous stench.

Cutter stepped over a patch of slimy fungus, then ducked beneath the branches of a fallen tree. Vile cobwebs became adhered to his shoulder, stretched across the dead wood. Cutter shuddered at the size of spider their expansive drapery suggested. He pulled himself free with relative ease. No drooling arachnids appeared.

Cutter neared the edge of the swamp, where giant dragonflies rested on the shoreline trees. These continued to sprout from the water in the manner of tropical mangroves. Mist drifted past as thick as steam, so he clambered over the boulders. The route led to a thin, muddy beach.

Just then, something peculiar caught his eye. It was brown - spherical - on top of a stake. Cutter approached with enlivened interest. Stepping carefully through a patch of nettles, he found a stained mortal remnant. A skull.

Cutter removed his homburg hat in mock condolence, as he knelt by the ravaged object. A face was still discernible, although it would need more than a makeover to qualify as human. Weevil-ridden meat clung to the bony circumference, along with scraps of skin. The eyes had become treats for nibbling scavengers, but the teeth were mostly intact. Shreds of flesh dangled from the point of severance, where the head had joined a neck. The thick wooden stake had been jammed through the jaw, to the very top of the brain case.

Cutter felt an inner delight at this grim discovery, so like the pewter badges on his waistcoat. There were other skulls on other stakes, in various states of freshness. Some were equally disgusting or pristine clean. The mist cleared to reveal another object. It was the broken body of Andrew 'Grunt' Sloan. His neck had been pierced by a stake. The skin was pasty in contrast to the sticky blood, which had congealed onto clothes and rock. Steel spectacles lay shattered nearby.

Cutter stared for a moment, motionless. The spirit of carefree adventure had gone. The bikers had argued, sure enough, but for this to be their final meeting? Cutter winced in anger and painful regret. He clenched his fist before him.

Desperately applying logic, Cutter analysed the situation. The world of Cutter's Yard, Wilf and the Midnight Café had become a distant dream. This shock had served to awaken him, if not in a literal sense. Cutter had been treating the forest as a jolly jape, designed to give him the shudders. Now he realized it was dangerous. An evil appearance held evil deeds.

He clenched the disintegrating skull between leather-gloved hands, and wrenched it free of impalement. Chucking this repulsive relic into the nettle patch, Cutter heaved the stake from the ground. It was a splintery piece of wood around four feet long, whittled to a vicious spike.

Turning from his old workmate, Cutter brandished the weapon. It might serve him well in a fight. Cutter set off through the foliage that rimmed the edge of the swamp. Insects chirruped all around.

The sun glowed softly through grey, pearly clouds, casting long bars of shadow on the ground. Time matched reality in this land of illusion, making it late afternoon.

Rachael's painting showed a nightmare version of the storybook forest, which existed only in her mind. Yet Cutter was exploring that very landscape, tangibly real. How had he come here? Was Grunt really dead?

Cutter considered these questions as he left the swamp, and headed deeper into the woods. He knew this was a land of fiction, despite its physical nature. The 'reality' held a peculiar paradox - displaying artifice in its distant features, combined with a limitless expanse. Flatness shifted to three dimensions as Cutter approached, so close objects revealed naturalistic textures.

Why the strange discrepancy? Cutter thought deep, and formed some kind of theory. He had no doubt Harry's powers were at work: they must have infiltrated Cutter's Yard through the stolen goods. Harry - or Harry's spirit - had found the painting, and been inspired to play games. This was a theatrical version of Rachael's art. A creepy pantomime.

Cutter began to regain his previous vigour. He marched further through the twisted trees, brandishing the wooden stake. Cutter swept it in divisions of a quarter turn, as if defying each direction. "*Happy, Harry?*" he asked. "Everybody's happy! Want to scare me? Want to snuff me? I am righteous, Harry. Send in the mind-snapper. Let's participate!"

Despite such hearty proclamations, Cutter watched for signs of threatening movement. There were none. The sound of his voice died away, leaving the chirrups, clicks and slithers of a thousand insects.

Cutter felt bewildered by his jangled nerves. He snorted, to relieve the tension. However fake the forest, however false its facade, it had an ambience of lurking dread. The biker walked on, feeling a genuine grief at the loss of his well-worn mechanic.

Yet it was difficult to believe the brutal death, despite the evidence Cutter had seen. Perhaps a body found in this illusory world was no real body. Perhaps it was another illusion, like the trees and insects, designed to create loathing and fright. Perhaps Grunt would be waiting, as sullen as ever, back at Cutter's Yard. They had argued, sure, but Cutter had cooled. *Mellowed*, even. He could see the logic of Grunt's dispute. The Yard was a big challenge. They should talk things over, make a fresh start. Grunt *should* have more authority. Even a new name.

The sun pierced a mesh of interlaced branches, tracing grooves of light through the mist. Cutter was sure of his direction as he walked the circular route. He would soon return to his point of arrival: the view depicted by Rachael.

Cutter could not deny one concern, which quickened his pace through the forest. Would he be allowed to wander for long? Nightfall was coming, and Grunt had been left to forewarn. This was Harry's production. Cutter was the volunteer.

Rachael decided not to visit Olly on Sunday afternoon, as he would need time to prepare for the eviction. She felt obliged to make the acquaintance of others under Mrs. Palgrave's roof, and visited the common room. Various ill-matched seats suggested a nursing home, although they were comfortable enough. A window provided a view of the damp garden. Two girls and a young guy sat around, flipping through magazines. There was a radio, but no TV.

Time passed by, but enough was enough. Rachael poured a glass of water and took it upstairs. There was no-one else around. She sat gratefully on her bed near the window, and took Harry's travelling bag from the bedside cupboard. Rachael unbuckled its flap, found the notebook and slipped out the photo. Her own likeness smiled from the image, as real as everything else. Harry next to Rachael in a lavish art deco foyer. It was no hallucination or transitory effect.

In secret, Rachael had doubted its authenticity. Having left the photo for a while, and then taken time to study it, she knew it must be genuine. The girl was such a close resemblance to herself, it could not be chance alone. Rachael had found the image at the moment of Harry's entrance. A coincidence was unbelievable. More, even, than magic. Harry must have projected Rachael's image into the photograph, or made another girl morph into her likeness, through some mysterious intercession.

Rachael felt cold. She glanced at the window, but it had not been left open. Just me...just my nerves, she thought.

Rachael slipped the photo back in the book. As she did so, her eyes fell upon its handwritten notes. Rachael was extremely curious, and started leafing through the pages. Their cramped words were scruffy enough to hinder reading, but lively enough to encourage it. Much was recorded in sepia ink, penned with a steel nib. Other entries were in black, or pencil when nothing else had been handy. Curling her legs on the rough blankets, Rachael stopped at a random entry.

As she read, her tingling reaction was merged with another feeling. It was invoked through a different cause. The growing unease she felt in her heart became inseparable from the grim narrative.

* * * * *

Cutter continued warily along a meandering path, below a structure of interlocking branches. He was nearing his point of arrival, so Rachael's imagery rose in the flat, painted distance. A painting of a painting, almost. Cutter swept his stake with the motion of a radar beam, ready to strike in any direction with equal speed.

The threat became apparent through an eerie revelation. A patch of brown, broken ferns caught the low sunlight. Their shadows slashed the bark of a bloated tree. Cutter noticed how the shadows rippled on this deep-grained texture. They had a life of their own. As they moved, the shadows became sharper. Crisper. They defined the lithe, hunched form of a demon.

Somehow, Cutter felt no real surprise. The fact clarified the situation, and explained the whole performance. He had read a book on conjuring before Christmas, when the robbery plan was being hatched. It was good to know his enemy. A section

had dealt with 'impromptu' magic - the answer to the question, "Show us a trick!" Such a trick used props found easily to hand, not those of careful preparation. Harry had combined elements from the mantelpiece at Cutter's Yard, adding sinister demons to the forest.

Cutter manoeuvred round a tree of similar stoutness to that with the demon's shadow. He thought it strange how the entity had not attacked first. Maybe it preferred to wait, patient and statuesque, till his own vindictive approach. Cutter would not turn away: he wanted a fight. He was sick of Harry and his pathetic sorcery, sick of the whole business. Cutter would blame the lot on that demon. Smash the ugly bastard to bits.

There it was, facing away from him. Its sinewy arms stretched wide beneath ragged robes. The knobby backbone formed a thin, veined neck, which supported the spiky head. This was cocked, listening for something. Its prey, perhaps? Cutter's stealth had closed the gap to that of a spirited spit.

Nothing better than a good, fair fight. A coward would strike from behind. Cutter studied the looks of the wiry creature. "Hello, gorgeous," he said, with a leer.

The demon's head rotated with an oily smoothness, and crackle of vertebrae. The eyes shone with the brilliance of a pumpkin lantern, applying a mean glare. Cutter was awed by the demon's features, despite his flippant address. They had the intricate texture of a complex mosaic, with horns sprouting with streamlined finesse. The head resembled an armoured crab, sewn to a bat's body.

The demon raised its sword - then shield - with considerable grace. The mouthparts twitched in silent agitation. Its breath floated as steam in the air, while Cutter's puffed as cold condensation. The creature emitted a low rasp, which rose to a grating cry.

The forked tail lashed up suddenly, from the weeds at Cutter's feet, and clamped tight round his neck. He was jolted back and forth by its wild shaking, as the demon thrashed in glee. Curses were lost in Cutter's throat as he gasped desperately for air. He tried to escape strangulation by striking the tail with his stake. The demon released Cutter in teasing fun. The biker fell to the ground.

Cutter scrambled up, wielding the stake as he turned towards his enemy. The demon twisted the sword and shield through jagged, ritualistic movements. Cutter noticed its necklace, strung with shrivelled, shrunken heads.

It scuttled sideways, teasing Cutter to follow, then hopped the other way. It moved fast, so the eyes traced orange streaks like comet tails in the ether. The shield glinted with flashes of reflection. The sword caught sudden gleams. Cutter kept lively: kept contact with those piercing eyes, never knowing which weapon might lunge. The sword scythed the tip from a lofty nettle, while the bladed shield whirled near. Then the sword jabbed from a low, unexpected angle. It was meant to pierce Cutter's gut. He stopped it with the wooden stake, then again. Splinters sprayed in the air.

The shield spun quickly, like a rotary fan. Cutter was chilled by its lethal rim-blades. He bashed the shield back to a safer distance, and knocked the sword-arm aside. *There!* The vulnerable underbelly. Cutter rammed the stake forwards, but the creature butted him with its lumpy skull. Cutter sprawled against the roots of a tree. The homburg was knocked from his head.

The stake! It had flown into the undergrowth. The demon leapt towards Cutter, and stooped over him with evil intent. A bony claw clamped him down. The shield's spike whirled like a drill towards Cutter's cheek. The sword pressed cold at his throat.

The demon could have killed him then, of course. But it relished the moment with devilish delight. The crustaceoid face loomed inches from Cutter's, blasting hot stinking breath into his nostrils. The eyes bathed him in burning light.

Cutter's hands were at its neck, trying to throttle the thing. The sword swept back in a flash, ready for the fatal slice. *Get an idea*, thought Cutter. *Fas!*

He got one. Dipping into his utility belt, Cutter grasped one of his faithful knives. Up it came with the practice of a thousand brawls, the blade flicking out as a silver gleam. Cutter shoved it straight into the gaping mouth, pushing brutally. He felt a splitting of inner membranes and the cracking of delicate bones. Ripping the blade free of this repulsive maw, Cutter dived for his hat.

The demon flung its arms in the air, sending the weapons flying. The shield vanished into tangled vegetation, but the sword hit clearer ground. The stricken creature fell on its back, thrashing in agony. The mouth spurted bilious liquid and emitted a screeching rattle. The fire in its eyes faded to a fizzle of flying sparks.

Cutter reached the sword, and gripped the carved wooden handle. He stood astride the demon with one intention: to skewer its writhing body. The sword split the robe, popped the skin and jabbed through vital organs. Cutter twisted the blade without mercy as the creature jerked beneath him. Flames burst from its ruptured innards, with acrid smoke in the air.

Cutter stood back when the job was done. The demon's head tilted at an awkward angle, its eyes dark and rimmed with soot. The tail performed a spasmodic lashing, then flopped like a dead serpent.

At that moment, on the mantelpiece in Cutter's Yard, a statue began to wobble. It toppled over the brink. The statue twirled for an instant, unconstrained by physical support. It struck the floorboards with a dull, metallic thump.

* * * * *

Rachael shuddered. The text of Harry's writing was swimming before her eyes: these were no dull memoirs. "Miss Stanwick!" called a matronly voice from the landing. Quickly, Rachael slipped the photo back into the notebook. She secreted this in the bag.

Night had fallen. This being Sunday - a holy day - Mrs. Palgrave had made an extra effort. The gloomy corners of the dining-room were relieved by flickering dabs of orange. Rachael looked deep into a candle flame, as she listened to the woman say grace: "For what we are about to receive, let us be truly thankful. Amen."

"Amen," mumbled the waifs and strays. They tucked into their daily stodge.

Night had fallen. The gloomy crevices of the forest were relieved by a flickering dab of orange. Cutter sat before the roaring fire, which he had lit with his trusty Zippo. It cast a pool of homely illumination. The sounds of nocturnal life surrounded him: chirrups, warbles and shrieks. They were enough to keep the bravest on edge.

As for the dead demon? Its tail had been severed, chopped into steaks, then roasted on the tip of its sword. The meat tasted good, and Cutter was truly thankful. He chewed with the relish of a banquet guest. The smell wafted far through the cold black woods, as the fire glowed in the night.

* * * * *

The time after midnight granted Rachael a deep, dreamless sleep. Eventually, the sky brightened with the winter morning. She snored gently as the soft light defined the room, casting a glow through the net curtains. Rachael's features were framed by her long, fair hair. Sombre engravings became visible on the wall.

Cutter woke early. He had not slept well, despite the sustenance granted by the demon's meat. He had watched the glowing embers for a time he could not determine, with no stars or moon in the void above. Rage had fuelled his spirited attack on the demon, after the discovery of Grunt's body. But it had faded with the dimming light. The past had come to haunt him, in this lonely landscape of the mind. The chill, damp air had underlined his growing inner pain. The creatures of the night had been strange company, twittering in the dark. Cutter had tried to relax beneath his tipped-down hat - or as often, tipped-up in fright.

Rachael had gone. So had Grunt. Perhaps Cutter should not call him that. It was fair to grant Andy one small, posthumous wish. He had never coined a new nickname.

Sleep had been bad for other reasons: more pragmatic ones. Twisted roots made a very poor mattress. Cutter arose, already dressed in his biker gear. The action demanded nothing but the decision to stand erect. The fire was a circle of ash, smouldering with a wisp of smoke. Time to move on, thought Cutter. He probed the undergrowth for a vital acquisition.

The shield had been left since the death of the demon. Its surface glistened with moisture from an early mist. Cutter crouched, and touched it somewhat tentatively. No adverse effects. He slid his fingers into the carved crevices, lifting it free of the weeds.

The shield was an impressive piece of work. Cutter was able to study closely the decorative swirls, which enlivened its diameter. Gems betrayed their presence with pinheads of colour, vivid in the morning light. Overall, the weapon had an artistry similar to Harry's kaleidoscope.

Cutter was perplexed. Perhaps the demon had been Harry's creation: Harry's vision of such a creature. The real thing might be different, if it had ever lived. Perhaps Harry had brought life to an ancient myth, feared by the statues' creators.

Cutter rotated the shield at a smooth, appreciative speed. The rim-blades were arranged like paddles on a water-wheel, and caught the rising sun in sequential flashes. The central spike was a vicious implement, with tiny backswept barbs. Cutter was repelled to see the streaks of dry, caked blood. Grunt's blood. No, *Andy's*.

Disturbed, Cutter whirled the weapon before him. It sliced through foul vegetation, leaving tumbling slivers in the air. He had left the sword impaled in the earth, just by the dead demon. The broad blade was sunk into a chunky wooden handle,

carved with a snake and screaming face. Cutter smiled in approval, pulled it from the earth and started on his way.

Once more, Cutter observed a familiar alignment of interlocking trees. He was nearing his point of arrival. What would happen now? Had he passed the trial of the demon, to earn his freedom and survival? Would he step from this phantom landscape, back to hearth and home? Or was there another adventure, another trial? Another level to the game?

Cutter stopped with a shudder of instinctive dread. He had reached the place where the forest matched the view in the painting. It was hardly a cheery scene. The trees were tinged orange by the fiery sun, while a cold mist embraced their tangled roots. The sky was the red of war, and Cutter expected trouble. He breathed deeply, taking in the maximum air, and exhaled with a long-drawn snort.

Cutter's senses were bristling with caution. Once more, he entered the very perspective of Rachael's nightmare. He did not reappear in Cutter's Yard. The time was not yet right.

So - another level to the game.

Cutter trudged on with grim resolution. He clambered over a great fallen trunk, pausing to survey the land. It seemed wise to practise with his weapons, so Cutter lashed at creepers and branches. He loved the sheer momentum of these hefty blades, ideal for less social gatherings.

However, new vistas began to open. Cutter noticed how the path became wider: how the trees rose ever greater, to merge in the canopy above. Creepers stretched to the length of tightropes, way above his head. Withered leaves drifted from contorted branches, to crumble underfoot. There was still an atmosphere of artifice: of a carefully contrived setting, however intricate.

Cutter pushed through a tangle of bushes, which obscured the route of his path. His homburg became snagged on a protruding thorn, so he carefully eased it free.

Nearby was a triangular edifice of stone, half-smothered by the rampant scrub. It was borne by a trio of decorative tortoises. Cutter was amused by the heads - or rather, lack of them. Each had been snapped and lost. The sides were inscribed with text, eroded to illegible grooves. After a fruitless attempt to fathom their meaning, Cutter spat with contempt.

What was the monument? A clue, a pointless folly? Probably a feature of the storybook, which Rachael had darkly recalled. The painting had depicted the spirit of her nightmare, based on a particular illustration. But the story would open onto further pages, with further wonders to see. Her vision offered a larger setting, given its three-dimensional form. Perhaps Harry's power had created additional threats, like the demonic monstrosity.

This theory became more apparent as Cutter reached a descending slope. The trees grew thick, although their roots were helpful in providing easy steps. He emerged into the open, on the brink of a rough precipice.

For the first time, Cutter had a clear view of the landscape. His heart quivered at its overwhelming scale, as a breeze ruffled his clothing. The drop was considerable, for

he was level with the treetops below. The land continued to fall away, before rising in the distance.

Cutter looked over the sea of decaying leaves, which clung to countless branches. There was a low plateau, perhaps a mile or two away. Upon this, half-shrouded in layers of cloud, stood a fortress of gigantic size. Jagged mountains chopped the distant horizon like frozen, stormy waves.

This was Cutter's first reaction: he was impressed. The second, however, was different. While he was clearly looking at an epic scene, the word 'scenery' came to mind. The sense of distance was there, but not of depth. At least, not the depth needed for such an expanse. As Cutter glanced between foreground and background, he could see a gradual alteration. The solidity of the precipice shifted past the intricate trees, to a loose impression of form and tone. The fortress appeared curiously flat, existing in the same plane as the mountains. These were stylized and geologically improbable, while the clouds hung grey and static in the sky. The sun was now a pale yellow, which would cool to the colour of daytime.

It's just scenery, thought Cutter, on an impossibly large stage. It expands and contracts as I travel on. Even the time flows with the hues of theatrical lighting: dawn and dusk, day and night.

Even so, it was awesome scenery: a stage that immersed its actor, with neither trapdoor nor pulley in sight. As he approached the fortress, Cutter knew it would grow and become real. It should be a sight worth seeing.

Cutter prepared himself for the trek ahead. He took a bundle from his utility belt and removed a chunk of meat. The rag had been ripped from a tattered robe, and the meat from the robe's owner. Admiring the view, phoney or not, Cutter chewed on the chunk with relish. It was cold, but still tasty. Shame there was no mayonnaise.

Rachael's room in the homeless shelter had grown brighter with the rising sun. This softened the contours of her face, tracing her hair in light. The engravings looked down upon the quiet scene: icons hatched with parallel lines, then trapped beneath dusty panes.

The face of Mrs. Palgrave evoked those prints on the wall. It was equally stern and grey. She counted the heads in the dining-room, enjoying porridge and toast. The total was short by one. "Where is Miss Stanwick?" asked Mrs. Palgrave. Judy, a roommate, should know.

Judy just shook her head.

"Go lazy, go hungry," murmured Mrs. Palgrave. She sipped her acid-brown tea.

* * * * *

Olly had finished breakfast this Monday morning, along with his friend Steve. There had been no time for fry-ups. They had packed their modest possessions, leaving plenty behind. The furniture had been found in rubbish skips, the books in charity shops.

Two buckets were kept in the kitchen. These contained cold beans, custard and vegetable peelings, mashed into a slop. They had also served as toilets this morning. Steve carried the buckets to the front hall, while Olly kept watch. Pulling scarves over

their faces, they waited from eight o'clock. A postman shuffled past with no letters. A long silence, then a knock.

Olly gave Steve a knowing nod. They took a bucket each. More knocks - louder this time - with a grumble of muffled voices. Suddenly, the door burst open with a vicious kick. Splinters flew from the wood.

Olly and Steve glimpsed three men in black. They threw the foul mixture. Neither paused to gloat on their actions. The squatters ran back to the kitchen. Their rucksacks were ready and waiting.

The men cursed as they wiped their eyes, before stumbling over the threshold. The squatters dashed across the yard, and clambered over the wall. Only then did they start to laugh.

A ledge zigged and zagged below the cliff-top, bringing Cutter down into the forest. It was a wilder, more edifying region. The area was interspersed with boulders and stony outcrops, concealing broken towers and tumbling walls. While Cutter was attracted to each nook and cranny, he was driven by the prospect of that fortress. He must have been led here for a reason. Best to get on with business. Best not to hang around.

In fact, Cutter had lost sight of the fortress. He was surrounded by trees of a gigantic, if crippled, stature. Then a patch of sky opened before him, revealing the structure once more. Cutter was intrigued by its shift in appearance: the fortress resembled a detailed cut-out, before the backdrop of grey clouds. This impression changed to one of an intricate model, which gradually expanded in size. Reaching the edge of the tree line, Cutter found himself on the bank of another swamp. This circled the fortress as a moat. He could almost believe the scale of the structure, looming over his head. On careful scrutiny, the effect was that of a large replica. A succession of stepping-stones was dotted across the mud. Cutter knew there was no option but to continue.

The stones were spread at a distance easy to jump, but difficult to actually step. The first protruded from the shoreline like a coarse-textured tongue. Cutter judged the distance to the second stone, then threw himself forward. He crossed the murky water, landing safely. The surface was not too slippery, so Cutter proceeded with greater confidence. His attention became fixed on this repetitive action.

It was not till Cutter had reached the umpteenth stone that he beheld the fortress again. It was bigger. Definitely bigger. It rose in a veil of drifting mist. This cleared in a crescent formation, to provide a better view.

The effect was now perfect: a full-size building, rising to scrape the sky. The walls tapered in a great cylinder, topped by a conical roof. This was rimmed with spikes like a weapon, and surmounted by a winged gargoyle. Cutter noticed a flurry of bats or birds, spiralling their immobile counterpart.

The walls sprouted buttresses and smaller turrets, broken by long gothic windows. These were glazed in a leaden calligraphy. Further sections of conical roof divided the lower section, circling the tower like great stone skirts. The overall shape resembled a rocket and Chinese pagoda, somehow merged into one. The fortress was cracked, and covered in moss.

Taking his final jump, Cutter reached the shore. A gateway of exotic, though crumbling, masonry led to a short path. Cutter proceeded with steely calm, weapons swishing, ever alert. Steps mounted the low plateau, which held the massive building. Statues of mythical beasts ranged each side of the steps, as if ready to pounce.

The whole fortress was crawling with decoration, although the overall colour was tombstone grey. Arriving on top of the plateau, Cutter confronted the great wooden door. This was edged with a stylized frieze: fighting figures, knives and skulls. The terrors and troubles of the world. The door stood ajar, as if expecting visitors. There was no bell or knocker in sight.

Each window was an area of ornate glass, as huge and delicate as an icy lake. Many panes were broken, and whole portions of lead drooped like crumpled mesh. An imaginary viewer might have floated through the smoky darkness: the upper vaults rose with graceful curvature, although their undersides were flaking like ancient skulls. Spindly chains were bolted to the concave ceiling, and dangled deep into the fortress - past archways and galleries, balconies and stairs. All were shrouded in dust and scattered with curios. The chains held heavy candelabra, like galaxies floating in the gloom.

A vertiginous tunnel of stonework dropped away, enlivened by narrow slits of daylight. Far down, a marble floor displayed a motif of vast, though simple, design: a spiral entwined with an angular pentacle. Close observation would detect a speck of movement: a tiny black triangle. It was a cloaked figure walking in silence, carrying a flickering lantern.

Cutter could see none of this. But the door was open, inviting him to enter. Should he be brave and do so, or wait for something to emerge?

The cloaked figure climbed the steps of a dais, which overlooked the circular chamber. There was little else but a slab-like altar, framed by lavish drapery. It held a sinister, cruciform structure. The figure placed the lantern on a small lectern, its face hidden beneath a cowled veil. The hands were concealed by gauntlets, while a gold pendant dangled round its neck. This matched the motif on the marble floor.

The figure studied a thin candle, burning in a brass holder. It cupped its hands round the gleaming flame, and stroked the air in a steady rhythm. A similar candle had been extinguished before melting so far.

Cutter had decided to defy the fortress. He strode across the uneven flagstones, towards the mighty structure. A dusty beam of darkness fell through the open door. Cutter held the shield before him, and raised the sword to counter any devious swipe. But the weapon was unable to counter its own actions. The sword trembled in Cutter's grip, then wrenched towards his neck.

Rachael's sleep was no longer unbroken. While the sun had not managed to wake her, the emotions - the sense of evil places - whirled in a mental vortex. She tossed and turned on the pillow in a state of inner turmoil. Rachael's eyelids quivered with the energy of dreams, and she mouthed a babble of silence.

Judy had been asked to fetch Rachael. Despite missing breakfast, she was required to mop the hall. Judy was keen not to anger Mrs. Palgrave, and arrived at the bedroom door. Her hand was raised and ready, but Judy felt unable to knock. She shivered, not through cold but a strange apprehension. There was an aura of privacy she could not disturb.

"Rachael," croaked Judy. "You're...*wanted* downstairs." This meek utterance was inaudible to Rachael. Judy had no desire to push the request.

Tingling with a sense of intrusion, Judy stared at the unmoving door. Her eyes blinked behind thick oval spectacles, and she clawed her straggly hair. Mrs. Palgrave would moan at any disobedience, but it would be even worse to obey. Judy dithered in confusion, rocking gently to and fro. She had been moaned at all her life. Moaned and moaned at. She could not take any more.

At first, Cutter could barely comprehend what was happening. His arm jerked the sword towards him, and he felt nothing but stupefaction. This switched to an angry resistance. Cutter tossed the bladed shield away, before it could start a second rebellion. He desperately struggled to hold his sword-arm back, but it continued with inexorable force. It was like iron to a magnet, edging ever closer to his neck. Cutter's fingers clung to the handle with a grip he could not release. As the sword twisted, Cutter fell to his knees. The blade came even closer.

Just then, Cutter heard a voice in the air. A wispy sigh in the wind. "*Cutter. Behold the festering swamp. See the form within.*" Cutter's weapon paused in its progress, allowing him to look.

Something was happening in the swamp. Cutter saw a mass of oily foam, surmounting a bulbous wave: this was split asunder by the outflung arms of a filthy, dripping demon. It was an incarnation of the second statue, wading its way ashore. Harry had another chance.

The creature stalked through the gate and up the steps, stretching its dank silhouette. Its eyes ignited with flame. The weapons whirled from nowhere, to be caught by nimble talons: another sword and shield. The demon stepped onto the flagstones, lashing its tail. Its claws clattered upon the surface.

The eyes glowered at Cutter from a few yards away. The creature was slaving, hungry for revenge. Its shield spun, its sword swished in the air. They traced cones of gleaming reflection. The foul mouth emitted a hideous squeal which set Cutter's spine tingling. The eyes now burned with a radiant yellow. Flecks of white seared their cores.

"*Your sword... or his,*" said the ethereal voice. It was neither male nor female, high nor low. The voice started to giggle in ghastly merriment, drifting off into silence.

Cutter's sword was cold at his throat, pinning him to the ground. The demon leapt across the flagstones and landed astride the biker. Its robes dangled like shredded skin. Cutter regarded the shrunken heads, strung around its neck. *Most* unpleasant features. The creature's eyes glared at him with a painful, savage brilliance.

The demon raised its sword with a ritualistic grace, back, back, ready for the down-thrust. The target? Surely my heart, thought Cutter. Harry would see the irony of his personal weakness. But was death *real* in this nightmare place, this forest of mad illusion? Would Cutter wake from a hypnotic trance, experiencing death throes on the floor? Or would he remain locked within this land of artifice, dead beneath a painted sky? Neither thought was very inviting. Cutter clenched his teeth in despair.

A sweat had broken out on Rachael's brow as she tossed and turned in bed. She grabbed the sheet convulsively, and suddenly awoke. Rachael jolted upright with shock. The nightmare forest had not been purged from her sleep. It whirled inside her once more. Rachael's eyes widened in terror. She shrieked a single word - "*No!*"

Instantly, Cutter's hand let the sword fly free. It clattered onto the flagstones. He rolled sideways, and sprang to his feet. The demon had frozen to a statuesque pose, as stiff as a taxidermist's specimen. Its sword remained poised, unable to chop. The eyes faded to ashen pits.

Cutter was glad of his luck. Which way now? Should he still enter the fortress? The demon was shuddering slightly, as it fought the powers of restraint. But it was just a

lackey. He should deal with the boss. Cutter ran to the doorway, and vanished into the gloom.

* * * * *

Rachael donned clothes at lightning speed, and grabbed Harry's travelling bag. Judy was almost knocked aside as the girl burst through the door.

Mrs. Palgrave had run out of patience. She required greater toil of her guests. Ordering others to mop the hall, she ascended for a formal word. The woman climbed the stairs with mean deliberation. Rachael ran down towards her.

"Young *lady!*" snapped Mrs. Palgrave, whipping out her arms. She grasped Rachael tight by the shoulders. "There are certain rules pertaining to my hospitality. Obedience, diligence, a humble deportment..."

Rachael was spared the standard lecture on Godliness, Cleanliness and the Work Ethic. A startling flash of orange gleamed in her eyes. Mrs. Palgrave staggered sideways as Rachael slipped past.

The girl slithered across the lino, leaving a dirty streak. Mrs Palgrave clung to the banister rail. Rachael shot through the door and slammed it. The building shook with the impact.

Mrs. Palgrave sank to her knees, murmuring prayers of salvation. She grasped the crucifix round her neck. Judy came down to comfort her, their tensions lost for a while.

* * * * *

Cutter found himself in a hall of indeterminate scale. Its atmosphere choked with the smoke of incense. He strolled across the vast marble floor, gazing at the innards of mighty stone. The fortress tapered to a vertiginous height, with columns of massive girth.

The windows alternated with tapestries, which hung in sombre folds. Flaming torches daubed the stonework with light. This lent a shimmering relief to the decorative friezes, which rimmed the ledges and balconies.

Why carve scenes of despair in every niche? Maybe the storybook was flaky, too. Cutter spotted hieroglyphic motorbikes and brooding bikers, taken from his own mind. Quite a good likeness of Grunt, he thought. Cutter's own resembled Moses in goggles. And - *fuck!* - there were those bastards, Harlan, Spasmo, Royce. Cutter made an appropriate gesture.

The biker reached the centre of the circular floor, although its emblem was invisible at this low level. "Nice place! Where's the Jacuzzi?" he yelled. The cathedralesque atmosphere dulled any levity.

There was no-one around. *Funny.* Where was the mystic geezer in the pointed hat? Cutter put a hand to his brow, sagging. The hall turned a dizzy dance. Aftershock of the fight, perhaps, or something demonic he had eaten?

Multiple torch flames split into pairs, whirling in Cutter's vision. The thick incense had filled his lungs with a swirling, druggy aroma. Cutter resisted, but slipped away. He fell to the cold marble.

Rachael ran through the morning streets, desperate to reach Cutter's Yard. Despite the wrongs Cutter had done to her, she did not wish to let him die. Rachael had thrown the killer forces into abeyance, so Cutter might escape with his life. But fear and magic reigned supreme. Rachael could only think of saving her lover.

Cutter was under threat in the nightmare world, although the forces had earthly counterparts. Perhaps she would act physically, as in Harry's flat, or challenge them with her mind.

Olly saw Rachael. He had hoped to meet her, with the eviction over and done. The girl barged between him and a startled Steve in blind, driven flight. "*Rachael...!*" cried Olly. The voice dried in his throat. Steve stared in concern.

Cutter woke in the fortress. He was no longer on the floor, but high on the sinister altar. The biker had been chained to its wooden cross. The robed figure observed with invisible eyes, its face hidden by the veil. Cutter rattled his bonds like King Kong, desperate to break free. They were forged from the strongest elements.

The figure came forward - gliding, so it seemed, for the legs were lost beneath the robe. It mounted a few steps to the altar, which resembled a small stage. Rustling to a stop, the figure raised its arms. The movement was languid and smooth. The robe was black, and embroidered with touches of red and yellow. The veil was enlivened with a tracery of gold.

What a weirdo, thought Cutter, managing pure contempt despite his desperate predicament. Then he noticed a familiar symbol: a five-pointed star, entwined with a swirling spiral. The figure wore it as a gold pendant.

The truth hit Cutter with the force of a runaway Norton. He had seen the symbol before, in Roberts' villa. That photo of Harry Hocus. Roberts had spoken of SOME, the Society Of Magical Entertainers. Harry wore a special badge. Cutter watched, subdued now, as the figure tugged the edge of its veil.

Cutter readied a sneer of derision. It might be his last, so it had better be good. Cutter would not satisfy the sorcerer with a look of fear, even if he shivered inside. "Come on, Harry. The great finale...?" Cutter made a quizzical frown.

The sneer, however, was never used. Harry had not lost the ability to astonish. For the face, as revealed by the casting of the veil, was not Mr. Hocus. It was Rachael.

Rachael dashed down the cul-de-sac of neglected buildings, reaching the gates of Cutter's Yard. She slumped against the solid wood and delved deep into her corduroy jacket. Cutter had given her a set of keys, in case the job at Harry's went wrong. They had not just split from the scene of the crime. They had split from each other's lives.

Cutter's Yard was a deranged prospect: the last place on earth to choose. Yet Rachael had rushed there this winter's morn, in a burst of instinctive panic.

The street door was set within the left-hand gate. Rachael trembled as she twisted the key, but managed to spring the lock. Rachael jumped through, slammed the door, and ran to the centre of the yard. Her hair lashed this way and that, as she searched in wild desperation. The place was silent and empty.

Forgetting the office, Rachael dashed to the unlocked workshop. She barely glanced at the benches and tools before charging upstairs to the flat.

Cutter was motionless. He was chained to the cross, but able to think for himself. How can this gothic visage be my lost companion, the lovely Miss Rachael Stanwick? She was instantly recognisable despite the grim cosmetics, which created a chalky complexion. The glossy black lips framed an evil smile, while the eyes resembled the wings of a deathly moth. She peeled away the gauntlets to reveal delicate hands, unlike those of a traditional witch.

The girl produced a decorated blade from the folds of her sweeping gown. It tapered to needle sharpness, glinting in the candlelight. The figure sniggered a bitter contempt, eye-to-eye with her foe.

"Welcome...to thiss domainn," she said. Her sibilant voice resounded around the fortress, till it was nothing but a fading sigh.

"You're nothing," snarled Cutter. "You're no Rachael, you're a *Rachling!*" He conceived a halfling between humanity and hell.

The *Rachling* toyed with the dagger, withholding any display of wit. Her gestures had a touch of camp excess: a trace of Harry's influence, perhaps. *"I am no trick,"* she said simply. *"No sbhadow."*

"You're crap!" spat Cutter. "Harry pulls the string."

"No string," said the *Rachling*. Her voice remained sober and firm. Cutter must fully understand before he met his demise. *"I am no puppet, although I do nnot act alone. Harry's power...enntered me, Cutter. He is part of mmy very soul."*

"You two-timing bitch," growled Cutter.

The *Rachling* sneered. *"You and I havve bodies in the ssolid world, but the show iss enacted here. The finale iss inevitable. You havve to die."*

"Like me money back," said Cutter.

"Your humour iss pathetic," said the *Rachling*.

"Pathetic?" snapped Cutter, looking around. "Slaughter me in Fairyland? Big deal. Harry's dead. He deserves it."

Once more, Cutter rattled the chains to gain physical freedom: at least, freedom within this peculiar domain. His eyes locked upon those of the *Rachling*, which

shimmered with a golden glow. She aimed the dagger at the centre of his shirt. Cutter became motionless.

“The days of anger are over,” she whispered. *“Your outlaws gone for good. No more kicks and crashes, Mr. Cutter. No more road rage revolt. Run’s snuffed, Cutter. Snuffed by the squares.”*

Mesmerized, Cutter could neither move nor answer. He just waited for the silver dagger to skewer his heart. The candle flickered on the lectern. Suddenly, the flame was snuffed out. The wick became nothing but a smoking stump.

Rachael stormed onto the landing of Cutter’s flat, and straight into the living-room. She stopped dead at the sight before her: Cutter stood in a trance by the painting, holding one of his knives. Cutter moved it back, back, ready to strike. His eyes were closed and oblivious.

The Rachling plunged the blade.

“Stop!” screamed Rachael. She threw herself around Cutter’s arms and pulled with all her might. The knife waggled dangerously near her chin. Cutter forced the blade towards his body. Rachael struggled in desperation. The girl’s dexterity fought the biker’s grip.

The Rachling shrieked with venomous fury. The dagger was alive in her grasp: it began to jerk her arm through random, spasmodic circles. Cutter’s reverie continued, for he was confused by the inexplicable scene. He shirked as the Rachling took control, and forced the dagger towards him.

These actions were mimicked in the flat. Cutter stumbled in his delirious trance. He bumped against the TV, which shook on its rickety stand. Cutter dragged the knife towards his chest. Rachael clung tenaciously to the handle: she nearly had it - *nearly had it* - if she could only loosen his grip. Cutter’s signet rings dug into her fingers, and she almost lost her balance.

Rachael pulled, nearly getting the knife - *nearly* getting it - but Cutter tightened his fist. She grasped harder, then tugged with frenzied determination. The girl lurched her whole body sideways, so the weight added to the pull. The blade was torn from Cutter’s possession.

The Rachling’s arm whipped up and away. The knife went spinning across the floor. She whisked round to dive after it, but tripped upon her trailing robe. Cutter was no longer watching. He rattled the chains. With the Rachling’s power thrown into confusion, their bonds had become weak. Cutter shook. He shook with all his might. And with two bounds, Cutter was free!

The biker leapt from the altar and its cumbersome cross. He raced across the shiny marble floor. The Rachling screamed, half-rising like an enfeebled bat. A contortion stretched her features into a livid mask. Her hands stretched like talons as she began to crawl.

“Wake up!” cried Rachael. “Wake up!” One hand held the knife, the other slapped Cutter’s cheek.

Cutter reached the great wooden door, with a glimpse of forest beyond. He heard a scuffle and looked back. The vile Rachling sprang up in his face. This time, she would bite.

“Come on, Cutter. Wake up!” screamed Rachael, slapping him once, twice, thrice around the cheeks. “Oh please, Cutter,” she sobbed. “Wake up!”

Cutter kicked with the focused power of a piston. Reality was starting to shift, for this struck both Rachael and Rachling. The girl landed on the sofa. She still grasped the knife, for safekeeping.

The Rachling had been repelled by Cutter’s force, but only for a moment. She leapt in a streak of fury. Her nails dug deep into Cutter’s skin as she began to throttle him. Her mouth slavered with lust for vengeance. The eyes burned orange within ashen pits.

Cutter stood quivering by the mantelpiece. His hands were at his throat. They were acting for the Rachling’s hands, performing strangulation.

“*Cutterr. I hate yyou!*” seethed the Rachling. She tightened her fingers.

“Cutter. I fucking LOVE YOU!” screamed Rachael. The Rachling was distracted, and loosened her deathly grip.

Cutter saw nothing but a flurry of movement. He began to fall, not down, but backwards - away from the fingers, the crazy Rachling, the doorway, the fortress, the swamp. He fell through a tunnel of interwoven trees, away from their tangled world. The forest collapsed into two dimensions, just like a pop-up book. Vistas flicked past, faster and faster, till the scene slammed back into the canvas. There was a swirl of colour, a splatter of paint. It really was a picture, after all.

Cutter groaned. He groaned like a boxer hit for six, or the survivor of a hangover from hell. His arms fell to his sides. Cutter shook his head with a jingle of neck chains, and opened his sticky eyes. There was Rachael. She was shuddering in fear. She was holding the knife before him.

“The Rachling,” murmured Cutter. “The dagger...”

“What?” whispered Rachael. She was rooted to the spot.

“Oh, I’ve had such a curious dream,” murmured Cutter. He glanced at the painting. “Been there, seen it, done it.”

“My nightmare,” said Rachael. She could still remember the dread, which had awoken her that morning.

“You are its mistress,” said Cutter, as he approached the girl. “Enacting the will of Harry. You tried to kill me.”

“No!” gasped Rachael. She edged round the coffee table.

“You can’t deny it,” said Cutter, matching her moves. “*Cutter. I hate you!* That’s what I heard.” Their breaths puffed billowing vapour in the cold, unheated room.

“Wh...what?” stammered Rachael. “I never. You must have heard wrong.”

Cutter was unconvinced. “Clear as a pin-drop at a thrash metal gig.”

Rachael shook her head in disbelief. “I came - ’cos I was scared. Knew the danger.”

“With your innocence lost?” sneered Cutter.

“Please,” gasped Rachael. “Don’t want you killed...”

“Then give me the knife,” said Cutter.

Rachael did not comply. How could she? “Look, Cutter...you killed Harry. You could have killed me.”

“*Could have*, Rachael? Should have. Dead girls never tell tales.” Cutter removed his mirror-shades to reveal a maniacal glare.

The two had completed a slow circuit of the coffee table. They glowered at each other during a tense, momentary stillness. Rachael’s voice had almost dried up. “I came to save you...”

“No! To kill me,” spat Cutter. “The *Rachling*.”

Rachael frowned. “The *who*?”

Cutter tucked the shades into the pocket of his leather waistcoat. “You’re both the same, Rachael. Two halves of a single soul. Harry’s got in, he’s using you. Now, you’re using him. Harry can’t die till you die. I have to complete the job. I’ve made the decision, and the decision stands - !”

Cutter jumped onto the coffee table, which shook with the impact. He straddled Harry’s hat and the dormant cine-projector. Cutter tried to grab Rachael, but she flopped onto the sofa.

The girl had a brief advantage: low as she was, she struck. Rachael spiked Cutter’s left leg with the knife. It had the sharp in-out movement of a sting.

Cutter winced. He stumbled off the table and fell against the armchair. Blood streamed through his grimy jeans, for the knife had pushed deep into muscle. Rachael could scarcely believe her action, so quick had it been. Which part of her mind had prompted her? The instinct for self-preservation? Or had a spitefulness surged through the *Rachling*, from the depths of Harry’s psyche?

Despite the fascinating dilemma, this was no time to think: Cutter uncurled in fury. Rachael ran, still wielding the bloodstained knife, as the biker limped in pursuit. He could hear her running downstairs, heading for the yard. Cutter needed a weapon, and needed it fast.

Seconds later, he had one.

The cine-projector flew after Rachael, straight down the wooden staircase. It smashed into a pile of components. Scenes of the Harley Rally snaked out, as a tangle of twisted film. Cutter’s memories had been sacrificed in vain. Rachael had been too fast.

Cutter crashed downstairs, despite the pain of his wound. The door was open, and he emerged into the yard. Rachael was running past the Rocket 3 combination, veiled by its creased tarpaulin. She was nearly at the wooden gates. Cutter turned to the metal shelving, and grabbed another prop.

Rachael had pulled the street door open, but she froze at an echoing voice. “*Rrr-achael!*” Who was it, a spirit in the ether? Harry, speaking in her mind?

She glanced back at the workshop. Cutter removed the lead pipe from his lips, and threw it like a javelin. Rachael dropped to the ground as the pipe slammed the door shut.

Cutter approached at a steady pace. He took the rattling keys from his utility belt and firmly locked the door. Rachael began to circle the yard in an anti-clockwise direction. She still had Harry’s travelling bag. Rachael passed the corner by the office, and edged past the Harley-Davidson FXS. Cutter retrieved the lead pipe and stalked his quarry. He swung the weapon to and fro.

“Cutter,” said Rachael. “Try to think. I’m Rachael. I did your painting. You’re Cutter of Cutter’s Yard.”

“I am,” said Cutter. “I make the rules.”

“Killing me won’t help,” pleaded Rachael. “The police’ll catch you, lock you up. You won’t make the rules then.”

Cutter reached the Harley, and came to a sudden stop. Rachael paused by the workshop window, where she awaited his next move. For now, he did not seem to have one. Cutter was captivated by the sight of his motorbike, and saddened by its untapped power. “No...future,” he murmured, quietly. Cutter examined his multiple reflections in the graceful chrome. He was stretched and squeezed through every distortion, just like his state of mind.

Rachael noticed Grunt’s Kawasaki Z650, beside her. The words ‘Innocence Lost’ were daubed on its tank. Cutter was still motionless, so she took her chance. The girl skipped into the workshop and bolted the door.

“What a game,” smiled Cutter. He stroked the Harley with the tenderness of true romance. Somehow, deep in his heart, Cutter knew he would never ride her again.

Cutter left the bike with a tug of resolution, and made leisurely progress to the workshop door. He stretched one leather-gloved hand to open it, but the door remained stubbornly closed.

Cutter pressed his nose to the dirty window, and peered at the shady interior. Where was Rachael? Hiding, probably. Her options were pretty limited. He would exhaust those limits before long. Unable to enter the conventional way, Cutter raised the lead pipe. There was a violent, shattering sound. Glass rained upon the broken cine-projector, before Cutter’s hand delved between the jagged edges. He groped around, slid the bolt, then pushed the workshop door. Its splintery edge scraped debris across the floor.

Cutter stood at the foot of the wooden stairway. He rested his hand on the banister post, and craned to see the flat above. Something troubled him vaguely, although he could not think what. Something very subtle had changed. The precise detail eluded him: he would concentrate on the hunt.

The flat was an unlikely hiding place. Rachael would probably search for a better weapon, most likely a tool from the workshop. Cutter flicked on the fluorescent lights. They illuminated its depths with a pale, greenish glow.

Stepping forwards, Cutter swung his pipe in a low curve. Rachael might be under the stairs. As his eyes adjusted to the dark recess, he could tell she was not there. The shadows held nothing but welding gear and crates of motorbike spares.

Cutter rose with a smooth, hydraulic action. He began a hunched, stealthy walk down the workshop - swaying continuously this way, then that. Cutter glanced beneath every workbench, at each conceivable hiding place. He was searching for any stray bundle or movement. The view was often blocked by heavy components, stored on the floor.

Cutter passed Cheryl, Mandy’s bright yellow scooter. She was still waiting for her repairs. Something else made Cutter pause for a moment: Grunt’s bed had been propped against the wall, beside a rucksack of clothes. Cutter remembered his row with

Grunt. No, *Andy*. He ought to call him that. Yet Cutter had granted this legal name, and found it difficult to cast aside. The lad had been gone a few days now, with nothing else to wear. Must be seriously mad and seriously sticky. We'll meet again, thought Cutter.

He soon reached the column near the end of the workshop. Here, chances for concealment were considerable: Rachael might be lurking to his left, in the junk pile, or behind the column itself. Cutter felt a quiver of suspense. Why not his private domain? The cubby-hole.

Check the junk pile first? Maybe. But this might invite a sudden attack if Rachael was behind the column. She could also flee from the cubby-hole if his back was turned. Rachael might be watching from inside.

Taking a spanner from the workbench, Cutter gauged the distance to the junk pile. He threw it, so the heaped components resounded with a loud crash. Cutter leered round the column and swung his pipe. If Rachael was there, the noise would have distracted her. She would miss the chance to dodge.

As it was, the pipe struck a chip from the brickwork. Grit dribbled from the hole. Neither did a shell-shocked Rachael rise from the junk pile. It hid no human form.

The last place, then. The cubby-hole. Realizing his vulnerable position, Cutter spun on his heel. The plastic strips concealed the refuge, which was dark inside. He could not see *her*, but could she see *him*?

Cutter assumed Rachael would back away as he stalked towards the curtain. The lead pipe could reach her with ease. Cutter rested his face on the hanging strips, without moving them a whisker. His left hand found the light-switch.

How should he play it? Cutter thought hard. A slow, chilling entry - then the click of the switch - or a sudden revelation? Cutter preferred the second option. Rachael might be crouched in the darkness, watching his silhouette. She could spring and surprise him with a frenzied stab, before he had flipped the switch.

Fixing his features in a Cheshire Cat grin, Cutter raised the weapon. He shoved his face through the curtain, and switched on the light.

Grunt's body was slumped across an audio workbench in a stiff, gory vignette. His neck had been impaled on Cutter's 'party piece' - the multiple blades of the chopping-board. Their tips had scored bloody gashes on his cheeks and chin, like the mutilated body in the forest world.

Cutter's grin changed to a rictus of feverish revulsion. He pushed through the plastic strips, which swished to hide the workshop. They had done so when Grunt had entered, concealing his body for days. The floor was covered with the sticky brown of semi-congealed blood, which glued Grunt's broken spectacles to the concrete. Much had flowed into the circuitry of a dismantled amplifier. It had dried like lava in city streets.

So it was true. Cutter had feared so, yet he had tried to deny the fact. Death in the forest world was not a game. It was a veneer of fantasy over a violent act: a driven physical suicide. The body lay as it had on the swampy shore. The hi-fis were as solid as rocks.

Cutter dropped the pipe with a dull, leaden clang. A pulse pounded in his head. Taking hold of Grunt's tufty hair, he began to ease him up. The blades slipped free of

the lacerated flesh. Globular gore plopped onto the workbench. The face was white or bloody in grim extremes. The eyes were dry and glassy, while the mouth was locked in a scream.

Cutter turned Grunt towards him. The hands were clasping a manual drill, which the mechanic had bored into his inner organs. Cutter noticed worm-like slivers of pinkish flesh, curled around its spiral groove. Suddenly, Grunt's arms flopped so the drill tilted. Cutter thought the corpse had aimed it his way. A nauseating moment.

Cutter raised the body till it was vertical. They faced each other, man-to-man. "Andy," said Cutter, in a sober voice. There was no trace of irony or bitterness. Cutter brought Grunt's cheeks to his own cheeks - touching the left, then the right. Stripes of sticky redness transferred to Cutter's skin. The effect resembled tribal war-paint.

Cutter remembered Grunt's first visit to the Yard, the summer he had started in business. Cutter had fixed the workshop ceiling, while Grunt had given him tips: he had worked for D.S. Roberts, after all. Over tea, the newcomer had professed his love of bikes. It had been the start of a relationship, not beautiful, but of mutual aid and assistance.

Cutter's late colleague deserved a more respectful position. Cutter lowered the body onto the swivel chair, and placed the spectacles back on its nose. Finally, he prised the drill from its death-grip. There: Andy was in the hot seat now. Cutter's Den was his own.

What better than music? A requiem for Grunt. Cutter pressed 'PLAY' on a cassette deck, so The Industrial Revolution began to rumble through the Yard. Grunt sat stiff on the swivel chair, lost in attentive rigor mortis.

The chopping-board lay on the workbench, with the blades pointing in the air. Cutter started to lift it. His stomach quivered at the crackling sound, as it peeled away from the surface.

Cutter admired his handiwork beneath the bare central bulb. Light sparkled on the blades. It could be more than a passive object, waiting for a daring hand. Like this, wielded by an expert, the chopping-board was a weapon. The blades could slice, the wood could bludgeon.

It was time to finish the girl.

Rachael had been waiting in silent terror. She exhaled each breath as if the sound they made might betray her current position: the air was released in an imperceptible stream, then replaced with slow inhalation. The small space was dimly defined by the light through a ripple-glass window. Rachael dared not sit, but stood ready for action. Only one seat was available to use. It was round, concealed by a lid, with a chain dangling from the cistern.

Rachael could tell little of Cutter's movement. She had squirmed when he smashed the window and entered the workshop. Rachael had not heard him close the door, so it must be blocking her exit. This left her unable to run. Rachael could push past, but this would mean noise and delay. Both could prove her undoing.

If Cutter was close but silent - by Mandy's scooter - he could pounce on Rachael in an instant. If he had gone further - to the cubby-hole - he would take longer to cover the distance. Those seconds could prove decisive, giving her a chance.

Once out, Rachael would need to hare across the concrete and get clear of the Yard. She might run faster than the big biker, but time to unlock the street door could prove fatally long. Rachael had already seen Cutter throw the lead pipe, and dreaded a direct hit.

Rachael jumped at a crash in the workshop. It was followed by a gritty thud. Heart racing, she held her breath. There was only silence.

Tense and waiting, Rachael let her eyes range across the grubby walls. They were scrawled in the manner of a public convenience, with obscenities and doodles. Bikes and emblems featured heavily, the work of visiting customers - although the best item of decor was a surviving festive novelty. It dangled from a noose-like string, fixed to a nail in the ceiling: the slut-eyed Christmas Angel, transmuted from a plastic beauty.

Seen now, in the context of these disturbing events, it possessed a demonic quality. Was the Rachling of Cutter's nightmare anything like this? Rachael could not be sure. No theory could ever show the truth, for magic - like art - was mostly effect. Harry - or the powers enacting his will - would use any gimmick or 'business' to achieve their dubious ends.

Rachael recognized the psychic bond between Cutter and herself. Its manifestation had been most notable on the night of Nevill's intrusion. Cutter had raced across town to reach his damsel in distress. So could she pinpoint Cutter's location through similar means?

Rachael faced the bolted door of the lavatory, and closed her eyes in concentration. She visualized the scene beyond: the workshop receding its thirty-foot length, dotted with motorbike parts. Rachael felt no sense of presence, and could hear no-one moving around.

What about the cubby-hole at the far end? Rachael had known every brick during her isolation, while painting the nightmare forest. There was a deep sadness emanating from within. Rachael was puzzled by the sheer intensity of emotion: unless Cutter was regretting his attack on her own person, it was hard to understand.

Just then, Rachael heard the sonorous tones of The Industrial Revolution. They were pulsing from the cubby-hole's hi-fi. Rachael lost her concentration, and the sense of Cutter was gone. She knew he was there, for someone had started the music. Given Cutter's love of those melancholy sounds, he would linger for some time. Rachael breathed a little more easily, with greater belief in escape. She resolved to leave the vicinity, while Cutter's attention was held.

Rachael took the keys from her corduroy jacket, and selected the one for the street door. She held it tight in one hand, with the knife in the other. Carefully, the girl slid the stiff iron bolt.

As she pulled the lavatory door inwards, Rachael could see her thoughts had been accurate. The door to the yard blocked her way, although the workshop was visible through its broken glass. The place appeared to be empty, so Cutter was in the cubby-hole. Could she edge round? Yes - but don't squeak the hinges. No-one on the staircase, thank God.

Despite the thumping music, Rachael trod gingerly across the floor. She was keen not to step on the shattered projector, or shards of fallen glass. Either might break with the pressure and give the game away. A sudden snap would alert Cutter to her moves.

Rachael dithered on the threshold. Should she run across the yard, or sneak to the wooden gate? Cutter might hear her running. His ears were sensitive, after all. It was better to go slow at first, then finish with a sudden sprint. The sound would not matter when she was nearly free.

Filling her lungs with an invigorating breath, Rachael stepped into the yard. Something moved. Cutter gave a fearsome cry. He swung the chopping-board like a samurai sword. Rachael's eyes latched onto the multiple blades, which curved through the air towards her. There was no time to run. No time to hide. Her body could not react. The steel tips sped with precision towards her static, dumbstruck face. They hit the Perspex visor of a crash-helmet. She had taken it from the banister post.

Rachael changed her plan. She ran. Cutter flinched from his weapon as it bounced back, and fell against the steel shelves. The pipes and fittings rattled. Cutter's homburg toppled from his head.

Rachael raised her key. She was virtually there. "Dance!" cried Cutter. She felt a jolt in her mind, and knew it was an instruction she had best obey. Rachael leapt high, with her legs up tight as if kneeling in the air. The chopping-board whirled beneath her skirt and smashed onto the concrete. Several blades snapped from the wooden strip, tinkling on the ground.

Rachael landed, and twisted round to see Cutter marching towards her. She backed away, but one foot trod on the chopping-board. There was no pain, for the blades had pierced the sole of her boot. Cutter stepped onto the other end, before she could kick herself free.

"I've still got the knife," said Rachael, jabbing it towards him.

"Sure," said Cutter. "You're a cold-blooded killer."

"Let me go," gasped Rachael. "I'll forget it."

"How terribly civil," he smiled. One hand groped for his utility belt. Rachael tried to see...

Cutter's other hand whipped out a cycle chain. The art of misdirection! The chain lashed across Rachael's fingers, and she released the knife with a cry. It clattered across the concrete, well out of reach.

Rachael pulled free of the chopping-board. She made it to the gates, and shoved the key in the lock. Suddenly, Cutter's arms closed round her neck. Rachael kicked back, but Cutter shoved her so the helmet hit the gate. It saved Rachael from injury, but her head whirled in dizziness.

The delay was enough for Cutter: he unfastened the chinstrap and prised the helmet off. Pausing to admire Rachael's bold graphics, Cutter dropped the object without ceremony. It struck the concrete with a hollow thud, and rolled like an empty skull.

Cutter pulled Rachael back. She lost her grip on the keys, which remained in the unlocked street door. The biker spun the girl, and held her firm before him. She found herself paralysed into inaction. Rachael had all her wits about her, yet Cutter had a dark stamina. It countered her at every turn.

However, there was a sense of calmness within Cutter. The bearded face hovered over Rachael with a monolithic presence. His breath curled in the winter air with the opacity of cigarette smoke. Yet the biker's question was an unexpected one. "Have you seen...*Andy*?"

Rachael shook her head.

"I have," said Cutter. "He's listening to music. Time to search his soul."

Rachael began to see what Cutter was getting at. "He's...*dead*?" she croaked. "I'm sorry."

"Snuffed," said Cutter. "By those forces in your head. You want Harry, do you Rachael? Want Harry *inside*?" Cutter tapped his temple in emphasis, giving Rachael a slight shake. As with a volume control, its level could be raised from two to ten.

"I didn't choose this," said Rachael. A tear twinkled in her eye. "I...couldn't let you kill Harry. He was just an old man."

She was not sure if Cutter was listening. His face had taken on a distant, almost mystical aspect. Then the eyes narrowed in a familiar expression. It meant Cutter's logic had formed some deep conclusion, and his logic never lied. He had cast light on the situation, and found it to be wanting.

"Rachael. We've...slept together," said Cutter. "Seldom took any...precautions. There could be something else inside you."

"Cutter...?"

"Early days, Rachael. Hard to say."

"A baby...?"

"*White rabbit*," sneered Cutter. "I've got a hunch. It's a boy."

Rachael trembled.

"Son of 'Cutter' Graves..." he added.

"...and of Rachael," she murmured, echoing the mannered style.

Cutter frowned. He was distracted by an inner turmoil, and even slackened his hold on the girl. One hand passed across his furrowed brow. Cutter winced with a look

of pain. His sarcastic remark about a white rabbit had sprung from festering suspicion. "Son of 'Cutter' Graves," he whispered, "or Harry...the dead and demented."

"No," gasped Rachael. "You're *crazy*."

Cutter glared at her, hard. "To think that *he* - as an insult - would merge with my genes. The righteous genes of an Angel. Part you, part me, but corrupted by Harry."

"It's a fantasy," said Rachael. "A nightmare."

She knew, in her heart, that this was not the case. Something had passed between Harry and herself, when they lay together in his flat. He had been dead to the physical world, she insensitive.

Cutter's eyes looked sore: on the verge of tears, or another furious outburst. "Tell me...you'll finish it," he murmured. "Tell me you'll abort the baby."

Rachael shuddered. Cutter's grasp was delicate. His fingers were almost comforting in the light pressure they exerted on her jacket. The other hand touched his brow, but could deliver a hefty down strike in an instant.

"We don't even know there's a baby," said Rachael, trying to placate the biker.

Cutter raised an eyebrow. "But if...?"

Rachael hesitated.

"I need your complete assurance," said Cutter.

Rachael was startled. Minutes earlier, Cutter had been trying to murder her. His mind was drifting between past and future: Harry's revenge had failed in the forest of illusion, to be replaced by mental torture.

"You heard," said Cutter. "Your complete assurance."

The two remained static for a moment. "Cutter," said Rachael, as calmly as she could. "A baby's alive. Harry was alive. I didn't know Harry, but I tried to save him."

"You didn't think about Harry," said Cutter. "Will you terminate the baby? Yes or no?"

"Cutter..."

"It has to be yes," he added.

Rachael sighed. "It can't be."

Cutter tightened his grip on her shoulder, and clenched his other hand to a fist. "It has to be yes," he repeated.

Rachael had little choice. It was only a word, after all. "Okay...*yes*," she said, for safety.

Cutter frowned. He sensed trouble in that reluctant reply: the deceitful tones of the Rachling, and even the faintest flicker in Rachael's eyes. Perhaps he had imagined it. Perhaps he had gone completely mad. But Cutter had to trust his inner urges, as he had always done. He saw no reason why his mind - in this case - would seek to mislead him.

Cutter looked at the girl. She was beautiful, yet vulnerable before him. Trust could no longer be granted. "Liar," said Cutter, simply.

As he spoke, Rachael knew her own mind. She knew Cutter's statement was right. "I'm sorry," she said, rather charitably.

"So am I," said Cutter. "Sorry we ever met."

Cutter had a crude method of abortion. If in doubt, kill the mother. His knife lay on the concrete, near the tyres in the corner. Rachael had dropped it, but he could reach it faster. He was Cutter of Cutter's Yard.

"I spy...with my little eye," said Cutter, "something beginning with 'k'!" He shoved Rachael, and dashed for the weapon.

Rachael fell to the ground near the office. Harry's travelling bag slipped from her shoulder. There was no time to reach the gates before Cutter retrieved his blade, so Rachael grabbed the handle of the office door. Luckily, it was open. Darting inside, Rachael slammed the door and assessed the situation. The desk was big enough to block the entrance. She began to push it along.

Cutter's face loomed through the ripple-glass pane, set into the door. He tapped it teasingly with the tip of his blade, then moved to the main window. The Venetian blinds were half-way down. Cutter smiled at Rachael's defensive preparations. She had spirit, this girl. Too much spirit. It was now opposed to his own, and must be extinguished.

Cutter strolled to a corner of the yard, while Rachael searched for another weapon. It sickened her to fight like this, but she had no other choice. There was little in the office to help. Rachael found an old whisky bottle, and knocked back its short measure. She needed the fortification.

Rachael heard a scraping sound from the yard, then a grunt more typical of Cutter's late mechanic. With a spasm of sudden terror, she scabbled under the desk. A motorbike wheel smashed through the window like a rogue flying saucer. Glass tinkled over the edge of the desk. The Venetian blinds swung wildly back and forth, their slats twisted and broken. The wheel struck the opposite wall, chipping the plaster, and dropped with a dull clang.

Rachael huddled silently, numb with indecision. The whisky bottle was a feeble weapon. The window's jagged edges were cast upon the wall by the pale winter sun. The shadow of Cutter began rising into view. Rachael had to stop him, but how?

The wheel was solid metal, too difficult to lift or throw. Rachael had noticed something else on the desk, and an idea pinged into her head. It might work if she acted fast, before Cutter could clamber in.

Rachael crawled quickly from under the desk. Her woollen tights offered meagre protection from the scattered, glassy shards. Cutter's shadow was motionless: he was some way back, judging the effect of his onslaught. Keeping low, Rachael peered over the rim of the desk. The shattered glass presented a scene like an arctic landscape. There was something dominating that landscape. It would not be there for much longer.

Cutter was still motionless. He had thrown the wheel to frighten the girl, and enable his own entry. Kill two birds with a single stone? Maybe he had killed her, too.

"C-Cutter," came Rachael's plaintive voice, seemingly in pain. There was a pause, then a moan, before she spoke again. "Please, Cutter. It's *hurting*..."

Cutter felt an inexplicable drop in rage. He must have done serious damage. The dumb sadness of the situation hit him: minutes ago, Rachael had been whole and healthy. Now she was dying on the floor.

“Rachael...” said Cutter, under his breath. There was true concern in his voice. The mechanical typewriter stopped his approach. She had aimed it straight at his head.

Cutter flinched, but not fast enough. The object grazed him with powerful force. Cutter fell from view. The typewriter crashed to the concrete, although its innards stayed intact. The roller held an invoice: ‘FAST PAYMENT BEST.’

* * * * *

Rachael could not tell how long she waited. Maybe a few minutes, maybe an hour. She remained in a squatting position, while clasping the edge of the desk. Her right hand throbbed with the lashing from Cutter’s bike chain. Pink weals rose on the skin.

The only sound, it seemed, was her thumping heart as she listened for movement outside. She had hit him all right. Brained him. Killed him? Rachael’s head swirled in a sea of nausea.

After this indeterminate time, the girl reached a conclusion. She would have to survey the scene. After brushing a path through the broken glass, Rachael climbed onto the desktop and slid towards the window. Cutter lay on the concrete, motionless and silent. The keys still dangled from the street door. She knew it was time to leave.

It was easier to climb through the window than unblock the office door. Rachael proceeded very slowly, while shirking away from the jagged edges. A sliver of glass caught a tassel of her skirt, threatening to unravel it. She unlooped the tassel, almost comforted by such a trivial concern.

Jumping down, Rachael landed a short way from Cutter. She approached with much trepidation, as she had with Harry’s body. There was blood all right, glistening on his temple, and no sign of any breathing. Rachael felt a great blankness, as if despair at her actions and relief at success cancelled each other out. For Cutter would have killed her, sure enough. She had only been defending herself - and, perhaps, that unborn child.

Unable to feel any simple emotion, Rachael turned away. She began to walk towards the gates. Cutter grabbed her ankle, closing his fingers hard. Rachael’s head twisted, so their eyes met for an instant. Cutter gave a powerful yank. Rachael fell, flailing, unable to stop. Her head smacked the concrete. She saw stars, patterns, faces from the past - Sue, Grunt, Olly. She heard voices, trumpeting music, and beheld spirals of searing light.

Cutter stood, and rubbed his temple. There was a gruesome scratch beneath his blood-soaked bandana, but a scratch was only a scratch. Hard work and patience had built the Yard. The same patience Cutter had used this morning, as he lay ‘dead’ on the ground. Cutter would have stayed there as long as necessary. Hours, even till night.

Rachael had been patient, too. She had waited in the office to ensure Cutter was unconscious. The biker had countered her pause with his own inaction: an illusion of safety formed the bait. Cutter had held his breath with Rachael’s gaze upon him, so his lungs threatened to burst. He had fixed his eyes in a startled squint, as if seeing that makeshift missile.

Cutter gazed down on the fallen girl. No crash-helmet to cushion the shock? Looked like the end for Miss Stanwick. Should he finish the job - use the knife - and

make doubly, triply sure? The answer was not hard to guess. Cutter had seen a few tumbles, and knew a bad head case. The knife would not be needed.

Besides - he might be a 'Cutter', but he was no butcher. Let her lie there beautiful, like a sad princess. Or an angel - for a halo gleamed round her hair. A circle of oil on the concrete, reflecting the sky in a rainbow swirl.

A trickle of blood swirled down the plug-hole of Cutter's bath. It appeared streaky pink in the water. Cutter hosed the shower attachment over his aching body. He was naked apart from the neck chains and bullet earring. Cool droplets trickled down his back, refracting the bold mark of the Blades: a tattoo made for a hasty kick, virtually forgotten.

Cutter had cleaned the forehead graze, eliciting further bleeding in the process. Now the area throbbed with a growing pulse, the prelude to a bruise or swelling. Cutter's fast reactions had served him well, as they had in many a fight. He could bear minor disfigurement for a while.

His leg, though, was more unpleasant. Rachael had cut surprisingly deep. The panicky urge of self-defence had powered her motion. The blade had been kept as sharp as a razor - befitting its owner, 'Cutter' Graves.

Stepping onto the bathroom floor, Cutter dried himself with vigour. He opened the first aid kit and applied a sticking-plaster to his head. After this, he tied a bandage round his calf muscle to compress the gash. The fury of the fight had blinded him to pain, but the leg's sting was undeniable.

Cutter dressed in a fresh set of clothes, just like those he had shed. His vital utility belt was the same, however, as was the leather waistcoat. Cutter slipped the mirror-shades from its pocket, and slid them onto his nose.

There was a cold beer in the kitchen fridge. Cutter knocked it back in one. His eyes fell upon an object that had been there for a while. The pink plastic flower - a tulip - that his flick-knife had become. It protruded from a green bottle like a restaurant decoration.

Behind, a pinboard displayed a variety of paper scraps: cuttings on crime, snippets from bike magazines and a selection of favourite snapshots. These were presented in a random manner, tilted and overlapping. Figures had been cut from their backgrounds or given speech balloons with a marker, uttering private jokes or obscenities. Cutter seldom studied them, but he felt the urge today. He peered close through his reflective glasses.

There was Grunt clowning in a lay-by, and Cutter with some tart in France; Cutter again, standing by the gates of the Yard wielding a baseball bat. That was when Grunt's friend 'Bingo' had made a call, to play rough-and-tumble games.

There were others, too, with Rachael. The latest additions to the collage. She was pictured in the living-room, dozing on the sofa. Grunt lurked in the background with a solemn face. Then a better one, taken with a timer: Cutter, Grunt and Rachael gathered round a motorbike. Cutter smiled, with one hand on Rachael's shoulder. She faced the camera with a sultry gaze. Grunt struck a surprisingly handsome figure, sober in his dark sweatshirt. He had the cool detachment of a James Dean look-alike. That was how he had wanted to be.

The swirl of memory and emotion within Cutter became blocked by its own excess. There was no way his mind could deal with the details, so it snapped into simple acceptance. The past was gone, he realized. Dwelling on better moments, on happier

times, could never bring them back. It was tempting to relish these photographs, of a time impossible to revive.

Cutter understood the folly of distraction. I'll not be another D.S. Roberts, he thought - lost in a maze of shattered illusions, fuelling desperate dreams with desperate schemes. Take them down, buy some wacky postcards. Freshen things up a bit.

A jolt of hope shot through Cutter as he imagined a new beginning to the Yard. A new mechanic might walk through the door, he would meet a groovy new girl. Just change the cast! It was easy, like a seaside variety show! Only one little problem: a couple of stiffs downstairs.

The sheer *inconvenience* angered Cutter, not an outburst of sudden grief. He brought his fist down on the table - "No!" - rattling sauce bottles and dirty teaspoons. Cutter felt he could sit and blub like a child, but the twinge in his chest was more physical. "*Jesus,*" he snarled, as a searing agony burnt a cleft inside. Cutter clutched the back of a kitchen chair, and waited till the wave had passed.

He had known similar moments before, although seldom with such ferocity. Cutter was strong and healthy in many ways, yet his heart had proved deceitful - not in love and loyalty - but the pragmatic function of pumping blood. Cutter wished he were a mechanical creature that could whip out the troublesome component. What had Jack Stanley said about his own grisly gut? Chuck it on the junk pile, screw another in. Better engineering.

The phase passed safely, as it had before. Cutter prided himself on his ability to ride these attacks. He regarded them as a challenge to his independent status, treating them with contempt. Cutter had the medication, sure, but saw it as a last resort.

Recovered, if somewhat shaken, Cutter returned to the silent living-room. Its appearance made it hard to believe a conflict had taken place. The cine-projector was gone, of course, although Harry's hat remained on the coffee table. Cutter glanced at the posters on the wall, the blank television screen - then something metallic on the bare floorboards. One of the demon statues.

It must be the one he had slain in the forest, Cutter reasoned. Its death in the mental landscape had caused a backlash of energy, meaning an undignified topple for the artefact. It was unbroken, yet lacked its previous sheen. Nothing but an ugly ornament.

Cutter left the demon where it lay. His eyes rolled over the badges on the mantelpiece, mostly collected by Grunt. The second demon was still in place - and the most dominant feature, Rachael's painting.

Despite his emergence from the imaginary realm, Cutter was impressed by the picture's composition. So much so, he found himself drawn a little closer. Cutter was amazed at the depth in the artwork, the subtle effects of the paint-laden brush. The space fell away, fell away. He inched close...seeing more...its grey light, its cold air. A startling mythical forest. So it sighed, so it stretched, so it grew in his mind. Its wildness, its pain...

He jumped back!

It had been mesmerizing, this painting of hers. Was it the skill of the artist or the late magician, whose powers had infiltrated the room? Despite his death - despite *Rachael's* - the magic lingered on: of such, Cutter was in no doubt.

Nothing must be left of these artefacts. Cutter drew the knife from his utility belt, stabbed a corner of the canvas, and slashed the picture lengthways. By repeating the action numerous times, from different points round the edge, he reduced the painting to a tangle of colour-daubed ribbons.

Cutter regarded his handiwork, unsure what to do with the second demon. Could it form another manifestation? How could he destroy it? Cutter's reverie was broken by a sudden, if commonplace, sound. The ringing of the telephone.

It was the older dial and bell variety, as were all the phones in the Yard. It did, however, ring clearly - unlike the rasping specimen in the office. Cutter had often thought to swap them over, but found the efforts produced by the office instrument an entertaining diversion. As it was, the piercing ring sounded through the entire flat. Cutter twitched nervously, jingling his mascots.

Sheathing the knife, Cutter turned away from the mantelpiece. He walked past the window with its view of chimneystacks, to the far end of the room. The phone was on a sideboard, next to the standard lamp in the corner. Cutter took the receiver, but remained silent. There was a moment's delay, as if the caller had expected a business-like greeting. Then her voice came clearly, if a touch bemused: "Oh...hello? Is that Cutter's Yard? I want to speak to Cutter."

"I am Cutter," said he.

"It's Mandy. Girl with the scooter. You finished her yet?"

"*Her*?" inquired Cutter. He was baffled by Mandy's sentimental term.

"Cheryl. Told you, stupid! Call me scooter Cheryl." There was a short hesitation: Mandy was unsure if Cutter was listening. "What's happening?" she asked. "I'd like to know."

"You'd like to know," intoned Cutter.

Mandy was perplexed. "Yes, Cutter. I'd like to know if you've fixed her. What the trouble was."

"I'll tell you the trouble," said Cutter, forgetting how cute he had found Mandy. It felt like an age ago. "Life's the trouble, Mandy. Life, love and liberty. Can't fix those with a toolbox."

There was a slight exclamation from Mandy. Her gasp mixed puzzlement with worry. Cutter put the receiver down, and heard nothing more.

Then he noticed something on the sideboard, just by the phone. It was that paperback Grunt had been reading: 'Sor the Savage. First of the Basker Trilogy', the masterwork of Alan McClaren. Cutter flipped through the great wodge of pages, and reached a grubby bookmark. Grunt's bubblegum card had seen little of the epic, though he had been reading it forever.

There might be something in this trivial fantasy. Some distraction from a curse of deep regret, never to be repealed. Someone would find Rachael. Someone would find Grunt. Nevill would hear about Roberts, tell the tale. A final link would be made. Cutter was at the centre of the web, waiting for doom to come.

Cutter flipped on the standard lamp, which cast a cone of illumination. His shadow sprang large by the mantelpiece, with the tattered remains of Rachael's art. Moving to his favourite armchair, Cutter sat with a sigh of satisfaction. He could appreciate his home comforts, even if they were just illusions. Suspension of disbelief! That was the trick. Any magician would tell you.

Cutter felt a wry amusement at the book's gaudy cover, with its muscled, axe-wielding hero. He had wondered how Grunt might cope in a 'real' conflict, and discovered only too well. Cutter glanced past the author's dull biography, and an amateurish map of the Basker world. Then he began the opening chapter:

'The Basker tribe had wandered the burnt deserts of the Northern Realm for as long as Sor could remember. He had started these travels as an infant, and reached his manhood to lead them. Sor was the last of the true Basker Warriors, and sought only one thing for his tribe: a place they could call a homestead, where they might start a new city for the Basker. Their old city had been lost in the War of Servility, which had ravaged these barren lands...'

It was all good testosterone-pumping stuff, and Cutter lapped it up.

* * * * *

Shaken by his argument with Cutter, Wilf had taken an unusual step. He had missed a shift at the Midnight Café. Wilf had rung in sick, leaving others to cope - although Sunday was a quiet time.

Extra sleep should have been welcome, but Wilf could not enjoy it. He had dozed intermittently. Thoughts of Cutter had come to haunt him - shouting, whipping out knives, attacking all and sundry. There was even a touch of conjuring, with sparkling glitter and spinning rings. 'THUGS KILL MR. MAGIC'. Cutter was a thug.

Wilf had stared at the ceiling, hoping to steady his nerves. He tried to concentrate on other, less troubling topics. As Wilf began to doze again, the spell of contrived composure broke. The disturbing images flooded back. He had given up past three o'clock, rising to make coffee.

The flat was a cosy, one-bedroom basement. Wilf was glad to be buying the place, however many greasy breakfasts it took. A visitor would detect his love of motorbikes, and other leather-clad men with big moustaches.

The guy sleeping in the double bed was hardly the macho kind. Calmed by the hot beverage, Wilf found Ken in the land of nod. He decided to stay awake, however. Wilf switched on his bedside lamp and pored over a poetry book. Eventually, a creeping drowsiness overtook him. Wilf's head slumped on the pillow.

Ken had arisen at eight, leaving Wilf to sleep on. He placed the book on the bedside table and switched off the lamp. Ken worked in an arty gift shop as a part-time assistant, so - free and easy till the afternoon - he went to buy food. Monday morning was a good time: it avoided Saturday's bustle, and there was fresh bread at the baker's.

Wilf was still in bed when Ken returned, near eleven. He was awake, but with a feverish appearance. Ken sat on the duvet to speak to his friend. "Something the matter?" he asked.

"A...headache," said Wilf. He felt his brow, as if burnt by a caustic wound.

"More than a headache," said Ken. "*A heartache.*"

Despite his inner reflections, Wilf managed a smile. "How well you know me," he said. Wilf stretched a muscular arm, stroking Ken on the cheek.

Ken, too, managed a smile. "Something we can share," he asked, "*Wilfred?*" Only Ken could call Wilf by his full name. It was the special way he said it.

"Told you about the row," said Wilf. "Row with Malcolm."

Ken nodded. "He wants to bop you on the nose."

"Worse than that," replied Wilf. "He didn't say anything. I lied to you, little Ken."

Ken was unabashed by the announcement. "I can take a fib," he murmured, fiddling with a button of his floral waistcoat.

Wilf spoke in a solemn tone. "Wasn't Malcolm at all. It was Cutter. He's been acting this...funny mood."

"And no tee-hee about it?"

"You're perceptive to the core."

Ken edged closer. "What's been worrying you, Wilfred? Cutter's a funny bloke. We know."

"He's violent," said Wilf. "I knew it, but...he's out of control."

Ken sighed. "And you got in his way?"

Wilf nodded. "Had my wits about me. Calmed him. It might have been a different story."

"So what is the story?" asked Ken. "Tell me."

Ken's wide and watery eyes stayed fixed upon Wilf. Such gentle persuasion was hard to resist. Ken had first captivated Wilf through similar means, at some dingy music venue.

Wilf could no longer contain his theory. "I believe Cutter...and Grunt...they've done a murder," he said. "That magician chap. That Harry."

Ken's face hardly altered a twitch. "I see," he replied, simply.

"I've thought long," gasped Wilf. "Dreamt longer. What makes it sure to me..."

"You don't need to say," said Ken. He raised a hand in a decisive though delicate gesture. "I trust your instincts, Wilfred. I trust your insight. If you say they did so, I believe you."

There was a moment of grateful silence, before Wilf raised a practical concern. "I've no proof. Can't split on a biker."

Ken bowed his head in assent. "We can ring with an anonymous tip off. Cutter need never know."

Wilf gazed down at the duvet. His eyes were mesmerized by the pale design. "I can't, Ken. Couldn't bear to. Couldn't pick up the phone."

"You missed the little word," said Ken. "'We', Wilfred. I can do it for you."

A moment passed - an anguished decision - before Wilf gave a solemn nod. Ken smiled in a moment of pride. He kissed Wilf's troubled brow.

‘Sor had listened with much attention to the tales of the Elder Warriors. To grant this title had been custom, although the ritual was a mere relic. The tribe had been ravaged by a thousand battles, and the bravest had long since perished. Sor alone still studied the Almanac of Arms, and knew the nine classic moves of attack and parry which made a Basker Axeman.’

Cutter read with studious fixation. His mind had been transported from a cold British winter to the heat-blasted deserts of the Basker world. The tale was slow to start, and he wondered how Grunt had fared with these opening passages. Yet there was promise of meaty stuff to come. Finish this chapter, thought Cutter, then make tea and toast. The Basker tribe marched on their stomachs. Cutter read on his.

At this point, the tribe was approaching a shantytown where they hoped to gain medical help. The heroine, Pirl, was suffering the early stages of a virulent disease. Her father was one of the gnarled old warriors, who needed a special herb to cure her.

‘Sor had agreed to help the wizened old man. He knew Pirl’s life was precious, and that she might give birth, at some future time, to a new breed of Basker Axeman.

‘Sor raised the gleaming blade of his mighty axe, ornamented with runes and etchings of long tradition. These told of many a battle. “We shall stop,” he said. “We shall search. The town will aid us or know my wrath.”’

The moment was enhanced by the thin shadow, which crept up the paperback page. It was cast by the standard lamp behind Cutter. His eyes halted at the end of Sor’s stirring speech, and followed the shadow up off the page. It moved over the floorboards, onto the opposite wall. It was another weapon - a sword, not a battle-axe - alongside the shadow of a bladed shield. They spread apart with the sweep of two spindly arms, swathed in ragged robes. A head sprouting horny projections rose on a scrawny neck.

Cutter placed the book open, cover up, on the arm of his comfortable chair. He remained calm, knowing this was an entity he had beaten before. Cutter’s mouth displayed a smile of derision and a sneer of hate, somehow intermingled. A hand hovered close to his knife. Cutter rose with a smooth, hydraulic ease. His head rotated with suspenseful deliberation. The eyes were lost behind mirror-shades. Harry could see his distorted reflections in their purple lenses. They were tiny and distant, like twin toy soldiers.

Harry wriggled his hands in a bat-like formation, used to create the shadow. Then he split them apart to show the trick was done. “I guarantee your astonishment!”

Cutter boiled with anger, yet he was unable to utter a word. *Harry Hocus!* Looking young, immaculate - dapper, even - in his dinner jacket and starry tie. How dare he come *here*, to Cutter’s Yard? Invade this private domain?

Cutter whipped up his knife, the blade ready. The uninvited guest had gone. The standard lamp glowed in the corner. It was the living-room, as before.

Cutter grunted. Had it truly been Harry, or some vile hallucination? The biker was either haunted, or plagued by insanity: not much joy in either. Cutter flinched so the flick-knife fell away, impaling its tip in the floorboards. His arm remained stretched before him. The forefinger pointed to where Harry had stood, and Cutter found his voice at last. He screamed an effervescence of fury. Foam sprayed from the bearded mouth.

The bellow dried into a grating croak, before a twinge in Cutter's chest. This expanded like a spider with pin-sharp legs, uncurling itself within. Cutter knelt on the armchair, staring at the empty room. Then came a nuclear explosion of pain. He clutched his heart and stood upright, with an incredible act of will. The pills were in the bathroom, so he had to get there fast. The biker lurched towards the door.

Cutter grasped the mantelpiece. He suffered a second shockwave, like an arc of electricity. Cutter's back twisted with a spasmodic jolt. He collapsed with the crash of an elephant. Cutter lay sprawled in a graceless posture, where he moaned for a few seconds. Cutter emitted a rattling sigh like a fading wind. He was silent evermore.

An energy had defined Harry. It had appeared, on this occasion, in the guise of his younger self. Now it swept over the big biker, down the wooden staircase, and through the broken glass of the workshop door. The energy quickly crossed the yard, to find the fallen Rachael. There was an aura of concern and respect - even a little love, for Harry had always loved his assistants.

She was not dead, but drifting in a deep coma. The kind doctors would debate for weeks, while injecting liquid food. Her powers - or *his* powers - lacked a mind to control them. They swathed the body in a harmonic glow, but were unable to repair the damage.

For a moment, Harry no longer saw Rachael. He remembered...

The thud that breaks his flow of patter, when laughter turns to screams. The walls are suddenly in motion, the ceiling a bulging mass. He remembered...debris falling on the upturned faces, carpets covered in dust. Harry drops his tricks and leaps into danger, over terrified faces in the orchestra pit. He can see his shirt-cuffs, pure and white - "*Take a look, sir, nothing up there!*" - pink with the blood of the crowd. He grabs bandages and swabs, helping whom he can. Still they take the stretchers away, with faces staining sheets.

Then the fire...swallowing seats, leaping up curtains. The rumble of collapsing rafters. They must run, and leave the dead to burn. But Harry sees an image to pulverize his heart. A crushed girl lays in a spangled tu tu. His glamorous assistant, Susan Starr, a victim of the London Blitz. None of his tricks can save her.

The magician knew his limitations. He had been a dabbler - a trickster - nothing more. His powers had been a gift to the girl, but needed the application of his art. So Harry took charge for a final time, directing with consummate skill.

Magic flowed through Rachael's neural pathways - restoring links and connections, mending blockages and breaks. There must be enough. There *had* to be enough. She was healing, but not reviving.

Harry's powers had entered Rachael on the night of the robbery. His spirit had also lingered in the things he owned - most notably, that fine top hat. This energy would fade in time, as Harry's memory faded from the world. Better it be used now, to save

another who was lost. Also the new life, which - Harry could see - was growing within her. Rachael needed a grand finale.

Harry, or the essence of his personality, beamed down upon the girl. He touched his wand to her brow. Harry's last thought on earth was a simple wish, before he joined the astral realm: Rachael should use his powers wisely, now her foes were no more. Yet Harry's motives had not always been good. The girl had resisted the urge for revenge. Perhaps she could teach him a lesson, too.

Rachael beheld a blaze of light within the void of darkness. Light - both white and pure, yet a blending of rainbow colours. She opened her eyes and sat upright, as if she had taken a nap. The rainbow gleamed on the concrete, no hallucination. It was a spectrum of engine oil.

Rachael stood slowly. She was worn, but somehow refreshed. A slight tingle in her body revived her. Rachael took deep, recuperative breaths.

She glanced warily at the yard around her. The place was deserted. The girl moved towards the gates, where she retrieved the travelling bag. Her keys were still in the street door, although something stopped her escape. A cold shiver ran through her body.

Rachael did not understand the manner of her deliverance. She sensed a feeling of dreadful loss from the flat above the workshop. Cutter, she thought. It must be Cutter. Something had got to him while she lay. Could it have been the Rachling, revived once more? *No*. The Rachling was part of her own personality, even if driven by the influence of Harry. A deep foreboding had entered her being whenever the Rachling arose. Rachael had felt nothing while she lay unconscious.

It was an act of duty to investigate the truth. She could trust her instincts, and knew the danger had gone. Hardly relishing the prospect, but with unshakeable resolve, Rachael walked to the workshop door.

The broken cine-projector still lay on the floor. Rachael was saddened at the memory of Cutter's show, watched by Grunt and herself. It had been a delightful experience. She took the unravelling spool for a moment, and held its crumpled film to the light. Multiple images of motorbikes, captured in time. It must have been precious, once. Placing the spool back in the wreckage, Rachael made her way up the stairs.

The passage came into view, then the ill-named living-room: Cutter's body lay across the threshold. The arms were frozen in awkward positions, and the face was a pallid grey. The eyes were lost behind mirror-shades, a little to Rachael's relief. She could see her own reflections looking up, as if staring from Cutter's soul. The eyes were the windows, after all.

Outside, a flurry of seagulls screeched across the rooftops. Their voices echoed the bleakness of the scene. The flat was now a hostile environment, and Rachael would not choose to linger.

A metallic demon lay on the floor, below the mantelpiece. Rachael glanced at her painting, somehow unfazed by its condition. So much work had been destroyed, although it had served as personal therapy. The nightmare forest had been expelled from her mind. The physical image meant nothing.

The second demon still remained standing. Rachael lifted it cautiously, with a tentative touch. She understood what had happened in the forest world. Surely Cutter's demise - here, in his very home - had been a different one than Grunt's. Altogether more strange and subtle, as befit the leader of the pack.

Rachael held the demon before her. She examined its grotesque, snarling visage with a grimace of mild disgust. What evil dwelt within, she wondered. What was it capable of?

Perhaps the demon wished to satisfy her curiosity, for its slitty eyes sparkled with a trace of flame. Rachael let go. The statue tumbled down, as if in a slow motion sequence. It landed with a heavy thud. The eyes stared at the ceiling, as dull as its late companion's.

Rachael was no *Rachling*. She had rejected the demon's power. She was a better person than Harry, as the magician had known.

Time to go, thought Rachael. Get out of this morgue. She moved swiftly towards the door. But something caught the corner of her eye, and she turned to the coffee table. There was a familiar object on its chess-board surface, which she had barely noticed till now. Something tall, silky and elegant. Harry's top hat!

There was no way she could leave it. Rachael opened Harry's travelling bag, which fitted the hat perfectly. She could hardly wear it on the street. Averting her eyes, Rachael stepped over Cutter's body. Then she quickly descended the stairs.

The girl ran across the concrete yard, and twisted the keys at last. She slammed the street door, dithered a little, then locked it firmly behind. Cutter deserved his privacy. It was the last respect she could pay.

Rachael scarpered, never looking back - yet a memory triggered in her mind. A snatch of banter from years ago, before she was even born. "*No bride, Mr. Ashley. Just...a little magic.*"

The voice of Harry Hocus.

Laughter and applause faded as Rachael reached the corner, heading for the centre of town. The punishments of fate had all been dealt, but there were still the earthly laws. Braintree and Leeds were on their way. Ken had made his call.

THE END