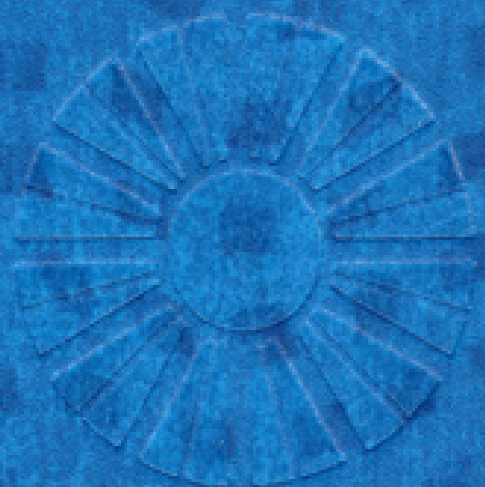


**DOCTOR
WHO**
NOVELLAS

THE CABINET OF LIGHT



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THE CABINET OF LIGHT Daniel O'Mahony

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FOREWORD by CHAZ BRENCHLEY



AT THE HEART OF ALL GOOD MYSTERY WRITING, PERHAPS AT THE HEART OF ALL GOOD writing, beats a single driving theme, and that's identity. At the heart of all good mystery writing, perhaps at the heart of all good writing, beats a single driving theme, and that's subversion.

And already we have a paradox: two hearts that cannot possibly beat as one; and that's fine, because this is fiction we're talking about, and in fiction actually they can. Famously, the Doctor has two hearts in any case – but even if he didn't, or even where it's only concerned with us simpler monocores, any story worth its salt dances to this double rhythm. You don't have to go to Bach in search of counterpoint; fiction too can be polyphonic, drawing its edge and its energy from the relentless opposition of equal voices.

At its simplest and least sophisticated, crime fiction has its mystery embodied in its own generic name: whodunit? This is the Agatha Christie end of the market, not so much a novel as a puzzle-book, a jigsaw in story form but still dealing with that fundamental question of identity as it sets out to unmask a murderer. The reader either leaps ahead of the detective or is left running to catch up, demanding an explanation at the end with all the clues laid out for examination; either way it doesn't matter, the chase is the point of it, the hunt is all that counts. It's a ritual, an embodiment of tradition, a reassurance: all will be well, and the world can be put back together just as it was, save for these missing pieces.

More subtly, more darkly, the private eye novel is really more concerned with the identity of its hero. We read Chandler to find out about Philip Marlowe – which is where the subversion starts, but by no means where it ends. We're offered the standard coin of crime, drugs and vice and corruption, but we find ourselves more interested in the narrator than in the story he tells; and all the time the way he tells that story, the language and the rhythms of his voice, act as another counterpoint to the plot. The words flow like a river, like a fugue (never forgetting that fugue has another meaning too, as a psychological state, an amnesiac's flight from reality: just ask the girl in pink pyjamas about that, as she opens this story) and, like a fugue, like a river, the glittering surface hides undercurrents that undercut the solid bank we think we stand on. Nothing is or ever can be that solid, in Marlowe's world; trust all your weight to something – or to someone – and you will fall through.

In an essay published in 1950, Chandler said of that world, 'Down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean.' Daniel O'Mahony borrows that same line here, in *The Cabinet of Light*; it's an affirmation that to be frank is not really necessary, but it is peculiarly apt. The story's geography may be transposed from the neon spangle of Los Angeles to the physical and psychological ruin of post-war London, the milieu may be transposed from gangsterdom to that borderland where science meets magic, from Mr Big to *Doctor Who*, but we're still treading the same fictional territory here, we're still talking about mystery and subversion. And we're still discussing them in the same rich language, still laying traps for the unwary and playing word-games for the aficionado.

Goya said that the sleep of reason brings forth monsters. Lechasseur's dreams do the same, we're told so very early; and that's appropriate, that's the message here, that Lechasseur (the hunter, of course) is the voice of reason, he's a rational man. But he's loose in a world that lacks rationality; even the Doctor makes better sense in this monstrous post-apocalyptic landscape than our human hero. Lechasseur isn't even comfortably at home in his own body or his life, afflicted by visions and premonitions, curiously healed from a disabling injury, seeking

constantly to remake himself from soldier to spiv to investigator. The traditional hunter, the private eye figure, is always and necessarily an outsider, an observer, a stranger in a strange land; here that's taken to extremes, making Lechasseur the true alien in this story, for all the Doctor's two hearts and inherent transience.

Two hearts make for double jeopardy, and it's always seemed to me that we ask a great deal of our writers, a double achievement: clarity of thought and clarity of language, a strong instinct for the story and another for the music, the voice of a poet and a mind like a steel trap. O'Mahony doesn't disappoint, on either side. I'd have stayed with him for the story, simply to find out what happened; I'd have followed him for the telling of it, simply to hear more and never mind its meaning. But that's too clumsy a distinction, for the delicate transactions of English prose; you can't truly shave one from the other. How can we know the dancer from the dance? We only know when one of them is stumbling, and neither one does here, bound up as tight as they are in each other and in the structure of the piece, which is the third part of the divided whole. A novella is a hard thing to shape, too baggy for a short story and far too constraining for a novel; all too easy to let any sense of structure slip. And to cheat, perhaps, to fall back on lazy practice, perhaps to haul in a *deus ex machina* at the end – why not, when you've been gifted with the perfect excuse, a very literal god-in-a-box, the Doctor with his TARDIS at his back? Not here. That perhaps is the final subversion, that the ending is its own business, irresolute and compelling, depending neither on the Doctor nor on the hero-figure Lechasseur forcing a solution to the mystery. It would be unfair to say more, as there are some traditions we must still observe, but it's tight, it's true and it is entirely unexpected.

George Pelecanos writes some of the most interesting crime thrillers coming out of America at the moment; he has said that all his work is about what it means to be a man (with the subtext 'in contemporary urban US society' understood). Perhaps it's not too flippant to suggest that all *Doctor Who* fiction is about what it means to be a Time Lord. The understood subtext is that it is written by humans, and actually we haven't yet figured out quite what it means to be us. The title itself poses

a question of identity, and in so far as it has an answer at all, it has always shifted with the seasons. In the end, what it comes back to is the mystery. Welcome to *The Cabinet of Light*. Anyone got the key?

Chaz Brenchley, October 2002



PROLOGUE: NIGHT AND FOG



IT WAS A TYPICAL EAST END FOG; IT WASN'T WHITE.

Like all true Londoners, and despite what he saw at the flicks, Cranfield knew the fog was *green*. It was a damp, tubercular, reassuring shade. For years the night sky had glowed livid pink, shot through with dust and flame, though that was fading now. With time the tiny clumps of black or red flowers that bloomed on the rubble would die out. Cranfield was a young man, he hoped to be pounding this beat twenty, thirty years on. His father had walked these streets when the first tentative bombs fell; his great-uncle had hunted the Ripper and the Limehouse Phantom nearby; he was walking in their footsteps and in the labyrinth of fogs he could almost believe their paths would cross, three generations of policemen at the same crossroads.

There came the peal of a bell from Shoreditch, hairs prickled on the back of his neck, a memory of sirens and all-clear whistles and the chime calling all hands to help pull bodies from the river.

His beat took him past Spitalfields Market, which was shut up for the night though the gate still thronged with people. The church opposite attracted them like doodlebugs. It was bone-white, yellowed with neglect then scorched black by a Luftwaffe handprint that might not fade for generations. To one side there was a scrub of grass where vagrants slept under newsprint blankets, though Cranfield couldn't imagine the dreams the church would give them. By day, when the streets filled with human heat, old women would sit on the steps beneath the angular spire

and suck green oranges and spit the pips onto the street to mock austerity. Cranfield felt great sympathy for them, the living public. By night the stones absorbed all the heat and people stayed huddled round pub doorways till closing time, then at the market gate. Ragged around the gate were the dark façades of houses, pitted with gaps where other homes had stood until, one night, they had been transformed into cairns of brick rubble and human pulp.

Outside the market a woman was singing, a broken voice, eerily Cranfield couldn't see where it was coming from. They were mainly women here, in their clusters. Vagrants stood shivering by a fire on the scrub. A dirt-faced boy ran in the street, grinning, clipped past Cranfield and the policeman instinctively felt like lashing out, but checked himself. There was a woman squatting on the steps, older than she looked, wrapped in a dark shawl but bare-headed; she sold flowers by day and had a flower's name but he couldn't place it right now. There was an old soldier beside her, tall and heavy in his black cap and coat; he turned to look at Cranfield with a long dead slab-face that probably hadn't twitched since 1918. Cranfield tipped the rim of his hat and nodded automatically, but the eye that watched him was white and sightless.

He moved through them, watching them bristle as he passed. Overhead was a shiny bomber's moon; they could all feel it, despite the fog. There was a patch of darkness on the far side of the church. The girl came stumbling out of that, a splash of violent pink in the midst of green. Cranfield wasn't the first to see her, it was the commotion that made him turn, but he was the closest and when she lost her footing he was there to catch her.

A few days later he would barely remember what she looked like. There was just the memory of her as she shambled towards him, taking each step as though it were her first, wearing nothing but a baggy pink pair of pyjamas. Not silk, not cotton, not even nylon, just pink and shiny in the moonlight. She was barefoot, her feet were blue. The pink pyjamas hung crumpled on her wiry frame. She was small enough for Cranfield to mistake her for a child, though once he got close he realised she was probably in her twenties. She was a skinny pale thing, she

shivered in the autumn fog, but she looked hurt rather than cold. Her eyes told him that – they had a grey traumatised sheen, *witness-eyes*. He could tell, just by looking, that her grasp on the everyday had been ripped away, and savagely.

It had been over four years since Cranfield held anyone like this. Then it had been a girl no older than twelve, and he cradled her in his arms as the life left her body. You heard stories of *Blitz miracles* all the time, unlikely survivors, but he had never seen one with his own eyes. This woman wasn't going to die. Her stare leapt wildly round the faces of the gathered crowd. He could feel delicate bones through her pyjamas.

'What's happened to you?' he asked. She was smiling. He tried a more basic approach: 'What's your name?'

'I don't remember,' she said. 'What year is this? I don't remember the year.' Someone mumbled it, embarrassed. The girl nodded and grinned. It was hard to tell if she understood the date. Cranfield thought *shell-shock*, though that made no sense. She had a Blitz-twitch. There were no signs of violence on her face, on her clothes.

'I don't know who I am.' Her eyes opened wider and she grabbed his uniform frantically. 'Police...' she said, and again he knew she was a victim.

'Are you hurt?'

'I remember *light*,' she insisted. 'I was going to die! There was so much light.'

She held open palms out for Cranfield to inspect, as if she'd been clutching the light in them, but her hands were just dark, bruised pink. A chill rippled through him anyway. Someone else was kneeling beside him, the flower-seller, holding out a worn out bloom, so blackened it was impossible to tell what it had ever been. The girl took it mutely, keeping her mouth tight shut as if holding back a scream.

Then her eyes closed and her head lolled back but she was only asleep.

The girl in pink pyjamas. The police never found a name for her and the press didn't need one. She became a celebrity and her fame spread wide, though not far beyond London. Briefly, she captured the public imagination – all the melodramatic ingredients were there, the pretty

girl, the sinister East End setting, a crime so terrible she had wiped it from her mind, even the pink pyjamas added a frisson that helped sell papers.

The girl in pink pyjamas. She was a distraction for dangerous times. She took up the front pages and kept the frightening business of the day folded within. You could look at her photograph and forget rationing and devaluation, Pakistan and Palestine, airlifts and fuel crises, China and Germany, the FBI and the MGB, and the silent dustclouds rising over Kazakhstan. She always looked damaged in the photographs, the authentic face of 1949. So, she was pinned through the middle of the twentieth century. All of London knew who she was, even if she didn't.

The girl in pink pyjamas. Eventually her celebrity waned and she was gradually forgotten. After a few days, once the novelty had worn off and the police had turned up no new leads, she began to vanish from the newspapers. By then, she had come to the attention of the Doctor.

But perhaps he already knew.

1: THE CITY OF EXILES



EACH MORNING AFTER MIDNIGHT, A WOMAN STOOD IN THE STREET BENEATH HONORÉ Lechasseur's window and screamed abuse at the bloody bastard Irish who had taken her son away. That was several wars ago but, sitting alone in the dark, Lechasseur could see the bullet going through her dead son's skull.

Lechasseur rarely slept but spent his nights drinking, whiskey, sometimes vodka. He'd lost the capacity to get drunk in 1944 and took alcohol as an anaesthetic. His dreams brought forth monsters, they always had done, but London seemed to amplify them. Cheap whiskey was easy to find for someone with the right contacts, though Lechasseur was beginning to suspect that his were wrong. Recently he'd taken a consignment of meat from a reliable source. It had been a bad deal. The meat was rancid, almost green, crawling with maggots.

He had wrapped a slab of the rotten meat in newspaper. The paper carried a report and a picture of a pretty, dazed-looking woman posing uneasily in light grey pyjamas. The image caught his eye, as sometimes important things would, but he decided it was just a sympathetic reaction. She looked out of place, another exile in London. The grainy picture rubbed off on his hands.

Rationing would last a little longer. After that the future was up for grabs.

He dreamed of the future sometimes, of a hybrid London whose familiar skyline had been fused with towers of glass and steel. He sat

cross-legged on his bed dreaming with his eyes open. He'd had vivid dreams as a boy – once he twitched and fitted on a street corner while in his mind he was out on the bayou, fighting a muck-encrusted gold-eyed swamp monster. That was rare, nothing to worry the conscription board. Then he was blasted through a Belgian farmhouse window and the dreams became sharper. Sometimes they came true and sometimes they didn't.

That morning he had managed to sleep a little and have ordinary dreams and the first thing he said to himself when he woke was '*doctor*' but he didn't take it to mean anything.

Around him his apartment was spartan and undecorated. He liked the clean bareness of the room, the raw plaster walls, the exposed plumbing, the pale brown wood of the floorboards. Sometimes he was forced to stow contraband here, most recently silk underwear and Russian cigarettes. He'd piled them in a corner but still bristled at the clutter they represented. The most important things he carried in his head. He let few people in. This was his private space.

He washed and dressed and inspected himself in the bathroom mirror. He'd let his hair grow since the army – neatly and down to his shoulders, and was cultivating a thin black beard and moustache. The black was shot through with premature lines of grey. He was already a distinctive figure in this neighbourhood, a colourful exotic with a slow charismatic smile and coffee dark skin. There were disadvantages but sometimes it helped to be hidden in plain sight.

His reflection stared back at him, hypnotically. He had prominent eyes, icy-white with deep brown pupils. He practised a rogue's grin, he practised a big confident stare. He brushed his teeth mouthing phrases in a bad English accent. *Splendid. I beg your pardon. Good show.* His mouth was a slash on his face, frothing with smuggled American toothpaste. He never slept but he always felt good in the mornings. Something in the unrationed day-light of London made him feel free.

The one thing Lechasseur knew he would never adjust to was the winter. It was always so cold here – even in summer the temperature couldn't touch the coldest New Orleans day. He pulled on his black leather winter coat before leaving. He'd also taken to wearing a hat, not

so much because of the cold but because it kept the dreams trapped in his head.

You look like a gangster, he told the reflection. He'd been moved to England in 1943, posted to a foreign land where everyone from the lowliest private to the highest-ranking Blimp believed that all America was Chicago and Al Capone was her honorary president.

After the war, he'd decided that was true.

I like being a gangster. I like being an American in London.

In 1944 he'd been told he would never walk again. He bounded out of the room and ran down the stairs. His landlady was standing halfway down, old Mrs Bag-of-Bones, with her knitted shawl and her patient smile that she wore only for the strange polite black foreign gentleman in her attic. He caught the banisters, set them creaking, before he could bowl into her.

'Good morning, Mr L. You're full of beans today.'

Like so many Londoners, his landlady couldn't quite get her tongue round his name, so he became Mr L. It all added to the lustre.

'I always am,' he said, as he edged past. 'And I've got an appointment.'

She called after him: 'There were men asking after you again last night. I told them you weren't here.'

'Were they police?' he asked, not turning.

'I shouldn't think so. They were very rough men. Ugly with big hands.'

'Ah, you had me worried there. They sound like old friends,' he said, mainly to assuage her fears. He knew a great many ugly men with big hands but he liked to keep them away from his home. Sometimes he felt a wanderlust and imagined a life half on the run, sleeping where and when he could, but the simple pleasure of having a fixed place of his own always outweighed that.

Besides, he liked Mrs Bag-of-Bones. On quiet evenings they'd talk together in her kitchen, exchanging war stories while she taught him how to enjoy tea. She'd lost a son in the Spanish Civil War. Like so many she was followed wherever she went by the faceless dead. London was haunted, she masked her eyes with pebble-thick glasses to avoid seeing them.

If he was troubled by the thought of night visitors, Lechasseur felt happier once he'd got out into the bitter air and onto his bike. He travelled everywhere he could by bicycle. He felt more connected with his surroundings than he would in an automobile and it was exhilarating to feel the rhythm of his legs as he pedalled. After the blast had shredded his spine he'd had to re-learn the art of walking. It had come to him surprisingly quickly and he always felt that he'd somehow embarrassed the US Army by trumping their predictions.

It was a ten minute ride to the café but he was held up at a checkpoint. It had been raised overnight in a once-narrow road that had been widened by the Luftwaffe eight years earlier, whole rows of solid planted houses gouged out of the ground. He'd ventured down into a bombsite once, like an archaeologist or a grave-robber. The dust from the blast still seemed to hang in the air, dull and unmagical.

Uniformed coppers manned the checkpoint and you could never tell with them. They were too often intimidated by his height, his colour and – most of all – his accent. He asked politely what was going on. Last night a boy had found a UXB while playing and cradled it in the dark, crying softly until dawn when a rescue party found him. The army were defusing it and Lechasseur was redirected with a warning. London was tense. There'd been reports of explosions around the East End a few nights earlier but there was no trace by the morning. It was as if the city were refighting the war in its memories, phantom bombs and dream murders. Lechasseur had always felt sensitive to these things.

He locked up his bike outside the café, a place he knew well, though it was the other party who suggested they meet there. He'd heard of her through a mutual contact. He knew nothing about her. He knew her at once, sitting alone in the corner, watching the door with fidgety nervous eyes. He felt warier than before but walked over to hover at the table.

She looked up.

'Monsieur *Layshazoor*?' she asked.

He pulled the spare chair back in an easy motion and sat down to face her.

'Just Mister,' he said, smiling leisurely to show her white teeth. 'I'm not French. It's just a name. I don't have a drop of French blood in my

veins.'

'Did I pronounce it right?'

'Close,' he told her, still smiling. A greasy boy came to the table and Lechasseur ordered coffee and breakfast. The woman had started without him, half-eaten bacon, eggs, fried bread swam in grease on her plate, the cutlery askew across it. Next to that was an ashtray with three cigarette stubs pressed into it. She had a fourth between her lips. Her hands, long and delicate with painted red nails, rubbed against each other on the wood tabletop. Lechasseur put his hands opposite hers and kept them still. He looked at her.

'You must be Mrs Blandish,' he said.

She slow-blinked. 'Yes. Emily Blandish.' She rolled the name round her tongue. She had an elegant mouth and she knew just how much lipstick to apply to bring out the red. She was, Lechasseur decided once he'd sat down, very raw and attractive. She had big baby blue eyes and healthy white skin. There was a heavy line in the bones of her face, of her shoulders, but she knew how to work with that. She wore a short-sleeved dress that exposed prettily freckled shoulders and the soft flesh of her neck. She had bleach-blonde hair, wavy but faded like a photograph. It didn't matter, it was a tight frame for a pretty face. She was seated but he could tell she was quite tall. He wanted her to stand so he could see her height, the shape of her back, the seam down her stockings.

He pursed his lips and blew silently. That made her nervous.

It was strange, he decided, that she could make herself look so confident yet also so shy. She looked slumped and uneasy. She sensed that, stubbing out her cigarette and shifting in her seat, ready to set out her proposal.

'Do you smoke?' Emily Blandish asked.

'No, thanks.'

Sometimes I see cigarette smoke as yellow liquid poison on the air. You don't want me to tell you that.

'So,' she said, after a pause. 'You're American.'

'You noticed,' he replied. He realised he was trying to flirt.

'I was in America before the war. I was an actress then... well, a

dancer, to be honest. Danced Broadway, vaudeville, hoofed round the States trying to get to Hollywood. I never did.' She'd relaxed, she smiled. Lechasseur studied her face carefully and decided that this was probably true. There was a brassy, trouper's edge in her voice, try as she might to sound like Celia Johnson. Maybe that's why this felt wrong – like too many Brits she was hung up with class and respectability. She was trying to impress him.

'So where are you from? I can't place your accent.'

'Louisiana. New Orleans.'

She shook her head. 'That doesn't sound right. I was in New Orleans for a month, I know the accent. Yours is different. I hope you don't mind me saying.'

'I've been over here since 1943. Ten years from now I'll sound like the Home Service. And no, I don't mind you saying.'

She smiled again with a real curl on her lips. She ordered more coffee from the greasy boy and hugged it when it came. The coffee was good here, it was probably from cheap beans Lechasseur had supplied himself and he'd never bilked anyone. Mrs Blandish stared at him over the rim of the mug. She was mellow-eyed. *Mrs Blandish* – he looked at her bare fingers, no wedding band.

'I've never met a proper spiv before.' She was lying and wanted him to know it. He tried to look offended.

'I prefer to be called a *fixer*,' he explained. 'Imagine there's a line and on one side there is everything legal and on the other everything is illegal. I like to walk along the line. Either side, it doesn't matter, so long as I stick close by it. Don't go wandering off,' he added faintly.

It occurred to him that she might be working for the police, but if she was he'd know and he'd never been guarded in his conversation.

She lit another cigarette and sat with it crooked in her fingers, watching him play with his food. He ate slowly, the breakfast was heavy and hard to swallow. He wondered what was going on in her head. Then she said: 'I don't want the police involved in my business.'

'So, this is something on the wrong side of the line?' Their mutual contact, a man called Mace, hadn't told him what Mrs Blandish wanted. It was likely she'd kept him in the dark as well. That was what intrigued

Lechasseur, her wilful mystery. Even as he spoke, Emily's face stiffened, her lips tightening, the flirty eyes flicking away.

She doesn't want to talk about this.

'No, nothing illegal.' She shook her head and the reluctant moment passed, she was smiling again. 'It's only that I'm a very private person. I need someone who knows how to avoid drawing attention to themselves.'

'I'm not exactly inconspicuous.'

'No, but I hear you're discreet. When I spoke to Mr Mace I asked for you specifically. You were recommended.' She didn't add to that.

He said: 'I'm flattered.'

'There's another problem – this is *murky*. If you do this for me it might turn up all sorts of things. The police, I believe, wouldn't be able to deal with it, not properly.'

It still wasn't the whole truth but he nodded. Discretion, she'd said. He was full of questions but knew better than to ask them now. He hadn't finished his breakfast but he pushed the plate away. Their hands were folded opposite each other on the table. She tapped her fingers on the surface, maybe nervous, maybe excited. She brushed the back of his hand and fixed him a glare, as if she'd only now decided to tell him.

'I want you to find my husband,' she said, briskly. 'He's disappeared.'

'When?'

'About a week ago.' That was odd – too vague – but he let it pass.

'Disappeared?'

'I think he's still in London. He has some... unusual friends. They may have hurt him or be holding him.'

'Unusual? Criminal?'

'No, eccentric. The sort of people who live underground, afraid of the light. I think they have him. I'd like you to ask around among the people you know, see if they've heard anything.'

'So, I'd get to be some kind of detective?'

She smiled at him, lazily and full-lipped. The brisk spark of the conversation discharged, she looked lulled and relaxed again, as though she'd got the unpleasant detail out of the way. She was lying – or at least withholding something – but he couldn't see why. 'You'd be a good

detective,' she said. 'You look very sensitive, you know. Not like most men, or most soldiers anyway. Most of the Americans I've met are very brash people. Very loud.'

'I've always been one of the quiet ones,' he admitted.

'You look like a detective. Could've stepped off a cinema screen. Except you're –' she waved her hand in front of her face and had the decency to look embarrassed.

'I don't see detective pictures. They're too violent for me.'

She laughed, a big aggressive noise that came in bursts. She really was afraid of him.

'I always wanted to be in pictures,' she murmured.

'I'll need a description of your husband. What's his name?'

Her lips twitched silently, then she said, 'The Doctor.'

Lechasseur made a mental note. 'Doctor... Blandish?'

She shook her head, paused again, then: 'No. Blandish is... My name is Blandish. He's just *the Doctor*.'

'I can't go looking for someone called *just the Doctor*.'

'That's how they'll know him. They wouldn't use his name. The Doctor.'

And that was it, that was the moment when he realised he was going to accept the job. The oddness of her request excited him, that and the gaps she was leaving in her story and the unaffectionate way she spoke of her nameless husband. There was no love in her face when she mentioned him, maybe even a hint of disdain, and he liked that. Lechasseur knew that she was drawing him in with an enigma, but whatever else he sensed from her, he got the impression that she liked him and held no malice for him.

He named his terms and she surprised him by agreeing. 'It's his money,' she said, with a shrug.

'Plus expenses.'

'Plus *reasonable* expenses.'

'Here I was, hoping to get that car I always wanted.'

Spontaneous concern: 'Do you carry a gun?'

'Not since I was in the army.'

'But you know how to use one?' When he nodded she looked relieved.

‘It could get dangerous for you. In fact, I know it will.’

He gazed deep and serious at the mask of her face. Most women would have turned away but she just trembled and let him see what he could, let him read her. He tried to make the words that would explain what the war had done to him but they wouldn’t come and he clicked his lips impotently.

Emily fished around in her bag and hooked out an envelope, creamy-white with an elegant watermark. This, she said as she pushed it across the table, contained a £30 advance on his services, an address in London where she could be contacted and a description of her husband. Lechasseur weighed it in his hand, it was heavier than he expected and he could feel a hard metal outline under his fingers. He reached inside and drew out a chain, a large smooth silver key hung on the end. The metal shimmered against his skin, the world seemed suddenly harsher and brighter as it did in his waking dreams.

‘That belongs to him,’ Emily explained. ‘If you find someone claiming to be the Doctor, this is the test. You’ll know him and he’ll know you.’

He must have looked perplexed, as she added: ‘Are you happy?’

‘Yeah, but this is all crazy,’ he confessed.

‘Isn’t it just?’ She rose and brushed his hand – a tentative shake – before walking out.

He spent the next minute just sitting and breathing. He didn’t check the envelope until she was long gone and immediately regretted it. One thing was missing, the description of her husband, the Doctor. Her address, at least, looked genuine. He’d been right, it was crazy, the whole thing was a wild goose chase, set up for reasons he couldn’t begin to guess. Then there was the key, a mystery that still fizzed in his palm, and the blank anonymity of ‘the Doctor’ himself. In a city of millions of souls he was going to be the hardest man or the easiest in the world to find.

Around him the café hummed with electric light but it was only just keeping the grime at bay. New Orleans, he remembered, was a city of murk and humid shadows. London’s equivalent was dust with a cold gritty texture. In front of him were two grease-smeared plates, several half empty mugs, an ashtray and dark stains where coffee had once

spilled. He added a scattering of coins. Then he set out to find the Doctor.

The search turned up nothing and put Lechasseur in a melancholy mood. He had contacts in the black market, the organised underworld and on the streets but no one admitted knowing the Doctor. He spoke to Emily once during that time, by telephone, to keep her updated on his stalled progress. She wished him good luck and he went on.

Even as a boy he'd been introspective. His failure to turn up anything didn't depress him so much as it exhausted him. With every blank drawn the pointlessness of his search became more apparent. *The Doctor* – the title was too vague, despite what his wife might say. Either it meant nothing at all or it meant too much. It meant a certain respectable GP with a drug habit; or a backstreet man who dug out unwanted bullets or unwanted babies for the right price; or a fabled mobster from Prohibition Chicago; or a man who'd hanged three years earlier for poisoning no less than thirteen of his wives. He was a ship's cook or the greatest professor of gambling the world had ever seen. Lechasseur used the name *Blandish* as little as possible, but even that drew a frustrating blank.

The cosh gangs hadn't heard of him, the slick-haired youths who called themselves the Dead Rabbits or the Cable Street Boys and wanted nothing more than to be as pretty and thuggish as Richard Attenborough and Dirk Bogarde. They practised their evil smiles on him but were surprisingly respectful. He found himself talking to pimps and policemen alike who stood, blank-faced and open-palmed and gave him nothing useful. He patrolled the docks and climbed down on the Thames mud banks but the riverside people told him nothing. Those were the first few days and he began to lose hope.

Yet sometimes the city seemed to be alive with word of the Doctor. Lechasseur found himself cycling through the canyon-deep streets north of Tower Bridge and seemed to hear the echo *Doctor – Doctor – Doctor* bounce off the sheer walls around him.

Failure wore him down. He went without hope to G. Syme's antiquarian bookshop on Charing Cross Road. Syme collected

incunabula. He was an unlikely contact but good company. He didn't talk about his past, not to Lechasseur, but word was that he'd been an undercover agent for the British since before the First World War. He didn't look like a spy, which was the giveaway.

Syme's companion answered the door. Lechasseur didn't know his name but he was a good fifty years Syme's junior, skinny and carrot-haired with a junkie's pinpoint eyes. He giggled when he saw Lechasseur but was collected enough to beckon him into the flat. He wore a red silk kimono unfastened at the front to reveal a pasty hairless chest.

'Honoré!' Syme declaimed, familiar as ever. He stood against a wall of books in his study, a searing red hearth before him casting expressionist shadows around the room. Unlike his companion, Syme always overdressed, leaving a trail of colour, silk and velvet, through a world that had grown too drab for him. He'd draped a cloak over his tweeds, he was gaunt enough but too ruddy and cheerful to be Dracula. He probably thought it was still Hallowe'en.

Syme's companion, realising the evening was going to be full of talk, complained of a headache and went to lie down, so Syme was moved to make tea himself. Lechasseur sat still in one of the big leather armchairs, trying to read the spines of the books but finding most too faded to be legible. Syme always served tea bitter and brown with a slice of drowned lemon, in small bone china mugs that came with chips and cracks courtesy of Mr Goering of deplorable memory: Syme was bitter about the war, confided that he'd been posting ominous reports on Hitler to the FO since 1923, to no avail.

'I thought of putting a bullet in the little bastard myself,' he said, 'then they banded him up and I thought *that's his lot*.' He grimaced, then settled back in his chair. 'So how can I help you?'

Lechasseur explained a little of his new job and watched first as a frown then as a crease of amusement crossed Syme's lean sardonic face.

He put down his tea and clapped. 'The Doctor, you say? That's *wonderful!*'

Lechasseur leaned forward. Syme pinched his lips and whispered: 'He's a hobgoblin.'

‘Sorry?’

‘Oh, Honoré, someone’s having fun with you.’ At least he had the grace to look sympathetic. ‘He’s a mischief, a leprechaun, a boojum. The Doctor is a myth. He’s straight out of Old English folklore, typical trickster figure really. Dear me, you’ve gone white.’

Lechasseur clicked his tongue irritably. ‘I don’t know about that, but there’s a real flesh-and-blood man out there called the Doctor, who isn’t from a fairytale. That’s who I need to find.’

Syme gave him a baffling smile. ‘You’re right about Mrs Blandish. She isn’t giving you the whole story. You know you’re the second person who’s come to me this week asking about the Doctor – and my last caller seemed to think that the flesh-and-blood man and the hobgoblin are one and the same. Let me show you something.’

He pulled out of the chair before Lechasseur could ask about the *last caller*. He clutched his lapels, chuckling faintly while casting round the room, before snatching a heavy leather book from the nearest table. ‘This is what I showed him. You’ll like this,’ he said, crouching by Lechasseur’s chair to display the open pages. They were covered with photographs, interspersed by text. In the pictures, turned grey by the camera but perhaps once vibrant and colourful, were prehistoric daubings on a smooth stone wall.

‘These are pictures from the Altamira grotto in Spain,’ Syme explained, hard-voiced now, all drollery gone. ‘It’s a narrative interpretation of the sequence. All very speculative but all very intriguing as well.’ His hands went across the page, tapping each picture in turn.

‘This is a record of a tribe living in Spain or possibly North Africa at the time of the last Ice Age. Human society is basically matriarchal and cave-dwelling, what Engels calls *crude communism*. The story begins.

‘It’s the long winter. The tribes worship *Orb*, the moon. The old cave mother is dead and her daughter is the new leader. No names, they wouldn’t have had anything like language back then. The new leader is weak because they have no fire. The tribe faces extinction.

‘A stranger comes, a powerful outcast from another tribe. She challenges the leader. The elders decide to give the healthy young men,

breeding stock, to the newcomer. The leader is seen to be weak because she allows her useless father to live. The old father fears fire – see that he’s basically a reactionary figure, that’s important.

‘There’s a power struggle within the tribe and they call on Orb to intervene. Orb sends her messengers who bring the secret of fire. They represent cosmic principles, but look at this figure, the one with the crown of flame. He looks like the old father.

‘The old man-messenger brings fire and also reason. The stranger kills to protect her privileges – the messenger exposes her not just as a killer but, as this image seems to say, a liar. Dissemblance, such a radical concept for these people! The old man brings not just fire but new ideas.

‘Fire and these new ideas change the way the society operates, the power of the cave-mothers is eroded, the hunters – the men, become powerful. And the messenger is an old man, who is shown to be not feeble or reactionary. He introduces the male principle. The matriarchy is overthrown. History begins.’

‘And the old man messenger...?’

‘... is the Doctor.’ Syme slammed the book shut. ‘An early appearance.’

‘You’re saying I’ve been hired to track down the Loch Ness Monster.’

Syme sat, still clutching the book to his chest. ‘I’m saying the Doctor is a personification of the engine of history. He crops up everywhere on Earth, never looks the same twice, likes to hang round London though, Lord knows why, it’s the midden of the cosmos. He’s like a gremlin, he’s someone we can pin the bad things on. Who burned London in 1666? Who kidnapped the crew of the *Mary Celeste*? Who built Stonehenge with his bare hands? The Doctor, the Doctor, the Doctor.’

‘My client thinks he’s real and he’s married to her.’

‘This Emily person, whatever nuthouse she’s escaped from... she’s paying you by the day, isn’t she? I say good luck to her. I don’t see you have a problem.’

In the bedroom, the young man in the kimono was screaming, probably seeing withdrawal-syndrome monsters coming through the walls. Syme flicked an irritated glance in his direction but a glaze of concern appeared on his eyes. The moment had become awkward, Lechasseur set down his tea and stood.

‘It could all be coincidence,’ he said. ‘There really is a Doctor, a real man.’

Syme’s attention had wavered but suddenly it was back on Lechasseur, measured and calm. ‘I don’t think so but as I say, you aren’t the only one who’s looking for the Doctor in London right now.’ He paused thoughtfully. ‘My last caller works for a man called Eric Walken. I did some checking. Walken runs a club in the West End. He’s a cheap conjuror but imagines he’s a bit more than that. I can get you the address.’

Lechasseur nodded his thanks. ‘Walken... English?’

‘He says he’s Dutch. He lies. I don’t know too much.’

Syme searched through his desk silently, ignoring the moans from the bedroom. He passed Lechasseur a small, smartly printed business card.

‘This club has a bad reputation,’ Syme warned. ‘The clientele are... well, they fought in the war, their side lost. It could be dangerous for you.’

‘Emily told me that,’ Lechasseur mused, turning the card round in his fingers before pocketing it. ‘I’ve killed, do you know? I’ve killed men.’

Syme shrugged. ‘These days, who hasn’t?’ But he was turning again to the bedroom and the screams of his companion. Lechasseur let himself out, into the dark and the hateful cold of the English autumn.

2: A DAY AT THE INFERNO



THE MAGICIAN RAISED HIS ARMS IN FRONT OF HIM AND OVERHEAD, GESTURING FOR quiet. His hands were almost the only exposed parts of his body and blood oozed off them, down his wrists, to stain his cuffs. It was blood or bile, hard to tell. Under the harsh red light and from a distance, it looked black.

‘Now,’ he intoned, ‘for the final and most fundamental miracle.’

He clipped his words, pronouncing each one as though it was precious and serious. He used a precise English accent, suggesting someone who had taken to it as a second language. Sometimes he whispered but his voice would still carry through the club. Moments earlier, he had performed magic on his young assistant. He had locked her in a narrow cabinet then driven a lattice of swords through its thin walls and her body. When he’d opened the box, she’d tumbled out, bleeding from her many wounds. Now she curled motionless at his feet, shrouded by her robe. A bare, limp arm stretched out from under the cloth, twitching on the bare stage.

For Eric Walken, the conjuror, this was all part of the act.

He turned his soaking palms inwards, then creased the shape of his wrists so that he seemed to be holding an invisible chalice up to the light. Stage gunpowder sneezed and when the smoke cleared his hands were no longer empty. A modest swastika hung in the air between his fingers. There was scattered applause from the audience, which grew ferocious when the swastika began to rotate, its spokes turning

anticlockwise. As it turned it glowed. The audience thumped their tables approvingly, cheering the symbol more than the magic. It was a thin crowd this evening, their noise didn't amount to much.

The magician stepped back and lowered his hands but the swastika hung in place, turning faster and glowing more brightly, until the stage and the club was bathed gold. The dark gooey patches on the magician's hands were deep crimson. Lechasseur took advantage of the prestige-light to get a better look at his surroundings.

He had arrived at Covent Garden in mid-afternoon, which meant that the sun was already squeezing down on the horizon and the sky was suddenly full of darkness and soot. He'd taken Syme's warning seriously and made some enquiries about the *Inferno* club during the morning. The word from both sides of the street was that the *Inferno* catered for misty-eyed nostalgic blackshirts, sad old men who liked to parade round in their evil fancy-dress so long as no one was watching. The new young hard-eyed hardcore fascist wasn't a regular here, it was too *weird* for him. Walken had studied Nazism in Berlin in the 1920s under the occultist Hanussen. The police thought he was a harmless eccentric, though more than once Lechasseur heard the suggestion that only serious bribery or serious blackmail was keeping him safe from raids and vigilante attacks.

Walken performed magic on stage at the club, though only as a matinee so Lechasseur reasoned that he wasn't popular or had better things to do by night. The bill suggested the evening's act was a cabaret, singing and dancing and bare flesh. From the outside the *Inferno* looked more pathetic than dangerous and Lechasseur was disappointed that the Doctor might be found here. Over the days of his investigation, Lechasseur had built up a certain respect for his quarry. He was tenaciously elusive, that was the only thing he really knew about the man.

The *Inferno* was seedy. It seemed to close off the potential of whom the Doctor could be. It had a narrow, grimy brick façade, shuttered behind a locked metal gate. Lechasseur scouted round the back and found a supply entrance protected by a low wall. Grey lifeless windows looked down on him. He resolved to go in through the front first, though it took

a hard breath and a shot of whiskey before he could face that.

Lechasseur had a smile that went right through the skin and into the soul. He got by on charm, politeness and novelty. The darkness of his skin and the Louisiana in his voice weren't impediments though they were never unalloyed blessings. He also had a whispered reputation as a war hero though he couldn't remember doing anything better or braver than the next soldier. So, he did not have a difficult time but even so there were men and women in London who found it easy to hate and the *Inferno* club promised to be full of them.

He was not refused a ticket, perhaps the clerk couldn't see him through the dirt smeared on the glass booth. When he got inside, once his eyes had adjusted to the annihilating redness, he found the club nearly deserted. Even after the sudden influx of young men towards the end of the magic act, fewer than a third of the tables were occupied. The body of the club was below ground. There was a flight of steps down one of the walls, just inside the main door. Coming through he'd got the impression of a cavern with smooth walls honed into angles but still retaining the lopsided and irregular shape of a natural cave. By swastika-light he saw he was mistaken, the walls were a deliberate collection of random angular shapes. They were decorated not with the expected memorabilia but jagged surrealist pictures of zigzagging landscapes, lopsided people and crooked houses. The stage was raised in the centre, tables ranged round it in no obvious pattern.

He sat alone. No one was looking at him. The red light made him invisible.

Walken's act began shortly after Lechasseur arrived and, judging from the low conversation coming from nearby tables, it held no-one else's attention; it wasn't until the magic swastika appeared that the crowd began to take notice. Only Lechasseur sat rapt throughout, but he had come to get a measure of Walken, not his act. There was something perversely fascinating about the show. It was designed to be cold and unengaging, it was performed without any of the flourishes or the humour he expected from a conjuror.

Walken's nameless assistant had introduced him and he'd come on stage wearing a turban of wasps. Real wasps – they exploded in a swarm

from his head and were sucked away by hidden tubes, but a few escaped and meandered sluggishly round the club. It was bitterly cold and they were waiting to die. Lechasseur brushed one off his coat. Walken was not a tall man and he had hidden himself in a black robe, worn over a tuxedo. Under the mass of wasps he had been wearing a cowl, which he did not lower, so it was impossible to judge the shape of his head. His face was part-hidden by a domino mask. He wrapped himself in layers. His tricks were mainly unremarkable but he was a good hypnotist.

Walken called a waitress onto the stage and, with a wave of his hand, convinced her that she loved his assistant passionately and she spent the rest of the act gazing lovingly up at the stage from a spare table. Walken hypnotised a volunteer into thinking he was a dog and, as an encore, brought a dog on stage and hypnotised it into thinking it was a man. It tottered on two legs and tried to speak. While looking for his volunteer, Walken's eyes passed over Lechasseur, then moved on.

At the end, he created a swastika from thin air and set it spinning.

'*This*,' he declaimed, goading the suddenly, shamefully alert audience, 'this misunderstood symbol is our miracle. It is not a cross, it predates the Greek Christ. This is the secret knowledge passed down to us from the Aryan people of the Indus. This – *swastika* – is the great wheel of life.'

Though a small man, he was strong. He scooped up the corpse of his assistant without effort and carried it back into the cabinet. He set it spinning again, in time with the turning of the swastika.

'The wheel of life unturns death and time!' Walken announced. 'The swastika brings forth a regeneration.'

The swastika-light flared to fill the club and Lechasseur flinched, seeing a brief negative impression of the conjuror, dressed all in white, on the inside of his eyelids. When he opened his eyes, all was red again, except for a pale spotlight on the magic cabinet, which wobbled faintly. No one in the club breathed. Lechasseur wanted to look round for Walken, who had faded into the darkness, but his eyes were fixed on the box.

The magic box collapsed in on itself and the blonde woman was there unharmed in the middle, no longer in black but draped in a red, white,

black swastika flag. She displayed bare and unwounded limbs to the clubgoers. Played perfectly, the crowd lurched to their feet, a violent ovation that lasted well over a minute despite the assistant's squeaks for hush. The magic was over, the cabaret had begun.

Lechasseur saw the shadows ripple where Walken was making his getaway. He rose and slipped after him, into the back of the *Inferno*.

Behind the jagged unsettling walls the club was pokey and unremarkable. Walken slipped down whitewashed passageways and into an annexe. Lechasseur went after him, not furtively but still quiet enough not to be heard. At the front of the club, the audience were clapping politely as the flag-draped girl sang and danced.

Walken had his back to the door, running his hands under the tap at a washbasin. He didn't turn when he heard Lechasseur enter. He slipped off his robe and mask and hung them on a wallhook. Then he stood studying himself in a mirror, pulling at the flesh of his face before turning. He looked unexpectedly young, maybe only thirty. His hair was slicked back, a faintly old-fashioned look that made Lechasseur think at once of Weimar elegance and Walken's own hyperbole about turning back time, but beneath that he had an unmistakable Cockney street style, a tight rage in his eyes, a wiry thug-body, a sour lopsided smile.

'Heil Hitler,' Lechasseur said, leaning on the door frame, his arms folded.

'Hitler was a Jew. Hitler and Himmler both. They were self-hating Jews. That explains a lot about what went wrong, don't you think?' The words spilled out in his practised stage voice but then his accent turned pure North-of-the-River. 'Now get out of here.'

Lechasseur was laconic, *American*. 'I'm here on business. I hear you're looking for the Doctor.'

Walken balled his fists, looked ready to pounce. 'Get out or I'll call the police.'

'You'd really call the police? To your club? With all that goes on here?'

Walken grinned viciously at him. 'No one would care. This week's enemy is Stalin.' Lechasseur thought that Walken would order him out a third time but instead the conjuror softened and said: 'What do you

know about the Doctor?’ His tongue was moving visibly under the skin of his mouth.

‘I know you’re looking for him.’

Walken stood still and suspicious for a second, then his face hardened. ‘Get out,’ he said and the third time meant it was serious. Lechasseur nodded and turned away but Walken was talking again, reverting to his conjuror’s voice.

‘I worked for the British during the war. I used my magic against the Germans. I stood at the dawn of time where my spirit wrestled with the Führer in psychic combat. I was a patriot.’

‘I’m sure you did your bit,’ Lechasseur agreed. Walken slid alongside him and offered him his hand.

‘I can see you’re an educated man,’ he apologised. ‘Perhaps next time we meet, we can start afresh.’

Lechasseur shook the offered hand, and sensed a powerful hunger in the magician’s grip.

It seemed a good idea to get out of the *Inferno* quickly. It took him less than five minutes to break back in. The evening dark offered him cover and once he’d scaled the back wall no one could see him from the alley. The doors were locked but the least-cracked ground floor window wasn’t and opened smoothly. Singing and cheering rose through the floor from the club below, the mood had turned rowdy since he’d confronted Walken. The conjuror himself was probably still changing. Most cabaret nights he acted as MC, or simply held court at his table with his entourage and his mistresses to watch the show. Lechasseur’s contacts said that Walken had simply watched too many gangster flicks but Lechasseur wondered if he wasn’t modelling himself on the occult charlatans of Weimar Berlin. Many of them, he remembered, gave themselves titles like *Doctor*.

The ground floor was a nest of dirty grey passages and unsuspecting store rooms. Lechasseur flitted from one to the next in the darkness, his eyes shining, listening carefully to the rhythm of the subterranean noise for any change. He took a narrow flight of steps up to the next storey, where the floorboards vanished under carpet and the bare walls were papered over. The first door he found was an office. The window offered

a disheartening view of the back yard, nothing magical. Most of the drawers on the desk were locked, the others were empty or full of stationery. There was a folder on the top with a Shoreditch address inked neatly by the spine. He picked it open. Newspaper clippings, all the same subject but arranged chronologically with reportage giving way to filler, what the press called *lifestyle* pieces. He didn't recognise the photographs of the girl at first but she was familiar and a browse through the headlines and articles jogged his memory. She was the girl with amnesia they'd found in the East End, the *girl in pink pyjamas*. No explanation, no notes, nothing connecting her to the Doctor, but still he felt he'd found a new line of enquiry.

According to the final item before the clippings ran out, she was staying at a guest house in Shoreditch, six months' rent paid for by the yellow press. Lechasseur replaced the file but made a note of the address.

There was another unlocked room on this storey and Walken was standing just inside. Lechasseur caught his voice coming through the walls and checked himself before pushing at the door. He eased it open a crack and saw the black line of the magician's back.

'I know,' he was saying, 'I said we'd take the girl tonight but things have changed. Something's come up. We can still shadow her.'

Walken wasn't alone – no, he moved his head to one side and Lechasseur caught sight of the telephone – still there was someone else there. It was a big room and he sensed at least two others present. He caught sight of a stocking'd leg and thought of Mrs Blandish but the woman leaned forward to kiss Walken on the cheek and it wasn't her. The room seemed big, a conference room with a curved, probably round table.

Then Walken said: 'I met the Doctor today' – and Lechasseur strained to hear more. 'No, he came here... No, and I'm not going to tell you where he is. I wouldn't be surprised if *she* can tap into the phones... *Yes*, but I recognised him... and, *no*, I'm not sure, but anyone can be persuaded, even the Doctor, and I'm an expert.'

Then Walken turned and, without looking, pushed the door closed.

Lechasseur cycled home, his head bloated with new information. He turned the pink pyjama girl's address into a mnemonic, a little poem that he could visit tomorrow. The rest of the clues he processed calmly: the amnesia case girl was implicated somehow and presumably she was the one Walken was planning to 'take', though not tonight at least; Walken had found the Doctor, or the Doctor had found him; Walken was holding this knowledge from someone; his relationship with the Doctor wasn't close, not yet...

... and, best of all, *the Doctor is real*.

So absorbed was he with all this information that he'd cycled to his front door before spotting the two rough men – ugly, with big hands – waiting outside for him. He ignored them at first but as he locked his bike away they strolled up behind him. They were ugly at different ends of the spectrum, the first a squat mass whose face had been flattened by repeated pummelling, the tall second as crooked as any man pictured on the walls of the *Inferno*. They were the thin one and the fat one, the Laurel and the Hardy, and the Laurel had a Luger in his big hands. The barrel pushed into the small of Lechasseur's back.

Lechasseur believed he had time to turn and knock the gun away but the Hardy was probably armed as well and since he recognised neither he expected they would at least pause to offer an explanation before shooting.

'Don't cry out, don't say anything, that's our car there, we're going for a ride and if you do as we say you'll be back here unhurt by midnight, nod if you understand.'

Lechasseur brought his head down and up, and on the up he saw the double-act's car at the kerbside. *Silver Ghost*. Whoever was pulling their strings was both wealthy and ostentatious, not a good sign. He saw intense mindless cruelty in the puppets' eyes but they would do as they were told. He let them put him in the car, the Hardy getting in beside him, the Laurel slipping his gun away before climbing into the driver's seat.

With the guns hidden, Lechasseur chanced a question: 'Where are we going?'

Four beads of contempt from the Hardy: 'Mestizer wants to talk.'

He smiled thoughtfully and nodded. The name meant nothing.

The Silver Ghost slid away and soon passed out of the familiar neighbourhood, heading north beyond Camden. The journey was smooth and he reflected that he should be abducted in style more often. His kidnappers were silent but he doubted they had much to say, so he passed the time watching the streets. The others made no attempt to stop him.

There was a reinforced leather bolster separating the back seats from the front but Lechasseur had soon realised that there was a fourth person in the car with them, sitting ahead of him in the front passenger seat. They were not Laurel and Hardy then but Groucho, Chico and now the ghoulishly silent Harpo. The bolster blocked Lechasseur's view but the Harpo looked bald, or was perhaps wearing a skullcap or leather helmet. He had a large blank dome of a scalp.

Lechasseur noticed that the whole of the front passenger seat had been removed, so the Harpo must be squatting in the gouged cavity.

Beyond Camden he was in unfamiliar territory. Still, they said he'd be returned by midnight, which meant they couldn't be going far. It turned out to be another half hour's journey, into the comfortable northern suburbs of London. There was more green out here, more space between buildings though the trees were November-naked. The car followed a back road along the line of a high brick wall. The trees behind the walls were healthily leafed as if their enclosed world was still in summer. Up ahead the wall was broken by elaborate iron gates that had somehow escaped their war-duty. Lechasseur wasn't entirely surprised when the car turned into the driveway. The gates yawned and the car swept down a gravel track into the grounds beyond the wall.

The house in the grounds was in silhouette and blotted out the night sky with a different darkness. The car's headlights passed over the walls as it approached but picked out only fiddly detail on the edifice. It had a deep gravity that hurt Lechasseur's eyes when he tried to take it in, it was too large. The car turned down a side path rather than approach the main doors and slowed by a dark-glassed conservatory extension.

The Hardy produced his gun and prodded Lechasseur out of the car. The Silver Ghost's engine hummed and it slid away once the two men

were out of the back. With a twitch of his gun, the Hardy pointed him to a side door on the conservatory. Lechasseur tugged it open and took a blast of sweltering air in the face.

In London, Mrs Bag-of-Bones' guest house had a small scrap-filled yard and a patch of yellowing grass. The conservatory here was at least five times that size and filled with colour. It was a paradise of hothouse orchids and exotic fruits feeding from the scalding hot lights arranged in gantries along the ceiling and from the fecund red earth that coated the floor. November had been banished from the glasshouse, which had seemed so much smaller on the outside, and there was a ripe stench of vegetation and dry soil in the sweltering air. But there was no birdsong, no sounds except the tread of the two pairs of feet and a babble of water. Everything was still and fake. If he broke a plant's stem Lechasseur was sure he'd find it artificial, ultra-modern.

There was a model pool in the centre of the room, fed from a false spring among the plants and lined with pebbles. They walked round the edge and Lechasseur resisted the urge to touch the water to find if it were as cold as he suspected. The conservatory was baking hot and wet, not enough to make him uncomfortable but the Hardy was sweating. He stopped Lechasseur by the poolside, where wicker chairs were arranged around a table. Lechasseur sat and watched the Hardy remove his coat. The goon's flesh was blotched with heat, he grunted and any resemblance to the pompous, dignified Oliver Hardy of Hollywood left him. He laid his gun on the table – it wasn't worth grabbing for – produced a pocket-sized magazine from his coat and began to read, all the while keeping a low eye on his captive. *Astounding*, read the cover, in a grey so faded it was hard to see. With its cold, painted illustration of an impossible domed city it looked far more elegant than the man holding it.

Lechasseur blinked. The magazine's journey by freight across the Atlantic; the thug's head underwater; a red mushroom cloud, billowing outwards. He looked up, his captor was staring at him with a curled sneer on his lips, followed by spittle. The thug began a furious rant, his voice on fire:

'Wipe that cocky grin off your face you filthy heathen bastard you'll

not be smiling when the Big Man sees you He will cut you in two with your guts hanging from your wretched black body He is worth ten times any man and a hundred of you He is the machine-man that we will all become God-willing when men are born from metal wombs when He was a man He fought the Hun those wicked bastards of Satan cut Him apart and left Him to die the dogs! but now He is repaired His mortal skin and bone rebuilt with steel and pumps and electrics that will not wear or fail He is the Steersman of Future Time no man commands him not least you the lowest thing that walks on two legs.'

Lechasseur folded his arms but didn't change his face. It was important to stay cool. The thug might only have paused for breath but there was a gentle rustling of vegetation from deeper in the room. Lechasseur turned, saw the Big Man and realised that his advocate had not been exaggerating.

He was big, at least eight feet tall and maybe half as broad. Lechasseur realised at once that this was the Harpo he'd been sitting behind and understood why the passenger seat had been cut out of the Silver Ghost. Whether he was a *man* or not was difficult to tell as he was covered in oily brown leather. He had a long brown coat, jangling with buckles; its hem brushed the floor, hung more like a cloak than a coat. Despite his width he didn't seem fat or ungainly, he moved swiftly and Lechasseur got a sense of a powerful muscular mass hidden under the leather. He wore thick black gloves and his head was covered by a tight leather hood that eliminated his features. He saw through darkened gasmask goggles and breathed through a tapering, trembling proboscis. The high collar on the coat hid his neck.

The other newcomer was a woman. She walked in front of the Big Man and seemed diminutive in his shadow, though in fact she was about as tall as Lechasseur. She dressed in black, a long bare-shoulder dress that looked almost as uncomfortable as the Big Man's leathers. She was also gloved, elegantly and up to her elbows. She had long, straight black hair and her eyes were hidden behind round smoked-glass spectacles. Her skin was ice-white, almost blue, especially around her lips. The Big Man stopped when she did and stood guard as she knelt down to run a gloved hand through the pool water. She was laughing faintly. Lechasseur

understood which of the two was in charge and the more dangerous.

‘Mr Lechasseur,’ she said precisely, rising and approaching him – she had a condescending English Rose voice. ‘I think we’ve brought you all this way for nothing. I am Mestizer.’

Her glasses came off and she was staring into his eyes, she had warm blue irises, flecked with gold, they sucked at him hard as though trying to draw his soul out of his body. He thought of the dancing dog at the *Inferno*, and realised how petty Walken’s powers were. This woman could have had the dog playing Hamlet.

He didn’t need to be hypnotised. With an effort, he changed the way he looked at her. She blinked, a moment of frustration, then covered her eyes with her glasses.

‘Oh, very good,’ she said airily. ‘Let me introduce you.’ Casual wave at the leather giant. ‘That is Abraxas, my lieutenant. Do as you’re told and you’ll never see him again. You’ve already met’ – finger twisting at her hired gun – ‘*thing*.’

‘Delighted,’ Lechasseur said dryly. Mestizer offered him a drink, then a swim. He said no to both.

‘A shame,’ she pouted, ‘I come here each night to swim, when no one’s around. You know, you really are very good. If I’d seen you from a distance I might have been fooled. You’ve been giving us quite the runaround. Let’s hope we don’t bump into one another again. It might make me unhappy.’

She sat and wrinkled her face as if to indicate the seat were still warm. Abraxas moved closer. He couldn’t sit, he would have broken the chair. Lechasseur could feel him, less than a foot away, a looming oily presence. Abraxas seethed when he breathed, a coarse mechanical sound.

‘Any man would be fooled,’ Mestizer continued, showing a mouth full of white teeth and hidden menace. ‘But I’m not a man. How much is Walken paying you?’

Lechasseur shrugged. ‘I’m not working for Walken.’

That seemed to be the wrong answer, she looked bitter in disappointment. ‘Only Walken would try something like this. I believe he has guts but no brains, though someday soon Abraxas will slice him

open so we can be sure.’ She got to the point: ‘You were seen coming out of the *Inferno* today.’

‘My first visit.’ He was reasonable. ‘Walken threw me out.’

But Mestizer didn’t want to hear this. She was staring at him through the dark globes of her spectacles and there wasn’t a bead of sweat on her perfect cool-white body. He could see blue faultline arteries under her skin and she looked back at him with an odd mix of revulsion and fascination. She wasn’t looking at his face or his skin, she was looking into him, at the soul she’d tried to pluck.

‘Tell Walken the cabinet is mine. Tell him that if he bothers me I will kill him. I will kill everyone with him. I will kill his friends. I will kill his debtors. I will kill his family and their friends. I will kill everyone he has ever loved. Tell him he is meddling with forces he doesn’t understand – that usually goes down well. Tell him to forget the cabinet and forget the Doctor.’

Mention of the Doctor caught his attention. If he hadn’t been so nervous he might have been more cautious, but he said it anyway: ‘And what about the girl in pink pyjamas?’

Mestizer craned her head upwards, addressing Abraxas. ‘Loose ends,’ she said. ‘Tell Walken I don’t care what he does to her. She can’t tell him anything. He can have her.’

She’d kept her hands close together, steepling her fingers as she talked, but suddenly she flung them open. ‘*Bored* now!’ she sang. ‘I want to swim. The water has regenerative properties, it’s good for me, if no-one else. Go on, go away, you don’t want to see me naked anyway.’

Lechasseur, his heart still thumping from the stupid moment when he’d said too much, decided to risk it: ‘I wouldn’t complain.’

She had a smile like nothing in nature, a crooked thing the wrong shape for her mouth. ‘No. You don’t want to see me when I take my skin off.’

Only the ex-Hardy laughed and maybe for him it was a joke.

‘Take Mr Lechasseur home,’ Mestizer ordered. ‘One thing before you go – stick your nose into my business again and I will have it cut off. It’s been a pleasure.’

With the gun brandished once again and the copy of *Astounding* tucked back into his pocket, the ex-Hardy led Lechasseur out into the bitter

dark, where the car was waiting. This time Abraxas came with them, a rasping shadow at Lechasseur's back.

Nothing was said in the Silver Ghost during the journey home. One thought came back to him, in the silence and the dark. If these were the men Mrs Bag-of-Bones had been warning him about for days, then they had been looking for him since before he'd heard of Eric Walken or the Doctor or even Emily Blandish, and that made no sense.

Unless I really am working for Walken, with Emily as a go-between. That's possible.

They stopped the car at his doorstep before midnight, but as he moved to open the car door his name was spoken.

– *Lechasseur* –

An electrical voice, like the distort on a radio, flecked with static.

Without warning the bolster separating the front and back seats was ripped apart, leathered wood and metal rods parting like butter. Abraxas' bulbous leathery face peered through the gap and Lechasseur saw himself mirrored in the discs of his eyes.

– *I will be watching you* –

– *One wrong move and you will belong to me* –

Lechasseur stepped out of the car and stayed to watch it move away.

3: THE GIRL WHO WASN'T THERE



'LOOK,' SAID THE LANDLADY. 'THERE'S A BLACK MAN HERE TO SEE YOU.'

Lechasseur spent the night trying to make sense of the previous day's events, but eventually he'd given up, the pattern loomed large and unfathomable. There was too much new information. He would have to report back to Mrs Blandish before he could make the connections. He reached for the whiskey bottle and stared entranced at his window until the sun came up to sting his eyes. His waking dreams were hazy and confused. Looking at the twilight steel skyline, he imagined he was back in the Dorset hospital where he'd spent the last months of the war. He displaced himself into the past, into a memory of a time when he was confined to a wheelchair in a building with infinite whitewashed corridors and no exit.

Later, he watched the dawn through reddened eyes and felt more hopeful. He had a plan for today: he would visit the girl in pink pyjamas and there didn't seem to be any harm in that. No one had got much sense out of her over the past weeks but maybe they hadn't been asking her the right questions.

Questions like: 'Do you know where I can find the Doctor?'

When he asked, she just stared and blinked, it meant nothing to her, nothing at all.

It was drizzling over Shoreditch that morning. The slow spots of rain felt dirty-warm on his skin as he cycled to the address he'd stolen from the club. The house stood towards one end of a long, meandering brick

lane. At the east end of the street, further up than he had meant to go, there was nothing, no buildings, just redbrick mounds where children played.

The number he wanted was in an unscarred stretch of terrace, one of a sequence of near identical narrow houses with lace over the windows and doors painted different colours in a stab at individuality. The door was opened by a sturdy middle-aged woman in a faded floral dress. There was a sour curl of suspicion on her lips, this was what the papers had called the Blitz Spirit. A card in her window said NO IRISH, NO DOGS but she'd left room for more. Lechasseur tipped his hat and announced he had come to see the girl in pink pyjamas, this and a ten bob note helped improve her mood and he was invited inside. He was, she apologised, earlier than most callers who came to visit the living mystery.

'She hasn't remembered anything,' he queried, 'not even her name?'

The landlady shook her head and didn't look at him. She led him up the stairs towards the girl's room. He was an unannounced visitor, a surprise.

'What name do you call her?' Lechasseur asked, but she had stopped listening.

She knocked on the door and pushed it open. 'Look,' she said. 'There's a black man here to see you.'

It was gloomy and airless in the house and the crack of the door was darker still. He wondered if she was still in bed – after all, if she'd forgotten *everything* she would have forgotten how to sleep and when. No, her voice came back from the room, faint but not tired, asking him to be sent in.

The landlady still kept the door blocked. 'I'm making some tea, do you want some?'

Yes.

She pulled back and tapped Lechasseur roughly on the shoulder. 'Go in,' she said, 'she won't bite.' Then she turned and climbed back down the stairs, hobbling as though each step were painful, though she'd been quite sprightly on the way up. *Typical eccentric Brit.* Lechasseur pushed on through into the dark.

The girl's room was unlit but there was just enough daylight filtering through to see the edges of her world. It was a small room, not much larger than his own, actually – he realised as his eyes grew accustomed to the gloom – a little smaller and bristling with clutter. There was only the one door, one exit unless you counted the windows. The air tasted of must and mothballs, as if the fresh air had been breathed-up weeks ago and never replenished. The walls were papered and patterned with wilting brown fleur-de-lis. There was a narrow mantelpiece to the right of the door, over a blocked-up fireplace, decorated with photographs – framed sepia darknesses – and a coronation mug, probably predating the room's current tenant. A fire would have been more use, as despite the lived-in scent of the room it was chilly.

Most of the far wall was window; it was a front room and should have commanded a view of the street outside. He'd assumed the curtains were closed but no, they were folded back to their edges. The light was locked out by raised blackout boards. The silhouette girl – no longer in pink pyjamas but a plain blouse and skirt – sat in the chair in the middle of the dark room, staring at her visitor, her eyes glistening. She was small, he must have seemed a giant shadow before her.

'This is cosy,' Lechasseur said, hoping to break the mood. She said nothing.

'I'm called Honoré Lechasseur,' he added breezily but awkward. *Honoré* was an odd given name, he didn't like to use it with strangers. 'I'd like to ask you some questions. I don't know if you can help...'

'That's a good name,' she said. He heard her lips twitching, repeating it silently.

'Thank you.'

Her eyes slid sideways and down in the dark. 'You can ask me things. Lots of people come here to talk to me.' Her voice was becalmed. Her arms were stretched out on the rests either side of her, there was no energy in her body.

'Why do you think they do that?'

She rippled. 'I'm a big mystery, they want to find out about me. Sometimes they think I can tell the future, but I don't know anything.' The way she said *anything* sounded ominously complete. Lechasseur

couldn't hear an accent beyond British, her background had been wiped clean along with her memory. He thought of the precise voices of BBC radio, hers was honed just as smooth, though less mannered.

‘Are you a detective?’

‘What makes you ask that?’

‘You’re American. I can’t be famous in America. They must’ve sent for you specially.’ She sighed. ‘I’m sure no one in America can have heard of me’

‘I’ve been here for a long time. I’m not a detective.’ He paused, wondering how best to phrase his next sentence. ‘I came to warn you, you’re in danger.’

She was looking at him again but he couldn’t tell if she believed him. The room trembled, then shook, the walls vibrating violently and the photographs dancing on the mantelpiece. The silence was drowned by the clatter of coaches, a train passing close by. It rose and fell in the space of a minute and the girl didn’t say a word.

‘This house backs onto the railroad?’

‘Yes.’

‘That might be your best bet. If someone tries to grab you from the house they’ll probably come through the front. If that happens get out the back along the rails, if you can.’

The girl laughed faintly, in silhouette. ‘You’re serious, aren’t you?’

‘A man called Eric Walken is planning to kidnap you. I don’t know when but soon – he’s already postponed it once. Does that name mean anything to you?’ Silence in the darkness. ‘The *Inferno* Club? Covent Garden?’

Her head was shaking. ‘No. Not a thing.’

The landlady returned bearing tea on a tray. She shuffled past Lechasseur to lay it on the table between them, two half-full mugs and a plate of grey biscuits. There was an electric lamp on the table and she turned it on. The little light struggled in the gloom but Lechasseur got a clearer view of the girl and her face. It was an odd shape, stuck undecided between narrow and chubby. She had pale skin, dark shadows round her eyes. Green irises, watery and stubborn. She didn’t wear make-up, or hadn’t recently.

‘Thank you, Mrs Beardsley,’ she said. The landlady looked stocky in her tan coat and headscarf.

‘I’m going out shopping,’ she said pointedly. ‘I won’t be long.’

She pulled the door to after her. The girl reached hungrily for her tea and biscuits and nodded for Lechasseur to do the same. He touched the mug to his lips, it was lukewarm and filmed-over, he didn’t drink but put it away on the mantelpiece.

‘She’s very good to me, Mrs Beardsley.’ She smiled wistfully, the first he’d seen from her. ‘No one else would put me up.’

He grinned back at her. ‘That’s not true. You’re a celebrity. People in this town would have been fighting to put a roof over your head.’

‘If you say so, but there’s the rent...’

‘I thought the papers were paying!’

She shrugged again, it was a pretty gesture. The tea, the biscuits and the landlady’s departure seemed to have relaxed her. ‘I hadn’t heard that. Do you really think I’m in trouble?’

‘I know Walken is having you watched. There’s a spy hanging around the other side of the street. He’s keeping an eye on you. Do you go out much?’ She shook her head. ‘Next time you do, there’ll be someone on your tail.’

She giggled and leant back, out of the light. ‘You’re pulling my leg.’

‘I’m serious.’

‘There are lots of people outside. This is a busy street. He could be anyone.’

‘He’s standing guard. Trust me, I was a soldier. I know a sentry when I see one.’ She still looked sceptical. ‘Look, if we take one of these boards down you’ll be able to see for yourself.’

She looked reluctant, but her face creased as if to say *why not?*

That was good, he felt he was getting through to her. They went to the window together. She didn’t have the stature or the strength to be much help taking the board down, she was a lot smaller than him and as he struggled with the blackout they bumped into each other, her narrow chin banging against his shoulder.

A soft rectangle of winter light opened into the room, picking out the dust flecks on the air and the face of the woman he’d come to see. In the

dark he could have believed that she was a girl, but she looked older in the natural light, maybe mid-twenties. She had a child's smooth skin and her long brown hair was worn loose like a schoolgirl's, but there was a flaw of experience running down her face. He'd seen cracks like that on the faces of men who'd been broken at Omaha. The abyss opened in their eyes and gradually the rest of their self was sucked in. It was a wound.

From this height he could see that the empty lot opposite wasn't a true bomb site. The building had been torn down deliberately and neatly, probably unsafe after a raid. He saw it as it would be in the future, a nothing between the houses, they'd make it a yard but there'd be no new building there for decades. It would stay there, an absent war memorial.

There was no one there. Walken's spy had gone, or was hiding.

The girl laughed and went back to her seat.

'It took us a while to get the blackout down,' Lechasseur protested. 'He had plenty of warning.'

'You really are a detective, Mr Lechasseur.'

He eased round to face her again. He must have looked tired from standing so the girl indicated he should sit on the bed. He lowered himself wearily onto it, all the while studying her face for clues. She still looked nervous and expectant but had relaxed in the light. It fell across one half of her face, she was very pretty.

As a boy he'd been friends with a girl called Cecile, a blue-eyed Cajun. He was nine, she was five years older, but she'd been taken with his sullen isolated sensitivity. He'd saved enough money to buy her ice cream, one day in the poor depressed American summer, and they sat together on a baking sidewalk, while behind them old prune-skinned men argued on their benches, while in front a funeral parade went by. Cecile sweated under her blouse and cotton skirt, a heady scent, and they shared that moment totally without speaking.

He still couldn't speak. Cecile was here in front of him. Ice cream would have burned his mouth in Britain, but he wanted to taste it. *Comradeship*. The girl looked uncomfortable but stayed polite through the silence.

He said: 'I'm not a detective. I'm a fixer.'

‘Yes? You mean you’re someone who mends things? Can you fix people?’

He shook his head. ‘It means I’m a spiv. Black marketeer. I can fix you up with whatever you need, whatever you want, if the price is right.’

‘Black marketeer?’ She laughed and he was relieved to find he wasn’t offended.

‘So,’ she said, reaching for something solid after her fit of giggles. She was still tiny and vulnerable in her chair. ‘What can I do for you?’

‘I’ll be honest, I never paid much attention to those newspaper stories about you. I came here because I found out about Walken. I’m looking for someone who’s disappeared and he – and maybe you – are mixed up in that.’

She nodded. ‘This sounds good. One person disappears, another mysteriously appears, maybe there’s a balance.’

‘I don’t think it works that way, unless you’re a man who’s been magically transformed into a woman.’ He nearly said *girl*. ‘Read any Kafka?’

She shook her head playfully. ‘I don’t remember.’

‘Have you ever met anyone who calls himself the Doctor?’

‘I’ve met loads of doctors. None of them knows what’s wrong with me.’

‘Not anyone who’s *the* Doctor?’

‘No.’ She smiled through her wounded face, leaning forward. ‘What’s wrong?’

He felt winded. He’d been so sure that she was connected to the Doctor. Her sincere hollow reply left him with nothing. She was still leant forward, scared in her eyes that she’d said the wrong thing. ‘You’ve dead-ended me,’ he stammered. ‘I think I’ve wasted your time...’

He tried to rise, but the girl leapt up and grabbed his shoulders firmly.

‘Don’t go yet,’ she told him. ‘Stay, please. I have to go to the other room for a moment but please, I won’t be long. You’re not taking up my time at all.’

Reluctantly he sank back onto the bed, from here the girl seemed to tower.

‘There’s a scrapbook under my pillow. It’s got a lot of my clippings. Take a look through,’ she suggested. ‘There might be something in there that isn’t in here.’ Her hand went to the side of her head, fleetingly as if she were scared of damaging it. She scurried away.

Lechasseur found the book and began to flip through it. It wasn’t much different from the file he’d found in Walken’s office, though here and now he had time to browse. There wasn’t much. The story of how the girl walked out of the night with amnesia was familiar and the papers added nothing but speculation. There had been blasts in the East End that night and the more sober papers speculated, proofless, that she was a shell-shocked victim of a leftover bomb. Of course, that left the mystery of why no one had come forward to identify her.

The yellow press thought she’d been dropped off by a flying disc. Typical.

The later clippings were from puff pieces, describing the girl’s celebrity. She was receiving visitors from all over the capital: well-wishers and admirers bringing her presents; amateur sleuths trying to solve the mystery; advertisers looking for endorsements. Lechasseur felt guiltily selfish. He turned a page and found himself staring at *The Girl in the Pink Bikini*, a yellow press piece with a full-length photograph of just that. She looked ashamed of herself in the picture. *London’s favourite mystery girl takes clothes rationing seriously! WE know it’s on the way out but don’t jog HER memory just yet!*

He heard her step back into the room. ‘You were talking about light when they found you. Do you remember anything about that?’

‘Just a flash of light, I remember. It was coming out of a door – not a house, a wardrobe or a cabinet. They say I was caught in a blast but I couldn’t tell you for certain.’

He looked up at her. She’d changed out of her clothes and was standing in the frame of the door in her pink pyjamas.

He must have looked shocked. ‘What’s the matter?’ she said, hurt. ‘Most of the men who come here want to see this. Don’t you?’

‘I don’t mind. I wasn’t expecting it.’

‘Do you want me to take them off?’

‘Yes. *No*. I’m happy if you want to wear them.’ He raised his hands in

surrender.

The girl stumbled into the room, he tried to imagine her wandering out of the fog like that but here she was too self-conscious. She stayed clear of the exposed windowpane. Modesty? Or had she really believed his warning about Walken's spy?

She didn't sit back in her chair but perched eagerly on the bed beside him, taking the scrapbook from his lap and closing it up. She was a strange creature, scrubbed clean of her identity. She leaned forward, trying to kiss him, but he resisted and she planted it on his dry, unmoving lips. When he didn't respond she turned bashful, stiffening and sliding back on the bed.

'Did you think of anything more to ask?' she said, drably.

'There's something I'd like to try.' She nodded. 'When you were a kid, did you ever play the game –'

'I don't remember being a kid – but go on.'

'Okay, have you ever played that game where you have two people and one person says a word and the second has to say the first thing that comes into their head?'

'I've tried that, it doesn't work.'

'I've tried it too. I was in hospital, screwed up, they put a doctor onto me to sort me out.'

'*The Doctor?*'

He hummed. 'I wouldn't think so. Try it,' he said. '*Cat –*'

She drew a silent finger across her lips then lay back on her bed, between him and the wall. The front of her pyjama jacket rode up slightly, revealing a tight skinny stomach. He could hear her breathe.

'*Abraxas –*'

'*Ice cream –*'

'*Doctor –*'

'*Light –*'

He could hear the rain dribbling on the window, the dust shimmering on the air, the uncomfortable shift of the girl's body on the rustling bedclothes. Her eyes were glazed over, not with boredom, with fascination. It was the crack in her face, sucking him in, she'd recognised the same wound on him.

‘It hasn’t done anything for me. They’ve tried it. I don’t seem to be able to make the connections. A cat is just a cat to me. Did this do you any good?’

‘I’m here aren’t I?’

‘Good point. What did the doctor say about the game, what it revealed about you?’

‘He thought I was being hostile, reacting negatively to everything he said. He said cat, I said dog. He said black, I said white. War/peace. Man/ woman. Little/big. I turned his words inside out. Then he said, there’s nothing wrong with that, it’s good for a soldier to think that way.’

‘So?’

‘That was when I understood I didn’t want to be a soldier. He was a good guy, that doctor. He was a little Scotsman, one of those royal eccentrics you have over here. Only doctor I’ve ever seen with a beard.’

‘What were you in hospital for?’ The girl sat up perkily and cross-legged, her face full of innocent enquiry. Lechasseur couldn’t resist.

‘I got caught in a blast, got my legs mangled, couldn’t walk for a year or two. It wasn’t a problem.’ He was speaking softly and she leant forward to pick up on the words. ‘Everyone else in my platoon was killed, except the sentries we left outside. We shouldn’t even have been there.’

‘Where were you?’

‘Belgium. We should have been in France, we strayed too far north into unsecured territory. We took shelter in a farmhouse that the Germans had just cleared out of in a hurry. SS, we thought. They’d looted the place but left a lot of wine and a grand piano and a whole ton of dynamite in the piano. We got drunk and we blew ourselves up.’

He paused wistfully, his senses suddenly filled with the rich and vivid memory of the night. There was the scented mix of spilled wine and cigar ash in the air, spoils of war. Something sparked, jolting him back to the tasteless present, where the pyjama girl hadn’t breathed since he’d fallen silent.

‘I remember,’ he continued, ‘the senior officer was white. That’s the way of the US army. He and I were the only two there who could have

played a note on that piano, you know? Most of the others were from Harlem... Chicago – different worlds. They made the lieutenant an *honorary Negro*. He was half Jewish, they reckoned he was a quarter way there already. They baptised him with wine and he sat down to play the piano to celebrate. And the next thing I know I'm in a convent back in France that's been turned into a field hospital and I can't feel my legs and all these sweet, ugly nuns are talking to me in French because they've heard my name and think I can understand them.

'I wasn't burned, not even singed. You know, when they found me they found the lieutenant's hands? Perfectly intact, just shorn off at the wrist. I never understood that.'

The girl breathed deeply, shaking as he talked. A tear slid down her face: 'You know so much about yourself, there's so much inside you. Don't stop.'

It was his life and it was stinging her. She listened to him carefully but he was sure she was hurting with inner emptiness. Her eyes, big and round, were painfully hungry for experience. Then suddenly it all came out, his story, the high and lowlights of his life. He talked her through the rest of the war and the time he'd spent in hospital. He described the sullen campaign he'd waged against the authorities, the odd rules he broke, the curious offences that had made him popular with the other patients and the civilian staff. He told her about the canny head-shrinker they'd put onto him, who'd persuaded him to go into exile in London, on the run from his own people. He told her about the black market and as he talked he realised that he liked being a racketeer as much as he liked being a soldier, but he couldn't tell her that.

He backtracked and told her about the Crescent City he'd left behind to go to France. He told her about the Cajuns and the bayou, the jazz men and the Big Easy. He described relative wealth and desperate poverty, the Depression and *le bontemps*. He told her about Rosewood and strange fruit, he told her about fear. He told her about Cecile and the day of eating ice cream. It all came out in a tumble of words, each one spontaneous and perfect. Then he began to tell her about the last few days, describing what had happened in his search for the Doctor.

It electrified her, a violent spirit filling the gap of her eyes. She

snatched at him, too quick for him to react.

‘*What* did you just say?’ She clawed at his jacket, holding him tight and desperate.

‘I said I’ve been hired to find the Doctor by his wife.’

‘And?’

‘Her name is Emily Blandish. I met her in a cafe and –’

She cut him off. ‘All this time,’ she said, ‘I’ve known that I *would* remember one thing.’ Her mouth was a fierce line, blood between her teeth. She was all anger, it burned undirected in her voice, the mute gone from her throat. ‘I would remember it, something would jog my mind, then I would *know*. And you’ve just jogged me. You’ve given me one thing back.’

‘Given you what?’ He tried to calm her, pushing her gently back onto the bed, but she fought.

‘My name! You think I wouldn’t know my name. It’s not her!’ It came from her mouth as a brutal noise, her identity screaming out of her. ‘It’s not her! It’s me! *I’m Emily Blandish!* Not her! Not her!’

He drew his hands back. ‘Okay okay okay, I believe you.’

That seemed to calm her down, she squatted on her haunches but her face was swollen and red, bleeding tears. He pushed his head close to hers so she could hear.

‘Emily, do you remember anything else?’

No, she shook her head.

‘Do you know who this woman is who claims to be you?’

No.

‘Are you married to someone called the Doctor?’

She snorted, held up her naked fingers. ‘If I am I don’t remember.’

Behind Lechasseur the door opened and he turned just enough for the newcomer to punch him across the face. He slumped against the wall but then rough hands lifted him and dragged him off the bed. He tried to grab at his attacker but he’d been caught off guard. The newcomer was a strong man, not army trained but powerful enough not to need it. Emily was shrieking, not for herself, for him. She was Emily, he knew it as clearly as she knew herself.

Walken, he thought, as his assailant pushed him out through the door,

but he was wrong. He landed sprawled on his back, gazing up at the solid trunk and scowling face of Mrs Beardsley. She spat onto him, missing his face. ‘She’s mine, stay away from her,’ she told him.

He got quickly to his feet. Through the door he saw the man who’d punched him – bald and scarred but with an unmistakable family resemblance to the landlady. Emily stopped screaming once he drove his fist into her stomach. Her pyjama bottom had already come off. Yellow-purple bruises spotted her flank. The man grabbed a bunch of her hair and held her wordlessly, like a prize catch. Then his sister pulled the door closed so Lechasseur saw no more.

‘Get out of my house,’ Mrs Beardsley said, ‘or I’ll call the police and say you were hurting her. Did you see those bruises? And who’s ever seen a guiltier face than yours?’

He had a moment’s vision before his eyes, a dream – or the future. He slammed the landlady’s worm-body hard against her wall, her brother hunched double, blood seeping from his mouth, *how long has she been gone?!* He was back in the dank gloomy present, Mrs Beardsley squinting at him from the door.

Trying not to listen to the whimpers of fear from the room of the pink pyjama girl, Lechasseur turned and made his way down the stairs. The landlady’s cold hateful eyes followed him but they weren’t as cold and hateful as his.

The window was blacked-out again as he left the house. Outside, he grabbed his bike then spotted Walken’s spy watching him from the far side of the road. He’d come in black, blending into the shadows but Lechasseur gave him a glare and the man realised he’d been spotted.

‘Hey!’ Lechasseur bellowed. ‘Hey! Come and get her. She’d be better off with you!’

Without waiting for a reply, he climbed onto his bike and cycled away.

4: HUBERNETES RISING



LECHASSEUR HADN'T YET REACHED THE POINT WHEN HIS SPIRIT FOLDED INWARDS, THE point of giving up. He still had hope and it lasted almost to the end of the afternoon. He felt bruised from the fight at the boarding house, he needed somewhere to rest and heal. The rain washed over his face, making him numb. He went to a café for lunch and sat facing the door, cautiously weighing the features of each new customer. He hoped the girl in pink pyjamas might have followed him from the flat but she hadn't. He blinked heavily.

The girl in pink pyjamas. Walken. Mestizer. Emily Blandish. The pieces of the mystery. They made no sense, not singly, not as a whole. The common absence was the Doctor. He held all the threads, finding him was Lechasseur's only chance of making the connections he needed. The outline of the Doctor he'd formed was shadowy and hard to pin down. It grew more elusive the closer he got.

Where now? Syme? Still the best lead – and *he* didn't even believe the Doctor was real. Unless Syme was lying, which was possible. It was also possible that the whole of London was in on the scam, a conspiracy directed by the Doctor to deceive the fixer. No, going back to Syme was admitting defeat. Emily Blandish then, his starting point? He was due to update her on his progress, he could drop in unannounced. He could find out what her real name was, then what she really wanted with the Doctor and that might just give him a firm place to stand. He left the café in an optimistic mood. For once, his foresight was letting him down.

The address he'd been given by his client – he supposed he couldn't call her *Emily Blandish* any more – was fifteen minutes' ride from the café, his progress held up by a heavy bustle of crowds on the market streets. London everywhere was a city of noise and slow movement but he'd grown used to the rhythm of his Northside neighbourhood. The tempo of life here was different, faster, harder. People clogged the streets but slipped out of reach before he could pin down their faces. This was the ruthless clearing ground of the city.

The address might turn out to be as false as the name. Another premonition? No, he didn't believe that. Pilots had premonitions, not soldiers. Pilots travelled through a fragile, deadly medium, they had a right to them. Soldiers, rooted to the ground, merely had morbid thoughts. Fixers too. And Doctors? They were so close to death they could see it coming and dodge it when they could.

The address was real, the building was real. Did the un-Emily live here? Hard to tell, without venturing in. It was four storeys, split into flats. The door was locked, there was no bell and no one answered his knocks. He stepped back to study the windows but they were smudged-grey, lifeless. They were huge rectangular bays with narrow sills. False-Emily, judging by the number, was on the top floor.

At the side of the house, Lechasseur found a makeshift fire escape. A tight window at the top was lockless. The ragged curtains disintegrated as he climbed through, adding another layer of dust to an already profoundly empty room. He glanced down, saw footsteps in the dust, a thin feminine heel. There was a telephone in the corner, raised on a protective layer of newspaper, notepapers spread on the floor beside it. He moved on. The next room was larger and fuller, spanning the length of the building. This floor had been gutted long ago – stubs of wood and plaster were ripped along invisible lines on the floor – but it wasn't abandoned. There was a bed, unmade, strewn with magazines; a dressing table with a mirror, decorated with personal ornaments and a cluster of ration books; a wardrobe. Cold air seeped in from the balcony. He pushed at one of the side doors – a kitchen, empty but newly warm.

He tried the next door, calling out for Emily. His voice came back at

him from a tinny tiled echo chamber, he breathed in the scent of soap and disinfectant. He knew it was a bathroom before the afternoon half-light let him see. The dark was trapped here, his eyes took a moment to adjust, which was why he didn't see her straight away. She was sitting on the edge of the tub, Mrs Emily Blandish, whoever she really was. Her arm was stretched out rigid, her eyes tight shut, her teeth bared and her revolver pointed right at his head.

It cracked.

Funny, no German ever pointed a gun at me that way, so close I could see the barrel. Their bullets were anonymous. I'm not used to this.

Too late to take the gun, he hit the floor and rolled.

The gun spoke again but Emily wasn't looking and fired high.

What happened next would depend on whether she meant to kill him. He risked it: 'Don't shoot! It's me! Lechasseur!'

Horror-shock flicked up her face, her eyes came open and she dropped the gun as though it were filthy. It clattered as it struck the floor but didn't fire on impact and so didn't take the top of his skull off. Emily's mouth gaped but she put a hand over it and reached out to help him up. Her hands, her arms, were soft. She hadn't been aiming for him.

'Bloody hell, I'm sorry,' she breathed. 'I didn't know it was you. I was jumpy.'

'It would've been okay to plug me if I was someone else?' he asked.

She nodded grimly, not seeing the joke. 'Bloody right! You're about the only one I don't want to shoot right now. I trust you.'

Seeing he was unhurt, she sank back on the edge of the tub, shaking. He found himself believing her; she didn't look malicious. Then he remembered she was an actress. She was a bigger woman than the real Emily. She looked more substantial, like she actually belonged in this world, and she was just as pretty but she didn't have the complicated wound on her face. Lechasseur realised he was shaking too and he folded his arms round her to steady himself.

'I wasn't expecting you till the weekend.'

Lechasseur persuaded Emily to part with the revolver, though at her insistence he reloaded it and left it on her dressing table. She wouldn't

tell him who she was expecting and he didn't want to press her, not yet. 'I told you it was a dangerous job,' was the closest she came to an explanation. She fixed him a drink, all she had were mugs and cheap gin – better than cold tea, it took the edge off both his shock and his bruised pain.

Emily Blandish. Now she was here in front of him he found it impossible to separate her from the name. She'd stolen it but she wore it well. Take that away and she would become as abstract in his mind as the Doctor and she deserved to be real, fleshy and warm-blooded. She fiddled with the top button on her blouse. It was dark red, the same colour as her skirt, it suited her skin.

'There's not a problem with the money?' she asked.

He shook his head. 'No problem.' Her first instalment had been generous, prompt and delivered invisibly.

'Whatever happens to me,' she told him, 'you'll be paid what you're owed. I've made arrangements.'

He sat on a stool. She stood, anxious and fidgety. She was the opposite of the real Emily. He hoped she might try to lie down on the bed, relax, but she wouldn't.

'You think you're in danger.'

'I've disappointed some people. Don't worry about me.'

'If you tell me about it, I could look after you.'

She snorted. 'I've heard that one before.'

'It's not the money,' he said. She nodded brusquely and went to the balcony window. Lechasseur wondered if he shouldn't confront her about the other Emily straight out, but that didn't seem the right way. This Emily was on edge. Too much pressure now and he'd lose her along with every solid link he had back into the mystery of the Doctor.

Besides, he liked her. She was a liar and she'd shot at him but he liked her.

'I'm picking up speed,' he told her evenly. 'I wanted to let you know. The last three days have been hectic. A lot's come up.' That at least was true.

'Have you found him?' She didn't turn.

'Your husband?'

‘The Doctor.’

‘Not yet. Actually the best lead I got was from a man who said he doesn’t exist.’

She laughed. She had her mug pressed up against her stomach and wasn’t drinking. Her fingernails tapped the rim nervously. ‘Oh, he’s very real. Trust me’

‘You’d know that better than anyone,’ Lechasseur replied, then realised he was baiting her and moved on. ‘That led me to a man called Walken. Have you heard of him?’

She looked at him and he saw her face was piqued with genuine curiosity, real surprise. ‘Eric Walken? The hypnotist?’

‘That’s the one. Do you know him?’

Her head was shaking, painfully slowly. ‘I’ve met him. I did cabaret work for him after the war. How’s he mixed up in this?’

‘I don’t know but I understand he met your husband yesterday.’

Finally she walked away from the window and perched herself on the edge of the bed. ‘I had no idea he was involved. I haven’t seen him for years.’

‘Perhaps you could introduce me properly. We didn’t get on’

‘Oh, neither did I. He’s what they call a little creep. He hypnotised me once and I still don’t remember what I did. You know I’ve done some bad business since the war and mainly it’s been so I can work with people he hates. On and off stage,’ she spat.

‘Does your husband know about your association with Walken?’

‘He probably does. He does now. *Walken* is a stage name, you know?’

‘No. What’s – ?’

‘I don’t know,’ she broke in. ‘Higginbottom or something like that, something that doesn’t sound right for a black magician. Not a name to conjure with.’ She laughed suddenly and it washed out of her for a minute, the sound of relief.

He tried another angle. ‘Did you hear about the girl in pink pyjamas?’

‘Who hasn’t?’ He didn’t register any special interest.

‘There’s a connection with her and the Doctor. Walken’s found out about it. I went to see her this morning to see if she knew anything. She didn’t but,’ – *deep breath* – ‘she remembered her name while I was

there.'

'Yeah?' She didn't flicker. He had the impression he was about to surprise her.

'Her name's Emily Blandish,' he said.

The false Emily had her head bowed at that moment, she was staring at the floor. Her hands opened. The gin spilled onto the carpet, the mug followed and broke into three pieces.

'Kind of a weird coincidence,' Lechasseur observed.

When she looked up at him her features were fixed in a rictus of guilt and fear, they weren't solid any more. They phased between Emily and not-Emily. She said: 'I didn't know it was her. It was the name he told me to use.'

'Who? Walken?'

'Don't be daft. I wouldn't do anything he told me for a million pounds.'

'So you admit you're not Emily Blandish.'

She hovered in her inbetween state before admitting: 'My name is Miranda Sessions. Actually it's Enid Cross but Miranda Sessions sounds, well, sultrier, more mysterious, *sexier*,' she pronounced it with her teeth. 'Everything else I told you about myself is true. I wouldn't lie about stuff like that. Just the name.'

'And about being married?'

'Well, that was the other lie. I've been married twice but not to the Doctor. That was my idea, giving him a decent relationship to me. I thought you'd ask too many questions otherwise.' She giggled. 'I bet you're full of them now. Try one on me.'

'Is the Doctor real?'

'Have you read that book everyone was going on about? You know, the one with Big Brother, this character who no-one's ever seen? *Does he exist in the same way you and I exist?* I'll give you a clue. The Doctor lent me that book. He does exist.'

'Okay, I believe you.' Time for the big one: 'Who put you up to this? And why?'

'I don't know why. All these questions. I like you, you know. When I told you this would be dangerous I meant that. I don't want you to get

hurt.'

Lechasseur looked back at Miranda-Emily with as much sympathy as he could muster, which was more than he expected. 'Please, tell me who you're working for.'

'It'll only confuse you.'

'I'm already confused. If it's not Walken, is it Mestizer?'

'No,' she lied. 'Well, all right yes. It was Mestizer, but she didn't want me to talk to you. You know when I first saw you, you were so beautiful. They said you had an aura and I could see it and I fell in love with you there and then. I couldn't believe you were who they said you were. I wanted to warn you but... this idea just felt better. And now I've gone behind her back and *that's* what I'm afraid of because *he* can't do anything to protect me from her and *you* can't either.'

He shook his head. 'That's too much, you'll have to start again.'

She jumped off the bed, put her hands on his and pleaded with him through her eyes. 'Yes, let's start again. Please, just go on doing the job I gave you. That's real. When you find the Doctor you'll understand.'

Lechasseur opened his mouth, unsure of what he was going to say.

And the balcony window exploded.

Lechasseur pulled Emily-Miranda's head into his coat and threw his free arm over his face to protect them both from the sudden rain of cutting shards. When he looked again he saw a glistening sheen of glass dust down the back of Emily's blouse, but she didn't seem hurt. He turned to the window, to the eight-foot shape kicking out the edges of the hole it had just made. Abraxas was nearly too tall and too wide for the frame but he squeezed through.

Emily-Miranda leapt up and tore herself out of Lechasseur's grip. She pushed him aside and scrambled across the room in a dash for the back exit. Abraxas raised his hand and stabbed a huge leathery finger after her.

– *Miranda Sessions, I've come to take to you to Mestizer* –

Lechasseur stepped in his way. Abraxas was seething with sound, a mechanical growl and hiss that Lechasseur had heard before but now it was much more pronounced, with anger, with activity. He must have come across the roof. Behind him the balcony creaked and collapsed in a

shower of dust.

‘For God’s sake, wait!’ yelled Lechasseur.

Abraxas swung an arm round and shoved Lechasseur aside with a casual force, with the impact of a metal bar. The mask and snout turned to Lechasseur, the glass eyes unreadable.

– *Do I look like the sort of man who cares what God thinks? –*

Emily scrambled for the door. Abraxas slid back the front of his coat and expelled two darts from the cavity of his chest. Emily squealed and slipped on her face in the dust, dark wounds erupting on her shoulder and her calf. She twitched but the darts dug into her, taut harpoon lines connecting them to Abraxas’ body. Lechasseur caught a glimpse under Abraxas’ leathery skin. There were faint lights around his chest, patches of metal gleaming. Armour? No, it was something writhing, breathing, something alive. Lechasseur snatched at the revolver on the bedside table.

Abraxas strode across the room, setting the walls and the dust shaking. He took the fallen Emily by the shoulders and in a simple effortless move he hoisted her off the ground, holding her tiny terrified face up to his. His proboscis twitched as he spoke, while she just gasped, gazing helplessly back at him.

– *We know you betrayed us. You offered your aid to our enemy –*

‘He made me do it.’ The words gasped out of her but her face darkened and she added: ‘No, it was my choice.’ She tried to spit in his face but it came out as a thin splutter.

– *I don’t know what Mestizer will do with you. She may want to make you like me. It’s not so bad. Am I really so horrible you can’t bear to be like me? I am the steersman of the future –*

She quivered and shook her head.

– *She’ll lie you on a bench and make an incision in your stomach. She’ll scoop out your guts and fill you with glistening toys and you’ll see what you’re really made of –*

‘Abraxas!’ Lechasseur howled but the Big Man ignored him so he stepped forward and put a first bullet into the creature’s back.

He could see where it struck, he saw the hole, but Abraxas didn’t flinch.

Three more bullets. Each went into him and settled there. Irritated, Abraxas dropped Emily and she hit the floor with a helpless wheeze.

A high fifth shot went through Abraxas' head and that didn't stop him. A little orange fluid bled from the wound, nothing more. He was unstoppable, he took Lechasseur by the shoulders, raised him off his feet and slammed him against the wall. The revolver and its last useless bullet was wrenched away. It hit the floor and slid across the dust to the far end of the room.

Abraxas' glass eyes pushed close to his. Lechasseur saw the outline of a ruined face through steamed-glass eyes, skin and bone held together by fine metal stitches and clusters of wire.

– I used to flinch from bullets. I remember how they used to hurt. Not any more –

Over the huge brown shoulder, Lechasseur saw Emily stretch shakily for the gun.

‘Abraxas. Let him go. That's all I ask. Let him go.’

Then Emily Blandish-Miranda Sessions-Enid Cross jabbed the barrel of the gun into her open mouth and emptied the final chamber. She sat back easily, almost slumped, against the bloodied wall and didn't move again.

Lechasseur's anguished scream followed the sound of the shot.

Abraxas glanced over his shoulder.

– Who am I to refuse the request of a lady? –

Abraxas leaned towards Lechasseur, tapering leathery snout twitching at his face.

– I believe that a truly weak man is one who can't protect his women –

Lechasseur closed his eyes and saw nothing, no future, not even darkness. When he opened them, he was slumped on the floor, Abraxas was gone but the woman's body was still crouched in the corner with her brains spread across the wall at her back.

That was the moment when Honoré Lechasseur gave up.

He left the scene before the police arrived. The balcony's collapse, the shots, caused a commotion and he found it easy to slip away. There was no evidence that he had ever been there, no one who could identify him,

nothing linking him to the scene but memories and he hoped he could forget those. As he made his escape he imagined he felt the baleful gaze of Walken's spy on his back but when he turned there was no-one there, just the flap of a black coat into the shadows. It didn't matter. He doubted Walken would try to use this against him. This was over.

He wished he'd never heard of the Doctor or set out to find him. What had Syme called him? A hobgoblin? That seemed right. Maybe he was only an unreal folk figure, a fleshless idea that could be blamed for all the chaos and all the death. *The Doctor*, now he thought of it, just seemed a polite and nervous name for the Devil.

He went back to his flat and locked himself in. When Mrs Bag-of-Bones came for the rent he raised his voice at her for the first time since they had met. She went away disappointed, giving him the space he needed. She was a good woman but he didn't need company now.

At the weekend his next payment was delivered, by regular post. He put the unearned money on his table but couldn't bear to touch it, not even to burn it. There was a short note with the money, signed *Emily Blandish*. It read, simply: *Down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean*. He put it on the fire.

He read newspaper reports of Miranda's death – she was *Miranda* now, she could only be Emily while she was alive. The police weren't certain if this was murder or suicide. Some credulous witnesses were reporting a moving gargoyle, a Spring-Heeled Jack, seen climbing across the walls then the roofs of the nearby buildings, but no-one paid them much attention. The dead woman was said smugly to be in show business, as if no more explanation were needed.

The gun was never found. Lechasseur presumed Abraxas had taken it. Maybe Mestizer meant to blackmail him – it was covered with his prints – but if so he never heard from her. There were no more reports of the pink pyjama girl in the papers he saw, so he presumed she remained unkidnapped in the care of Mrs Beardsley.

He didn't want to think any more about the body he'd left in the flat.

He spent too much time at home. He squatted on the bed with a bottle of vodka and a circle of postcards spread round his body, as if he could project himself through space and time just by concentrating on them.

He was letting himself go, as he had done after the explosion in Belgium. And he was back there, in the drawing room of the farmhouse with all the dead men and he could see their little lives bleeding out of them, the light pouring out of the joins of their bodies. He was the taciturn man of the platoon, the outsider. He stood at the windows watching the flashes of distant war in the night.

And the lieutenant sits at the piano – boys, says he, things are about to get Germanic but Beethoven has been dead a century and is therefore neutral. And Private Lechasseur thinks Fifth Symphony and turns – dot dot dot dash

– the blast blows him through the window, his body fracturing as he passes through wood and glass, his bones fragmenting, his skin a suit of pain.

Back then he'd had time and aid to heal. He couldn't deal with this the same way, not so quickly and not on his own. Now he was alone with the certainty that he would have to change again. He'd been a soldier, then a black marketeer, why shouldn't he shuck off his skin once more, remake himself as a new man?

He liked the idea of being a fixer.

Down these mean streets... No.

When he emerged at last it was to sell his hoard. London's black economy wobbled with a sudden influx of cheap goods, undercutting the other spivs. Most of it went quickly. He destroyed everything he couldn't sell. He was left with too many bottles of cheap vodka so he climbed to the flat roof of a nearby warehouse and emptied them into the wind. For one day only it rained alcohol on London.

There were more A-bomb tests in the East. The vodka bottles were unlabelled, probably Russian. He smashed them one by one, not as a protest, but to make a garden of glass fragments on the roof. When the Soviets flew their bombers over London they'd see something abstract and beautiful in the few seconds before the city vanished into heat and light.

That night he fell asleep fully clothed and cross-legged on his bed. He didn't need to drink and he didn't dream. For once he slept soundly but was woken early in the morning by the crash from below. There were

heavy feet tramping up the stairs. His eyes opened – though not for long – in time to see the masked gang break his door down and pile into the room around him.

5: SENSITIVE CRIMINALS



DOCTOR?

He's still out cold.

He can hear us. I know he can.

They'd chloroformed him and now there was a hard lump of blood on his tongue. He had little time to struggle, the gang had surrounded him and pinned his limbs while they pressed the pad over his mouth, but they hadn't hurt him. There was a hard streak of muscle at the base of his neck, from the awkward pose he'd slept in. He was sure he'd been moved, even with his eyes closed he didn't recognise his surroundings. The scent, the acoustics, were wrong. He had an impression of being underground. There was a warm dampness in the air but it tasted stuffy and enclosed, laced with a flowery perfume. He picked up two voices as he came round, one male and familiar, the other a shrill feminine tone. There was at least a third body present, he could hear rasped breathing that suited neither voice.

He'd been unconscious upright in a chair, upholstered, not uncomfortable though his arms were bound behind his back, pinning him in place. He flexed his wrists, slowly so as not to attract attention but there was no slack in the cord and making some would take time.

The taste of acid in his mouth was too strong. Lechasseur rolled his head to one side and spat at the floor.

Oh, yuck.

I think it's beautiful. (The man's voice.) Can we get some of that in a

jar?

How can you say it's beautiful? (The woman – it was her perfume he could smell, the scent of dry rotting flowers).

It's the product of a wholly exotic biology. It's like ectoplasm.

It just looks like sick and spit.

He's telling us he's awake.

The aftertaste caught in his mouth, unshiftable. He inclined his head forward and opened his eyes. The light was red and pulsing behind his eyelids, he fluttered them open but the glare was still hard, the revealed world looked queasy and unsettled. He smelt something smouldering, but it was in his mind. Lechasseur didn't get real headaches, not any more, and these disorientating moments of waking were the closest he came to reliving them.

His lips flickered like his eyes, his mouth almost too dry to make words.

'Hei-Heil Hitler,' he stammered.

'You know, that's twice as amusing the second time around,' said Eric Walken.

'What does he mean?' squeaked the girl. 'You didn't say anything about Hitler.'

'I'm joking,' Lechasseur mumbled. There was a movement at his feet. He glanced down through bleary eyes and saw another man on his knees, wrapping up discarded acid-spittle in a handkerchief. He was a big guy with cropped hair, a gorilla in evening dress. As Lechasseur's eyes settled on him he rose self-consciously and, at a nod from Walken, left the room, clutching his precious find in indelicate fingers. On his way, he looked back at the captive, then at Walken, with slow concerned eyes.

'Don't worry, he's not going to hurt us,' Walken told him.

'I don't know,' Lechasseur warned, the strength returning to his voice, 'he *might*.' He shrugged the pins-and-needles out of his body and made himself comfortable in the chair. He drew in his surroundings, a drab store in what he guessed was the *Inferno* club. The light was naked and electric, dangling on a flex from the ceiling, wasted on a room full of dust and boxes.

Walken was tuxedoed again, playing the club boss rather than the conjuror. He hadn't grown any taller since their last meeting, still the same powerful little man, poised like a solemn ape ready to spring. He stood swaying about a yard from the chair but seemed about ready to start bounding off the walls in a fit of pure energy.

His mistress, who looked all of nineteen, sat on a crate of black market champagne, swinging long legs to her own rhythm. Walken had dressed her in nostalgic tics, white fur and pearls, elegant grey elbow-length gloves, she looked like a gangster's moll from the 1920s or a silent movie star. She was heart-faced and wide-eyed, a little too starved to be truly elegant. She had a bag of toffees on her lap that seemed to hold her attention more closely than anything in the room around her. She smiled at Lechasseur from under blonde curls but their eyes didn't meet.

Walken said: 'I apologise for the method we had to use to bring you here. I had some trouble tracking you down after our last meeting, time is – as you know – of the essence, and you have a reputation as someone who isn't easily persuaded. I'm sorry.'

'It's stopped hurting. I still can't move my arms.'

Walken seemed poised to move forward to untie his prisoner but he checked himself. He didn't want to come close, to touch him. He was holding in all his spirit, all his natural aggression, from fear, almost from awe. Whatever it was it gave Lechasseur a little leverage over the situation. Walken was deferring to him, even the girl could sense that. She chewed toffee and kicked and swapped perplexed glances between the two men.

'Not until we're each of us clear about what the other wants.' Walken flashed his empty palms at him, a peace gesture, *nothing up my sleeve*. 'I'm a cautious man, I'm sorry, but I'm also a reasonable one.'

Lechasseur offered him a sour, contemptuous smile.

Walken coughed. 'Our last meeting didn't go well, so shall we start again? I haven't introduced myself properly. My name is Eric Walken, I'm the owner of this club. I am the most powerful human being alive on this planet today. I know you must think that's a small thing, a very tiny thing, but still I am' – he clapped his hands together – 'honoured to be here talking with you.'

Lechasseur sat in silent pause before replying: ‘Who do you think I am?’

Walken nodded. ‘You’re the Doctor.’

It would be a mistake, Lechasseur knew, to laugh.

‘I’m not the Doctor,’ he said quietly. He watched Walken shift his weight from one foot to the other, the face an untroubled mask but the body twitching with uncertainty and impatience. Walken pushed his hands and eyes as close to his prisoner as he dared. He wasn’t simply looking, he was drawing an impression through all his senses, through his face and skin. Lechasseur felt himself being read.

Walken snapped back, stung, fear flickering over his face before he recovered his composure.

‘There’s no mistake. You *are* the Doctor.’

Lechasseur shook his head wearily. ‘Someone asked me to find him, that’s my connection to him, but I’m not him. Who told you I was?’

‘I can tell. Almost from the moment I saw you, I knew it was you.’ Walken thrust his arms outwards, stabbing his shaped fingers at his captive, pulling them short of contact. His hands described a sigil in front of Lechasseur’s face, his chest, it would have looked impressive on stage with the right lighting creating the flaming shape in the air. ‘You have a distinct aura. No human has an aura like that, not even Crowley or Hanussen, and they were among the greatest magicians in the history of our species. I didn’t see it at first – how could I? – but when I did I knew. It’s your signature, you bind time with it. You are the Doctor.’

Out of toffees, Walken’s skinny moll craned forward to look for Lechasseur’s aura and cooed in mock delight when she couldn’t. Lechasseur felt his mouth tighten in a smile and watched Walken’s left cheek tic.

He thinks I’m toying with him.

He had no idea how Walken would react to anything he said. The conjuror was totally immersed in his fantasy. Maybe it was time to try on the Doctor’s skin for size.

‘You know, if I’d only known I was the Doctor all along it would have saved me a lot of hard work,’ he said, airily. ‘I was searching in all the wrong places.’

Walken gave a snort of laughter and his real voice broke through and his body relaxed with the weight of pretence gone. ‘*Doctor*, you arrogant sod, d’you really think you could fool me?’

Lechasseur cocked his head sideways, smiling prim and silent.

‘Now, I can’t think why you’ve chosen to incarnate as a Negro or – God forbid – as an American, but’ – *shrug* – ‘your ways are not ours. And I’m just having fun with you. We searched you while you were unconscious. You know what we found?’

Lechasseur shook his head.

Walken dipped into his pocket and pulled out – as though it were a string of coloured handkerchiefs – a length of chain and a dangling key. Lechasseur remembered Emily passing it to him in the envelope, the warm brush of her hand on his.

‘Your key, the one that opens your cabinet of light. Do you know where it is?’

Lechasseur shook his head again.

‘Mestizer has it, I’m sure, but I don’t know where. That golem, that patchwork prosthetic Abraxas, is working for her but I’m sure you know that. You’ve met Mestizer?’ He assumed a *yes*. ‘Now we have the key we can steal it back from her. I’ve arranged a gathering for this evening, see if we can force a materialisation right here in the club. Those idiots in California thought their botched Moonchild rite was the magical event of the 20th century. Typical Hollywood occultists really – pulp hacks and rocket-men treating the Devil like it’s something Abbott and Costello could meet. Well, sod them. The big event is right here tonight in London.

‘And if that doesn’t work we can always head up to her place and burn it down.’

The girl was clapping, she was making fun of them, but Walken didn’t notice or care. His eyes were soaring up through a world only he could see. He was enraptured. Lechasseur squashed his hands, trying to slip loose of his bonds, but they held. Everything was unclear now, he had no visions to fall back on, nothing but darkness behind his eyes. He would have to go where Walken led.

Walken was living in his own delusional world of patchwork men and

goblin Doctors and Lechasseur knew he was in danger of being sucked in. It was only that overheard remark of Walken's that convinced him the Doctor was a living man in the first place. Ruefully, he realised that Walken must have been talking about *him* all along. The elusive Doctor slipped away, unreal again.

The conjuror came out of his reverie to look at his mistress. She ruffled herself, both self-conscious and glad of the attention. She was, Lechasseur guessed, part-hypnotised. Her eyes weren't focused quite as they should be. They were fixed on nothing.

'This is Amber,' Walken told him.

'Eric! That's not my real name,' she piped in.

'She'll be the medium for tonight's ceremony – I hope you approve. If things go well, I'll give her to you. I know you never travel alone. What would the Doctor be without his amanuenses?'

Amber pouted, believing she'd been called something rude, but was sensible or mesmerised enough to keep quiet. Walken sent her out to fetch some assistance for the Doctor. She went obediently, kicking the dust up with her heels.

Walken produced a penknife and set to work on Lechasseur's bonds. The conjuror's mix of deference and revulsion was suddenly more dangerous for being invisible and out of sight. The blade brushed Lechasseur's skin without cutting it.

'Can't you do this by magic?'

'I wouldn't waste it. I must insist you stay at the club until the ceremony is complete. I know you're thinking about escaping. You could take the key, approach Mestizer on your own, take back your stolen cabinet without my help. I wouldn't advise it.'

'I wouldn't do that, we seem to be on the same side.'

'Oh, no Doctor, I think that's exactly the sort of thing you would do. But I have plans of my own and the ceremony is going ahead tonight, with or without you. If I don't have your key then I'll find another focus for my magic. I could bring in that pink pyjama girl you're so fond of, cut her open and consult her entrails. She's the ace up my sleeve.'

The knife went through the cord, which slipped loose to the floor.

'I'll stay to keep an eye on you,' Lechasseur promised.

Walken leant over his shoulder, so close he could feel the warmth of his skin and his mouth. ‘Doctor,’ he whispered, ‘I knew you wouldn’t let me down.’

The *assistance* proved to be three waitresses from the club. They moved mechanically and said little unless they were directly addressed. Their pupils were hard and black, the life drained out of them. Unlike Amber they were completely under Walken’s spell. ‘I have conquered biology,’ he boasted. ‘I could order their hearts to stop beating and the blood to dry up in their veins, and it would, but they’d still go on as though nothing were wrong. My will animates them.’

Lechasseur nodded sceptically. Maybe Mestizer could do it, he could imagine that.

The waitresses followed him everywhere for the rest of the day. They treated him as a guest, not a prisoner, but even so they were guards. They didn’t look strong but he could imagine Walken could order them to tear his arms out if he tried to escape. He let them tend to him, though his flesh crept when they stared at him with their lifeless eyes. He couldn’t look at their faces.

Walken stayed out of his way for much of the day, claiming that he had the ceremony to arrange, but Lechasseur could sense fear and suspicion under his mask of admiration. He didn’t want to sit at the Doctor’s feet, picking up scraps of wisdom. His idea of the Doctor was flexible enough to absorb anything that Lechasseur said or did. He had no fixed assumptions about the Doctor’s behaviour or characteristics. Lechasseur became *Doctorish* without having to act, without even claiming the title.

He ate dinner in the cavernous body of the *Inferno* club, watching the stagehands putting together the scenery for the evening’s cabaret. The lighting was white and ordinary. It revealed the seediness of the club, its threadbare painted walls, grimy floors, air hung with stale cigarette smoke from the previous night’s audience. The glamour was gone. Walken came in to inspect the stage, didn’t see his guest at first. Lechasseur had been eating quietly but he finished his mouthful and called out: ‘Getting ready for tonight’s performance?’

Walken hummed. ‘There won’t be a magic show tonight, not for the

paying public.’ He struggled up onto the stage, looking suddenly like an impatient little boy. He turned to look out across the club at Lechasseur, his hands dug into his pockets. ‘You really are a riddle wrapped in an enigma inside a mystery. I never know what to expect from you.’

‘You must have tried to imagine what I’d be like?’

‘Oh yes. I’ve heard such wonderful contradictory stories about you. My godfather met you in Dublin during the Rising. You were a white man then and older. You wrote Poor Tom’s dialogue in *King Lear*, I’ve seen your handwriting in the first draft. You are Tom o’Bedlam, you are the king-in-patchwork, you are the flickering unman who never was.’

‘I must be a real disappointment.’

‘No, not yet. I don’t understand you yet.’

‘What about Mestizer? I haven’t got a handle on her. Who is she?’

Walken shrugged. ‘The dark lady,’ he said, ‘the spider woman, the evil seductress who tempts man and brings about his destruction: He pouted, glancing down at his feet and blowing sour air out through pursed lips. When he looked up, he said, ‘There’s something I’m sure you’ve worked out. I should tell you for the sake of fair play.’

‘Yes?’

‘If I can find a way to kill you, I will do it,’ he droned, ‘but even if I let you live you’ll never be the Doctor again.’

‘I don’t get it.’

‘When we’ve fixed Mestizer, I’ll have your cabinet. I’m going to steal it from you. And once I have it, I’ll be the Doctor and you’ll be nobody. You’ll never have existed. I’ll take your cabinet and make you *mundane*. I won’t let anyone take her from me, not as easily as you did. I will have all your powers and all your knowledge and all your light, but when I’m you, Doctor, I won’t waste them like you did.’ He blew again, bored. ‘Just thought I should warn you.’

‘We’ll see,’ Lechasseur called, chewing on this thought as he chewed on his food. Walken, dejected, shambled off the stage. He was a volatile man, given to moods.

For the rest of the day, Lechasseur was kept isolated, even as evening drew in and he heard the first patrons arriving for the cabaret. For all their zombie scariness, the waitresses took good care of him, even

tending to the bruises he still wore from his encounter with Abraxas. He wondered if Walken had also ordered them to kill him, when the time arose. No, he'd do that himself. He still had a street-kid arrogance that demanded he do his own dirty work. Besides, they had to get through the ceremony first.

It began shortly after eight. Music and applause were rising from the basement space when the waitresses took him to Walken's inner sanctum, the room adjacent to his office on the first floor. He'd had a glimpse of this on his last visit, now he saw it all. It was an odd-shaped room, with its corners boxed-off in a doomed attempt to make it seem circular. It was decorated in sober creams and dark greens, a little oasis of opulence in the decrepit club, and as a flourish Walken had decorated it with scarlet banners bearing occult symbols. The swastika was there, with others. A large window along the far wall gave the same dismal view of the backyard as the office, spoiling the effect.

He was the last guest to arrive. There were twelve already in the room, including Walken and Amber. He didn't recognise any of the others, men or women, but most of them gave off that peculiar British scent, class. Walken rose from his seat to introduce the Doctor and a ripple of approval passed round the table. Lechasseur felt the mood transform as Walken captured the admiration of his betters. They were a sorry bunch, shabby even in their evening dress. The faces of one or two gave away the same feral tenacity that Lechasseur saw in Walken but most had pale, frightened faces. They were the dying old order, they'd probably turned to the supernatural out of fear of extinction.

Walken introduced his guests but Lechasseur took in few names. They would turn up in the papers over the next week as individual tragedies for their great families.

Walken indicated Lechasseur should sit in the empty chair between Amber and a young fop who introduced himself as Clute ('Another name for the devil, doncha know?'). The table was circular but as far as it could have been said to have had a head, it was Amber, the medium, not the magician. After the initial ruffle of interest in 'the Doctor,' the circle's eyes went back to her. Walken sat almost forgotten to her right, Lechasseur to her left. She was dwarfed by the big leather chair and sat

stiffly with a hypnotised gloss over her eyes. There was a small ornamental dagger through her left palm, the point jutting from the back of her hand. The wound was puckered but unbleeding.

‘A demonstration,’ Walken intoned, the magician’s voice, ‘that I have put Amber into a deep trance. I’ll forgo the other tests I’d planned, as we have ladies present.’

Amber took the dagger with her free hand and slid it loose. She set it down clean in front of her. The tabletop was varnished, the same rich brown as Lechasseur’s skin.

‘The inauguration of the cabinet will take the form of a séance,’ Walken continued. ‘We will link hands. We will be alone. We will not break the circle. The medium will chant but only I shall speak. I hope this is understood.’

Nods of agreement from round the table, Lechasseur agreeing warily. Walken waved the three waitresses away and they turned out the lights as they left. With the doors closed, the room was sunk into a moment’s darkness; in the dark Lechasseur felt Clute grasp his left hand and he wrapped his right around Amber’s cold, unmoving fingers. Then the candles at the centre of the table flared, another Walken trick. The yellow light flickered on Amber’s pale face, against the white skin of her shoulders, on the Doctor’s key that she wore as a necklace.

Her lips moved. She began to chant, guttural moans separated by long pauses. Lechasseur realised she was intoning *Mary Had a Little Lamb*, syllable by syllable. He snorted.

‘Thank you, Doctor.’ Walken was wide-eyed, his pupils full of candlelight. Many of the others had their eyes closed, afraid of the dark. ‘The chant is only a focus. We are linked. You’ll feel the power flowing soon. We’re free of these bodies. We’re rising over London. We’re flying in the bodies of the pigeons, searching with our bird-eyes for the cabinet of light.’

Now Walken mentioned it, there was a buzz, passing between Clute’s flesh and his flesh and Amber’s. Walken gasped, breathing hard.

‘I can feel the wind and hear the beat of my wings. We are carried north. We see the radiant city spread out beneath us, we see the mundane glimmer and are not fooled. The true light was brought into this

mundane world by the pretender-god. He spoke the words and there was light, given to his mechanism, his subjects and his descendants. The cabinet is a vessel, built to hold the light. She is an anchor into other worlds and we see her as a shaft of true light. We *see*.'

Lechasseur could see. He saw it glowing in the night, a blotch floating over the centre of the table, a gouge of brightness in the air. Light isn't white, Lechasseur realised giddily, but a smear of all colours. The blotch was the shape of a malformed hand and his heart thumped, realising he could see himself through it. It wasn't in the room, the room was inside it.

Walken wheezed – laughter. 'That's Mestizer's house. That unbelievable shameless bitch! She's had it hidden there all along! Give Amber your strength, we can take it now!'

Amber chanted harder, her hands shook and Lechasseur could feel the stab wound under his fingers. It was flowing now, but not much. The buzz came again, this time like a knife through the heart. One of the women in the circle coughed her guts out onto the floor, a rank bloody smell, but her hand held tight; one of the men was screaming but his voice sounded isolated and faraway. Amber chanted. The key at her neck was white-hot.

'It's coming!' Walken gasped, his eyes swimming with triumph.

Over the sound of the chant and the cabaret they heard the roar of engines, ancient machinery struggling back to life. Their wheeze and their groan filled the darkness. They bellowed, not engines but something *alive*, a mother's mouth twisting as she gave birth, a baby – a *girl* – erupting into the world screaming before she could breathe.

Lechasseur looked into the light, which grew larger, and saw the shape of the newborn. It was a cabinet, as Walken said, a tall blue box with a drab, oddly familiar outline. The light swirled round it as it phased in and out. The blotch swelled ripe, ready to burst, ready to spill its contents into the room.

There was a crash from the basement, shots and the first explosion.

Amber snatched her hands free.

The light imploded, sucking the vision of the blue box into the darkness. The candles snuffed out. Lechasseur felt the energy from the

stance snap through him, he grabbed the chair to steady himself. One man wasn't so lucky, the invisible blast blew him back out of his chair and sent him staggering against the door, which creaked open. Another slumped lifelessly forward on the table. Lechasseur felt an empty shock then saw the same on the faces of the other occultists. Only cold immobile Amber seemed unaffected. The key winked and shone on her chest.

More rattling gunshots from downstairs, yells, then screams. Automatic weapons, Lechasseur guessed. That and the explosion suggested a hit rather than random violence. He stood uneasily.

Walken had gone quiet after contact was broken, but he looked up suddenly, a vicious line on his mouth. He began to pound his fists on the table.

'Amber!' he screamed. 'We had the cabinet! We lost it! How could you do this to me?!'

She took the dagger gently in her palms. 'You had nothing,' she told him in her flat trance-drone. 'You never will.' She swung round to put the dagger into his chest, then sat back patiently in her chair.

Walken shifted before the blow hit and took it in the shoulder. Maybe that was the moment when he finally conceded that Mestizer was the better hypnotist. Lechasseur didn't want to stay to find out. He turned to the door in time to see the waitresses reappear, their eyes still hollow, their hands now full. The man who'd struck the door struggled to his feet and shrank back but the closest girl put two clean bullets through his forehead.

Lechasseur turned from the door and ran for the window. The yells from below had died down but the shooting continued in short brutal bursts. Walken's goons were probably mounting a defence but the attackers sounded better equipped and had surprise on their side. Behind him the waitresses were finishing the occultists with efficient double taps.

The window could be pushed open but there was no easy way down he could see. There were a number of cars parked in the yard, large ones with long solid black roofs. He could risk a jump, they weren't going anywhere and might take his weight. There was a drawback, the Silver

Ghost sitting in the alley, the eight foot figure at its door, his obvious silhouette inadequately disguised by a broad brimmed hat. Someone was watching from the open window of the back seat. Lechasseur couldn't see clearly, but he guessed Mestizer.

In the window glass he saw Amber's reflection behind him as she rose leisurely, a small ladies' pistol in her hand pointed at the back of his head. The key was still on her neck but he'd lost that now, he had no use for it. Amber's finger squeezed. He shoved at the window and leapt.

The bullet went over his head but the sound of it made Abraxas whirl. The Big Man was cradling a large machine-gun, of the make it took three ordinary men to carry. With a glance at his passenger, he turned and brought it to bear on the figure falling from the window.

Lechasseur crashed onto the roof of the nearest car and struggled for a footing. The jolt went through his body, undoing all the good work Walken's assistants had done for his bruises. He didn't have time to climb down, he hurled himself forward onto the roof of the next car, buying himself a little time before Abraxas could change his aim. He pounded forward and threw himself into the gap between the second car and the back gate. Abraxas was blind behind them. A shot *pinged* into the gates from above, Amber still had him covered but she was a rotten shot. He hurled himself into the alley and ran as hard and as fast away from the club as he could manage.

There was another blast behind him, filling the night sky with light and smoke. The shock knocked him onto the floor. The stones were cold and wet, but London was suddenly hotter than he remembered. It was raining flecks of ash and flaming wood. He looked round in time to see the fireball rise through the roof of the building. The windows were smeared red and yellow. The *Inferno* was burning.

The blast had knocked Abraxas down too. That bought him enough time, if he could just find the strength to get up.

The hand, black and gloved, was thrust at him from the dark. Lechasseur took it automatically and the newcomer pulled him up.

'This way,' he said, thumbing at the alley. There was soot smeared across his face and his coat was burning faintly where the embers had touched it. He turned and ran and Lechasseur pelted after him, a bitter

sensation in his mouth. His rescuer was Walken's spy from Shoreditch, the one who'd been preparing to grab Emily so the magician could study her entrails.

Behind him, Abraxas was up and firing wildly. The spy crouched in the shadows as he ran – that was sensible and Lechasseur followed suit. Walken was almost certainly dead and his man was no threat – Abraxas was the immediate danger. The air seemed full of the rattle of exploding bullets, they rang like bells, then he realised they were bells. The fire engines of half the West End were probably bearing towards Covent Garden after the blast.

'I've finished with this,' he yelled at the dark back ahead of him. 'I don't want anything more to do with it!' But apart from a low wordless murmur there was no answer. The other man led him through the alleys and the shadows further away from the club, though the fire soared across the skyline, like a landmark, turning it an unhealthy pink. Every night in London was once like this. Every night.

Walken's spy stopped him by a burned out site. A whole section of alley had come down here, a line of shops that were lost forever under rubble. He stabbed his finger at a crack in the side of the wreck, a narrow hole leading down into the darkness of the buried building. 'Through here,' he said bluntly.

Lechasseur shook his head and made to go on but the man grabbed his shoulder and pushed him back.

'Mestizer's gang are going to be searching this part of London for the next hour at least. If they find you, they'll kill you. You're safer with me.'

Lechasseur shook his head wearily.

'You're hurt, you won't get far.'

'I can try.'

Exasperation filled the soot-covered face. His rescuer turned to the crumbling brick pile and slapped it in frustration. Then he turned back to Lechasseur and offered him a clear-eyed, hard-faced appeal. He held his arms out, palms solemnly displayed.

'Trust me,' he said. 'I'm a doctor.'

6: TRICKS OF THE DEVIL



'ISN'T IT FUNNY,' THE DOCTOR REMARKED, 'HOW YOUR LIVING SPACE, EVEN SOMEWHERE you lay your head for a few days, gradually begins to resemble you? As if you're mapping the contents of your head onto your surroundings.'

'Funny peculiar?' asked Lechasseur.

'No, the other kind of funny. You get anguished because something's fallen down or out of place, or the dust's building up on the shelves you never bother to clean. Then, just when you're about to burst with frustration, you see the joke and you laugh, you can't help yourself, it pours out of you. That's the human condition. So I'm told,' he added darkly.

The Doctor had been living under the heaps of rubble a short distance from Covent Garden. It had been a toyshop once, now there were flowers growing in green clumps from the ceiling. The surviving room must have been a basement store or repair space. Marionettes hung from a rack on the far wall, their strings frayed, their skins flaking, their carnival clothes stained with mould. Weed fronds crept silently down to strangle them. The vegetable patches were speckled with flowers, Blitz-daisies nourished on blood and fire. Most flowers strained upwards to the light, these subsisted on darkness.

Lechasseur had expected the climb down to be dank and cramped but the crack widened and the Doctor pointed out the fractured but steady steps down to his hiding place. The store was at the bottom and there were lights twinkling in the subterranean gloom. The Doctor moved

familiarly through the dark to his candles, lighting them with a match that he'd pinch out, then reignite, without it ever burning down. He tossed an empty matchbook to Lechasseur, who plucked it casually out of the air without taking his eyes from his host.

He held the book up to read the label, through the corners of his eyes.

'PROMETHEAN' EVERLASTING MATCHES

A PRODUCT OF THE ETERNITY PERPETUAL COMPANY

'What a wonderful idea, what terrible business sense,' the Doctor declared.

He didn't live in the workshop but in a narrow room to the side. He had some sort of water arranged for the place as he disappeared within and emerged minutes later with a clean, shiny face and a sloshing kettle for tea. He offered Lechasseur the chance to clean up but met with a wary, stone-eyed response. He asked to check Lechasseur's wounds but Lechasseur felt grimy and only a little tender and declined. The Doctor put his everlasting match to a gas stove and set the kettle boiling.

Lechasseur barely said a word in those first few minutes but drew in his surroundings. He tried to imagine what the store had been like before the bombs closed it. He remembered childhood shops as being colourful, untouchable treasure troves and felt unsettled by how faded the memory seemed. This room was the opposite of a toyshop. It was the backstage of the doll theatre, their dreamspace, their afterlife. Everything here was broken or incomplete. A shelf of naked china dolls gazed down at him, their glass eyes unblinking, their bodies sexless and smooth. There were the marionettes with their rotted faces. There was an ornamental clock, its front prised open, its cuckoo snapped off at the spring. Teddy-bears, furless and scorched, were mouldering in a corner. The light he'd seen as he'd first entered this room was a luminous glisten from the skins of dead toys.

There were larger objects that, if they'd been whole, would have been beyond the dreams and piggy-banks of all but the richest London children. Lifelike uniforms on mannequins, nurses and soldiers mainly; rocking horses; cars big enough to fit a small-bodied driver; an old-fashioned steam train, like the ones that first crossed America; and there was the Ferris wheel. It stood five feet in diameter and was resting on a

workbench in the middle of the room, almost touching the ceiling. Apart from the black dirt that had accumulated since this room was last in use, there didn't seem to be anything wrong with it. Before the Doctor retreated to the other room he gave it a tap and set it spinning. The wheel went round and round and never stopped.

The Doctor claimed he had been repairing it during his hours of boredom, but Lechasseur didn't trust a word he said. And he used a lot of words, he was in love with them. He had the gift of the gab.

His other hobby since arriving in London had been researching the history of his hideout. He and Lechasseur sat facing each other on rickety chairs with the Ferris wheel at their side. The Doctor crouched on his seat, his legs drawn up into a squat as if trying to make a smaller man of himself. He held his mug in both hands, like a soup bowl. Lechasseur also had a mug. It seemed easier just to accept one than argue.

The tea tasted foul.

'Until it was bombed, this shop was owned by a man called Sun. It's always been run by a Mr Sun, as far back as local history recalls. The first Mr Sun seems to have arrived here from China in the mid-18th century and set up his business on arrival. Possibly he inherited it from someone else and I've found it impossible to trace who's actually *owned* the place in the last two hundred years.

'Each Mr Sun appears to have been a stooped man, maybe only middle-aged, prematurely old but never ageing. Even if the shop was passed down through the generations, this is still a bit of a mystery. All the Mr Suns were thoroughly Anglicised and never dressed up to suit orientalist fads. They all seem to have enjoyed the company of children.

'One woman I spoke to, who is now in her nineties but grew up round here, remembers the Mr Sun of her childhood inviting the street children into the shop, rich and poor alike, for parties. There would be food, magic and other entertainment and the children would all come away with small toys as gifts. She also recalls that a later Mr Sun was imprisoned during the Great War, not because he was a foreigner but because one day in 1915 he took a train to Hove and shot dead, for no readily apparent reason, a professor of economics who later turned out to

have been spying for the Austrians.

‘I also spoke to a woman who met the most recent Mr Sun in 1938. They were intimates. He told her that he had a dishonourable ancestor in ancient China. This earliest Mr Sun had been a betrayer, a spy and a poisoner of wells. He was captured, imprisoned and sentenced to death. The night before his execution, a man came to his cell, a stranger, an occidental who promised to help him escape in exchange for an unspecified favour. If they hadn’t made this deal, there would have been no Mr Suns in London, no toyshop at all.

‘The last Mr Sun walked out of his shop one evening six years ago and was never seen again. That’s nothing unusual in wartime. The shop was bombed a week later, again not unusual. According to local legend, the shop would sometimes disappear. You’d go to the door and find the whole façade *vanished* with nothing but a brick wall in its place as if it had never been there at all. And one day in 1943, it really wasn’t.

‘I don’t know who Mr Sun was but he sounds like a remarkable man,’ the Doctor concluded. He put down his mug. Somehow he had managed to drain it without Lechasseur ever seeing him drink. Lechasseur set his own mug down and addressed him.

‘For a while,’ he said, not sure of what words were going to come, ‘I thought you were just a hoax. I didn’t think you were real at all.’

The Doctor brought his hands together, a hard solid clap. He was smiling slightly, fussily. The lips would almost have smirked if the eyes weren’t so pained. He’d shed coat, hat and muffler while washing and emerged in a soft black velvet smoking jacket and pristine white shirt. The collar was loose, exposing a narrow neck, a pronounced throat. His features were large but not thick, quite the opposite, very graceful and aquiline. His hairline was receding, revealing an expansive dome over a face given to sly frowns and flashes of confusion. He wasn’t a tall man and without the disguising bulk of his coat, he was gangly.

He wasn’t at all what Lechasseur had expected.

The wound of his face wasn’t visible, not like any other damaged man Lechasseur knew, but when he closed his eyes the scars he wore under his skin were clear. His wounds had burned, they were ancient smouldering things. Lechasseur couldn’t see much about this man’s life,

there was too much space and time inside his body. He saw the Doctor, both much older and much younger, handing a burning briar to the naked hairy heavy-browed cavewoman, a smug-worried smile on his mouth. His fingers were faintly scorched by the fire.

In the dark, the Doctor had lit his everlasting match and put it to a cigarette. He offered it to Lechasseur then drew it to his own mouth when it was refused.

‘Are you sure? Improves your singing voice. To tell the truth, the last time I smoked I was a whole other man. But right now I have a body with cravings.’ His eyes lost focus and his voice softened into a reverie. ‘I remember visiting the city by the bay, meeting a woman in black, a beautiful lady with no pity. Then someone shot me and that’s what made me the man I am today. I’m hazy on the details, Mr Lechasseur, my memories aren’t fixed in time in the same way as yours. Or may I call you Honoré?’

Lechasseur nodded before he realised what he was being asked.

He wasn’t tired but he ached. He had sat restlessly through the Doctor’s story of Mr Sun, impatience gathering like silt at the base of his spine, but the Doctor’s easy manner was relaxing even as it irritated him. The Doctor wasn’t like Walken or Mestizer. He didn’t need hypnosis. He was genuinely disarming. Besides...

There had been the hand thrust out in the alley, pulling him up when he was down. He owed this man some polite time for that, whoever he really was.

He coughed. ‘What I mean is, I’ve heard a lot about you. The Doctor is *this*. The Doctor does *that*. I’ve been told to stay away from the Doctor and I’ve been told I *am* the Doctor. You say you’re the Doctor, the real thing, but I’m not sure I should believe you.’

The Doctor tapped his head politely. ‘Anyone who claims to be me but isn’t is sick in here.’ His hand went into his watch pocket and pulled something out. The candlelight caught it and set it shining. ‘Recognise this?’ he asked.

Swinging hypnotically on its chain was the key the false Emily had given him.

‘Amber had that,’ Lechasseur said cautiously. ‘How did you get it?’

‘This is my copy. Amber – and now Mestizer I imagine – has the spare.’ The key went back in his pocket. ‘I’ll need that later tonight. Actually, I’ll let you inspect it if you’re still not sure. Didn’t Miranda tell you we’d be able to recognise each other with the key? Not that I ever needed help recognising you.’

‘You were spying on me.’

‘I’ve kept an eye on you whenever I’ve had the chance. I don’t get out of here a lot. Mestizer has been combing London for me over the past few weeks. She has agents everywhere, many of whom don’t even know who they’re working for. It’s a sinister way to operate. I’ve had to lie low.’

‘How did Miranda get the key?’ Lechasseur rapped.

‘I gave it to her. That reminds me –’ He rose suddenly and slipped through the side door, returning moments later with a revolver held gingerly in his fist. Lechasseur tensed, ready to throw himself to one side, but the Doctor let it go, expelling it from his hand as though it were diseased. It clattered down on the table at the base of the Ferris wheel, its barrel aimed towards a rank of tin soldiers.

‘Never let it be said that I don’t carry guns,’ the Doctor said, trying to sound breezy but with a genuine twinge of disgust on his face. ‘They lend authority to moral argument, in the right hands,’ he added but he didn’t sound convinced.

Lechasseur recognised it. ‘That’s Miranda’s.’

The Doctor nodded and resumed his seat opposite. With his hands free, his props all vanished, he suddenly seemed larger and more dangerous. He saw what Lechasseur was thinking and said: ‘That’s right, Honoré. I’m a Holy Terror. I am what fear itself is frightened of. I’m the sleep of reason. So I’m told, but I can’t keep up with what I am most of the time.’

He had big hands, not rough or powerful or crude or clumsy, just big.

‘I took the gun before the police arrived,’ he explained, and Lechasseur imagined those hands gently easing the revolver from Miranda’s mouth. ‘They have a record of your prints and that would only complicate matters.’

‘Miranda thought you would protect her,’ Lechasseur said quietly,

though still loud enough for the man opposite to hear. ‘She killed herself because you didn’t.’

The Doctor shook his head and couldn’t look him in the eye. ‘Is that what happened? She didn’t trust me enough. She should have let Abraxas take her prisoner. I could’ve got her out again. I’m good at that. Oh, oh dear,’ he finished, and it was a pathetic thing to hear coming from his lips.

‘It was you, wasn’t it?’ Lechasseur said, stabbing with the sound of his voice. ‘Miranda was working for you when she hired me.’

The Doctor nodded but said nothing.

‘So, I was hired to track down the Doctor by *the Doctor*?’

‘That’s right.’

‘Wasn’t there anything better you could spend your money on?’

‘I never meant for you to find me. The way you searched, what you turned up, that was the important thing. You were already involved. Mestizer’s agents had identified you. They were planning to bring you in.’

‘Why?’

‘They mistook you for me.’

Lechasseur gazed into the doleful white face of the Doctor, at the clean shaven chin and lip, at the slick thinning brown hair that had turned gold in the candlelight, at the deceptive heaviness of his face. The man was smoking again, the same cigarette returned to his mouth as though he’d had it simply slipped away in his pocket.

‘It’s like looking in a mirror,’ Lechasseur said.

‘I don’t mean physically,’ the Doctor replied, his head shivering from side to side. ‘You have an aura that resembles mine. Not to the trained eye, it wouldn’t have fooled Mestizer for a minute if she’d set eyes on you. But it was enough to trick Walken and Mestizer’s agents.’

Lechasseur reached lazily for the gun, pulling it off the table and into his lap. The blood rushed out of his hand as he touched it, numbing uselessly. The blood flowed back, pins-and-needles prickling inside his trigger finger.

The Doctor adjusted his poise in the chair, where he crouched like a Puck. Like Walken his body was a barely-sealed container, twitching

and ready for release, but while the conjuror was reining in a violent energy, the Doctor was holding back something else, something more abstract. Different shapes, different voices, different versions of himself. Lechasseur felt coolly sympathetic. He could understand that.

He had a sudden mental image of the Doctor, Mestizer and Walken as a family, husband, wife and damaged son. He saw them as if it were a photograph, sepia and faded so that the Doctor's face was now almost obscured. They were an unholy trinity. It was a persuasive image but he knew it wasn't true.

‘So what's so special about my aura?’

The Doctor fixed him with a devilish grin. ‘You have dreams where you can see the past and the future as if they were there in front of you. Sometimes you dip into your memories and change them. You have premonitions you know you can thwart. You're a time sensitive, Honoré. You have a unique perspective on the physics of the world. One day you'll look at a woman and think *she's going to die in 1926 and 1951* or at a man and see him in four dimensions, as a flesh-worm extending continuously from cradle to grave.’

‘And this is how you see things?’

He shook his head. ‘No, not me. I'm the opposite. I face time the other way. I see snapshots.’ He whistled suddenly and said, ‘Your aura is like mine, but inverted, so it honestly is like looking in a mirror. Half the time sensitives I've met are clinically insane, by the way.’

‘And the other half?’ His fizzing hand was on the gun now, warily.

‘They're bitter, cynical people. They look at the flesh-worm and think that's all there is. Then they start to think that it doesn't matter if the worm lives or dies. It's just a worm, like any other. It'll stop moving and decay and go into the ground. They can't let people into their lives, that's their trouble.’

‘Thanks for the warning,’ Lechasseur said. He was smiling faintly. *Time sensitive*, the idea rolled round pleasingly inside his skull. ‘I had a doctor once – another doctor – tell me that.’

‘Really? Then I'm your second opinion.’

Lechasseur nodded. He was sitting in the hospital again, in his smock and wheelchair. It was the moment when he'd been trundled out to meet

the head-shrinking Dr Paterson for the first time, his eyes full of sullen hostility, those he met full of genial intelligence. He couldn't breathe, the air was gone. He felt physically propelled back to the hospital, slipped back in time through his memories. Then he snapped back to the present, to the dead toyshop and the Doctor.

He coughed, the gun trembling faintly in his hand. The Doctor was watching him thoughtfully, waiting for him to speak, so he said: 'Who was Mestizer's agent, the one who identified me?'

'Does it matter?'

'It does matter,' Lechasseur said. 'You know I have this revolver pointing at your chest. I can put a bullet through your heart.'

The Doctor jiggled his head enthusiastically. 'Assuming that the gun's loaded. There's only two ways you can find out: take a chance and pull the trigger; or open the chamber and give me the opportunity to grab it from you. That's a horrible image, don't you think? Two grown men grappling for a gun in a toyshop.'

Lechasseur shrugged. 'Would it make a difference if I shot you dead now? You've caused enough trouble. Your body might never be discovered. The candles would burn out – I don't think they're everlasting – and I'd leave you dead in the dark.'

The Doctor climbed down from his chair and turned away, presenting his back as a big blank target. 'You see what I mean about *bitter* and *cynical*. You won't shoot me, though I know you can. I think you have a sense of natural justice. I saw that when you left Mrs Beardsley's. You came out of that door with such a look on your face. *Brute empathy*, that's what they call it. I've never seen such compassion.'

As the Doctor spoke, Lechasseur span open the barrel of the revolver and found a bullet tucked into each of the six chambers. He pushed it closed then slid the gun back onto the table. He didn't make a sound but the Doctor's shoulders sagged.

'How about we just pretend I'm pointing a gun at you?'

The Doctor turned, revealing a hard humourless smile. He perched back on his chair, hunched still and squinting like a bony-limbed gargoyle. 'Miranda Sessions was Mestizer's spy. She mistook you for me. Then – after she'd identified you to Mestizer – she had a change of

heart. That was when I went to her with my plan. You were already involved, you had to be, and I wanted to set you on the offensive. And it's worked. You confused Mestizer's agents and gave me cover to move around freely. You distracted Walken and you drew Mestizer out into the open early. She gave away her entire hand tonight. Poor Miranda.'

'And you suggested she use the name Emily Blandish?'

'Just another clue to point you in the right direction.'

'So'— he shrugged —you just wanted me to stir up trouble? I was a patsy?'

The Doctor shook his head. 'All of what you did has helped me, a lot, and I am grateful but I've had something else in mind for you from the start.'

'Yeah?'

'You're a smart man,' he said. 'You'll work it out.'

Lechasseur raised a pistol shaped of his fingers and shot the Doctor through the head. 'Bang.' He laughed then, a laugh that he couldn't help, that poured out of him.

'Good,' the Doctor purred, leaning forward, his chin on his hands, good.'

Lechasseur turned his pistol back into a hand. 'So what is this all about?'

'It's simple really. I travel. A few weeks ago I was attacked as I arrived in the East End. Something of mine was stolen by Abraxas, who is in the employ of Mestizer and I have a history with her that goes back a long way. Tonight I'm going to go to her, now that she's vulnerable. I'll try to get my property back.'

'And what's going to happen?'

'Oh, I can think of ninety-nine different outcomes but only two are likely. She kills me or I kill her. When I say I'd kill her I mean with great reluctance and only by allowing her to stumble into her own traps, which is exactly what she says about me. Abraxas will probably turn against her — he has his price, like all mercenaries — that's the way these things tend to go. There'll be a few loose ends, of course.'

Lechasseur ran a hand through his hair and asked: 'It's the blue box, isn't it? The cabinet of light?'

‘That’s right.’

‘Does it belong to you?’

‘Yes.’ He hummed suddenly. ‘No. No, in the sense that I stole her but that was a long time ago and we’ve become inseparable. For all I know, she didn’t belong to the person I stole her from in the first place. I am the best of all thieves. And sometimes... Sometimes I think that I belong to her, that she stole me, it makes some kind of sense.’

Lechasseur smiled wryly but it was time to steer the mock interrogation back to more concrete matters.

‘What about Walken? How is he involved?’

‘He’s a sideshow – he was, I should say. He’s the home team and, once he learned what she was up to, he thought he could take on Mestizer. I’m not sure quite what he was hoping to achieve in the long run. Hubris, a dictionary definition case.’ He leaned forward and buried his pensive face in the steeple of his hands.

‘He wanted to become you,’ Lechasseur said. ‘He told me. He thought that if he had your cabinet he would turn into the Doctor. As you say, *sick in the head*.’

‘I can understand that,’ the Doctor murmured from behind his hands, ‘but I play me better than anyone.’

‘What about the girl in pink pyjamas? The real Emily?’

‘She was there when I was attacked. She helped me get away but lost her memory. You could call her a witness, if you liked. She’s got all that locked up inside her now. Sometimes I hate myself.’

‘So, she was just someone in the wrong place at the wrong time?’

‘A witness,’ the Doctor insisted. He was pulling a sour face, staring at his hands as if they weren’t truly his. Again, Lechasseur saw his wounds. Like stigmata, they wept silently. He had never seen a flesh-worm, not as the Doctor described, but he suddenly saw the man in front of him as a patchwork of alien flesh, snapped apart and stitched back into place. Each patch had its own horrors and its own delights. It wouldn’t be hard to tap into one of those wounds, sample some of the memory leaking from him. He reached out –

*vermilion sands a grey tower toppling a girl who is yet to be born alien
birdsong*

– and found he was reaching physically, overstretched. He was intoxicated on the heady images, the Doctor was a fresh fountain of time and memory. He felt giddy. He couldn't help himself. He stumbled out of the chair and fell head-first against the Doctor before falling backwards. The Doctor grabbed for him but gravity was faster and he hit the floor.

It was only a second or two before he recovered his senses. He was on his back, his breathing was hard and his hands were clenched into defensive fists. The Doctor was leaning over him and he wasn't a trickster, he wasn't the Devil, he wasn't a hobgoblin. He was a real, flesh-and-blood man with a soft but genuine concern in his sad old eyes.

But he was a man pregnant with worlds.

'The tea wasn't that bad?' he asked.

'You are Mr Sun,' Lechasseur whispered, but the Doctor just shook his head. He offered his hand but Lechasseur kept his fists bunched and smiled it away.

'I have to go,' the Doctor said and stepped out of Lechasseur's line of sight. When he returned, Lechasseur was back on his feet. The Doctor had collected his hat and coat, they seemed to be all he needed, all that he took with him to define himself. He moved behind the Ferris wheel, so that the slow rotating shadows hid his face.

'If you see anything here you like, feel free to take it,' the Doctor said, his voice flattened out. The playful notes had gone. 'One way or another, I won't be back.'

'I should come with you,' Lechasseur said, but the Doctor waved him away.

'I want you to stay in London.' He looked away pensively, then said: 'Here's something for you to think about. You love this city, I've been watching you, I can tell. You probably weren't here in the Blitz, when all these broken buildings blossomed overnight. The nights have changed since the end of the war. It's a real quality, I don't simply mean the absence of falling bombs. Think about that. Work out what's changed.'

'Goodbye, Honoré.' He stepped away from the Ferris wheel and was gone.

Lechasseur stood alone while the candles burned down around him. The animating spirit of the room had left with the Doctor. The wheel turned but the toys were just unhaunted old junk, pathetic rather than sinister.

Lechasseur waited for five minutes after the Doctor had gone then he opened his clenched right fist and stared down at the chained key on his palm, the cabinet key that he'd slipped out of the Doctor's pocket as he fell. He reached for the revolver on the table and weighed it in his hand until he knew the shape of it.

'Doctor,' he whispered, a promise, pressing the brutal metal barrel against his skin, 'you're not getting away that easily. I want to know how this ends.'

He left Mr Sun's toyshop in darkness and set off north, on the trail of the Doctor.

7: THE NIGHT OF THE HUNTER



ORB WAS BRIGHT THAT NIGHT, THERE WAS NO FOG AND HER MOONLIGHT TURNED THE world silver. She had a crisp white face, part-shadowed as if she were distracted away from the Earth. The dark whorls on her surface, which the hunter knew to be thirsty seas of dust, formed a face.

With a kick and a silent breathless whoop, Lechasseur dropped from his precarious foothold on the wall and into the dense bushes below. He kept the revolver clutched to his chest. Branches slashed at him but they softened the fall. He rolled and flattened himself face down on the grey-white earth, the revolver probing the darkness ahead of him. He was in his element.

There had been a moment of doubt, as he stepped out into thin air, a moment when he asked himself: *why am I doing this?* He was a rational man and wasn't entirely persuaded by his own answers.

I don't trust the Doctor.

I think the Doctor needs my help.

I want to see how this ends.

The Doctor was long gone once he'd found his way out of the toyshop. He hadn't come back for his stolen key, so Lechasseur assumed that he either hadn't noticed or that Mestizer's goons had caught up with him before he had a chance to turn back. There was a third possibility – the Doctor had meant him to take the key, but he dismissed that thought. It left too many variables, too much to chance, even for someone as opaque as the Doctor.

The Doctor had been trying to sideline him. He had drawn Lechasseur into his arcane world, maybe not willingly, but now he wanted to shut him back out. The key was a solid connection to the Doctor and while he had it there was always a way in. It was Lechasseur's lifeline back into the other world. He wore it round his neck, under his shirt, against his skin where it felt warm and icy simultaneously. Once he came off the wall he checked it hadn't come loose.

The fire at the *Inferno* was fierce red but under control. It had spread to the adjacent buildings and firemen were fighting to contain it. Their faces were coated with ash and sweat, they faded in and out of the smoke and steam like sinewy ghosts. The Blitz must have been like this... No, maybe not. The heat of the flames was real, as were the cries of the men as they worked to turn back the flames, but this fire was isolated. The skies were empty and unthreatening. Lechasseur wondered whether that was the point of the Doctor's riddle, but his gut said *no*.

When he'd adopted London he'd been warned that it was liable to burn down from time to time.

The fire had gutted most of the cars at the back of the club and some had popped open like fireworks as the heat reached their petrol tanks, but a couple were still intact. Lechasseur found a sporty yellow number – its owner was dead and burning already in the *Inferno* – and drove it away while the police were distracted by the fire. It was a question of touching the right wires together and he saw them instinctively. He remembered the route from his last visit but even so it took an hour for him to reach Mestizer's house.

The wall wasn't such a barrier, especially with the car parked up against it, the roof offering a useful step up. He hadn't seen signs of any other intruder-proofing at the house last time, except for the men with guns and he could deal with them. Mestizer had either captured the Doctor or she hadn't and either way she would be distracted. The big problem he reckoned on was the Big Man. Abraxas was bullet-proof, though at least there was only one of him.

He hoped there was only one of him.

Why am I doing this?

His skin shivered with potential. He felt awake for the first time, fully

conscious of the world around. The Doctor had done that to him. *Time sensitive*. The words didn't sound much, they weren't any kind of explanation, but they didn't have to be. He perceived everything round him sharper and brighter than he had done before. The whole world was interconnected and spread about him. Even if he couldn't see or taste or touch everything it didn't matter, he still saw the threads that bound the world together. Even the moon looked down on only half the world each night.

Lechasseur was a rational man. The Doctor and Mestizer were not rational people, though Walken might have been in his own cracked way, under his disguise. He was here, Lechasseur decided grudgingly, because a rational man should be present at the end to witness it and make sure it made sense.

I can see a spider patient in her shiny silver web. I can see the bushes sway in the wind around me and before me I can hear the huge thick trees slow-breathing oxygen out into the cold air. There are insects on the earth beneath my feet and there are rabbits huddling in the burrows beneath the earth. There are germs on everything, whole teeming colonies of invisible life. There's a grass snake writhing towards me but I'll be gone by the time it's here. I'm immersed in life. There's my heart pumping a shade too fast under my ribs and I calm it down. There's the moon overhead and millions Of miles away, so distant that I'll never touch her skin or walk on her surface, and far beyond her there are the stars.

He rose in a crouch and ran for the trees. He half-ran stealthily with the revolver held low and steady in his left hand, his shoes hardly touching the ground. He wouldn't break a twig, if he could help it. When he hit the trees branches whipped at him, but he leapt and ducked and didn't break the rhythm of his movement. The trees crowded out the sky, their huge deformed hands reaching to block out the moon. The gun shimmered again in his hand – he'd squeeze the trigger three times in the coming minutes, he *knew* it. The shadows parted, the bright sky opened, the trees broke.

There was a stream beyond the trees and beyond that there was a clean neat lawn with a faint downhill incline, at least two minutes' worth of

run to the conservatory door, the easiest way inside. He held back at the edge of the trees, scanning the grounds for movement and seeing none, but failing to capture the whole outline of the house with his eyes.

The silhouette bled into the night sky around it. The moonlight made the grass silver but the house was impenetrably black.

Staying low and praying to all the gods-that-never-existed that no one was watching from the invisible windows, the hunter set out in a brisk dash across the lawn. He ran hard, half-expecting the grass blades to grow mouths and scream as he crushed them, *anything* to alert Mestizer to his presence, but the lawn stayed silent. If anyone saw his approach they didn't raise the alarm, they stood at their window and did nothing.

He got a stitch then lost it again.

He no longer noticed the cold.

The gun was weightless in his hand. He brought it up to his chest as he reached the conservatory. The door was unlocked and opened outwards. He went inside, into the steaming heat.

Mestizer's thugs were at the banks of the artificial pool but they weren't waiting for him. They were the two he'd met earlier, the fat one and the thin one, and they were too busy amusing themselves to notice Lechasseur approach. They had a long bundle, wrapped up in a black sack. The fat man was up to his waist in the water and held one end of the bundle under the surface, a swollen Baptist priest pushing it down with his two firm effortless hands. The bundle looked shapeless and sodden in the water but enough of it was stretched out on the shore for the second thug to kick at and stomp on. They were a real contrast, the fat man with his still and methodical sadism and the thin one full of twitchy violence.

The fat man pulled the tapered end of the sack out of the water for a moment's respite and it began to cough. It had a human head, revealed through the sodden outline of the sack. Lechasseur realised there was someone in there, barely alive, but then the thug pushed the head back below the waterline to sink it.

Lechasseur stepped forward with his stolen revolver raised. He was queasily certain about the sack and its contents. He knew who it was they were drowning.

‘Emily,’ he said, helplessly.

Something the Doctor had said popped into his head, but it was the wrong time and the distraction was nearly fatal. The thin goon whirled, quicker than Lechasseur expected, slipping his own gun round to bear on the new target quickly and easily. Ex-British military, probably a special service, better-trained and more prepared to kill than a typical American infantryman. Lechasseur knew he was dead.

The thin man snarl-grinned and spat an insult at his enemy, wasting his precious advantage. Lechasseur made a neat hole in his chest then a ragged one in his face. The thug fell backwards leaving a smear of blood on the air. Lechasseur turned to the other man, who seemed to be obsessed with his drowning; he barely registered Lechasseur or the gun. He pressed the hooded head down as far under the water as he could manage. His hands devoted themselves to the head, squeezing and smashing. A haze of pink surrounded the sack, blood from too many wounds.

Lechasseur could not risk another shot for fear of hitting the sack. So he leapt on the thug, tried to knock him back, but the man pushed him away, laughing. He had a child’s snide laugh. His hands were empty now and he turned them towards his attacker. The bundle twitched, bloodied, half floating on the surface and forgotten.

Lechasseur would always find it hard to describe what he felt in those next few seconds. In later life, he would only ever tell one other human being what he did to kill the fat man and his explanations were expressed in flattened listless words. The secret meaning of the fight he kept to himself.

It was an uneven struggle. The fat man was a mountain of flesh but it was all muscle, he was another old soldier. They struggled in the waist-deep water, which dragged Lechasseur back while the fat man parted it smoothly. He giggled in his squeaky boy’s voice as he drove his fists at Lechasseur, but nothing else about him was crude. Lechasseur let himself be pounded, he had no choice.

Then he did.

He felt the first line of blood run down his face. He closed his eyes and saw where the next blow would fall. He twisted away from it and his

opponent shuddered in the water. Lechasseur spun with all his weight and this time the pressure of the water lent force to his blow. He cut the fat man's legs out from under him and the whale bulk slipped down beneath the surface, roaring.

There will be a time when the Earth is drowned and humanity will be ruled by men like these, bloated supermen who've learned to breathe underwater.

The thug pulled Lechasseur down with him. He was still giggling under the surface, his face fully visible through the clear fluid, his fleshy chin breaking the surface. His hands clawed at Lechasseur's skin and hair, to pull him down where he couldn't breathe.

Lechasseur's revolver was trained at him, jabbing his exposed face. Lechasseur touched the trigger, felt the kick along his arm and saw the thug's head explode. A red mushroom cloud billowed in the pool from the stump of the neck, the body began its slow fall to the bottom.

Lechasseur took the bagged human bundle from the pool and pulled himself out onto the dry ground. The body was still shuddering faintly and he stripped back the sack to reveal a shattered face.

Sometimes I see what's real. Sometimes I just see my own fears.

It wasn't the girl in pink pyjamas. It was Walken.

The conjuror had lost his poise in the water and the violence that once rippled out of him was gone. His hair was dark and slicked across his face and his skin had turned pale white and bloated. He wasn't quite dead, his lips still sucked air and his eyes were open and flicking, but they were fading. He reached out, a sodden paw pushed against Lechasseur's cheek.

'Doctor,' he said, pushing the word out of his lungs. 'You saved me.'

Lechasseur looked down on him, saying nothing but letting the man's palm inspect his face. It was something like a last request.

'You're already dead,' he said.

Walken rippled, his skin turning golden and thin under the hothouse lights.

'I can still... *regenerate*. She laughed at me... when I said... that's what I wanted...' He tried to sit and choked and coughed up water and blood. There was some of the old brittle energy in him, he smiled showing

sharp teeth. 'It's the end...' That was too much for him and he lay flat on his back, glistening with water and mortality.

'I always wanted...' The last thing he said that Lechasseur heard, 'to be saved by... you... Doctor.'

Walken's hand slipped down on the floor at his side and lay still. Lechasseur thought that was it, he was gone. Walken's body trembled but there was no life in it. The exposed face and hands took on an unearthly glow but Lechasseur had seen that before and knew it was the phosphorescent glimmer of the fat in his flesh.

The other two men, the two he'd killed, were just dead.

He stepped away from the corpses and the pool and pushed into the interior of the conservatory, towards the house itself. He was soaked up to the ribs and the steaming humidity of the hothouse made him damp and sticky. It suddenly became harder to move stealthily and comfortably. His shoes squelched with every step and he left a trail of dirty water and earth behind him. He'd given away half his bullets. His break-in was about to become a lot harder and more dangerous.

He was surprised by how easy it was.

The door at the back of the conservatory led into a short narrow tiled passage. It was cooler but there was a refreshing blast of warm air as he stepped through that seemed to dry him. The damp weight in his clothes evaporated, the trail dried up behind him, he began to move easily again. He couldn't explain it, not at first and never rationally, but...

...but as he penetrated further into the house he became convinced that he wasn't just moving through space but also through time. Mestizer's house, with its baffling decor and many rooms, felt more like a maze than a home. The floor had a downward slope and without being able to help himself, he knew that every step was taking him towards the centre and the bottom of the labyrinth. He was supposed to be a time sensitive but he picked up nothing from his surroundings. The key dragged heavily round his neck. When it moved it swung like the pendulum of a clock. When it touched his skin it itched. He didn't scratch but he imagined it worming into his chest like a parasite. It was leading him, he knew, towards the low point of the house and the dark heart of the past.

Perhaps that had dried him off? Maybe each step toward the centre had

rolled back time enough so that he was dry again. It was an imperfect theory – when he checked his revolver there were still three empty chambers and he knew that the three men he'd left in the conservatory were irrevocably dead.

The walls were pocked with geometric shapes for most of the way. They weren't the lurid occult symbols he'd seen on the walls of the *Inferno* club. They were simple universal symbols, too obvious to have any meaning for him. The walls were sometimes black, sometimes white, sometimes grey, but there was no colour in them. His memories were often monochrome, so it came as a natural conclusion that he was walking into the past.

The house was inhabited but all he saw of the occupants at first were huge angular shadows looming on the walls of distant corridors. He ran after them but never caught sight of their owners. He heard their voices, muttering like sleepwalkers, from rooms on the far side of the wall, but he'd never find a door. He caught sight of a group of huddled figures, moving faintly at the end of a corridor. They ignored him. He thought of grabbing the nearest and asking directions but he held back, afraid that he'd reach for them and his hand would just pass through thin air.

The first truly solid living creatures he found were monsters.

He walked into a room and found them dressing. There were three of them, each one different, each was being helped into patterned yellow robes with high collars and hoods. The closest to the door was about seven foot tall and spindly with a narrow lizard head on a high tapering neck. Its body was squat and solid. It turned and regarded Lechasseur through yellow cat-like eyes. Next to that, but further back in the red-tinted gloom was something more human and he felt this one was male. It had a hard obsidian skin, truly and deeply black, but it paid the newcomer no attention as it struggled with its robe. It had red eyes smouldering like coals in the hollows of its face. The third, and hardest to make out, made a little ululating shriek and began to harangue him in a sweet voice full of clicks and hums. She had a pasty face with a narrow trunk and she pulled on her robe to cover her body.

The gun swung unthreatening in his left hand. Lechasseur tapped his temple and said: 'I beg your pardon.' He had a smile on his lips when he

walked out. He felt excited and oddly calm. He'd recognised the monsters' dressers, they were all waitresses from the *Inferno*, Mestizer's hijacked hypnotised army.

Soon after that, he found the Doctor.

One of the passageways opened onto a metal gantry over a well shaft that sank another two storeys below him and rose up to a faraway ceiling. He craned over the edge of the gantry and saw an intense ritual of activity beneath his feet. The floor of the shaft was packed with machinery, not big industrial engines but compact pillars, consoles and nodules that throbbed with light and heat and energy. They were strung together with cables into one vast complex device that covered the floor and climbed the walls. Each part of the machine whistled and winked light, playing its part in the unfathomable whole. Indistinct human figures with shaved heads and drab coveralls moved among it, like little cogs, or insects caught in the mechanism.

No, not insects. The way they move reminds me of Abraxas.

There was another gantry across the well on the next level down, and the Doctor was standing there. He was right beneath Lechasseur's feet, leaning on the rail with one hand extended holding – a flower? – Lechasseur couldn't see clearly. Mestizer stood next to him. Their poise was easy, they were both relaxed, though Lechasseur could tell nothing more from the tops of their heads.

'This is a very impressive set-up you've got here,' the Doctor said.

Mestizer didn't reply in a normal voice, she sang. She had a high strong voice but the words she came out with were a string of gibberish. The Doctor turned to her and showed her his hands and said something Lechasseur couldn't hear, but the woman in black just kept singing. There was a third person on the gantry, Lechasseur couldn't see properly. Abraxas? He leaned forward, risking them spotting him. No, it was too small for Abraxas. He recognised the outfit before the head of hair – it was Amber. She had her arms folded over her handbag, where she'd kept her gun.

He couldn't see if the Doctor was a prisoner or if he was in charge of the situation.

The Doctor could take care of himself for now. Lechasseur wanted a

closer look at the machine, and a better shot at Mestizer.

‘What do you hope to achieve with all this?’ The Doctor’s voice, contemptuous. ‘Oh, *very* original. Where is he, by the way? You know, the Big Man. No, I can’t imagine he’d be trotting at your heels all the time.’

Amber stepped forward to slap him but Lechasseur didn’t see the rest, already stealing across the gantry to the far side. Then he was through into another corridor and out of sight of the Doctor and his enemy, though Mestizer’s atonal banshee-song chased him down the passageway and wouldn’t shift from his head.

He took a few more turns downwards to what he hoped would be the working floor of the machine, but the maze twisted deceptively and he found himself somewhere else altogether. It was a low circular antechamber, with passages spoking out from it in all directions. He had a curious sense that this unremarkable room was the low, dead centre of the house. The key scratched against his chest, scrabbling to get loose of the chain. He clapped his hand over it.

In the middle of the room was a tall blue cabinet, property – he guessed – of the Doctor. It was the box that Abraxas had stolen for Mestizer, the box that Walken had coveted and died for, the box that Emily Blandish had witnessed before it wiped her mind clean. He’d seen them on street corners, there was one a minute’s walk from his apartment, though he’d never paid it any attention.

POLICE, it said, white letters stencilled above the door, PUBLIC CALL BOX.

Lechasseur had always distrusted the things. There never seemed to be one around when you really needed one. This was the most incongruous he’d ever seen, sitting in the middle of the monochrome maze. It was a poor prize to find at the end of the rainbow.

There was a set of narrow dusted-over windows in each door but they were dark, the box was lightless and lifeless.

He pushed at the door. It was locked. He unslung the key from round his neck and slipped it into the lock. It was a whim, it didn’t look like they were compatible, but it slid inside easily and turned. He heard tumblers clicking distantly and the door opened a fraction, revealing a sliver of dark. Lechasseur stepped back and walked in a circle round it,

hoping to find something unusual. Nothing. It was very disappointing.

‘Step away from the police box.’

He heard Amber cock her small pistol. She was behind him aiming it at the back of his head, probably only three feet away. She’d shoot him before he could make a move. He backed away slowly and watched her as she hove round between him and the open door.

‘It’s okay,’ he told her, ‘I wasn’t planning to steal it. I’m about the only one who doesn’t want to, I bet.’ But her eyes were as shallow as he remembered and she didn’t laugh.

‘You don’t even know what it is,’ she droned. She had Mestizer’s voice. ‘You’ve been making this up as you go along, hanging onto the Doctor’s coat-tails and not looking where he’s going. He’s all appetite. He thinks he flits through the world leaving no waste and no tracks behind him, but he does. You’re stepping in them.’

Lechasseur shrugged. He could have grabbed the gun then but he found he couldn’t move. His eyes had gone to the part-open door, to the very base of it where the darkness was suddenly broken by a thin line of golden light.

‘So, now what?’ he asked.

The explosion came from nearby and it jolted through the room, the shock knocking Amber down. Lechasseur grabbed the police box, held fast, and watched the interior light creep up the height of the door. It was a blinding glow, spilling out of the narrow open line of the cabinet. He flung his arm over his eyes and staggered back.

‘What have you done?’ Amber was howling, staring into the light from where she’d fallen. ‘What have you done?!’

As Lechasseur stumbled back he heard the light, the magnesium hiss of it as it flared up brighter from the door. He risked a glance and saw the police box enveloped in an egg of annihilating whiteness. The halo trembled, ready for another burst, another expansion. It coughed, he fell back through the doorway and watched the light blossom out to fill the entire chamber. He blinked and saw POLICE PUBLIC CALL BOX printed black under his lids.

The box wasn’t a box, he could see that, even as its silhouette faded from his retina. The box was a disguise for the light. This was its true

form. It had swallowed Amber. He could see her shadow rising but she was stripped down to a narrow black blur writhing in the glow. If she was making a sound he couldn't hear it, the speed of light outstripped her voice.

The lightline crept forward. He turned and ran before it could absorb him. There were more blasts, close by and jolting, but he kept his footing. He wasn't sure if he'd set off the blasts by opening the box, or if this was something clever the Doctor had done to Mestizer's machines. Whatever, it felt like an ending, Mestizer's plans vanishing in a show of sound and fury. His path took him onto the machine floor and the light followed him, eating through the walls. Around him tall metal cones crumbled into nothing as it advanced and the bald slaves, shackled to the machine by the cords of their eyes, sat stoically at their consoles as the light rolled over them and swallowed them whole. It was a voracious thing.

He ran, he ran, he ran. He pelted down the corridors hoping instinct was taking him in the right direction. Pandemonium erupted in the passages around him as all the occupants of the house struggled to make their getaway. No one and no thing tried to stop him or fight him on the way out. He lost the gun, risking a glance back so that he could toss it into the light. Then he turned and ran faster, the light ate the revolver and didn't stop.

He burst out into the conservatory and made for the darkness outside, but even so the light followed him. He ran for the trees, making one long breathless dash of the lawn. Only when he'd reached the trees' sanctuary did he look back and see that the light was no longer close behind him. It was streaming out of every hole in the house wall, every door and every window and every crack it could find in the façade, but it had stopped its relentless forward roll.

The light flared into a pillar stretching towards the moon. The crazed outline of the house flickered colourfully in the heart of it, then vanished, and finally the light was satiated. The pillar collapsed in on itself, folding down into a single point in a matter of seconds before winking out. Lechasseur coughed cold bloody air out of his lungs then sank down by the trees. He stared out at the stark, blackened empty lawn

and shook with a moment's laughter. The house was gone, taking everything that had been inside with it. Even the corpses of the men he'd killed were gone, though their deaths weren't washed away.

The Doctor was gone, and Mestizer.

He'd seen them once, just for one weary moment when he'd stopped and turned back to face down the light. He had a clear view straight into the heart of brightness, right back to the police box door. He'd seen them there by the box, silhouetted but not completely swallowed by the glare around them. They had been locked together, struggling he thought, or dancing. He watched them wheel round one another, their limbs interwoven, their hands pushing and pulling at their opponent's body. The Doctor's hat had been knocked off and went tumbling into oblivion. Mestizer's hair streamed round her crown. They moved silently in front of the lightgiving box.

Lechasseur hadn't looked back after that. He wondered which of the two, if either, had won the fight.

Does it matter? It's over.

He slumped by the trees for half an hour, holding his head in his hands and laughing to himself. The house was gone. How could a house just vanish like that? It didn't seem possible. He was no longer hurting, the pain had washed away in the darkness, but there was a lingering ache in his limbs. He could fall asleep right here, right now, and not wake up until this time next week. He felt his eyes flutter shut.

The Doctor said: 'There'll be a few loose ends, of course.'

And the Doctor said: 'You're a smart man. You'll work it out.'

And Lechasseur stepped forward, with his revolver raised, and said: 'Emily.'

Lechasseur was awake, back on his feet, running for the wall, running for the car, running harder than he had ever done before. The light was gone and there was only darkness at his back.

8: WITNESS



I AM A CYPHER, CLEAN AND BLANK, TABULA RASA.

Spitalfields' scarred white church has a blasphemous new gargoyle. It hunches on a narrow perch, casting its gaze left to right across the horizon. Its leathery snout twitches, teasing out a single human scent from a city of teeming millions. It finds a trace, quicksilver thoughts echo in the bowl of its skull. It swings off its perch and leaps. It remembers being a man, and as it bounds from rooftop to rooftop, it thrills with boyish pleasure.

The woman on the railway tracks, so quirky-faced and fresh you might mistake her for a girl. The skies drizzle on her, her stolen coat whips in the wind and she's got nothing warm under that. She has hair full of rainwater and a head full of misery. She's just learned who she once was. She keeps her name stuck in her throat though for the past week she's wanted nothing more than to bellow it at the top of her voice and tell the world who she is.

The fixer hunches forward in the front seat of his borrowed car, hurrying to meet an urgent appointment. He's too far off, he might as well be on the moon for all the good he could do. He bangs on the stolen steering wheel but that doesn't make it go any faster. He knows, at last, exactly what the Doctor hired him to do. Spread before him London is sparkling, a city that never sleeps with an electric nimbus lighting the sky.

He's guessed the answer to the Doctor's riddle, the difference between

the city at war and at peace. It was blacked out during the Blitz. Tonight, London is full of light.

More than once, the girl in pink pyjamas had been tempted to stand outside the guest house and scream her name at passers-by. She'd creep down the stairs – quietly so as not to disturb Mrs Beardsley – and crouch by the front door building up the courage to reach for the latch and pull it open. She warmed up slowly like a television set – Mrs Beardsley was thinking about getting one in time for the next Olympics, now she could afford it – and one day maybe she'd warm up enough to step outside and shout 'I'm Emily Blandish! *I'm* Emily Blandish!' at the world.

She doubted the world would care. It didn't mean anything, the name. It didn't connect to anything in her head. She'd lied about some of the things she could remember. There were glimpses in her mind from the time before the crowd had found her at the market, from after the moment when the light had welled up to obliterate all that she'd ever been. She was running, she remembered that clearly, pulled through the alleys of East London by the man in black. Behind them beat the batwings of their pursuers. Her companion threw compulsive glances over his shoulder. 'They're gaining!' he shouted.

She remembered his face but didn't know his name. He looked half-wise and full of quiet desperation. When she couldn't run any more, he pulled her aside and told her they would have to split up. 'It's me they want,' he said. 'They'll let you go. They won't even notice you.'

His eyes were frosted and unconvinced. He looked afraid but she trusted him. 'Will I see you again?' she asked.

Her friend nodded. 'At least twice.' Then he was gone.

She hadn't told anyone about that. She hadn't even told Lechasseur, the miraculous black man who'd come to restore her name. She hoped he would return but he never had, frightened away by her landlady's brother. The evening after his visit, Mrs Beardsley had sat her down and made her repeat lies about Lechasseur – again and again under threat of being abandoned on the street – until she almost believed what she was saying. Fewer people were coming to the house to see the celebrity, the stream of visitors was drying up.

Mrs Beardsley had a face like a stone toad ornament and she could probably read minds. She'd taken to locking the front door and hiding the key. The customs of these people were unfathomable.

That morning another man had come to visit Emily and brought flowers. He'd said she was pretty and asked to take photographs. Then he became aggressive and unpleasant so she threw the flowers in his face and pushed him out of her door. There was no lock but she pushed the chair under it and sat quivering on the bed while her visitor – then Mrs Beardsley herself – pounded outside and called her names. The visitor had dropped his camera – she opened it and pulled out the film, trying to see her face frozen in the grey perforated strip.

That evening Mrs Beardsley drew an ice cold bath for her and sluiced her hair with bitter freezing jugfuls when she complained. The cold stung, worse than the soap, but it made her bolder. She fixed her landlady with a serious glare and asked whether it was true what Lechasseur had said about newspaper money. Mrs Beardsley had taken her dirty neck and pushed her down under the water to drown her for a minute.

She opened her mouth and swallowed dirty water. There was nothing in her lungs and she wasn't in the bath but the river, pulled down into the lower depths of the Thames. Londoners would find her corpse years later, her flesh eroded away but her hair rippling towards the bright surface like pond weed. Then the airless hallucination got stranger, she was a man being held down by his enemies. Lechasseur appeared, a gun in his hand, ready to pull her out and save her.

That was just a dream. Mrs Beardsley lifted her out leaving her blinded and choking. There was Thames scum floating on the chill surface of the water. The bathroom was unheated and Mrs Beardsley left her alone with a scrappy grey towel to dry herself, while she went down to listen to the wireless. The girl dried herself and scrabbled down to sit by the fire but her landlady had blocked the sitting room door with an armchair and the rest of the house was cold as the night.

She found her pink pyjamas and slipped them back on. While the radio voice hissed and barked its secret instructions to her landlady, she stole into the understair cupboard and took a coat and a pair of shoes, both too

big for her. The strength she'd honed inside herself to call out her name now sharpened – deepened – into a desire for escape. She needed to break out of the house, burst through the prison walls and run into the night. The front door was locked but the back wasn't, why should it be? It opened onto a garden scrub and a low wood fence, beyond which the trains would rattle on their way to the docks.

Lechasseur had told her to get out along the rails. He hadn't realised, not then, quite what she needed to escape from. The fence was runged like a ladder, she clambered over it in her outsize shoes and skidded down the bank on the other side. The lines were dark in both directions – she'd hear and see the trains as they rolled by and didn't feel she was in any danger. Behind her the cosy little guest house was darkened, no light escaping from its windows and Mrs Beardsley would be listening to her sainted Light Programme for the rest of the evening. So – which way now?

Emily Blandish walked south towards the Thames.

Emily Blandish – it didn't mean anything to her. She could shout it all she liked but it wasn't going to bring her self back. The real Emily lurked under the surface, itchy but unreachable. She felt blank and unknowable. Why did she have to be anyone? *Emily Blandish* was just an easier sound on the tongue than *the girl in pink pyjamas*. Ahead of her, the brown metal tracks and slats were fused into the landscape, into the cut-away earth. Signals glinted in the dark but there were no lights on the track ahead and no trains looming out to run her down. She moved cautiously down the sleepers, brushing against the weeds and mudbanks that clustered by the rail. The clouds gathered and opened within a minute of her escape from the house and they turned the earth into a thick black sludge that got into her shoes until, finally, she had to kick them off and go on barefoot.

Honestly, Mrs Beardsley said, you'll catch your death.

She'd left her scrapbook behind, her own little history of the last few weeks. As the rain drove harder she considered turning round and going back for it, but that wouldn't be right. It was a catalogue of the life she'd left behind. There was so much outside the house to explore, she would never go back, she would lose herself in London.

There was a man waiting further down the track. The storm blasted around him but he wore a heavy coat, probably a signalman kitted out for the weather. At first she thought he was a soldier, still stranded waiting for the train to take him to war, but she shook that thought out of her head. It reminded her too much of her old landlady's brother, still brimming over with unspent violence. The figure turned and gave her a slow wave. He had a thick brown trunk of an arm. He was a tall man and there was a great bulk under his coat.

Emily span on her heels and ran back up the track, hard as she could. Her feet squelched and slipped in the mud. Behind her, she heard the Big Man coming, his legs taking long leisurely strides toward her. His coat flapped in the breeze, the beat of batwings. He caught up in seconds and leapt at her with a joyous whoop resonating from the buzzing radio of his throat.

She threw herself down in the mud and rolled out of the way. The Big Man overshot her, she saw him dart overhead in a graceful swing that belied his hugeness. She caught a glimpse of a compact head, round and grooved like a football. He splashed down in the mud beside her and when she looked up at him she saw goggle-gasmask eyes and a rubbery insect-mandible nose swinging to face her.

She didn't scream. It occurred to her that she'd seen and forgotten stranger things.

'Who are you?' (Her voice was trembling, *stop shaking!*) 'What do you want?'

– *I am Abraxas* –

– *I have come to cut open your skull and spew acid on your brains* –

His hands moved for her – he stank of oil and musty dinosaur hide – but she rolled out of the way, back onto her feet and across the tracks. They were humming with the song of an oncoming engine – why now? Of all times, why now?! She ran on. This Abraxas, whatever it was, meant to kill her anyway. At least being struck by a train would be impersonal and ordinary. And perhaps it wouldn't even hurt. She couldn't tell which way it was coming from but its hollering bell clanged louder and louder until she was convinced it was all in her head.

Bells mean death. Bells always mean death.

Over her shoulder she saw Abraxas padding lazily towards her.

Then the train roared across the far track and slammed him away.

Lucky, lucky, lucky. She skittered across the tracks towards the far fence and scaled it, splinters scratching and pricking her feet on the way, though she didn't care. She leapt down, hurting but still running, onto scorched black scrubland. Mud stank on her coat and her skin but there was a worse smell up ahead, sewage stunk out by chemicals. She ran towards the stench, between broken columns of toppled stone. Abraxas' eyes couldn't be that sharp, maybe he was hunting through scent.

Anything was worth a try.

Fires flickered amid the stones, against the rain. They'd made camps here, the derelicts and the dispossessed-by-war. She heard old men singing old soldiers' songs, one man's croaking voice coming loud and sweet out of the darkness. Coarse and broken, unlike anything ever to be heard on the BBC, it was still passionate and human. *They will come back*, he sang, *oh yes, they will come back, the dead will rise from their muddy graves to build the promised land, but they have already lost, the future will betray them and tear down their dreams.*

The lament broke off into a long scream of alcoholic horror and she knew her pursuer must be close behind. The drunk wouldn't sing again for the rest of the evening – he'd lie in his dry stone niche, howling fitfully at the horror he'd seen. Emily shot a glance over her shoulder and saw Abraxas taking silent flea-hops through the air. He bounded across the scrub towards her, and all around the tramps were dousing their fires and chancing the pneumonic cold for fear of being seen.

Emily kept running forward, fighting the pain in her feet and her legs. Her lungs were shredding cold air and there was a crease of pain in her stomach. She kept moving. She broke over a ridge and stumbled down towards the docks and the river, both still alive with night-time London bustle. The Surrey side bank was shimmering with light, diffused through the sheen of rain. She ran towards it but lost her footing and tumbled down the ridge, landing painfully on her back. There was another drop alongside her, into a channel filled with dark, slick water. A pipe outlet jutted further up the bank feeding the channel with a steady flow. It went straight down to the Thames.

Abraxas reached the top of the ridge and stared down at her.

– *You're the last witness, you know?* –

– *I wouldn't do this for just anyone* –

The car came at Abraxas from the side, taking them both by surprise. Emily saw the two beams pass across him, picking out the smooth leathery detail of his body, and that was the only warning before the car ploughed into him and carried him screeching further down the bank. Locked together, Abraxas and the machine tumbled and rolled and skidded to a halt a good fifty feet away, tottering on the edge of the channel.

Lechasseur had jumped clear of the door just before the car struck. He took quick sure steps down the bankside, all the while gazing frustrated at the burning metal wreck as the pinned but unhurt Abraxas heaved it aside.

He pushed his hand out to Emily. She took it and he pulled her up.

‘I should have been here earlier,’ he apologised. ‘It’s what the Doctor wanted.’

‘Abraxas!’

Lechasseur made Emily crouch down behind him. She looked tough and wiry enough when she needed to be and she’d given Abraxas a better runaround than he could hope for, but she was also exhausted and shivering cold. Her feet were naked and bloody with cuts from her getaway. If he could keep her alive he’d take her to Mrs Bag-of-Bones’ for the rest she needed. That was assuming Abraxas didn’t snap her neck the moment he got near her.

He hoped he could talk him out of it.

‘Abraxas!’ he shouted. The Big Man had flung most of the burning metal aside and was staggering to his feet. He looked damaged, but not badly enough to make a difference. He stabbed an accusing finger at Lechasseur.

– *You were warned and now I will cut you apart and pickle the remains in a jar* –

– *You were warned* –

‘Shut up!’ Lechasseur spat. ‘Mestizer is... gone. I don’t know if she’s

dead or alive, but she's gone. The Doctor's gone too. It's over. You don't have to do anything else. You can go!

Abraxas shuffled his weight from one foot to the other. His mask betrayed nothing, but maybe he was considering.

– *You don't understand – she is the loose end I have to cut off –*

– *You too now, I have my orders from Mestizer –*

– *I am a soldier –*

'Yeah, so what? You don't have to follow orders all your life. Even when they matter, you can still say no!'

– *Mestizer pays well and what's it to you? –*

Lechasseur breathed deep and said: 'I have orders too. From the Doctor.'

There was more than that, of course, but he knew now that from the moment he'd entered the café to meet the false Emily, the dead unsaved Emily, that he would end up here in front of Abraxas. Whatever else the Doctor might have wanted or done, at heart he needed someone who could be here when he was gone, taking care of the loose ends he couldn't.

I might be wrong, but it feels like the right thing.

Abraxas laughed, a faint babyish sound from his crackling voicebox. – *The Doctor is a cheapskate!* – he cried, and sprang forward to attack.

And Lechasseur could see Abraxas, he could see all of Abraxas. He saw the worm of his history spreading back and contorting through the burning wreck, stretched thin back up the slope from when he'd been thrown, then twirling through the air back to the railway line and beyond. His attack seemed stifled, inching forward like a fast-cranked film through sticky unyielding time.

Lechasseur had tracked the pink pyjama girl from the house this way, following the Emilyworm through space and through time. It hurt his eyes. He felt the pressure build behind them, inside them, almost enough to detonate them in their sockets, but if he concentrated hard and urgently enough he could see the world unfold in four dimensions.

Abraxas came at him, a beautiful brown leather snake with infinite arms. The suit, he saw, was keeping him alive. It was riddled with pins, plugged through the layers of armour and the atrophying skin within. An

orange fluid that was not blood ran in his veins and machines throbbed in his chest where the heart, the lungs, the stomach should have been. His leather skin was oily, flayed from the backs of creatures that no longer walked the Earth.

He was moving fast, though it looked languid. Lechasseur pulled Emily aside before the Big Man could crash into them. Her skin whispered to him of amnesia, a layer that had built around her as insulation against a violent and incomprehensible world. It was a thin layer, it would peel off easily if they survived.

And for the first time, he thought that they might.

He pulled Abraxas out of his attack and tried to fling him onto the ground. Even with time on his side that was impossible. Abraxas' balance was too good, he was too strong, but Lechasseur gouged a hole in the stitches of his armour as he tried. Abraxas howled and battered him away, skidding sideways to rest on the bank.

– *You hurt me?* – It was almost a plea.

Abraxas reached for him and missed. Lechasseur saw where his fists would be, moments before they made contact. He wove a cat's cradle between them.

Abraxas wobbled but regained his footing. Lechasseur was on him, pounding and tearing with all the strength he could muster. Abraxas' hands clamped round the back of his neck and for a second he couldn't breathe – then the electric voice moaned and the fingers let him loose. He heard the crump of metal on metal, looked round with bloody red eyes and saw Emily beating the Big Man on the back with a metal bar she'd pulled from the car wreck. She managed another swing but Abraxas snatched the bar out of the air and snapped it in his fist.

Her momentum lost, Emily skidded back onto the ground and lay still.

Stay down, please stay down.

Had it been like this in the war? He couldn't remember. He'd never seen the enemy so close. Abraxas was right up against him, their limbs were tangling and he could feel air being pumped from his face by the machines inside. Death in Belgium had come invisibly by sniper fire or pianos laced with dynamite, not so brutal, not so physical. He ducked Abraxas' next two grabs, seeing them before they came.

There was a weak spot on the Big Man's midriff, where he'd torn his first hole. He made a claw of his hand and rammed it hard into the wound.

Abraxas screamed. He had three voices and they all screamed.

The first was the electric voice. Lechasseur's fingers found wires in the hole and as he popped them the humming galvanic pitch wobbled violently, turning into a hard high screech-tone, then grinding down into harsh static.

The second was his whole voice, flickering through the worm of his life. It wasn't so much a scream as a gasp of air with a near imperceptible squeak at its heart. The past-time segments of Abraxas were fixed but they all moaned to themselves now and forever under their breaths.

The third voice was human and came from Abraxas' gut – and from a ragged hole in the flesh and bone under his tight leather mask. It was the worst thing Lechasseur had ever heard and he had to step back. By the bank, Emily shook her head and coughed out phlegm and thin vomit as the sound went through her body.

Abraxas' gloves fastened on Lechasseur's shoulders and pulled him close but the Big Man was dying. He sank to his knees, his mass dragging Lechasseur down into a kneeling hug in the churned mud and the rain.

– I was a soldier like you – he confessed

'I know,' Lechasseur told him, because he had seen it when his fingers met flesh in the hole he'd torn. He'd seen the little blond boy arrange his painted lead soldiers in ranks on the table in his bedroom, then the lead went through him at Passchendaele, shredding his body. The boy lay on a barbed-wire bed and sobbed blood, Christ-wounds. The angels, when they came, had chrome faces, they unstrung the dirty metal hooks and fitted clean replacements. The blond boy was in his dorm at school, a leader of men who saw nothing but suffering in the walls, writing poetry because he thought it could redeem him though he had nothing to say. He kissed a girl whose name he forgot, he looked at Emily through glass eyes and wondered if she was maybe the forgotten girl's daughter though all human women looked the same to him now. Mestizer looked

at him with her grease-paint face then he had seized the Doctor by the head and pinned him to a mushroom-shaped pedestal in a room of light, and the Doctor looked like Mestizer, a man in an ill-fitting mask. He was Abraxas and he was the boy laughing at a dirty joke then he was in a butcher-stink uniform while all round him humans and horses were transformed into blooms of gristle and excrement and all he could think to say was –

– *I need a doctor I need a doctor I need a doctor* –

‘Yeah,’ Lechasseur agreed. His tears were like blood on his face. Abraxas’ voice broke down into gibberish and then went silent, so Lechasseur eased himself out of the dead grip allowing the body to slip forward into the mud.

Emily was shaking and crying and so was he.

‘I’ve been warned against turning bitter and cynical,’ Lechasseur reflected. He’d found a stone pressed into the earth, out-of-place in such soggy ground. It was smooth-flat and looked orange in the night lights. He imagined it being lodged in Abraxas’ brain, shaken loose like a seed when the body died. He flipped it across the channel of water but it didn’t skim.

Emily Blandish sprawled beside him on the bank with her bare pallid feet resting lightly on his knees. He’d checked them for splinters, an impossible task in the dark, and rubbed off some of the dirt. She had tiny weightless feet with toes pushed narrow together. She was probably bruised all over – so was he, but he’d heal.

‘Was it the Doctor?’ she asked. ‘Who warned you?’ He made a nod.

‘I think I do remember him. Not very clearly,’ she admitted. ‘I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to hold anything back from you, the first time we met. I couldn’t have told you much.’

‘It doesn’t matter. I’m not looking for him any more.’ He set her feet back down on the ground. ‘He wanted me to find you. He wanted me to protect you, once he was gone. Though I’m not completely sure of that, he was kind of elusive.’

‘I know what you mean.’

‘You really do remember him?’

He couldn't tell if she was nodding or shaking her head. 'I remember *someone*. I don't know if it was the Doctor, the real Doctor. It could have been anyone really.'

Lechasseur couldn't think of a helpful reply but sat staring at his hands. There was blood on the open palms, blood and a sickly ooze that smelt like oil but wasn't. Abraxas' humour, it tingled his hands, dissolving in the rain. *I'm melting, I'm melting.*

Emily piped: 'How does he manage it?'

'What?'

'How is it that the Doctor isn't bitter and cynical?'

'He is. I've met him.' Lechasseur sighed. 'But he said it was something to do with... I don't know what you'd call it. Companionship?'

'Friendship?'

'Yeah.' He nodded.

The rain drizzled away and a heavy mist rose quickly from the damp earth and the Thames. The south bank lights were already skinned over by green fog. Emily was sweating despite the cold. Lechasseur had pulled Abraxas' heavy cape from the body and draped it over her shoulders. She looked frail in its tent-size folds, as vulnerable and defiant as a day-old baby. She'd survive. She was tough.

'The Doctor's gone,' he repeated. 'I don't know where.'

'He'll be back.'

Lechasseur nodded. He stepped down the bank to crouch by the body. Abraxas lay snout-down in the mud. Lechasseur had considered calling the police but Emily shrank away from that. She didn't want to return to the Beardsley house and anonymous celebrity. Besides, Lechasseur had lost track of the number of laws he'd broken that night, including *thou shalt not kill*. No, a water burial was the easiest option. The stream would carry the body down to the Thames and from there he might float all the way to the sea.

Lechasseur turned to Emily and said: 'I can't do this on my own.'

He could barely touch the thing he'd killed, it was still twitching with remembered mechanical life. His fingers went for the leathery mask then drew back. He couldn't bear to see the skull beneath the skin. Emily moved off the bank to help him roll Abraxas into the channel. He was

surprisingly light. He dropped into the water with a dull splash, sank into the grime then bobbed up as the current delivered him to the Thames.

They stood together, watching him go. Lechasseur could still see the wounds on Emily's face and his own wounds reflected back at him on her eyes. He blinked and watched her worm-segments ripple back through time to the moment when she'd stepped out into Spitalfields market. Before that she tapered into nothing, she was newborn and the Doctor had delivered her.

Their hands were held together, a joint fist of interlocking fingers.

'Can you see them?' Emily asked. She was thinking of the Doctor, he could sense it through her skin. She'd cast her gaze back up the bank but when Lechasseur turned to look there was no one there but the shambling old men of the shore. They looked down at the companions, curious spectators, their faces smudged and illegible, their costumes once gaudy but now frayed. Lechasseur thought he heard faint voices caught on the wind from above, but he couldn't hear what they were saying. No, it was birdsong, the shrieks of seagulls wheeling in an alien sky. And Emily, no longer thinking about the Doctor, turned back to face the river.

Emily Blandish and Honoré Lechasseur didn't move from the bank but clung together until they were sure that Abraxas's body was gone. Lechasseur was tired and he felt Emily's weariness in the weight resting on his arm. On the river monsters moaned in foghorn voices and their huge lumbering silhouettes slid by in the murk. Abraxas bobbed down to join them. They waited until the speck of his body was enveloped by the fog, then Lechasseur and Emily walked off the bank and were swallowed up themselves, at least until the morning.

Out there in London, the future was waiting for them.

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