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Opening Extract from...

Haggard Hawk

Written by Douglas Watkinson

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Haggard Hawk Extract

We'd reached the main ward. News had broken through. Someone had assaulted one of the patients. It was touch and go. There were high pitched exchanges as I walked through, demands to know who I was.

“It's okay,” said one of the nurses, “there's nothing to worry...”

I dropped to the floor, scanned under the beds. Nothing. Up on my feet again, out of the ward, posse behind me.

At the lifts, I heard questions with beginnings but no ends.

“What's the...? Have you...? Will it...?”

The ageing security guards had reached us, one of them wheezing badly. I snapped at his companion:

“Get these people away from the lift.”

“Now just a second...”

“Do it, George,” said the nurse.

The security guards began to shepherd the crowd to safety. I turned to the man in the boiler suit.

“Can you open the lift doors? Just enough to look in?”

He took a dog-leg key from his pocket, reached up and placed one end of it in a socket in the overhang. He unwound the mechanism and the rubber edges of the doors parted with the stretching sound of a cartoon kiss. When the gap was four inches wide I raised my hand. The man in the boiler suit stopped. I peered in. Nothing.

“Open them all the way.”

He wound the key like mad and as the doors slid back so I caught my reflection in the lift mirror. It gave me a second's pause in which to ask myself what the hell I was doing here, taking charge, taking over... In the lift mirror I saw a louvered door open behind me, a cupboard, a fire reel inside, wound tight on a red drum and, emerging from beside it a dark figure. He saw me turn to him and he took off like a sprinter, down the stairs. I stooped to the boiler suit’s toolbox, picked out a claw hammer, and followed.

He was taking the stairs with athletic ease, stepping the first three or four of each flight then leaping to the flat before the turn. He was losing me, even over the short distance to the first floor landing, where he pushed aside people in his way, some to the wall, some to the floor. I followed the startled gazes, pointing me to my quarry.

Dark clothes. Tracksuit. Balaclava. He turned left at the end of the corridor and I followed.

He reached the narrow back stairs leading to the ground floor way ahead of me. As I began to take them, three at a time now, I heard the crash of a powerful physique against the fire exit. When I reached it myself, the door had swung back, juddering on its hinges. I pushed it and stepped out into the night.

There were floodlights overhead, blazing down on the side alley which ran the length of the ground floor clinics. Cars were parked there, people were getting into them.

“Which way did he go?” I yelled.

In their own, extended time, people answered. Arms floated, fingers uncurled and pointed towards a low building with a tall, grey chimney, billowing smoke.

“That way,” said a voice I'd already left behind.

Ahead of me, the dark tracksuit leaped a wooden fence and dropped down the other side of it. The fence grew taller as I approached it. I upended a dustbin, went up, up and then down onto a patch of grass beside the main boiler house. A door in the side of it opened and a silhouette in the frame, holding a mug of tea, peered out.

“Here, what's going on...” it began and withdrew, seeing the hammer.

As I ran in the only direction my quarry could have taken, I saw that the mug of tea had been exchanged for a phone and the silhouette was dialling a number. I rounded a corner and there was the tracksuit again, clearer now in the light spilling over the wall which ran along Walton Street, the main road through Jericho. The heavy door in the wall was locked. He stood back from it, kicked it with the heel of his foot, to no avail. He turned to me. He may have been considering his options as he came towards me - I was certainly considering mine - but his didn't involve physical confrontation. When far enough away from the wall, he turned and ran back at it with tremendous power, jumped and scrambled onto the top course of stone and dropped down the other side. I heard a girl scream, then footsteps running off down the pavement. I went to the door in the wall, ripped off the lock with the hammer and stepped out into the street.

The group of kids I'd surprised stood welded to the pavement in fear. I yelled at them:

“Which way did the bastard go?”

A girl in the group raised a trembling hand towards the city centre. As I turned to set off I heard the kick start of a motorbike thirty yards ahead of me, followed by a burst of acceleration, saw the streaming of a headlight as the bike came straight towards me. I stepped back, aimed the hammer, and threw it. The biker swerved, the hammer skidded across the tarmac, sparking against the opposite kerb.

I would have killed the first person who spoke to me.