

The Adventures of Alan Shaw

Volume 1

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Alan Shaw and the Fate of the Automatons

I

London, England, 1842

THE KEEN RASP of a policeman's whistle cut high above a chorus of leather soles on pavement.

With the wind and his own heartbeat thundering in his ears, the boy ignored the burning in his lungs and ploughed on, splashing through the alley's puddles of water and overflowing gutters. Rounding a stack of old crates at high speed he leapt clumsily, missing a slumbering drunk by inches and twisting as he landed. The ground came up hard. The hand he threw out to catch him slid in something that might have been rotten vegetable and what the boy hoped was water slapped him in the face. He rolled to the side and lay panting for a minute against a slimy wall, dazed by the cold and adrenaline. He shivered all over like a laudanum addict. Water seeped through the gaping seams of his shoes; rubbish bin hand-me-downs that he'd never known as new, and now his short trousers and thin cotton shirt were soaked too.

As a troupe of coppers ran by the end of the alley, the boy hustled himself further against the wall, hoping that the crates would shield him. The old drunk beside him muttered something and let out a ripping flatulence. Screwing up his face, the boy gave the old soak a harsh jab with his toe, but the drunk just rolled like a ship on the surf and settled back down again.

Allowing himself a smile, the boy hummed a few bars of *What Shall We Do With A Drunken Sailor* as another police whistle rang out, much, much further away. But he wasn't daft. Wrapping his arms around his knees to fend off the cold, he sat to wait for a while longer.

The hand came down on his shoulder with such finality that it might have been Death himself who was taking hold of the boy's shirt. He screamed, thrashing on reflex, his elbows and knees all jagged edges until his whole body was a churning, spiked machine. The owner of the hand let out a yell and the boy dropped to the ground, but before he could muster his legs to scramble into a run, another set of arms wrapped about him. He was trapped; hugged close to the copper's wool uniform, his arms trussed at his sides. He wriggled and cursed with words he knew but wasn't sure the meaning of, but the copper's grasp was absolute.

"Give it up, son. You're nicked."

VOICES, CLATTERING HOOVES and a distant bell floated in through Inspector James Carpenter's window. A faint whiff of the Thames circled the room like a moist dog, thankfully diluted by distance. On the other side of the building where the monorail ran, a shuttle rattled by, making the police station shake from joist to foundation. Carpenter slammed one hand down on a pile of papers to stop them travelling, and pinched the bridge of his nose with the other until the shuttle faded away. Then he continued to read.

Line after line of cramped handwriting jostled under the Inspector's gaze. A constable's messy pen had left a trail of ink blobs across the report, and the spellings were creative, but Carpenter could make it out well enough to sign. Dabbing the nib of his fountain pen on the blotter produced a nectar-like ink drop. He scribbled, sighed, and shifted the paper to his out-tray.

Blinking once, twice, the Inspector allowed his report-induced blindness to adjust. Squinting through the glass partition which made up one wall of his office, Carpenter watched his police officers sashay back and forth or stand mumbling in groups. Papers changed hands here and there. *Probably checking each other's spelling*, he thought.

Simon finally came into focus. His back was to the window, and so also his father. The white label of his school blazer stuck up from his collar, still displaying the faded name his mother had inscribed there. One of the boy's hands propped his head, the other scratched at his hair and returned out of sight. Inspector Carpenter could tell the boy was reading. He was always reading. And Carpenter wouldn't have it any other way. Simon didn't even look up from his studies when Constable Jennings walked past, a very different kind of boy clamped under his hand like a fishing trophy.

The Inspector slid another report in front of him as the door rattled with Jennings' knock.

"Come in."

The constable leaned through the gap, helmet protruding first.

"We found the boy, sir."

"Give you much trouble, Constable?"

"Yes, sir. Plenty."

"Alright, bring him in."

Jennings disappeared. Carpenter took out his pen again, and dab-dabbed on the blotter.

From outside he could hear Jennings growling at his prisoner: "Don't make me carry you, lad. Get in there."

Carpenter kept his eyes fixed on the paperwork, skimming and signing, skimming and signing.

The boy came in at the end of Jennings' boot. The constable whipped off the boy's cap and handed it to him. The boy sneered, but didn't put the cap back on. Jennings went to say something,

and thought better of it in front of his superior. Stood before the Inspector's desk, the boy kicked his heels against the meagre carpet. After a while he tried to whistle, but gave up.

"You assaulted three of my constables," Carpenter said.

"Wouldn't have done if they hadn't chased me."

"Just so you know, Sir," interrupted Jennings, "Reg will probably need some time off with his knee."

The boy gave a puckish smile.

Carpenter signed his name, let the ink dry a moment, and slid the paper aside. He finally looked up at the urchin. The boy was a puppet in badly made costume, every joint protruding from his bones as if added with afterthought. While he didn't flinch under Carpenter's gaze, pale hands wrung his cloth cap like a dish rag. Jennings was blocking the door, but the boy's eyes lingered at the open window. He'd have to climb over the desk to get out, but Carpenter had no doubt he'd fly to it like a trapped pigeon if given the chance.

"Why'd you bring me here?" asked the boy. "Why not just take me to Bow Street?"

"Do you want everyone you know around Covent Garden to see you walking out of a police station, Scot-free? How'd that look?"

The boy looked at Constable Jennings to see if he was missing some joke. Apparently, he wasn't.

"So I'm not in trouble?"

"Not yet," said Jennings.

Inspector Carpenter slid a file across his desk, looking down to hide his smile. There were only three pages in the folder. He flicked through them while composing himself.

"What's your name, son?"

"Albert. But that's Prince to you," replied the boy, running his nose across a tattered sleeve.

Even Jennings smirked.

“I think your name’s Alan,” said Carpenter, not bothering to check the boy’s reaction. “I think you’re an orphan. You’re about eleven years old, but you probably don’t even know that for sure, and you ran away from St. Martin’s workhouse just before it closed down. You’ve been living in and around Covent Garden since then, working odd jobs for food. You can stop me anytime, Alan.”

The boy was silent.

Carpenter carried on before the shock waned: “Do you know what an Automaton is?”

The boy stayed quiet. His eyes had glazed over.

“Alan?”

“No.”

“Have you ever seen this man?” Carpenter held a daguerreotype of a serious-looking individual. He could have been a second rate gentleman, scuffed at the edges, but Alan had seen eyes like that before. He was a villain. The kind that made his money at the expense of other people’s injuries.

“No. Never.”

“Alright, you can go,” said Carpenter.

The boy’s head swung between the policemen.

“I’m really not being done?”

“No. Thank you for your time.”

Jennings propped open the door, and Alan wandered outside. The door clicked to the jamb.

“Sir?”

The Inspector was still watching Alan frozen beyond the door’s glass. He passed his attention between the urchin and his son.

“Yes, Jennings?”

“Forgive me, sir, but I’m curious to know where you got all that information. I’ve seen that file, sir. List of contents and file reference, list of boy’s names, and the picture. That’s it.”

“I made it up, Constable.” Carpenter met Jennings’ eye for the first time. “I knew his name, and where he’s from. St Martin’s was the nearest workhouse.”

“St Martin’s? So the lad already knows his way around the insides. That’d be useful for the kind of caper Rafferty’s planning.”

Carpenter nodded.

“You’ll make Detective yet, Jennings. And when we squeezed Throaty for the list of children, he said to watch out for the Shaw boy. Throaty didn’t like him. That’s enough to make me think there’s more to the lad than meets the eye.”

“But if we can find him, Rafferty can find him too,” said Jennings. He looked into the office where Alan stood as if unsure whether he could leave or not. “Poor little bugger, eh, Sir?”

“Poor little bugger indeed, Constable.”

ALAN STOOD WITH his back to the office door. In and out, just like that. No trouble. No list of offences. Bloody hell, if they’d have picked five crimes at random, they’d have hit the mark somewhere.

He shook himself, straightened up, and puffed out his chest with a deep breath.

There was a boy at the desk beside him, about his age, maybe less judging by his size, dressed a little similar but minus the muck. There was a shield embroidered on his jacket. He had a book open on the desk in front of him. Alan leaned over. The page was full of words.

“Good book, eh?” he said.

The lad looked at him as if he were a rattlesnake.

“What’s it about?” Alan asked, watching as the other boy looked between page and urchin a few times.

“Urm, biology,” he said. “Science.”

“Phew! Rather you than me.” Alan doffed his cap. “See ya.”

Striding away, Alan disappeared down the stairs to street level. The floorboards shook as the station door slammed.

Outside, breathing free man's fresh air, Alan tugged at his jacket. The air was sharp enough to shave with, had he been old enough to have growth, and a weak spring sun only warmed his wet clothes a little. A policeman came running along the pavement, excusing and apologising to the folk he jostled. Turning sharply, he almost skidded right past the station's steps and had to grab the stone banister to stop himself. He darted up, knocking Alan aside as if he weren't there.

“Oy!”

But the copper was gone, leaving only a swinging door.

Alan danced down the pavement. Jamming hands into bottomless pockets, he sauntered along the path, enjoying the feel of other people's expensive trousers against his elbows. The gentlemen and ladies avoided him mostly, weaving out of his way as if he were contagious. Someone suggested he walk in the road and Alan politely suggested that his backside and the gentleman's lips become acquainted. Somewhere beyond a horizon made of top hats and bonnets, Hackneys rattled along rutted cobbles. The scent of crushed horse manure was only a sniff away. Before Alan reached the end of King Street, he heard the familiar *flupflupflup* of running feet and ducked into the road just in time to avoid the coppers as they ran past, the one who'd grabbed Alan earlier at their head. There had to be twenty of them, he thought. One copper blew a whistle and, as they reached the junction, another group met them from the other direction.

At the end of the road, Alan could see what the commotion was all about. Another protest filled St James square. A mass of people, men mostly, some wearing postal uniforms, others dirty from the docks or the gas works. Some held banners scrawled with

words Alan couldn't understand. There was chanting, but it made no more sense to him than the signs.

"Man over metal!"

"Oil and blood don't mix!"

He walked round instead of cutting through; no point pushing his luck with the police twice in one day. The coppers had formed a wall to one side; one of them was shouting at the protestors and not doing much good. The mob started to march in an increasing circle like the beginnings of a hurricane. Soon, someone would throw something and the whole thing would get out of hand. Alan was glad to be away from it.

Taking the most direct route to Covent Garden, Alan cut by Queens Theatre where another crowd was massing. This one was cleaner, quieter and Alan liked it even less than the last one. Summoned and banished by the whirring of pocketwatches, the whole upper class was as repetitive and lifeless as the wooden dancers on a Swiss clock. A gentleman snorted, a lady whinnied back. The men bowed to offered hands and the women pattered and fuffed with their stoles. Stepping up beside one of the gentlemen, Alan thrust his thumbs into his waistband and waited.

"Geoffrey, you seem to have collected something on your boot," said one of the ladies, tittering.

Geoffrey looked down at his shoes, distraught, and found Alan.

"Oh yes, Madam. So I have," he said. "Run along boy, there's nothing for you here."

Alan motioned to his ear, then his mouth, and made a sound he'd heard deaf-mutes make.

"Deaf, eh? Then there's no point engaging you, you little scoundrel. Be off with you."

The gentleman placed the tip of his cane in Alan's chest and shoved him. Alan tumbled back, only just remembering not to swear as he went down. Rolling from the curb, he fell into the road.

His head jerked painfully as a hoof passed close enough to make a muddy stripe on his blonde hair, and he rolled back toward the pavement before the carriage wheels could claim any limbs. He lay in the gutter for a moment, panting, clutching at his head and looking for blood on his fingers. He turned over like a dog exposing his belly, and set glistening eyes first on the gentleman, then on his lady where they lingered.

“Oh, Geoffrey. There was no need for that at all,” she said, and lifted her skirts so she could bend. “There now, let me help you.”

“Oh really, Madame. Don’t humour the thing. The doors are opening.”

Alan recoiled from her hand as if it were a branding iron and scuttled along the gutter.

“See? He’s healthy as a buck. Leave him.”

Alan took one last look before disappearing around the corner. The woman had turned to scold Geoffrey, who was backing away. The other gentry were parting around them like a cock fight.

Around the corner, Alan smoothed his hair, straightened himself, and sauntered away trying to whistle. There was a reason he preferred solid work; begging just wasn’t worth the effort.

ALAN HEARD THE honking before he saw the geese. A man wearing a long apron herded the fowl through Covent Market’s crowd with a wooden staff, steering them toward a butcher’s block nearby. Alan let them swarm around him rather than move, their swaying necks passing like reeds in a river.

Stalls made of barrels and planks ran in rows across the open square, all leading toward the arcade’s columns where the official market could be found. Alan sailed past banks of flowers and fruit, bobbing in the crowd’s flow like driftwood. At a frame hanging with skinny rabbits he turned left, ducking under the makeshift counter, past the owner who was busy gutting another coney, and

out the other side. Skirts and trouser legs extended to the sky; mottled with dirt and worn thin at the knee. But Alan was in a canoe now, and he carved through the textile river, waving to Indian braves and squaws who worked their fields far from London's drab and stench. He'd become quite good at mimicking a river's *swooshing* noises.

His adventure was cut short when a familiar voice hailed him.

"Master Shaw! Here, boy, here!"

Alan dug in his imaginary paddle, turning toward the voice. A grocer waved a rag above his head.

"I'm glad you're here, you can save my legs," said the marketman.

"That I can, Mr. Barnsley. Of course, you understand that how easy your legs will feel depends on my wage."

The grocer bent over his stall to regard the boy with a squint. His apron had once been white and blue squares. Now it was one big stain from top to bottom, greens and browns ground in deeper than any dye could go. The same coloured his thick fingers, as if Barnsley had more than a fair affinity with his vegetables. He had a Yorkshire twang to his voice that Alan always found amusing.

"Oh, you want paying do you?"

"Only what I'm due for the work."

"Due? And what do you think you'll be due for carrying this sack of veg to Harker's?"

Alan ducked under the stall. The sack was almost as tall as him, hessian weave and full to brimming with potatoes, turnips and carrots. Hands on hips, he rounded the sack on all sides, then stood and rubbed his chin. Barnsley watched the boy, forcing back the curl of a smile when Alan looked up at him.

"Looks heavy," said Alan. "My pay is based on the sweat I shed while performing the task."

“By that stroke, I should call for an older boy. He’d find it less heavy and so charge me less. Thank you very much, Master Shaw. I’ll be sure to bear your lesson in mind.” Barnsley turned back to shouting the price of his wares.

Alan’s stomach gurgled. He eyed the sack.

“I find older boys slower witted and greedy, mind you.” Alan sighed as if the very thought of working with older boys was a bother.

“Oh? So you say?”

“Oh yes. Whereas you might pay less in coin, an older boy couldn’t guarantee the safety of your delivery like I can. And if you’re willing to barter, I’m sure we can agree what’s fair for both of us.”

“Barter, then,” said Barnsley. He took a seat on a low stool, leaning forward to come eye to eye with Alan.

“As I said, the sack looks heavy—”

“Only if you can’t carry it.”

“—And it would take me away from other duties.”

“Oh, God forbid.”

“It’s alright, I don’t mind putting myself out for a regular customer.”

“That’s good of you, Master Shaw.”

“Of course there’s wear and tear on my shoes and coat where the sack will rub.”

“Of course, of course,” Barnsley nodded along. His large hand was now resting over his mouth as if in thought, but his eyes were watering.

“I’d say no less than a bob.”

“A shilling, by God?” said Barnsley. “I dare say I’d rather risk my wares not making their destination than paying a whole shilling.”

Alan shook his head. "That's your choice, Mr Barnsley. Can't say I didn't warn you though."

Barnsley walked to the sack, weighed it and set it back down. His back was to Alan, but the boy could see the Grocer's shoulders shaking.

"Well now," Barnsley's voice seemed to be under some strain. "I'll offer six pennies and want your word that this veg will reach Harker's without a single bruise or spilled carrot."

"You can have my word, Mr Barnsley, in return for eight pennies and the use of your barrow."

Barnsley span around, his hand extended. Alan darted back a step, his head flinching into his shoulders. Barnsley's smile faded. He knelt to the boy and took him gently by the shoulder.

"I wasn't going to strike you, lad. Only shaking on it."

Alan's face coloured. He held out his hand to the grocer who took it and couldn't help but notice the shaking in the boy's palm.

"It's a deal. You're a shrewd little business man, Master Shaw." Barnsley lifted the sack into the small barrow behind his stall and handed Alan eight pennies from the pouch on his belt. Alan checked the coins carefully before stowing them somewhere about his person. Then he was off under the stall, pushing the barrow ahead of him.

"Master Shaw!"

Alan turned, and caught the apple that Barnsley tossed to him.

SOMEWHERE BEYOND THE rooftops, Alan heard the *shak-kakak-kakak* of the speeding monorail shuttle. There wasn't a single street in the whole of the North Bank where they couldn't be heard now, either shooting overhead or in the distance. The noise faded as Alan steered his wheelbarrow into the alley beside the York Street pawn brokers. Steam ghosted from the alley's grates, tainted with a smell of cabbage and boiling fat that made Alan's stomach complain, but

it'd be another day or so before he was proper hungry. Drawing up beside a cellar trapdoor, he opened one side and then the other. The faint rumble of Harker's tavern echoed up to him. Stowing the wheelbarrow under some old cargo netting and a barrel, he hoisted the sack down, step by step into the gloom.

Harker's was never in full light. A few lamps on distant tables gave a vague idea of where the walls might be, and only one showed how low the ceiling was. Dragging the sack between the small tables, some of them full despite it being barely midday, Alan rubbed shoulders with Pickpockets, Area Divers, Speelers and Cly Fakers, Maltoolers, Palmers and Dippers, Kidsman, Mutchers, Lurkers and Flimps. All of them were men, every one dirty and spending their only coins on the thin beer Callas brewed. The stink of stale ale had soaked into the floor along with blood and cat urine. The offender himself, Newton, came to make a nuisance of himself around Alan's feet as he made his way behind the bar and into the backroom.

"Get away, cat," said Alan, and slid the moggy sideways with his foot. Newton mewled and followed him, tail up like a flagpole. Setting the sack down, Alan stretched his back like an old man he'd once seen, with hands placed above his hips for a pivot. The back room had a long table to one side, and a few shelves to the other, and that was all. Under a trap door, steps led down again to the sub-cellar where the kegs were kept. Alan could hear Callas down there, swearing to himself in Spanish. Alan took the sack again, and quickly dragged it past the trapdoor before the bartender could come up and harass him. He went through the only other door to a kitchen where steam hung like a bottled storm. He slid the sack under a work surface made of a trestle and old planks.

"Sarah?" he called. No answer. "Sarah, are you in?"

From somewhere in the fog, a voice called back. Alan moved toward it.

“Where are you? I’ve brought some veg from Barnsley. You should open the window in here. I can’t see a thing.”

Out of the fog, arms grabbed around Alan’s waist, hoisting him straight off the floor. He landed on the work surface’s planks with a bump, squirming and thrashing to escape his captor.

Sarah’s face descended out of the fog.

“Boo!”

She finally let go and Alan struggled himself to sitting.

“Bloody hell! You’re funny in the head, you are,” he said. “I thought you were one of the customers come back here to kill me. I could have hurt you!”

“You shouldn’t curse,” said Sarah. “And you wouldn’t hurt me, Alan, you don’t know how.”

“Is that right?”

He leapt off the counter top and into her arms, tickling his fingers around her neck. She caught him but fought against his tickling as much as he had against her attack.

“What’s going on in here? I know it isn’t work, because it doesn’t sound like work!”

Callas came into the kitchen like the murderer Alan had expected. He cursed in Spanish and hobbled into the steam pot belly-first to find the boy and barmaid.

“Oh god,” whispered Sarah. They huddled on the floor beside the little oven, hidden from the Spaniard’s wrath by the steam. “Quick, Alan, back to the bar.”

She shoved Alan forward. He reached back for her hand and they sneaked across the kitchen, bent double behind the work surface. Sarah’s hand was as clammy as his own, and he was sure that their hearts raced the same too.

“There had better be broth for our customers when I find you, Sarah. Or swear me down dead, you’ll pay for it,” yelled Callas.

He lumbered out of the kitchen and through to the bar. Every face turned to look at him. Sarah stood a little way off, handing a tankard to one of the customers. Alan was just coming down the tavern's steps. Newton sat at the end of the bar, playing along by licking himself.

"Is everything alright, Callas?" asked Sarah, her face pale with innocence.

Callas' eyes narrowed.

"If I ever find out how you do that, I swear I'll thrash you blue!"

The Spaniard lashed out at Newton, sending the cat flying with a yowl, and stormed into the back room to the sound of laughing customers.

ALAN SWERVED THROUGH the tables, balancing the old wooden platter so the empty tankards wouldn't slide off. He pretended that collecting and stacking the tankards took so much of his concentration that he didn't hear any of the conversations around him. In a night house like Harker's, it was best not to hear. Although a few Dollymops perched on knees here and there, it was still mostly men who hunkered over the little tables. So it was mostly men's voices that Alan was ignoring.

"Nah nah, we go in through the *upstairs* and work our way down. The guard's office is on the ground floor. By the time they find out we're there, we'll be gone—"

"—I tell you, he knows. Of course I was careful, but I swear he bloody knows—"

"—Jimmy says he can have us in the warehouse around midnight. All we have to do is get to Limehouse and get back again. Christ, we steal a carriage. It's not like we've never done it before is it?"

And so on, until Alan knew everything about every criminal activity planned around Covent Garden. And most of the men, plotters and thieves and murderers, just ruffled his hair as he swayed past with his tray. He finally slid the tray down on the bar and began to set the tankards aside. Sarah was ladling lumpy soup from pot to bowl.

“That’ll be a shilling, my darling. Thank you. I put some carrots in it this time, just for you.”

When the old soup buyer had shuffled away, Alan leaned in.

“Why do you talk to them like that? Like you like them. Like they’re nice.”

“The same reason you forget where your pay comes from, Alan. Because we have to.”

“I can’t wait to get out of here,” he said, climbing onto a stool beside Sarah.

“Oh you’re going somewhere are you?”

“America. All the way. Train to the coast and ship to New York.”

“And what’ll you do in New York?”

“Anything I like. In America you just have to walk in a straight line and throw your hat down. Where it lands, is yours. That’s how it works over there. No one owns any of it until you walk up and say that you do.” His eyes were fixed somewhere a thousand miles beyond the wall. Sarah smiled.

“You’ll be a land baron, then?” she said. Another drunkard staggered over. Unable to speak, he just pointed at the pot. Her ladle dipped in and out again.

“Nah. I just want a place of my own. I’ll catch rabbits and grow things. I’ll wear bear skins and learn how to use a bow and arrow.”

“All that on your own, eh? There you go, darlin’. Just a shilling because it’s you. Thank you very much.”

“I expect I’ll make friends with cowboys and the Indians,” said Alan.

“Oh, I expect so.”

“You don’t believe me do you?”

Sarah turned to him and cupped his face in her hand. She smelled like soup.

“Of course I do, Alan. You’ll do whatever you want, and go wherever you want. You just have to want it *bad* enough.”

“Have you never wanted to go anywhere?”

“Yeah, once. I wanted to go to Spain. But then I met *him*.” She nodded toward Callas who was filling a tankard from one of the kegs. She giggled and set Alan laughing too.

“Are you the Shaw boy?”

Sarah yelped at the voice over her shoulder.

“By god, you scared me!”

Alan turned in his seat to see the stranger. He was tall; taller than the average man. His brow sloped back like a gentle hill to well-oiled hair. Dressed in browns from head to foot with a black cravat, he could have stepped right out of the Police Inspector’s daguerreotype. Alan’s mouth filled with saliva. He gulped it down.

“Apologies, lass. It was your young friend I was after,” said the man in a rich Irish accent.

“Alan? What could you possibly want him for?” laughed Sarah. But the stranger had turned serious.

“I reckon that’s his business and mine. Why don’t you go dish your soup along the bar there?”

Sarah did as she was told, not daring to look back. But Callas was on his way toward them. He leaned over the bar so his barrel chest was square with the stranger. “What business have you with the boy? He has work to do and gets paid by the tankard, not by the conversation.”

The stranger looked to Alan.

“How many minders do you have in this place, boy?” Alan didn’t answer. “Never mind. You just run on now Callas. Yes, I know who you are. Now unless you want someone to start asking why a Spaniard is running a tavern bearing another man’s name, I suggest you go back to your kegs and bring me a pint of your horse water.”

And the stranger actually made a shooping motion. And Callas actually went. Alan smirked despite himself. Callas shot him a look as he retreated.

“So, finally I reach the man I wanted. You are Alan Shaw, aren’t you?”

Alan swallowed again.

“No need to be scared of me boy. I’m here to offer you a job.” He looked around the tavern. Alan couldn’t help noticing how many men averted his gaze. “A quick job. A quick job with good pay.”

“Where’d you get my name?”

“You’re as shrewd as they say, then. A man by the name of Throaty, down by the docks.”

Callas came back with a tankard and hovered for payment. The stranger dug in his pocket for a couple of coins and flicked them to the barman. “Good man, now be off with you.”

Callas ebbed like the tide.

“Throaty Larson wouldn’t send you to me. He doesn’t like me,” said Alan when his employer was out of earshot.

“That’s right. He said you’re too sharp. But that’s not surprising from a man like Throaty. And lucky for you, sharp is exactly what I’m looking for.”

“And who are you?”

The stranger’s eyes twinkled.

“You don’t last long around here without being sharp, do you? I wouldn’t be surprised if you were a big man around here someday, Alan. You’ve got the mind for it, I can see.”

“You didn’t answer my question,” said Alan. “I can’t work for someone when I don’t know who they are. That’s how people end up washed in the Thames with holes in their pockets and another in their guts. Thank you, but I’m not interested in your work, sir. I don’t think it will be for me.”

The stranger laughed then took a sip of his pint.

“Alright. Let’s stop this dancing. Do you know what an Automaton is?”

Alan’s brow creased. That was the second time someone had asked him that in the same day.

“I see by your face that you don’t. That’s fine, all will be explained. I have a vested interest in them, you see. But all you really need to know is the job. A delivery, in fact. You deliver things for people all the time don’t you? That’s good. This will be no different. I’ll come back here tomorrow. You come with me and you’ll get paid half the wage for hearing the rest. Decide to take the job, and you’ll get the other half when it’s done.”

“Half pay even if I say no sounds like a fiddle to me.”

“Aye, it would to me too. Let’s call it payment for silence. You know how that works, don’t you? Now do you want me to come back tomorrow? Or do I find another lad? Time is of the essence here, Alan. But you have first refusal because I like you.”

“I won’t be here tomorrow,” said Alan. The stranger started to speak but was interrupted. “I work the gasworks boxing pit. If you turn up there, I’ll think again about your offer.”

“Little man, you’ve got yourself a deal.”

With another sip of his pint, the stranger left; stools and tables scraping out of his way as he headed for the stairs.