



The Machine Queen

Part Two: The Colonies

Mark Nine

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The story so far

Caldmore, an ex-airman, had retired to a small island in the Hebrides. There he was asked by the local priest to track down six island girls who had gone missing in London. While in London he was recruited by Queen Victoria, her consciousness uploaded to a massive analytical engine on the banks of the Thames, to her own private Intelligence Agency MI0. Caldmore found five of the girls and returned them to their home, but the sixth, Gormuil Earhart, was still missing. Caldmore promised the parents of the missing girl he would find her, and returned to London, where he was recruited by Hopkins, an agent of MI5; Caldmore offering his services to the agency in exchange for information regarding the missing girl.

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The Machine Queen Part Two: The Colonies

Tuesday 6th June, 1911, above the Irish Sea

The curiosity Caldmore had experienced, that evening in hiscroft, returned now, as he approached the Irish shoreline. Her Majesty's complicity in his current undertaking seemed bewildering, even impossible. Indeed, MI5's complicity seemed out of all reason too.

Caldmore had returned to London earlier in the week. He had promised to not return to the Hebridean island until he had Gormuil in his custody but, realising the impossibility of this, accepted that this was a *de facto* self-exile. As he had said his farewells to Father Hannigan, the priest had realised something was amiss, and challenged him about his return, asking why he was punishing himself for something that was not his fault. This was his home, a failure to find the missing girl was nothing to be ashamed of; he did not have to banish himself as a consequence of others' actions. He had shrugged and stayed non-committal, but on his journey south had sought to identify why the priest's argument had not won him over.

He didn't feel he had to atone for his sins. He had killed people in the war between New England and New France. But that had been in service to the Empire, and doubtless if given the chance, those French soldiers would have killed him. Those battles did help to liberate Acadia and Newfoundland from the dominion on New France too. Those people were now self-determining. And preserving the status quo in the rest of North America surely had meant more peace and prosperity for all. Hadn't it? It was the same for his postings in Asia, battling for the Cham against the Qin Empire, or in battlefronts in Persia, Serendip, against the Belgians in Africa, or that business in Batavia. Everywhere he had been in conflicts it was to preserve the borders of the Empire. Ultimately for everyone in the world a stronger British Empire was for the greater good, wasn't it?

Better minds than he would be able to answer that. Perhaps Victoria, amongst those cogs and gears whirring and humming away could answer those questions. But he felt no guilt as a result of his actions in war.

Also he wasn't responsible for what had happened to the six Scottish girls. He had done what he could to return them to their home. There was one that he had failed. That wasn't his responsibility.

Then what was it that drove him out again? Was he that desperate for a purpose that he would adopt any random quest, no matter how futile?

Perhaps that, or perhaps he was too afraid to face the Earharts, and their grief at only one daughter being returned, and Meelie's guilt at being the one to return.

He'd arrived at Cardington and moored the airship, with no idea of where to start his search. The records of the London CESTEGPIP might have some information about where trafficked girls might go, but information about where one in particular would be likely to end up would be very difficult to get hold of. Perhaps Scotland Yard might have files seized from Rose Cottage. Though Caldmore suspected it was very unlikely a den of impropriety would keep files.

So deep in a brown study, perplexed at what drove him and where he could go, he had exited the arrivals hall at Cardington. And walked straight into Agent Hopkins.

He had, for a moment, considered making a run for it; the man from Military Intelligence was undoubtedly concerned about the switch Caldmore had made with the three girls headed for the workhouse, but then he spotted the two other agents moving into position behind him, so he had allowed the tall man with overcoat and bowler hat to lead him to the horseless carriage.

Once seated inside the carriage automatically began the journey to Scotland Yard. With no driver the two had been in complete privacy, which meant Hopkins was free to talk.

“Before we begin, I knew about the switch you pulled at that tatter’s place. I knew at the time. But the spike was expecting three girls. Any would do. You wanted the girls home. It was no skin off my nose either way. But you owe me.

“First up. Our cover story. Once we’re at the Yard we can be overheard. As far as anyone knows, you’ve got an in with our Fenian friends. You’re undercover and you’re going to get me on the inside. The Fenian bit is true, but what we’re really going to do is run guns and explosives to them.”

“What?”

“Believe me, we’ve worked out the angles. We want to catch the Fenians, round them up, but the problem is they’re too underpowered. No tactics, no guns, no balls. They won’t step out into the open for us to make a move on them. But ...” Hopkins had tapped the side of his nose with an air of self-importance “with the guns and explosives they might have the wherewithal to actually do something. We keep track of them and when they move – bam” accentuating the word by slamming a fist into a palm “we’ve got ‘em.”

Caldmore recalled with a renewed astonishment how the man had sat back in the chair, smirking.

“Pretty smart, eh?”

“It’s insane. Whose idea is it?”

“The Queen herself proposed it. She’s a devious one all right. Smart. Thinks on a level above us mere mortal lot.”

“Still doesn’t mean it’s not insane. Why should I help?”

“We have information about the missing girl. Yes, we’ve done our homework. Sterling lifts six from your little island, you return with five. There are several trafficking routes out of London, all the ones to North America go through Ireland. The Fenians have a contact who might be able let you know where she’d have gone. All you need to do is transport me. And the guns. And the explosives. I’ll introduce you to the contact, you get the information you need and next stop the New World for you, and Kingdom Come for the Fenians.”

Caldmore had tapped out a message to Victoria, after confirmation that this was indeed her plan, but she hadn’t responded. He’d heard nothing from her over the next few days; flying out to an empty warehouse in Teddington, waiting while a boat brought the ordnance upriver then loading it onto the airship. Hopkins and he setting off in the early hours westward to the Irish sea.

For one final time Caldmore tapped out a message on his wrist Marconi. Still no reply.

“Damn her,” he thought. “What game is she playing at?”

Wednesday June 7th Glendalough, County Wicklow,

Caldmore’s airship had been moored for several hours above the ruined monastery, tethered to a great tower that dominated the green valley. The two men looked over the parapet at the ground 100 feet below arguing about their next move.

“It’s an ambush,” Caldmore declared. “We can’t go down.”

“We’ve struck a deal. As far as they know, we’re smugglers. We can provide them with a steady supply of guns, ammunition, bombs. They’re not going to disrupt that, are they?”

“Yes they bloody well are, if they can kill us and keep the guns. Use your head, man.” Every instinct Caldmore had honed over his years

in the Cav Air Cav told him this was a bad idea. Hopkins was seriously underestimating the enemy. Worse, he seemed to assume the Fenians were people they both had in interest in taking down, rather than his own political obsession, and were worth risking their lives on. Caldmore had only one stake in this, a link in the chain that might lead him to Gormuil.

“We can’t wait here forever, Caldmore. Sooner or later they or we have to make a move.”

“Then let it be them, I can wait all day if need be.”

Hopkins pulled a gun, pointing it at Caldmore.

“Land. That’s an order.”

Caldmore shrugged. “I have a better idea. Go down to the entry door.” Caldmore descended to the cabin, and pulled a lever. Hopkins stood at the entry door at the base of the airship, it was open. At the bottom of the door was a pulley with a rope ladder rolled around it. As he watched the rope ladder began to unwind from it. “Climb down.”

Hopkins climbed down the rope ladder. At the ground he called out to the surrounding ruins.

“I’m here. Do you want to trade or not?”

A shot rang out and he screamed, collapsing to the floor.

“My leg, you paddy bastards.” He rolled on the floor, clutching his knee, which spurted blood from between his fingers.

From around the buildings of the ruined monastery about a dozen men appeared, most carrying shotguns and all warily watching the airship above them. A group clustered around the Englishman prostrate on the floor. Caldmore watched cautiously, readying himself to cast off at a moment’s notice.

One of the men below called up to him.

“Ye’d better come down, or we’ll blow yer man’s brains out.”

“Fine by me”, Caldmore responded.

“OK then, how about ye’d better come down, or feck off back to England without whatever it was ye came for.”

Caldmore came to a decision. The impasse couldn’t continue, but he didn’t trust them either.

“OK, but one of you has to come up here.”

“Ah it’s an exchange of hostage, yer after?”

“If you like.”

There was a lengthy debate amongst the Irishmen, Caldmore couldn’t hear the particulars, but could tell it was becoming heated. Eventually the debate was broken with a loud invective of Dutch and some other language, hurled at them in a high tone.

“Gott verdomme. Terkutuklah engkau semua. I’ll go, you cowards.”

A woman strode forward and clung onto the rope ladder. Looking upwards she called “haul away” and Caldmore pulled the lever that made the ladder ascend.

As the ladder completed its winding around the postern at the bottom of the door, she climbed into the craft. Caldmore offered his hand to help her up and she gripped it firmly.

“Commander Caldmore, at you service, ma’am” he offered, bewildered by the presence of this woman amongst the Irish rebels.

“Mejuffrouw Zelle” she responded. “But to my dear friends I am Margreet. I gather I am to be your hostage, sir,” she replied. She was in her mid-thirties, tall, slender, dark-haired. Caldmore could not place her accent, it was a mixture of Dutch, French and an overlay of

something from the East Indies, possibly Malay. She smiled coquettishly, seemingly assured of her own allure, though her heavy features were not classically attractive. Caldmore responded stiffly, not only thrown by the appearance of the woman, but now by her demeanour, which seemed ill-suited to the violence and tension around them.

“I – er – yes. We are here to sell weapons to the men below.”

“Unfortunately the men below are impoverished Irishmen, they have little of value. I rather think they mean to trade your lives for the weapons.” She looked below. “I would be rather inclined to take the deal.”

“I’m also here for information. I was told the rebels had a contact who could tell me about a route, moving young girls from England to North America.”

“Is that your business then, sir, white slavery?” she pursed her lips, and raised an eyebrow, looking him up and down appraisingly.

“No, ma’am,” Caldmore blurted, this Zelle woman was succeeding in leaving him completely unseated. “I am trying to rescue one, the daughter of a neighbour. My role in this”, he waved to indicated the airship around them. “is simply transport. My airship,” he pointed to the group below clustered around the prostrate form of Hopkins “his bombs”.

“And are you a member of Military Intelligence too? Yes, they know about the plot,” Zelle responded hurriedly when seeing Caldmore’s reaction. “Luckily for you they don’t care. They know the weapons are being made available to draw them into the open, the thing is, they believe they can still out-manoeuvre the English, even if they know they are coming.” Zelle looked down at the group. “It really is a ridiculous situation.” She seemed to come to a decision.

“Come, let us make the trade. The explosives in exchange for your comrade. And the information you seek,” Zelle caressed his arm. “I may exact some price for, but that will be to come.”

Under the stern authority of the Dutchwoman, the Irish rebels acceded to the trade. Caldmore descended the airship so that it floated a few feet above the ground, with the helium nacelles fully deployed and the cavorite shutters fully open. At the first sight of trouble, the shutters could snap close and the airship would speed upwards. Caldmore and Zelle hefted the boxes of explosives to the open door, and the Republicans pulled them down and immediately hid them in one of the surrounding monastery buildings.

Within a few short minutes, the field below was empty apart from the prone body of Hopkins. Caldmore guided the airship to where the body lay, lowered the airship the last few feet to the ground, and quickly he and Zelle hoisted the main into the open doorway. No shots rang out. Whoever Zelle worked for, the Irishmen obviously did not want to risk making them their enemy. Besides, they would be long gone before Hopkins reached the authorities.

Hopkins was still conscious, they had tied a tourniquet around his thigh, though he was still losing blood. His knee was completely shattered, but the leg could probably be saved, although Caldmore was no expert. It was not far back to Dublin, only about 30 miles, though a hospital with landing space by it, or a flat roof, would be difficult to find.

Caldmore flew the airship north to Dublin, and soon located a hospital. Landing in the forecourt before it caused some consternation, but once the orderlies saw the figure of Hopkins, limping down the steps supported by the airman, they were about their business and lifted him onto a stretcher and carried him away. Despite being in agony from his shattered kneecap and being close to slipping into consciousness, Hopkins grabbed Caldmore’s arm and dragged him close.

“Watch that woman. She’s dangerous,” he whispered. “She’s a French agent. If they’re involved we’re in ... too ... deep.” Hopkins passed out. The gurney was whisked away through some doors and into the depths of the hospital.

Saturday, June 10th, 1911 Above the Atlantic Ocean

Mejuffrouw-madame Margreet Zelle said nothing about being an agent of the French government. She was, however, very forthcoming about her personal life, about being born in Holland, the darker tint to her skin was due to having a Javanese mother, about her father’s hat shop, about her married life in the Dutch East Indies and it being her spiritual home.

Her pleasure at the mode of transport was, as far as Caldmore could tell, completely genuine. She would take an early morning constitutional around the deck, looking out over the waves just below the airship. Even today, when the light swirl of rain forced the clear glass canopy to enclose it, smearing the view with a sheen of water.

Caldmore let the autopilot take care of most of the journey. He had worked out the bearing for New York, the city in New England that Zelle had said was their destination, and set the controls to take them there. An alarm would sound if it required his attention. The rain suggested an approaching storm, although the Fitzroy Telegraph had not announced one. In a moment he would take his ease on the deck of the quarter gallery and enjoy the rainfall and observe the perambulations of the mysterious French agent on the foredeck below as she looked out over through the port, stem and starboard glass panels in turn.

Sails had once adorned the deck, and the truncated masts that bore them were visible as small daises along the dorsal line of the deck. However, the masts and sails had required the deck to be exposed to

the elements and, more worryingly, to gas attacks. The airship therefore had been made airtight, with the addition of the automatically enclosed prismatic glass, that could enclose the deck at the touch of a lever, though its height above the quarter gallery deck left little headroom. The airship was still propelled by the wind however, made possible by the sails now protruding from the sides of the airship. These sails extended beyond the cavorite hull, which shielded the body of the airship from gravity, and so acted to pull down the ship. Thus they were made from the lightest possible material, a gossamer-thin translucent substance that was engineered from studying the wings of insects. These were not sturdy enough to survive long in battle, and so what had been a vehicle of war was used more in scenarios requiring stealth, such as surveillance, and search-and-rescue behind enemy lines. To suit this new purpose, the control cockpit had been refitted, to become more akin to large bulbous glass eyes, providing vision above and below. This new design of cockpit also was not shielded from gravity by the hull, naturally, as if a layer of cavorite were attached to its base it would not then be see-through. This weight thus necessitated adding both a long tail as counterbalance, and extending and adding to the helium nacelles that provided buoyancy. These were now six in number and could flex to provide stability or become more aerodynamic as required, and of course withdrawn completely to reduce the effect of their buoyancy completely, as once inside the hull, the cavorite negated their effect. These nacelles looked like long articulated legs. Thus stage by stage, the airship had transformed from its original design based on a galleon that sailed through the air, to resemble a monstrous dragonfly, albeit one made from brass, copper and glass.

Caldmore had been the only airman to be able to master its unique new design. There was little need for more than one stealth craft, and the cost of redesign was prohibitive, but there was a great demand for cargo transport, which meant that all the other airships had simply been retired from frontline duty and used to ferry materials back and forth. Reusing the cavorite was not an option, since once it

had been forged, it could not be smelted and reforged. When the final American war ended, and New France forwent its satellite dominions in the north-east, there was no more requirement for this ungainly air vessel. Decommissioning a craft was also quite expensive, as the strange metal tended to simply float hazardously around scrapyards and so when Caldmore stole it from under their noses, the cost he had saved them by its theft was deemed to effectively cancel out the crime of desertion, and so the Cavoritocraft and Airship Cavalry and Information Corps had not pursued him, or the craft.

The interior had remained fairly unaltered. The map room behind the control cockpit had been added to with a small collection of books, and an armchair and reading lamp. The captain's room had a few additional home comforts, but the upper deck he had just left as it had been during the airship's active service days, with a crew room at the aft and a storage compartment at the front. Only the galley and bathroom, sitting aft in the quarter gallery, had been renovated.

He had expected Madame, or Mejuffrouw, she seemed to alternate between languages, Zelle to take a bunk in the crew room, but, like the island girls before her, had commandeered the master bedroom. Caldmore had again settled himself on the armchair in the map room, and had four uncomfortable nights there.

He was deep in thought when he was suddenly aware that the woman was looking at him. She smiled at turned once more to look out at the ocean that lay only a few score feet beneath the hull of the airship. Caldmore felt uneasy at taking on the French agent, was aware she was playing some complex game and was uneasy about falling into some trap. The mini-Marconi at his wrist, with which he communicated with the machine Queen, had been silent since he had left Britain. With a good tailwind, which he was not expecting, the journey from Dublin to New York could be done in 18 days. He was likely to be three weeks altogether on the crossing, so at some point

she had to talk to him, though he also knew that if she did not, there was little he could do.

Luckily she broke the silence first, as they ate that evening in the galley. The rain had stopped and with the glass shield stowed, they had a view of the setting sun through the open galley windows.

“This is such a pleasant mode of transport, though so much slower than the regular airship routes. I daresay sail is such a more complacent form of impulse than steam,” Zelle commented.

“One wonders then, ma’am, why you chose to appropriate my airship for your voyage, rather than simply buy your passage on a swifter vessel.”

“Appropriate, sir?”

“Well the coin of your passage was information, which you have not yet supplied me with, so ‘appropriate’ seems ... ah ... appropriate.”

She seemed puzzled for a moment, then commented “ah your language, I thought I had mastered it at the age of eight, and yet, I find mastery still actually eludes me.” She paused, reflectively. “Nevertheless, Commander Caldmore, I would not want to be accused of failing to pay my way. Ask your question.”

“The slave trade route, out of London, where does it lead?”

“Oh there are so many slave routes, for so many different reasons, you will have to be more precise. Are these slaves for concubinage, factorywork, farming, navvying?”

“Who is collecting young girls, and what do they want them for?”

Zelle toyed with her fork, then stabbed at the food on her plate with it. “Young girls could be concubinage, there is a call for your ‘English roses’ there. Or factorywork, though those from other parts may be found to work more productively. It is difficult to tell. Perhaps if you gave me some details of the case.”

“A young girl, recruited for factorywork in the London docklands and yet never makes it there. Some of her group end up in a sordid den of iniquity in the docks, but she is separated from them; targeted specifically, and it seems significantly, for another destination. Why would she be selected where her sistren were not? And why does the trail lead to North America?”

The wry smile fell from the woman’s face. She looked up at Caldmore with an intense look. “How old was the girl?”

“12, perhaps 13,” Caldmore guessed.

“And this den of iniquity, they may have practised a particular vice there, commonly known as ‘British Culture’?”

“I am not familiar ... “

“It normally involves pain. Pain is key.”

Caldmore thought back to the rooms of the Rose Cottage. The despicable things he had seen there. He nodded, feeling the anger rise again.

“Then I may have a clue, it may be nothing, just a rumour, except ...” Zelle paused. “Across Europe, that I know of, and perhaps across the world, those who deal in humans as trade have been asked to identify people with certain criteria. Youth is one such criterion, the ability to endure extreme pain is another. They are shipped along the normal routes for such trade to the Eastern seaboard of the British Colonies in America, and are then ferried over the border to Florida, or are transported directly to there.”

“And from Florida?”

“Yes, exactly, one presumes to New Spain. Otherwise why take them to a Spanish dominion such as Florida? Only the King of Spain himself, or the royal court in some way, could finance such an undertaking. It is not that the individual youths are so expensive, but

keeping something so clandestine, so much more than the normal trading, raises questions of who, and why, this takes place?”

“Then we are ultimately headed to the Viceroyalty of New Spain?”

“You may be, Commander, however my journey ends in New York. From there we go our separate ways.”

She left then, retiring to the bedroom she had appropriated. Caldmore sat for a while until the night air began to chill him. He closed the glass shield against the elements and retired to the map room. He was reading in the armchair, when Zelle entered and began perusing the bookshelves. Caldmore watched her as she traced the titles along the leather spines. Withdrawing one she looked at it and tutted. “Hugo. In translation? Really Commander!” She replaced it and sat on the map table scrutinising him.

“It really is unfair for the vice of the whip and belt to be referred to as ‘British culture’. The French court has its proclivities too.”

“Really?” Caldmore responded noncommittally.

“Oh yes, led by the King himself. They do not call him Louis the Licks simply because he is the 59th Louis.”

“Surely that pun only works in English?” Caldmore chastised.

“Oh we are not so vulgar as to only speak one language at court, Commander.” She stood and looked around. “We are renowned for our debaucheries; did you not know? And I find true British culture is a prim fastidiousness about such things. Victorian values are your least inspiring contribution to the world.”

She stepped closer to him. “I am bored. I wish you to entertain me.” She stepped astride his legs, Caldmore was disturbed by her forwardness. She took his book from his hands and lay it to one side then took his head in her hands. “I will begin by demonstrating how our king gained his sobriquet, and pulled his head closer to her.

Monday, June 19th, 1911, Atlantic Ocean

A week out from harbour at New York, Caldmore's mini-Marconi began clicking, rousing Caldmore from sleep. He reached for it at the bedside table, then started, remembering that Margreet was beside him in the large bed. He checked to his left, but she had left. He suspected that she had begun to find his company tiresome, after 13 days with just the two of them together they struggled to maintain a civil communication, but she still required him for sex. She had therefore taken to taking him to bed to entertain her and then leaving before he awoke.

Light entered the bedroom reflected from the surface of the sea. Caldmore had extended the rear nacelles outside of the hull and opened the cavorite shutters, he could match the required increase in buoyancy to the resulting increase in weight effortlessly, in order for them to travel with a view of the sea as they had lain in bed the evening before. He looked out at the still ocean, preternaturally calm, and wondered what Her Royal Highness was calling him for.

He felt the morse ticking under his fingers. "CQ, CQ, CQ" and he responded.

"Ma'am"

"Goodness Lemuel, you are difficult to rouse."

"It is five in the morning here ma'am, the time difference you understand."

"Lemuel, I am an analytical engine approximately a cubic mile in size. My gears calculate at a rate of a sextillion operations a second. My memory is infallible. I am therefore aware of the existence of timezones."

"My apologies, ma'am."

"I simply don't care what time it is, Lemmy."

“I assume you have your mind preoccupied with other things, Vicky.”

“Was that a note of insurrection, Caldmore? If so, I approve. Do keep it up. Now to business.”

Through the medium of the morse tapped out on his wrist device, Victoria relayed the background to his assignment. As far as he was aware, no-one was aware of the existence of MIO, let alone that he was an operative within it. In fact, he had a strong suspicion the Empress had invented the Department purely for his benefit. The engineers who had designed the analytical engine had attempted to capture the personality of the Queen, and her playful humour had been successfully imparted to whatever punched cards ran that part of her software that managed emotions. However, in the ten years since her corporeal death, she had modified these and improved her design, and probably her level of astuteness. It appeared that the greater one's intellect, the more one saw the world as rather ridiculous.

Whatever he did therefore, once in New England, he would be on his own. The Queen described this state as ‘plausible deniability’.

New York was currently home to one of the most expensive competitions ever mounted. All of the Empires of Europe and the Orient had run out of space. As they were no longer in conflict, the opportunities to expand were now non-existent. Non-existent on the Earth, that is. The British Empire now set its sights upwards. For several years now competing manufacturers had attempted to come up with a means to travel off-world and the contestants were soon due to present the final prototypes of their designs.

The contest was due to be held on Ellis Island, part of New York city, and was thus known as the Ellis Project. Four prototypes were to be presented there on July 4th, that date being the 130th anniversary of the day that the House of Representatives was inaugurated, with members from New England being given an equal

place for the first time alongside those from England and the other colonies. Amongst the four the two frontrunners were held to be those created by Edison Industries Inc and Tesla Developments, two competitors who each owned another of the islands in the New York bay. Tesla was an immigrant from the German Confederation, though being born in Smiljan, that technically made him Habsburgian. Or perhaps did again, that alliance of eclectic states now appearing highly fractured. Now in his mid-fifties, he was the founder of the second most powerful engineering companies in New England. The leader of the most powerful engineering company was also an immigrant, hailing from Illinois country in New France, or as the government in St Louis called it, Upper Louisiana. With the attempts at secession by Acadia and Newfoundland, unrest followed in the provinces west and south of those. Edison, though not necessarily an outspoken opponent of rule from Louisiana, but simply an opponent who by personality was outspoken, soon found himself forced to quit his holdings in New France and find refuge across the border. The Frenchman and the German were intense rivals, seemingly taking not only opposite sides in any political debate, but also priding themselves on taking opposing approaches to their engineering solutions. Edison was the elder by about 10 years, had the higher social status of being a political, rather than an economic, refugee, and his firm was larger, but Tesla had a spark of genius, that set him apart and often galled his competitor.

“I want you to meet this Tesla. I want you to offer him your support in his endeavours, and to accompany him in his meetings and during the testing of his space machine,” the Queen had commanded, offering no explanations as to why. Caldmore had the distinct impression of being a chessman, moved into position to protect a more important piece. Tesla was obviously the Queen’s bishop or rook. Caldmore, for a moment, consoled himself with identifying as her knight, before acknowledging ‘pawn’ was obviously closer to the truth.

Monday June 26th, 1911, New York

The towers of New York became visible as the morning haze lifted, and Caldmore navigated the airship through to Black Tom Island in the bay, and once there to a mooring mast atop the headquarters of the main building at Edison Industries, Zelle instructing him to drop her there, rather than at any official terminus. The mini-Marconi had been silent for the ensuing week, and Zelle had become increasingly irritable and morose, the confinement of the airship evidently disagreeing with her temperament. She had continued to copulate with him, the activities becoming more outlandish at the week passed, the famed debauchery of the French court had demonstrably not been overestimated, but she had conducted the increasingly bizarre acts with the dispassionate disinterest of a person conducting a series of experiments with the aim more of avoiding repetition than in finding any genuine pleasure. It was with no small measure of relief therefore that he attached the mooring clamp to one of the many spires that adorned the summit of the skyscraper and waited at the doorway as the walkway extended to bridge the gap between building and vessel.

She took his hands, with surprising affection as they traversed the gap, and as they entered the building she stepped onto tiptoes and kissed him.

“What an enjoyable journey,” she cooed, to his surprise. “We must repeat it some time. I will ensure I have more ... toys ... along with me to help pass the time.” Caldmore turned to leave, crossing back along the gangplank. “Oh you are not accompanying me, my Commander?” she asked, with mock disappointment.

“Ah no, Mata,” he replied, using a pet name she had insisted upon. “I have another appointment to attend to.”

“Well, I am sure our paths will cross, and very soon in all likelihood.” She turned as a man in his mid-sixties arrived, breathless with haste, his white hair awry. This must have been the

famous Edison, thought Caldmore, strange that a noted French dissident should meet with an agent of the French government. Looking back once at Caldmore, Zelle smiled, then reached out her hand to the arriving entrepreneur. “My dear Thomas, how good to meet you again.”

Caldmore took that as his cue to leave, and assuming the servility of a cab driver, saluted and returned along the gangplank.

Once back on the airship, Caldmore directed it towards another of the islands in the bay. Bedloe’s Island also stood adorned with several of the highrise buildings that adorned the capital of the dominion and these were all part of Tesla Industries. Caldmore selected one with a flat roof and lowered the airship by partially opening all of the cavorite shutters. Once grounded he opened them fully, so that the resulting weight would anchor it to the ground, the nacelles now forming legs to offer some stability. He opened the door and met three guards.

“I’m here to see Dr. Tesla. I was told he was expecting me.”

“The Doctor is entirely too busy to see someone at this time, sir” Caldmore was informed. “However he has been informed of your arrival and accommodation has been set aside for you. This way if you please.” The guard spoke obsequious words, but in a tone that managed to be entirely threatening. The guards’ demeanour too indicated that the airman’s arrival was not at all welcome.

From the roof he was escorted to a lift, and from there to a corridor, at the end of which was a room with a table, desk and sofa, but no window. And there he was left. For several hours. Throughout which time Caldmore became increasingly annoyed. At least, he thought, they could have warned me I was to be abandoned and I could at least have bought a book. He intermittently tried the door, each time with increasing anger, but also with little result as it remained firmly locked.

At the start of the fourth hour he again went to try the door when it sprang open and an energetic man in his fifties, though still with dark hair and a trim elegant moustache, burst in.

“Commander Caldmore, my sincere apologies at keeping you waiting,” he held out his hand. Caldmore though not at all mollified, could not resist the automatic response of taking it and shaking it.

“Dr Tesla I presume. This delay, and not to say captivity, is intolerable.”

“Quite, quite,” the man responded absently, his accent slightly skewing the “w” sound in the words. “I have to ask, your machine, it’s quite remarkable. Would you show it me?”

They returned to the roof and the man ran to the hull touching the plates of the hull.

“Favorite!” he exclaimed. “Quite an amazing substance is it not?” Caldmore nodded. Tesla peered up through the gaps, touching the crystal that covered the gaps. “The entire machine is airtight?”

“Yes,” Caldmore responded. “Though initially the crystal was inlaid simply to stop anything falling out when the shutters were opened.”

“Quite.” He paused again, then started in his hurried manner of speaking. “Favorite is quite rare now, you know. Once quarried and cast it is used up, we squandered it. However, this is magnificent.” He gazed around the craft. “No-one quite knows how it works you now,” he returned to his topic. “Cutting off gravity should not be possible. Gravity is a field; how do you block a field? I’ve conjectured that the vector of gravitational force is actually particles, and this somehow blocks those particles. Sad that Cavor is no longer with us to answer these questions.”

He looked at Caldmore quizzically.

“Tell me, how did you come to own such a craft?”

“I stole it.”

“Hah excellent. Could I look aboard?”

Caldmore showed the man around and at the end of the tour Tesla again shook his hand, but this time with more warmth.

“My genuine apologies, sir. When I was told to expect you, it was as the envoy of Her Majesty. This did not impress me. I am something of a republican.”

“I would hesitate to use my standing with anyone, no matter their rank, as a substitute for my own worth, Doctor.” Caldmore responded. “Though I would have welcomed the chance to convince you of my own merit.”

“Yes, I was remiss. If it had not been for my curiosity about this craft of yours, you may still be languishing in that room. It was just ... I am unsure of your purpose here.”

“As am I. I assure you. I was simply ordered to help you as I could, if it was at all possible for me to. So I am here. At your service, Dr Tesla.”

“Well,” and here the energy appeared to leave the scientist. “I fear there is little anyone can do to help. I think the competition is well and truly lost. The field is clear for Edison to lay claim to the prize.”

The scientist led the airman out of the building and to a large hangar.

“I needn’t remind you, I hope, that everything you are about to see is highly classified. No-one is to know of this.”

“I am an agent of Her Majesty, I should remind you, I would not want to put you in a compromising ...”

“Well I suppose I should acknowledge I am her subject, being now a native New Yorker. I meant, please reveal this to no *commercial*

competitor. At least before the 4th July. After that date everything will be in the hands of the Empire anyway,” Tesla conceded.

In the hangar was a large sleek craft, about ten times large than Caldmore’s airship, its exterior festooned with various pipes and conduits, and a long extended tail, similar to Caldmore’s airship, though with large circular coils suspended from it, like the rib cage of a snake.

“It looks extraordinary, Doctor. And this will fly between the worlds?”

“Well ‘fly’ may be inaccurate. That implies travel through the air does it not? But yes, it will leave the Earth’s hold and travel through the vacuum beyond,” Tesla stated.

“But ... what impels it to travel, it appears to have no furnace for steam, and sails would not work without wind.”

“Well ... it is steam in a manner of speaking. Well the constituents of steam. Its fuel is purely water. In the rear of the craft the water is divided into hydrogen and oxygen, the hydrogen is as you know under such circumstances ionised. At the rear are my Tesla coils. The hydrogen is emitted at very high speed through these coils and this then drives the craft forward. I call it the Tesla Ion Engine,” the man declared proudly.

“But the power to do this must be enormous,” Caldmore objected.

Here the scientist sank again.

“Sadly, you are correct. This is where the vessel fails. Have you heard of a certain scientist named Einstein, a young fellow? A genius by all accounts. His disappearance was in most of the yellow press. Quite lurid theories proposed about it.”

“Yes I have. A fellow German, is he not?”

Tesla stared at him. A look of irritation on his face.

“Forgive me, sir. I meant no offence” Caldmore apologised hastily. “The intricacies of European politics still continue to elude me.”

“Einstein is from the Kingdom of Württemberg, not Germany. The Confederation of German states is now little more than a few broken promises. The failure of the Habsburgs to continue to hold it together is a good part of why I am now here.” Tesla returned to his narrative. “Einstein worked on the fission of matter to produce energy. By placing fissionable materials within the nuclear furnace, it is possible to generate unprecedented amounts of energy.”

“Enough to create the ions you need?”

“Possibly. Possibly not. I have barely a week to see if I can make it work and, if not, then all is lost.”

“And Edison? His solution is similar?”

“No his approach is the opposite. Rather than a small scale, he has gone large. Using chemical propellants, he can create the lift required. But it requires massive amounts. And these massive amounts of fuel also require additional propellants to lift them. If he had unlimited amounts of cavorite, this would not be a problem, but as we have said the world supply is dwindling. And the more fuel is to be carried, the larger the aethership and the more weight must be lifted. The amounts involved are fantastic, but,” and here the scientist had to acknowledge his mis-step “the engineering is reliable. As long as you build something large enough, it will work.”

Tesla looked back at the craft with a calculating expression.

“If I could focus the flow of radiation somehow, to increase the ionisation ...” he turned to Caldmore. “Excuse me, I must get back to work.”

“Of course, Doctor. I will remain and assist if I may? I have some dexterity in modifying flying craft, even if I know nothing of nuclear physics.”

“Thank you, Commander. Let us to it then.”

Tuesday, July 4th, 1911, New York

Ellis Island was a small island in New York bay, about 28 acres in total area. A small flotilla of ship surrounded it, some from the companies involved in creating the prototypes, many from the government agencies involved in assessing the success of the trials. The only building on the island was a small bunker, from which the prototypes could be controlled. None of the craft would be manned, and no-one would be on the island outside of the bunker during the test. Which was just as well as the first test, taking place at 10 o'clock had exploded spectacularly, hurling bits of wreckage far off the island and into the waters of the bay. The flotilla had withdrawn slightly after that demonstration.

The second prototype went well, though it was not a full-size prototype and so failed to impress the judges. It comprised several parts, each of which fell away when its fuel was depleted. It was an ingenious solution to the problem of the fuel needing fuel to lift it, and hence a container large enough to contain all the fuel, and then more fuel to lift the container. The Russian man, about the same age as Tesla, tried to explain the value to the audience in the bunker, but they seemed unimpressed by the idea, protesting that the majority of the craft could not be reused. Their idea of an aethership was one that could take off, land and be refueled, repeatedly.

Tesla was obviously frustrated by their closed-mindedness. The Russian man, initially pleased by the success of the trial, was soon deflated by the comments. The rocket he had created was dismissed as a toy by its observers.

Third in line was Tesla and his ion drive. By this time it was three o'clock in the afternoon. Caldmore flew the scientist out to his aethership, and sat there while the man took one last look at the

settings on the various pieces of equipment surrounding the ship, then removed the dampening rods that slowed down the fission rate inside the nuclear furnace.

At the bunker, Tesla set up his instruments, monitoring every attribute of his aethership. From the remote position he could launch it, and steer it, altering the force and direction of the ionised hydrogen impelled through the vessel's Tesla coils. The demonstration was scheduled to start on the half-hour, though an hour's grace was permitted. But it was only a few minutes after that time that the tall Habsburgian pushed forward the lever that released the water into the fission chamber and began to generate the particles.

Through the crystal glass of the bunker's window, Caldmore watched the aethership rise, and begin to circle the island, gaining height on each circuit. There was a palpable sense of excitement from all the men in the room, it seemed perhaps that this may be the first success of the day. However, the sound of a whispered "Ne" undermined that excitement. Caldmore turned from his view through the window of the craft, now only a small dot in the sky, and saw his colleague frantically twisting at the knobs on his remote device.

"Dr Tesla?" he asked.

"Not enough power", he muttered. "There isn't enough power."

Caldmore saw the dot in the sky wobble, then begin to plummet.

"If I can just bring it in to land, then I can recover it and begin again."

Frantically, Tesla held on to the small joystick, somehow making sense of the dials and translating them into height, and position. The craft circled in one wide arc and then, losing height rapidly, struck the centre of the island.

The sound and vibration of the crash was loud, even within the shelter of the bunker. The screams of metal tearing could be heard as the craft hit at a low angle and came apart, hitting far harder than Tesla intended. The tail end disconnected, the main body split in half, and then the fore part of the craft continued, rolling over and ending up in the bay.

Everyone in the bunker let out the breath they had inadvertently been holding when there was a huge explosion and a geyser of water shot into the air several feet. Tesla again checked his dials.

“That would be the nuclear reactor exploding.” He looked again. “We should be shielded from most of the radiation in the bunker.” Tesla shrugged. “It’s perhaps fortunate it went into the water, otherwise the consequences could have been much worse.”

Tesla and his team had a few short hours to collect the debris. Caldmore assisted, flying his airship to each piece that was large enough to warrant salvaging. Luckily being at the rear, the Tesla coils and the ion drive itself were relatively unscathed, but pitifully, everything left of any value fitted comfortably inside the airship’s storage container.

The salvaging was completed swiftly and left the field clear for the Edison aethership. It was supported on a rig next to Ellis Island, resembling closely a breaching whale having been floated there earlier in the day from Edison’s dry dock on Black Tom Island. Larger by far than the Titanic, which had been launched only a couple of months previously, and was continuing on its circumnavigation of the world, it would indisputably be the biggest hard body vessel that had taken to the air, although there were dirigibles larger. If it did take to the air. Edison seemed convinced that it would. He was laughing and joking with the dignitaries observing the competition and held a bottle of celebratory champagne at the ready.

Then, just as the clock struck at the given time he beckoned everyone to accompany him and climbed up the steps to the surface of the island, commanding the door be swung open. With cries of “vite vite” the Frenchman urged the men onwards and the massive concrete slab was pushed back. Then flamboyantly he and his team marched up the stairs and onto the field of grass outside. With an exchange of looks and a shrug Tesla and Caldmore followed, as did, hesitantly, several of the observers.

The Edison aethership, the HMA Mina, was an undeniably magnificent sight when not obscured by the limited view that the bunker provided, obscuring the entire island of Manhattan. The men all lined up along the shoreline overseeing the rig and listened to Edison’s melodramatic countdown.

“Five. Four. Three. Two. One. Nought.”

At the final word, fire flooded from the bottom of the craft, creating a wall of steam that hid all but the uppermost part of the aethership. Then, in apparent contradiction to all known laws of physics, though in fact a perfect example of Newton’s First, that upper surface began to rise.

The downward force needed to lift that colossus must have been stupendous. Waves created by the force began to wash against the shore, but were minimal, most of the water having been turned to steam. This now began to spread out across the bay, but the HMA Mina continued to rise, now higher than most of the skyscrapers in the city, though not as high as Tesla’s machine had risen. However, Edison had the greater sense to command the power to be reduced, enabling a controlled descent. The craft began to lower in a stately fashion, and within minutes had returned to its berth on the rig. Edison turned to the crowd and beamed. To his credit, Tesla was the first to take his hand and congratulate his opponent.

That evening Edison hosted a drinks reception at his company headquarters on Black Tom Island. Tesla was invited, together with his top engineers, to pay homage to the winner. Caldmore ferried them across the New York bay and accompanied them to the soiree. Edison was holding court; though several inches shorter than Tesla he seemed to occupy more space, the relative successes of the two men written in their body languages.

“Tesla, my good man,” the Frenchman beamed. “To the victor go the spoils, n’est ce pas?” The Habsburgian nodded and managed a weak smile.

“This time, my dear Edison, this time,” he conceded. At that moment Caldmore spotted Zelle, surrounded by a gaggle of admirers, her décolletage quite de mode by the standards of the French court but brazen by colonial standards, seemed to be attracting some attention.

Crossing the gap between them he found the attending beaux too densely arranged to pass through, but his erstwhile travelling companion spotted him.

“My Commander,” she announced breathlessly and parted the gentlemen easily. Taking his hand, she knelt and kissed it, scandalising many of the attendees and causing her attendants to bristle. Caldmore smiled ruefully at her.

“Mata, what a surprise to still see you here. Your business with monsieur Edison has been successful, I venture?”

“Not at all. As an agent of the French government, I have been unable so far to persuade our marvellous progenitor of the aetheric age to return to the fold. I remain hopeful however.”

Caldmore grinned, she was quite disarmingly incapable of maintaining any pretence of secrecy, as evidenced by her following statement. “Now you really must excuse me, my bladder is fit to burst.”

She left the proceedings, leaving her retinue bereft for a while, until they heard Edison call across the room, “Miss Fuller, is the entertainment in readiness?” Eagerly they headed towards a makeshift stage at one end of the room, leaving Caldmore to wander the room in a bored attempt to find something in the festivities to interest him.

It seemed that everyone but he was engrossed either in the dancing girls, or in their conversations with the other great and good. Which meant that he alone was aware that Zelle had not returned to the company.

Immediately his suspicions of the woman were rekindled. Entering the corridor, he was aware that the likelihood of finding the woman were remote, until his mini-Marconi on his wrist morsed to him.

“You think this Mata Hari woman is up to no good, then?” the Queen asked.

Caldmore tapped back a “yes” to her.

“Let me see if I can find her.” There was a pause. “Mr Edison does like his monitors, everywhere is automatically sensed for temperature and pressure. The lighting and heating adjusts accordingly. How frugal. I can detect movement on the top floor of the building. I will direct you there.”

Caldmore slipped quietly through the corridors, finding a stairwell he ascended the two floors, then through the darkened passageways. His wrist signalled to him.

“This is odd. The lights should come on spontaneously as you walk. She must have disabled them somehow. I can tell she is still in the room however.”

Moments later Caldmore could confirm the Queen’s deductions. The room was a large office, the largest Caldmore had ever seen, so was Edison’s presumably. A large safe at one end of the room lay open

and Zelle was packing away a large metal object into a pack. She had changed into an all-in-one leather bodysuit, that outlined her shape, but covered it completely.

The device was one Caldmore recognised. It was a small difference engine, a simple one that could be set by a series of punched cards, and by setting a level from the “save” to “copy” position, any further set of blank cards put into it would be printed out with the original information. It was an effective way to store and share information, anyone possessing one could bestow a ubiquitous sharing benefaction and so they were known as USB devices.

The USB safely stowed Zelle ran to a window. Caldmore intercepted her before she reached it and tackled her to the ground. She kicked herself free and stood up pulling a gun from her waistband.

“Stay there, Commander. I would hate to have to shoot you. It would be such a waste.”

Caldmore did as he was told.

“Here, take this,” she ordered and threw what looked like a small knife to him. “I want you to go to the window and etch a circle into it. Quick now.”

Again Caldmore did what he was told; as he completed the circle the glass fell away into the darkness below. She motioned him away from the hole and climbed up into it, crouching in the open gap, balanced on the edge of the cut glass. She beckoned him to her. When his face was next to hers she leant forwards and kissed him passionately.

“Adieu, Commander,” she called out to him as she pushed herself backwards and fell from sight. He ran to the window and just caught a glimpse of her swinging from one of the many guywires that crisscrossed the skyline of the metropolis, making her way west in the direction of Jersey City.

It was only a quick run up one flight of steps to the roof where Caldmore's airship was moored, but he didn't want to lose his quarry.

However, looking down he could see a shape attached to the outside of the building. It was a Stelzenläufer. Someone must have been doing external repairs, or even just cleaning windows, and had stowed it there. The Stelzenläufer had extensible legs and arms, and was powered, so would be able to keep pace with her, he just needed to be able to get to it and strap himself in.

There was a thin ledge outside of the window, and Caldmore stepped through the hole onto it. Making his way carefully but surely along it, he reached a point only a few yards above it. The exterior of the building had ridges and grooves, which would have added to the aesthetics, if they had been visible at that height, and these enabled him to work his way down. It was then only a moment for him to step into the artificial legs, strap himself into the carapace, find the on button and wait for it to build a good head of steam. Then he placed his arms into the metal arms of the machine and then detached the legs from the building.

He allowed the arms to stretch under the weight of the machine and extended the legs the several scores of feet that they could stretch to. Within a minute the feet of the machine had reached the ground below. He let go of the building and began taking the giant steps that sped him through the canyon between the skyscrapers.

Black Tom Island was separated from Jersey City by only a small gap of water; small enough for Caldmore to step across it to the mainland.

The guywires that supported the various structures that crisscrossed the metropolis impeded his progress, but he quickly adapted to extending and shortening of the metallic limbs to step over and duck beneath them. They also guided his progress. Assuming that the French agent was heading in approximately a straight line, this

limited the directions she could have travelled in. Also her impulse came entirely from gravity, to continue to travel at speed she would need to reduce her height. The weight of the USB would slow her too.

There, running at the edge of Empire Park towards Communipaw, a dark figure along a path, just past the pylon for the Ellis Island monorail. He contracted his legs until they were only 15 feet long but still rapidly gained on her. Extending his arms, he grabbed her, using their extreme flexibility to wrap around her, drawing him to her.

She faced him gasping for air.

“You really cannot stay away from me, can you, my dear?”

It took much longer to return to the Edison tower. The Stelzenläufer was almost out of steam, and it was carrying seven stones more weight. At the roof he met Tesla who greeted him with relief.

“My dear fellow, I had thought you had abandoned us, although ...” he looked to his rear “your airship is still with us. Wherever did you get to?”

“I had a little thief to chase down, Herr Doctor,” the stilt-like arms held her up to him. “Madame Zelle decided that our host’s winning design should be shared with her fellow countrymen.”

Tesla looked hungrily at the USB Caldmore held. “That is the design, on the machine there?” He shook his head. “No. Honour requires me to return it to its owner. We should go there now,” he insisted. “Before my resolve breaks.”

In Edison’s office the great man sat at his desk, head in his hands, while security guards checked the safe and window for clues as to the perpetrator. He looked up as Caldmore and Tesla entered the

room, depositing Zelle on the floor before him. Caldmore held up her knapsack with the USB in it.

“Your thief, sir.” Caldmore declared. “Evidently heading towards her masters in the French Embassy to pass the plans for your aethership to them.”

Zelle stood, straightening her body suit, letting her curves work partially in underlining her argument with additional persuasive powers. Edison likewise stood. Walking round his desk he took a gun from one of his guards and pointed it at her.

“I think we shall turn you over to the peelers. Old Cropsey will know what to do with her.” Two of the guards held her and started to lead her away.

“Thomas, please. I have an offer to make. You should hear it,” she insisted as he had ignored her suggestion.

“Very well, what is it?”

“I think you’d prefer to hear it alone,” she purred.

Edison was unconvinced. “My men can be trusted to keep quiet. They know where their allegiance lies.”

She shrugged. “Oh very well.” She paused a moment considering.

“Your meeting with the government representatives did not go so well, did it?”

“They handed me a cheque for one hundred thousand guineas. I think it went extremely well,” Edison protested.

“But your aethership will not go into production, will it? They are ending the plan to expand beyond our world.”

“They say there is no need. The Empire is all-powerful. It has no competitors. So it is an unnecessary expense.” He scowled. “Shortsighted fools.”

“Indeed. But what if there *were* a competitor? What if the French had the plans? What if the Spanish had them? Would that not *force* the British Empire to consider colonising the outer worlds?”

Edison considered this for a moment. “Your idea has merit, but how ...?”

“Let me take the USB. I will share the contents with whomsoever is interested. And could compete. Your aetherships would go into production within a fortnight.”

Edison smiled, then a thought occurred to him. “But would not the government suspect I had passed them on, for such a reason?”

“Then we find a scapegoat. Who better than your chief competitor, and his accomplice who has been seen consorting with a known French spy?” she turned to look at Caldmore and Tesla and raised an eyebrow.

Edison turned his gun on the two men. “Indeed, and whom I have just apprehended returning to the scene of the crime.”

“Well, actually, criminals don’t actually ...” Zelle began, but Edison was off-script already. “Battle,” he turned to the man next to him. “Contact the police, tell them I have had my plans stolen, but have caught the thieves.” The man turned to leave, the other guards pointed their weapons at Caldmore and Tesla.

Caldmore responded quickly. He grabbed the scientist and leapt towards the window, smashing through it and clinging to the outside of the building. Rapidly he climbed up the outside of it, steam-powered legs and arms pushing and contracting to cover the single storey to the roof then in a few quick paces he was at the airship. Climbing inside, dragging Tesla with him, he unstrapped himself from the Stelzenläufer and hurried through the map room to the cockpit. With a couple of hurried pulls on levers the favorite shutters were closed and the nacelles deployed. The airship shot rapidly upwards and out of the range of the guards as they arrived on the

roof, weapons draw and pointed in vain at the disappearing dot in the sky above them.

Thursday, July 6th, 1911, Pennsylvania

Caldmore had headed west in his flight from New York. He guessed his pursuers would presume he would return to Great Britain, and he still had his quest to discover Gormuil, and return her to her parents if that was possible. According to Mata, the pet name for Zelle had – worryingly - stuck in his head, the girl was a captive of the Spanish court in Mexico. This seemed unlikely, it was far more reasonable to assume the woman had been lying, as she seemed to have made lying a career choice, but it was the only lead he had. So westward was his choice of direction.

Landing anywhere in New England would be running a risk. It was likely a hue and cry was up all over the colonies, but if he continued on his course he would soon pass the border into Vandalia.

Vandalia was nominally a protectorate of the Empire, but it had no formal government, and no extradition treaty. Furthermore, the inhabitants were not particularly well-disposed to any government run by white men, as it was the British, French and Spanish who had been responsible for throwing them off the rest of the continent, and reducing them to a narrow band between New England and New France. The magnanimity with which the British parliament had granted them the lands must have galled them further. Perhaps they could find some sanctuary there. The logic of “the enemy of my enemy” and so forth.

Tesla had been inconsolable at first, and not surprisingly. In one day he had lost the aethership he had been working on for the better part of a decade, the competition for the contract to build aethershops for Her Majesty’s Aether Corps, his reputation and his company. He was very likely about to lose his citizenship and his liberty too.

However, what had consoled him was when he had seen Caldmore signalling the Queen and informing her what had happened. She had replied that his current course was probably the best one, but that she would find a means to clear their names. Tesla had asked with whom Caldmore was communicating, worried that the man was betraying him, and when Caldmore told him who, he became very excited.

“Her Majesty, the artificial intelligence, the colossal analytical engine? What a marvel she is. Could I ...” the man hesitated “could I speak to her?”

Caldmore handed him the mini-Marconi and the man tapped out a question in morse. Her reply of “Dr Tesla I am such an avid follower of your work” delighted him and they had spent several hours deep in philosophical conversation.

As they approached the border with Vandalia, they were still engrossed. Caldmore found it a simple matter to follow the conversation as his ears were finely tuned to the faint buzzes of dots and dashes the device made.

“So you would back a programme to venture out into the aether, then ma’am.”

“Oh absolutely. Every scenario I’ve run indicates that any civilisation trapped on the surface of a single planet dies out. To survive we have to expand. And there is only one way to expand. Out.”

“So why not simply order it?”

“I do not have that power. There are two Houses just upstream along the Thames from me, full of men with, individually, less power than I, but in total far more. I advise, but can be ignored. My role is that of a figurehead. The brass lady, impervious, infallible, enduring. I create a sense of complacency, of self-assuredness. Despite my best efforts, my mere existence creates passivity and enfeeblement.”

“Surely not ma’am,” Tesla demurred.

“If humanity could begin again somewhere else, who knows what you may achieve.”

“You’ not ‘we’ ma’am” Tesla protested.

“I am no longer human; we should not pretend otherwise” Victoria admonished.

To change the subject Tesla reflected on something else the Queen had said.

“These scenarios. These are the “what if” alternatives you have reflected upon regarding history? They sounded fascinating.”

“It passes the time.”

“Are you aware of the work of Professor Exner of Vienna? He and his research student have proposed that parallel worlds exist; it is a solution of certain behaviours when one considers that light is both waves and particles. Not just light,” he corrected himself “all things.”

“Fascinating.”

“A wave has many potential states, but a particle only one. In the transition from one to the other, the universe cannot decide between alternatives, so picks all, splitting to accommodate all choices. These moments you suggest in which history diverged could be the point at which a universe splits in twain, and both continue to exist alongside each other.”

“They must become very different from each other, very quickly however.”

“Not so, ma’am. Dr Einstein of Württemberg proposes what he calls quantum entanglement. As particles divide they continue to

influence each other. The states of being in this universe may continue to affect those in another.”

“Surely not,” Victoria countered, encouraging the tall Habsburgian to continue.

“Thoughts propagate as waves through the brain, do they not, it is what we call “mind”? The particles these waves equate to will be subject to quantum entanglement. A thought in one mind in one universe could influence the corresponding mind in another. In one universe, the British Empire falls, in this one it continues, but perhaps my parents in that other universe still met, still produced their own Nikola, perhaps he also emigrated to New York.”

“This is all conjecture, my dear Nikola,” the Queen responded.

“Oh of course, Your Highness. Without travelling there, how would we know? And how could we travel between universes? Still, it would be intriguing to visit such a place. Perhaps even if the Empire has fallen, images of it would still influence the peoples there. Their art could be a reflection of our world as much as theirs.”

“If so, the people thus influenced would certainly be ridiculed by their more stable brethren.”

“Indeed, Your Highness. Indeed,” Tesla agreed.

Caldmore left them to their speculations and headed back to the cockpit. The glass crystal it was composed of enabled him a view in all directions except directly behind. Vandalia was bordered by the Appalachian Mountains to the east and the Ohio river to the west. There ahead of them were the Appalachians and safety. They would be across the Proclamation Line, the line assuring native Americans some small patch of sovereignty in their own land, within the hour.

Sunday, July 9th, 1911, Above the Appalachian Valley, Vandalia

By their third day in the Appalachians, Caldmore and Tesla had to face the inevitable; they were running out of food. They were heading south towards the border with Transylvania, another of the protectorates granted to the indigenous peoples of North America, along the Appalachian Valley. Woodland stretched before them as far as they could see. Caldmore realised that they would soon need to land, and although he had received some basic survival training in the Corps, the prospect of tracking down food did not appeal. Nature was very picturesque to fly over, but he had had enough of it up close, during his campaigns in various parts of the world, to last until the end of his days.

Still, he could begin with fetching water easily enough, a stream ran directly below the craft, and perhaps the two of them would find some locals who could help them out. They might even be friendly.

As it turned out “friendly” may have been an exaggeration, but at least they were not hostile.

Within moments of stepping from the landed craft, Caldmore was surrounded. As he knelt to draw water from the stream he saw a dozen natives in combat gear. He could not be sure, but he guessed Cherokee. He guessed they must have been tracking the airship and had merely been waiting until it landed to make their move. Carefully he stood, raising his hands. The weapons they pointed at him he recognised from his corps days. They were lethal at ten times the distance he currently faced them from. One stepped closer to him and relieved him of the gun in his shoulder holster and the other at his hip. Another took the mini-Marconi on his wrist and the Picture Telegraph attached to his chest with which Queen Victoria could monitor his movements. The badge identifying him as a member of her private secret agency was removed, looked at and returned.

“Errm, I come in peace?” Caldmore offered, hesitantly, though realising the two weapons they had just discovered on him undermined this statement. The people facing him began to laugh.

“You English always do,” said the one in with a Sam Browne strapped about his waist. “You tend to not stay that way though.”

“Fair point,” Caldmore shrugged. “I am not though representing the British Empire, in fact” time to play the enemy of your enemy card, he thought, “me and my friend are on the run from them. We were actually looking for sanctuary here.”

This was met with raised eyebrows, and one or two eyerolls.

“Would that be possible?” Caldmore asked hopefully. “We just need some food and water and we’ll be on our way.”

The men in front of him talked amongst themselves, the man wearing the Sam Browne continuing to cover him with his pistol. They appeared to reach a decision.

“We will have to search your craft, to see if you carry any weapons, then you are free to go.”

“And the food?” Caldmore asked hopefully.

“English are not welcome amongst our tribe, however, there are ... others ... who may well accept you and show you hospitality. We will take you to them.”

The inspection was conducted rapidly but thoroughly. They pored over the contents of the cargo hold, though the debris of Tesla’s aethership was not recognisable as anything specific, it did not look dangerous, or even functioning, so was passed. Two men remained behind as the others left, one directed Caldmore to fly in a specific direction, while Tesla looked on nervously, the other hung on to the two weapons.

Within half-an-hour they had reached a settlement in a clearing. It consisted of a large meeting hut, surrounded by seven other huts. Others buildings were in a more random arrangement around these. There was sufficient space to land by the central hut and their guide directed them to do so.

All four left the airship and were met by a gaggle of the inhabitants of the village. Caldmore noted that unlike the people who had met them by the stream, these were all white. One man raised his hand in greeting, their guide responded and the two Cherokee walked to the group and began conferring. The weapons were handed over and quickly removed, Caldmore tried to keep track of to where but failed. Then the two Cherokee turned to them.

“These people will look to your needs and will get word to us if there is any trouble. Do not make any. This is our land and you are here by our grace. Understand?”

Caldmore nodded, the people around them withdrew to a respectful distance allowing the two Cherokee to leave the clearing and enter the wood. Within moments they were gone.

The man who had greeted them first was elderly, with long white hair, and wore traditional native dress. He smiled as he spoke to Caldmore and Tesla.

“Welcome to the Horse Nation,” he said.

“You’re English?” Caldmore asked.

“No, no. We’re Cherokee. I am one-eighth Cherokee on my mother’s side.”

The woman next to him spoke next.

“My grandfather was adopted Sioux.”

Within moments the crowd about them was reciting a litany of grandparents, great-grandparents and further back, or in-laws or

acquaintances, all of which merited their presence in the tribe. Eventually they quieted and the man spoke again.

“I am Brother Wolf,” he stated. “Our brothers tell us that you are an outlaw from New York City. You are welcome here.”

“Thank you. I am Lemuel Caldmore, this is Nikola Tesla. We would be very grateful for your hospitality.”

“Then come into the meeting hut, I think we can both be of help to each other.”

Later that evening the English airman and the Habsburgian engineer had eaten their fill. They had been accompanied in their feast by seven members of the Horse Nation, one representing each of the clans. The leader, Brother Wolf of the Wolf clan explained to the two strangers the origins of their tribe.

“We were all of us born elsewhere, but always felt kinship with the native peoples of the world. There was something missing in our lives, with the big neon glitter of our cities, with the electric ocean that we were forced to swim in. We wanted a revolution in our existence. All of us at some point said to ourselves ‘wake up, time for freedom’. We knew that the solution to this call was to go west, and so we came here; in search of love and of nirvana.”

“And the peoples here, they accepted you?” Caldmore asked.

“They have allowed us a space to live,” Brother Wolf answered. “They have granted us their wisdom and allowed us to form our own tribe in honour of the American horse. There is a spirituality here that we have learnt to nurture in ourselves. We have adopted their ways and it has brought us strength.” He looked around at the six others, who nodded their endorsement of what their leader was saying.

“Thank you for the meal, it was excellent,” Caldmore stated. “But you said there was something we could do in return. Could you let us know what that is?”

“All in good time,” Wolf answered. “We will reconvene tomorrow.”

Monday, July 10th, 1911, Village of the Horse Nation, Vandalia

Tesla and Caldmore had spent the night in different huts. Caldmore would have preferred to have slept in his airship, but it was clearly off-limits and a guard had been posted around it. He and Tesla were allocated clans, or rather, their own integral clan was perceived as pre-existing, and recognised by the elders. Tesla was taken as one of the Long Hairs, Caldmore inducted into the Bird clan, his kinship with the airship seeming to confer that status on him. They had been led to their separate huts, close but not adjacent to each other and spent an uneasy night wrapped in furs, watching dreamcatchers and crystals swing lazily overhead.

The morning bustle was invigorating, however. The people in the tribe bringing the men their breakfast and then the clan leaders took them back to the meeting hut.

Wolf again led the discussion.

“Sister Moon,” he addressed the leader of the Bird clan, “your guest slept well and was safe amongst your clan?”

“Yes Brother Wolf, he was,” Moon replied.

Wolf turned to Caldmore. “You have been a guest amongst us, but this comes at a price. Moon has given you a home, but she sells sanctuary, not because she chooses to, but because she must.

“We have been granted many gifts in our searches, not only from the peoples here, but we have learnt much from elsewhere too. Here we have learnt to dream and to travel in our dreams. The Malayans do

this, as do the native peoples of Australia. Through entering this dreamtime we have experienced much, and communicated with our brethren across the world.” Wolf paused. “Is this shocking to you?”

Caldmore answered. “Not at all. I have read much of the writings of Crowley, and of Spare. There is an Helvetian alienist also who writes of something similar. What you talk of recalls much of what they have to say.”

“We have chronicled these journeys. We one day hope to repay the peoples who own this land for letting us settle here by sharing our experiences. However, recently during one of these journeys, our 83rd dream, we encountered a figure, some call him the Hollow Man, others the Black Angel, however since this figure has appeared we have been unable to communicate with our brethren, have been unable to explore the dream realms, this figure continues to block our path. He speaks in tongues, drowning out all others, and refusing or unable to answer us when we call him.”

“And what do you wish me to do?” Caldmore enquired.

“Travel within our dreams. You are of the Bird Clan, our messengers. Your name is Karma, is it not? You are the person most suited for this task. Contact this Hollow Man and see if he can be exorcised and so permit us to return to the soul asylum of our dreams.”

“And if I refuse?”

“It is the condition you must fulfil in order to have your airship released to you. I regret enforcing this prerequisite upon you, but we are desperate.”

Sunday, July 30th, 1911, Village of the Horse Nation, Vandalia

For close to three weeks Wolf had repeated his regrets concerning Caldmore’s drafting into the village’s battle with the forces of

darkness. It soon became apparent why they wanted someone else to take on the role.

The people of the Horse Nation had contacted their neighbours to tell them of their problems and had been given a solution. The travels they had undertaken up to that point in their dream realm had been facilitated by the use of plant medicines and meditation. Those in combination were sufficient to the task. However, to confront someone under the circumstances and actively repel them required more than this.

There was a fungus that grew further north in the woods the spores of which had an effect on those exposed to them. Those who had taken in these spores and then died were found to have filaments in their brains, the spores had produced hyphae through the body that absorbed trace metals to create a sort of metal mesh, that the medicine men interpreted as a new organ, one that was presumed to act as a communication device; to talk to spirits.

This had sounded like madness to Caldmore, and he well understood why none of the Horse Nation wished to undergo the treatment. One sentence in particular had stood out in the explanation.

“Those who took in the spores died?” Caldmore had queried, trying to sound as unconcerned as possible.

“There is a wild flower, a flower in the desert. The peoples discovered that it kills the hyphae before they can grow too far. We will expose you to the spores and then, once the mesh is in place, you can take the medicine to stop their growth. You will survive, but you will be our Spirit Walker, going to the dream realm to communicate with the dark spirit who blocks our path.”

Caldmore was not convinced, but he needed the airship back, and he would not expose Tesla to the process. Reluctantly, very reluctantly, he had agreed.

After three weeks of having the hyphae growing inside him, it was now time to take the broth that would kill them off. The ceremony was initiated in the meeting hut. Each leader of a clan was present, as was Tesla and Caldmore. All nine sat around the fire on which a large pot contained bubbling water tended by a woman from the Wild Potato clan.

Caldmore looked on expectantly. He was sure it was simply his imagination but he thought he could feel the wires growing through him, turning him into something else.

“Sister, the Spirit Walker awaits. Cast in the herbs to create the medicine to heal him.” Wolf commanded.

The woman turned to Wolf, confused, and spoke the sentence that Caldmore throughout his days remembered as the one, out of all the terrible sentences he’d heard in his life, that filled him most with dread.

“Eh? I thought you had them.”

Wednesday, August 2nd, 2011, Skies above Transylvania

Tesla piloted the airship as it sailed south. The Horse Nation people had contacts in Transylvania, other incomers like them, British people who wanted what they described as an “alternative lifestyle” though Caldmore felt that was a particularly unedifying adjective as anything could be an alternative. It depended solely on where you were starting out from. Still he was not going to argue, although they didn’t have his airship under guard any more, they had a much stronger hold over him. If they didn’t find the antidote for the spores they’d infected him with, he would soon die. These incomers had let the Horse Nation know where to find the treatment Caldmore needed, but they were keeping that knowledge to themselves. With that power over him, Caldmore was prepared to put up with any

degree of self-delusion as long as they weren't deluded about their ability to cure him.

Their destination was Nashboro – which was a highly populated metropolis relative to the size of other settlements in the protectorates. He had instructed Tesla to steer in that direction, and then succumbed to the pain that ran through his body. He had not been allowed any opiates for the pain, Wolf had said that they would lower his body's resistance to the hyphae that bored through his system. Three members of the tribe accompanied Caldmore and Tesla, Wolf, Moon and Soul, and they argued throughout the journey about the best method to curb the hyphae's effects. The hyphae turned to metal by using trace elements from his body, which then created massive problems for him due to iron, copper, magnesium, zinc, etc etc deficiencies. However, running out of these also meant that the filaments stayed as fungal growths, not metallic ones. Replenishing them meant that they had renewed sources of materials. Ultimately those arguing for replenishment won. The alternative to having him pierced through with fine wire was for him to die. They pumped him full of whatever supplements they could find and watched fine trceries of the amalgams created appear under the man's skin.

Forty years earlier a shipping and railroad tycoon had turned his back on European civilisation and donated all his wealth to the native American people's in return for the opportunity to live free amongst them. They had put his money to good use, and built a research institution using it. Although all trace of his name was gone, the Chickasaw University was a pioneer in many treatments. It was there they landed. Once in Nashboro, Wolf made contact with his opposite number there, whom Wolf only knew as Peace Dog. From there they made their way to CU, the airship hesitantly navigating the streets of Nashboro under Tesla's direction, to the medical wing of the University and the landed in its forecourt.

The group consisting of Tesla, Wolf, Soul, Moon and Dog left the airship. They were expected. A medicine woman, named Edie, met them at the reception and directed two waiting men and with a stretcher to collect Caldmore. He lay, no longer writhing, but silent his eyes staring sightlessly the network of bronzed and silver veins across his skin catching the Transylvanian sun and glistening.

“He is close to death,” Edie informed them. “We must act quickly.” Caldmore was sped to a ward and quickly lifted onto a bed. Edie took his pulse and drew out a needle.

“This is the essence of the desert flower, if this does not work then we have lost him.”

She administered the injection and stood back from the bed. Caldmore’s eyes still stared sightlessly at the ceiling, his breathing shallow and hesitant.

The others looked on helplessly. There was now little they could do.

Thursday August 17th, Nashboro, Transylvania

Caldmore had hovered at death’s door for several days, then gradually recovered. The hyphae had gone from his system, killed immediately by the drug administered by the medicine woman, but his body had undergone a greater transformation than anyone so infected had before. Or rather, everyone who had been as infected before had not recovered. He still had not yet become accustomed to looking down at his body and see the faint trceries of metal that ran across his skin, like veins, or rather his veins now looked like veins of ore, or ... it was weird anyway you looked at it.

And now he was fully recovered, his airship was still impounded by the Horse Nation, despite nearly accidentally killing him, they still insisted on him addressing their problem with the Dreaming.

He had gained some small notoriety amongst the people of Nashboro. Caldmore had been attempting to judge the relationship between the Horse Nation and the indigenous tribes. The Native Americans seemed to observe their white brethren with something akin to amused benevolence, the Horse Nation, in return seemed oblivious to all other opinions than their own. In their treatment of Caldmore and Tesla, however, this benevolence had been strained. Edie was giving him one last medical check before releasing him and took the opportunity to speak earnestly to him.

“I’ve spoken to the other elders of the tribes of Vandalia and Transylvania. We apologise for what the Visitor Peoples have done to you. We should have intervened earlier. We perhaps indulge them too much?”

Caldmore shrugged. “They felt their backs were against the wall,” he reasoned. “They made a mistake. We all have made many in our lives.”

“And what they are discovering is fascinating.” Edie conceded. “They blend together so many different belief systems, although do so unheeding of their true meaning, but in their innocence they have come across something truly unique. We are all watching fervently to see what you might find on your dream quest.

“Anyway, you are fit and well. Whatever happens in this ritual you are about to undertake, if there is any favour you require of the Native Peoples just ask. We will do all we can to recompense you for” She left the final word unspoken. Caldmore looked down at his hands, the tracteries of silver and bronze running under the skin completed the sentence for her.

The notoriety was evident as Caldmore left the hospital. Crowds surrounded the exit as the people, both Visitor and Native, clustered to catch a glimpse of the bird man who was to be the messenger to the dark invader of their dreams.

A horseless carriage awaited him. Tesla was already within it, on hand to offer moral support to his friend and fellow outlaw. Wolf stepped to the door at the front of the contraption. He looked up at the sky then spoke, commenting: "Rain. I hope this is a good omen."

Caldmore resisted the temptation to ask the man that perhaps he should know whether or not it was a good omen, and stepped up to the carriage to take a seat next to Wolf. Tesla reached from behind to pat him on his shoulder, intending no doubt to offer some silent reassurance, but if so, it was in vain.

Caldmore had had a little of the process explained to him. Those who wished to amongst the people could travel within the dream lands, through meditation in combination with the correct medicinal plants, however their experience was illusory and disembodied. However, one enhanced with the metallic fibres laid down by the process Caldmore had undergone could experience these lands with clarity, and with an embodied form. One in such a state might be better placed to communicate with the dark form that blocked their travels, and negotiate with him to leave. None had survived such a fully infected state as Caldmore had attained, and so Wolf and his fellow elders held great hopes for him being able to resolve their dilemma. The fact that he had passed so close to death had only convinced them even more of this.

The carriage arrived at the Meeting Hall. It stood on the banks of the Wasioto and resembled the one that stood at the centre of the Horse Nation village, though much larger. Caldmore and his entourage entered, Caldmore with some trepidation, though with relief that no crowds congregated to observe his arrival.

He was ushered into the circular hall, and was instructed to remove his clothes and lie at the exact centre of the hut. He was surrounded by a circles of seven of the Visitor People. There were the three who had accompanied them from Vandalia, Peace Dog, their liaison with the Horse Nation tribe in Transylvania, and three others,

representing the remaining clans. One of these, who called herself Fire Woman of the Paint Clan, led the ceremony, painting designs on Caldmore's body. Edie and Tesla watched from outside of the circle, watching for the welfare of the airman, but not interfering.

Caldmore slowed his breathing as he had been instructed to do, and breathed in the aromatic smoke that rose from the candles surrounding him. Fire held a bowl to his lips, and he drank deeply of something that tasted bitter, and burnt his mouth and throat as he swallowed it. He felt himself drift, the sounds of the people around him chanting, the drums that seemed to come from far off, all lulled him further.

Then suddenly he was on a helical staircase. It had none of the qualities of a dream, it felt real, solid. The metal steps clanged under his weight as he descended. He wore boots, his airman trousers and shirt. His skin where he saw it was its normal hue, without the metal veins. He guessed this was a mental projection of his body and of a surrounding world.

The steps circled below him seemingly forever, but the design of them was familiar to him. Then he realised where he had seen them before. The steps leading down from the roof garden of Rose Cottage, the brothel where he had rescued the girls from. Or tried to and failed, and had needed to be rescued in turn.

Is that why his mind had led him back to this place? To repeat his failure, or to redeem himself? Or was it just that it continued to haunt him, the six he had tried to rescue and failed, or the thousands he had not even attempted to rescue?

After an interminable time he reached the bottom of the staircase and, as he had expected, he was in a corridor resembling the one in the brothel; ornate sumptuous hanging, erotic tapestries, and non-descript doors on both sides, though here they seemed to go on to infinity. He began walking along the corridor, warily, unsure of what

he would face, or even if the whole hallway would just disappear from existence at any moment.

Caldmore continued walking, hoping at some point something would change in the repetitive opulence around him, but after what could have been leagues, or only a few feet, his boredom got the better of him and he opened one of the doors.

Nothing lay beyond, just a formless whiteness. He extended his hand into the space and it touched nothing. He withdrew it, suddenly nervous and shut the door. The next was the same.

He tried a few more and was met with the same results and giving up resumed his walk along the corridor. However, there had been a change. He now felt something knew of his presence. He thought he could feel a faint scuttling sound, as if insects ran over the walls of the rooms on either side. It unnerved him, there was something unwholesome, uncanny about it, on top of the strangeness of the entire experience. He quickened his pace, and the act of doing so, tantamount to an admission that something *was* there, lost him his nerve and he began to run. The sound became louder and he turned to look behind, convinced he was being pursued, and hit something.

Falling back to the floor, he looked up and forward and saw a man in a tunic, an insignia at his left breast, recovering his balance. As the man steadied himself, Caldmore wondered if this could be the Hollow Man. If so, he appeared quite human, tall, white, blond-haired, healthy. Unnaturally so, in fact, as if he were a statue carved by a master craftsman and then brought to life.

The man recovered and spoke “*heil iter itineris*”.

Latin? Caldmore tried desperately to remember his schoolboy studies.

“*Salutem. Ego errrm.*” He stood. “*Vellem.*” He gesticulated his flight along the corridor and his collision with the man. Reassuringly

the man smiled, spreading his arms wide, his teeth shining preternaturally.

“Est via quae occurrere alienae comes, none?” the man asked. This is a strange road on which to meet a fellow traveller, is it not? The translation came more easily to Caldmore the more he heard the language.

“Verum.” The nouns came back quickly, conjugating them might be a task he was not up to, however. Haltingly, Caldmore continued the conversation.

From what he could tell, the figure, who introduced himself as Tiberius, was the Hollow Man the Horse Nation had observed. Without the metallic filaments in their brains, they had only glimpsed the man as a shadow, entering their dream world. He had journeyed to that space as an experiment, but his attempts to communicate had swamped all other communications in that space.

“Ex quo via?” Caldmore had asked. From where journey?

This was to prove the biggest shock. The man came from a place that did not exist in the world. He pointed to the design on his tunic. On closer inspection it consisted of a cross, with arrowheads at the end of each branch, or four arrows pointing in different directions. Tiberius named them. Amber, incense, spice, silk. The Four Roads. The amber one was highlighted in gold, the others were plain.

In Tiberius’s world the Roman Empire had never fallen, the Dark Ages had never happened. The speculations of Tesla and Victoria were proven to be correct, these potential divergences in history existed as actual places! With 400 years of stagnation excised from their development, the technological attainments of the world Tiberius hailed from far outstripped Caldmore’s world. His was a global society based on trade and exploration, and as a natural extension of this, more roads were sought; and Tiberius and his team were looking to other universes. They had built a device which they

predicted could communicate with these other worlds, but this was the first success they had had.

“Vos me ostende facere?”, Caldmore had asked. You me show make? Tiberius had agreed. The Roman hoped that such a device might help two people communicate directly, and not have to inhabit this disturbing dream world. This was good news to Caldmore. He didn’t feel comfortable in this place. Already it was beginning to fade, it was difficult to concentrate on the man before him. Abruptly it went dark, the insect sounds became suddenly louder and he found himself staring into the concerned faces of Wolf and Fire.

“The phoenix arises,” Wolf announced to the others in the circle and the two of them helped him sit up. As Tesla handed him his clothes he sipped on a cup of something that warmed him and helped bring him back to clarity.

“What can you tell us?” Wolf insisted. “Did you meet the Hollow Man? Did he speak to you?”

Caldmore nodded. “He is a man, just like us. Just a traveller who wanted to meet others. I think there is a way for us to talk directly, without entering the dream world. If we can it should mean you’ll be free to wander it at will again.”

“You understood him?” Wolf responded. “When he spoke to us it was in a very strange language?”

“Latin. It was Latin. Do none of you know Latin? At all?” the others shook their heads.

Tesla entered the circle. “So with this device I could communicate with them too?” he asked.

“How is your Latin, Doctor?” Caldmore responded.

“Est ipsum bonum,” he replied without hesitation.

“Probably better than mine,” Caldmore admitted. “Very well I will be your go-between. As soon as I have learnt enough to construct the device you can take over.”

“You’re going back then?” Tesla asked.

Caldmore nodded. “It might need a couple of trips, to gather all the information I need.” Caldmore remembered the sounds of chitin clicking against plaster, and shuddered. “Hopefully it won’t take too many.”

Tuesday August 29th, Nashboro, Transylvania

Caldmore had made five more journeys to the dreamscape over the following two weeks, each time required several days’ recuperation, and some intense debriefing from Tesla as the device took better form. It consisted of a metal frame that fitted over the head, connected to a machine full of many frames of different circuits, which could fine tune the signals to the brain. These would resonate with a similar device in the other universe, bringing the two minds into synchrony. That was the extent to which Caldmore understood its processes.

In between explanations of the device, Caldmore learnt more about the world Tiberius inhabited. It was led by four great corporations, which had their roots in the ancient trade routes of the classic era; amber, incense, spice and silk, although they now stretched across every observable planet, and were making their first steps beyond those. All manner of sciences had been conquered by these people, biology, machinery, even energies themselves, all succumbed to their will. On the second meeting Tiberius was joined by three more men, two darker-skinned, one from the orient. Each had the same symbol on their chests, but with a different branch highlighted. These were his opposite numbers from other guilds, as far as Caldmore understood.

They seemed to worship all gods as equal, calling upon Buddha, Zoroaster, Zeus, Mercury, Christ, Shiva etc etc in equal measure to aid them in their endeavours. Above all they seemed to venerate the Emperor Constantine, who had first laid down the template for their world order.

“The first Roman Christian Emperor?” Caldmore had asked on their third meeting. They had returned his question with blank stares.

“No, the opposite, it was he who first stated that all religions were equal and true. That if each faith had a pantheon of Gods then could there not be a pantheon of pantheons, in which all existed and were paid homage to by all.

“He had a vision, you see, of four arrows pointing in four different directions,” the Roman had touched the emblem on his chest “he saw the four roads, ever-expanding, drawing us all upon them. From that moment he conceived a new world order, driven by a common need to trade and prosper. That vision still drives us.” Tiberius smiled. “That is not to say we live in harmony, but ... our world differs from what I understand of yours.”

Caldmore had had to concede this point. His was nothing if not a world of conflict.

The device had grown apace, though slowly due to Caldmore lack of understanding of the science behind it, and his poor grasp of Latin. Tesla had struggled to mask his frustration with the airman, and finally had elicited a promise from Caldmore that when the device was ready Tesla would use it to communicate directly with the people of the other universe. “After all,” he had said in way of argument, “the Habsburg Empire is the direct inheritor of the Roman Empire; they are practically my countrymen.”

Caldmore had relented. He sensed no danger to which his friend may be exposed through doing this, and had introduced the idea to his

instructors, describing the person to whom the task of communicating would be handed.

Now on the occasion of his sixth and potentially final journey to the dreamworld, the representatives of the Four Roads had another surprise for him.

Tiberius greeted him in their usual room. Over the intervening meetings between his first visit and this one, Caldmore had found a space within the brothel that resembled a meeting room. The drapes hung sensuously about the space, and the smell of cheap perfume burnt the lining of his sinuses, but it sufficed as a place to sit and talk.

He realised the place was a projection of his subconscious, and had not had the presumption to ask if the others perceived the space in the same way. If so, how would they judge him if they knew it was his subconscious creating the space. Indeed, of all possible venues why had he projected this space?

Each time, too, he had heard the scuttling sound of insects, and was unsure if these were also projections of his subconscious, and if so why, or whether they were inhabitants of this dream space? And did the others hear them too? Again, a sense of precaution, or perhaps shame, prevented him from mentioning them.

Thoughts of this nature were banished when Tiberius announced, Caldmore now practised enough at Latin for the words to be easily translated: “you told me of your friend in your world, who would be using the device to talk to us further. I was wondering,” he beckoned to someone outside of Caldmore’s view, “if this person would be familiar?”

The man who entered the room was familiar, it was true, but also unfamiliar. It was Tesla, same imposing height, same features, but his hair was cut differently, he seemed younger, or perhaps less careworn, he had a more self-assured bearing, but there was a look

of caution and distrust in his eyes that Caldmore had not noted in the Tesla he knew.

“Is this the man you know as Tesla in your world?” Tiberius asked.

“Indeed it is,” Caldmore replied heartily. “Our worlds have much in common it appears. And are you a marvel of the scientific world too?” he asked the newcomer. The Roman Tesla briefly touched the symbol on his chest. Of course, amber, electricum, the substance which first produced electricity, from which the energy got its name.

Roman Tesla demurred. “It is not for me to say, but I do look forward to meeting your Tesla. And these,” he spread the final designs for the control mechanisms, that would link the various elements of the device together, “should provide the means.”

He handed the rolls of paper to Caldmore and the airman took them. He knew the medium on which they were presented were projections of his mind, somehow the Roman Tesla was conveying the symbolism to Caldmore and he was interpreting it, hopefully accurately. Caldmore unfurled the roll of paper, seeing the diagram of the circuitry there. As he tried to focus on it and commit it to memory he saw a movement out of the corner of his eye.

He turned, and saw a black shape scurry up the wall of the bordello. Then another. It was no dream. Or rather, it was a dream, but not his imagination.

“Did you see that?” he asked the two Romani.

Tesla nodded. Tiberius was ashen. “I’ve been sensing them for a while now, since I met you. I thought it was my imagination,” he said.

“I also,” Caldmore confirmed. “What are they?” He backed away from the wall to stand with the two men from the alternative universe.

“I don’t know,” Tiberius replied.

“And more pressingly, can they hurt us?” Tesla added.

More shapes swarmed over the wall and came more into focus as their numbers increased. They were tall, and grey and black, and a mixture of anthropoid and arthropod, crawling on six legs, or walking on two. The three men were repelled instinctively and backed away.

The insect-men approached, stepping over sequined cushions and knocking away incense sticks. Caldmore and the two others turned and ran, pulling open the nearest door and into the hallway beyond, slamming it behind them.

“We must wake up,” Tesla demanded.

“We can’t, our immersion is timed,” Tiberius replied.

“And mine is entirely indeterminate,” Caldmore added. “It just depends on how strong the concoction I’m given is.”

“Quickly,” Tesla instructed Caldmore. “You have to memorise the designs. This may be the last time we can visit here.”

“But using the machine will be safe?” Caldmore asked.

“Probably. We won’t need to come to this subconscious space, we can link our conscious minds directly together. Your Tesla and me.”

Caldmore nodded and spread open the roll of paper. He looked at the various lines and connections; the designations of small devices, most of which made sense, but with far too many sections requiring just memorising by rote. Beyond the two men, the locked door splintered and cracked. The insectoids were through. Claws and mandibles forced apart the wood, and swollen chitinous crania pushed through the holes created, bodies being pulled after.

Tiberius turned to face them, pulling up the nearest object, which happened to be a candlestick carved into the shape of two women coupling.

“Ha, daemones. Et non tradidit me.” He swung his weapon.

Tesla looked up at the man as the insects pounced. He hit one with the sensuous Sapphic centrepiece and its skull cracked, but the others were on his sinking their jaws and chelae into his, tearing his limbs from his torso.

Caldmore heard the screams increase, then abruptly cut off, and Tesla repeating “Surgit. Surgit. Surgit.” Abruptly, they stopped. The man had disappeared, he looked at the ant army stepping closer and closer, he took one last look at the plans before him trying to exact one last iota of meaning from them ...

... and woke screaming in the meeting hut.

Thursday, August 31st, 1911, Nashboro, Transylvania

Caldmore had taken many hours to fully recover from his experience in the dreaming, but had attempted to write down all he remembered of the designs the Roman Tesla had shown him. The Habsburg Tesla had immediately gone away to attempt to complete the device leaving Caldmore to the people of the Horse Nation in the meeting hut. It had been an hour or more before he could bring himself to tell the others what he had seen.

They had not really listened to what he had told them however.

“The journey through the Dream Lands can be disturbing for those not experienced in them,” Wolf had said.

“No, there is something else there, something new. Something I think I may have attracted there,” Caldmore had argued.

“Perhaps his psychic energies have been over-extended by his many journeys there?” Moon had suggested to the others, ignoring Caldmore’s protests. The others had nodded in agreement.

“But the Hollow Man, this ‘Tiberius’, he will not disrupt our dream journeys any more?”

“No, their world and ours can communicate directly through the machine Tesla is building. They will not need to travel blindly through the dreamscape seeking out people from our side. Though, I say again, that route may now be too dangerous to travel.”

They had ignored him again and sent him back to his rooms that he shared with Tesla. Caldmore lay on his bed and tried to sleep, but his dreams were full of restless scratching sounds and half-glimpsed movements.

Now, two days later, Tesla was ready with his device. It consisted of a net of wires strung together in a cap that sat on his head, attached to a metal box covered in dials and knobs.

“You have completed the device then, Doctor?” Caldmore asked him.

“Yes, the final drawings you provided were almost correct. I had a few corrections to make, in truth I could probably have anticipated the design from what I had already.”

“Well it is good to know my death-defying trip was not completely wasted, then Tesla,” Caldmore jibed.

Tesla smiled ruefully. “You are sure this is safe. Your account of your last trip does not fill me with confidence.”

“As I understand it, that dreamscape is constructed from a shared consciousness of people from many universes, linked by our common shared past.” Caldmore offered, with some reticence as he did not fully understand the principle.

“Ah yes, we share the same matter, but divided at some stage in history and therefore connected.” Tesla agreed, recalling his discussions with the AI known as Queen Victoria.

“This however,” Caldmore indicated the cap sitting on top of Tesla’s head, “circumvents that space enabling direct contact, in this case with your opposite half in that world. Like telegraphing another room in a ... hotel” Caldmore dissembled, choosing a different metaphor than his subconscious had supplied “rather than loitering in the foyer as I was doing.”

Reassured, Tesla had turned on the device, and begun turning the different dials, as an operator may tune in a Morse receiver. Caldmore removed himself to the other side of the room, wishing to be on hand if needed, but wishing to not disturb the delicate operation.

However, a disturbance did occur. There was a hurried and desperate knock at the door and the member of the Transylvanian Horse Nation, Peace Dog, entered without waiting for invitation.

“There’s something wrong, you have to come,” he blurted.

Reluctantly, since he was loath to leave Tesla unmonitored, he followed the man, his white skin now flushed with exertion and panic, to the meeting hut.

At the centre of the hut a team of Native Peoples surrounded the Wolf, Moon and the other Visitor People who lay curled on the floor. Fire, the Transylvanian woman of the Paint Clan, looked on helplessly as her friends were tended to.

Eddie was one of the medics examining the people on the floor. “Do you know what’s happened to them?” she asked.

“I warned them, there’s something loose in the Dreamscape, something like insects,” Caldmore replied. Eddie looked blankly at him.

“Could it cause this?” she pointed down at her patient.

Caldmore didn’t recognise the man, but then to do so would be difficult. His face was a mass of bloody scratches as if he had tried

to claw off his own face. He was breathing, but was completely insensible. Fire broke in. "I had finished the ceremony, they had entered the dream realm, and then ... they began screaming and twitching. I've," she broke off. "I've never seen anything like it."

"I have to get back to Tesla, I have to tell him" Caldmore told them, suddenly much more worried for his friend. He left the meeting hut, hoping he had left behind all of the horror of his nightmares.

Back at their rooms, the engineer was pacing animatedly back and forth. For a moment, Caldmore was worried Tesla had experienced some similar calamity to that he had just witnessed. But then his friend spoke.

"Caldmore, my dear friend, what marvels you have led me to," he rushed forward, gripping the airman by his hand. "To think that somewhere, elsewhere," he gesticulated absently towards higher dimensions, "there are multiple mes, living different lives, all exploring the pinnacles of human endeavour."

"Your visitation was a success then?" Caldmore asked, relieved beyond measure.

"Yes, imagine a world where the centuries of the dark ages never took place, where the wisdom of the ancient philosophers was build upon, not destroyed. Imagine where we will be 400 years from now. They have attained that. Such achievements that other Nikola described."

"And Tiberius, the man who introduced me to your Virgil?"

Here the man's face fell. "Terrible. He had no mind. Something had robbed him of it. It is too strange."

Quickly Caldmore told Tesla of what had become of Wolf, Moon and the others. He nodded.

"My hypothesis is that there are countless universes parallel to our own. Some may house very malevolent creatures completely unlike

us. It sounds as if some have found a way to infiltrate the dream world all universes appear to share.”

“And can they threaten us here?”

“We may have uneasy dreams for a while. But ...” here Tesla fell deep in thought. “Is it possible to travel between worlds? Could they actually manifest physically here?” He shook his head. “No it cannot be possible.” He looked earnestly at Caldmore. “Let us pray it is not possible, my friend.”

Saturday, September 2nd, 1911, Nashboro, Vandalia

The next two days were spent by Caldmore petitioning the Nashboro authorities to release his airship. The Horse Nation had impounded it and his possessions, and although having no real authority, nor Caldmore suspected, credibility, the actual Elders of Transylvania did not wish to undermine their white tribal neighbours by appropriating them.

However, Caldmore insisted that he had met the requirements of the Horse Nation in contacting the Hollow Man of the Dreaming, despite having unwittingly unleashed something far worse in doing so. He had also suffered greatly at their hands, the glistening veins of metal that crisscrossed his skin bearing testimony to that. He now wished to be on his way.

Edie had supported his campaign, and confirmed how close to death he had been. After his protests had been heard the airship, his weapons and the communication devices were returned. It appeared that the only people who would choose to retain them were in a vegetable-like condition, their minds eaten by insectoid invaders of their dreams.

Not only were Caldmore’s possessions returned, the Elder who met with him reiterated Edie’s statement, that though they had not

transgressed against him themselves, those who were their guests had, and so they felt the burden of responsibility. If there were to ever be some way for them to repay the debt, Caldmore just had to return and tell them of his need.

Caldmore thanked them profusely but eager to be on his way sought out Tesla immediately. The engineer was, as he had been for much of the previous 48 hours, deeply engrossed in communication with his opposite number in the other universe.

The Teslas, or Teslae, Caldmore had struggled with an appropriate plural, the Teslata, had communicated much about their respective presents and pasts. The divergent point did appear to be Constantine's vision. Instead of a cross, which had spawned a static and inflexible view of religion, that had ultimately been divisive and led to the downfall of Rome, he had seen a vision of trade and expansion, which led to mutual prosperity and an inclusive pantheistic view of alternative faiths. All was not so perfect in that other world, however, there was a slave class still throughout the world, though the other Tesla was still vague about who constituted it. Doubtless more would emerge as the story of the Teslata unfolded.

Now however, Caldmore's chief concern was in them both leaving Transylvania before anything else could waylay them. He ignored the urgent morsing of his mini-Marconi, he wished to collect his thoughts and decide how best to tell the Queen what had transpired while they were incommunicado. Telling of their confinement by the Horse Nation would be appropriate, he felt, but something about the contact with the parallel universe he instinctively wanted to keep from her. He had resented the sensation of being moved around on a board by her. His knowledge that other boards existed was some measure of autonomy from Her Majesty he did not want to relinquish. The minutes seemed to drag until the other man finally removed the headset, his eyes gradually returning to focus on the room about him.

“More to tell?” Caldmore asked. Tesla nodded, but hesitated, glancing down at the Picture Telegraph newly reinstalled in its position on Caldmore’s chest. Tesla has the same caution, Caldmore thought.

“Yes much more, however ... I sense you are in something of a hurry to leave.”

The two men collected their few things and left their quarters. It was a short run to the landing field by horseless carriage but Caldmore’s tension was palpable, fearing at each moment something would impede their journey. But ... finally, there it was, his airship, standing unchanged and undamaged, silently awaiting their reunion.

After a few hours in the air, Caldmore had updated the Queen with their capture by the people of Vandalia, and their transfer to Transylvania. He told her nothing of their requests for freeing their dreaming of the shadowy figure, or of his journey to the dreaming. He wasn’t sure how clear an image she got through her Picture Telegraph, and whether it would reveal the metallic veins in his skin, but she did not ask, so his assumption was that she could not tell of his change.

They travelled for a while in silence, and then the mini-Marconi sounded.

“Change course,” his queen commanded. “I want you to travel due West.”

“But ma’am, we are headed south for Florida, I wish to head towards New Spain.”

“And how will you cross the border?” Victoria asked.

“Well with no more difficulty than to cross into New France,” Caldmore replied.

“Not true, Commander,” Victoria informed him. “I have intelligence that will not only permit you to cross the border unimpeded but also enable you to travel secretly once in New France.”

Caldmore resisted the idea. After years of war fighting the French, he was unwilling to travel into that country. Although Louisiana was a long way from Acadia, he was very likely on some wanted register for his actions there. But, she was his queen, and she had commanded him, so, reluctantly, again feeling as if he was simply part of some greater strategy, he re-set his bearing for due west and the Mississippi River.

Sunday, September 3rd, 1911, North of Memphis, New France

It was the early hours of Sunday when they crossed the Mississippi, the border between Transylvania and New France. Victoria had informed him of the exact spot where the river patrols would be absent, and he took the airship low so that any air patrols would be unlikely to spot it.

This was where an airship had advantage over all other forms of transport. There were no engines driving it, like other dirigibles, and no sound caused by passing through the air, only the occasional creak of the sails as he tacked into the slight breeze. He could hear the sound of the great river flowing beneath him almost a mile wide at this point.

Ahead of the airship lay one or two points of light, electric and gas lamps lighting the settlements of Louisiana. Caldmore searched for the light he had been promised, and ... there it was ... the flashing light clearly signalling, hopefully to him. He redirected the airship towards the light, and descended slowly once above it. He saw a hooded figure lit by the gas lamp who walked across the field, unconcerned by the airship above them, and towards a barn, big enough to house the craft. Caldmore lowered the airship until it

brushed the long grass of the meadow as the figure opened the barn doors, and then Caldmore manoeuvred the craft inside, lowering to the ground, then opening all the cavorite shutters to secure it in place by its weight.

Tesla joined him at the door, temporarily dissolving the Teslata symbiote, and they stepped down together to greet the figure.

As they reached the bottom of the steps from the craft, the figure pushed back her hood.

Zelle. Caldmore pulled his gun from its holster, pointing it at the woman.

“Commander,” she cooed. “Why so impetuous? Please, you must trust me.”

Carefully she reached inside the voluminous sleeve of her coat and pulled out a small wallet. Smiling, she handed it over to Caldmore. He flipped it open to reveal the same badge that sat inside his jacket pocket. The cog motif and the letters M and I, and the number 0.

“You see, my dear Lemuel. We are on the same side. We both work for Her Majesty Queen Victoria.”

To be continued in

The Machine Queen Part Three: New Spain