

The background of the cover is a textured, aged, light brown paper. Overlaid on this paper are several faint, embossed or stamped images of interlocking gears of various sizes, creating a mechanical theme. The gears are rendered in a slightly darker shade of the paper's color, giving them a subtle, watermark-like appearance.

# The Machine Queen

Part Three: The Journey Further West

by  
Mark Nine

PRICE One Penny

## **The story so far**

Commander Caldmore has come to America in search of kidnapped girl, called Gormuil Earhart. However, in his travels he has encountered some additional complexities. These are:

- 1) Recruitment as the personal agent of Queen Victoria; an artificial intelligence housed in a large mechanism on the banks of the Thames.
- 2) A plot by MI5 to lure Irish rebels into the open by supplying them with guns and explosives, which the Irish have willingly entered into, knowing it to be an MI5 plot. The French government are involved on the side of the Irish.
- 3) The theft of plans for Edison's new aethership by Margreet Zelle, aka Mata Hari, an agent of the French government, for which Caldmore and an engineer called Tesla have been framed and consequently are on the run from the New York police.

In an attempt to escape pursuit from the NYPD, Caldmore, in the company of Tesla, has left New England and has headed west, to the protectorate of Vandalia, one of the countries in which the indigenous peoples of North America have been allowed to keep their land.

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## **The Machine Queen Part Three: The Journey Further West**

**Sunday, July 9<sup>th</sup>, 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 in Vandalia, 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.

On leaving New England, Tesla had produced a recent invention; a version of the mini-Marconi that could reproduce voices, enabling conversation to take place naturally rather than through the dahs and dits of Morse code. He had passed on his invention to Queen Victoria, and she had recruited artificers in London to build the equipment that could translate Tesla's voice to the punched cards that would enable her to make sense of it, and vice versa. Once the two-way voice communication had been inaugurated, the two had been deeply engrossed in an exchange of ideas, to an extent where Caldmore had abandoned any direct communication with Her Highness. As Caldmore surveyed the woodland below from his cockpit he could overhear the continuation of their most recent theorising in the map room behind him.

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

“It passes the time,” the speaker device he held replied, in an uncanny replica of the 10-year deceased queen.

“Are you aware of the work of Professor Exner of Vienna? He and his research student have proposed that parallel worlds actually exist,” Tesla replied. “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 actually 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. He says they are “entangled”. 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 this quantum entanglement. A thought in one mind in one universe would therefore continue to influence the corresponding mind in the divergent universe, because they remain entangled. In one universe, the Habsburg 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 British Empire has fallen in other universes, images of our reality 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 ignored the rest of their conversation. It all seemed very abstract and inconsequential to him. His main concern at the moment was that they would soon need to land. Although he had received 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.”

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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 10<sup>th</sup>, 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 and the Yacqui know of a dream world. 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 a 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 83<sup>rd</sup> dream, we encountered a figure, some call him the Hollow Man, others the Black Angel. To our despair, 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 30<sup>th</sup>, 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 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2011, Skies above Transylvania**

Tesla piloted the airship as it sailed south. The Horse Nation people had contacts in Transylvania, other incomers like them, Europeans 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. 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. Starving the hyphae of the metals the hyphae needed slowed their growth, but also damaged Caldmore. Ultimately those arguing for replenishment won as 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 traceries 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 17<sup>th</sup>, 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 traceries 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 avidly 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 trceries 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 overcast sky then spoke, commenting: “Rain. I hope this is a good omen,” before entering

Caldmore resisted the temptation to ask the man that perhaps as a shaman 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 remaining girl, Gormuil, he had failed to rescue, 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 curiosity 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. Giving up, he 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, drowning out their dreams.

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

This was to prove the biggest shock. As they stood there and talked Caldmore realised that 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. They were Men like Gods. Tiberius’s 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 he will depart and 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 meaningless babble?”

“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 29<sup>th</sup>, 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 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 classical 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 entirely in harmony, but ... to an extent that 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 neared completion, 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 were 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 intermediary 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 Tiberius, sinking their jaws and chelae into him, 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 31<sup>st</sup>, 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 anymore?”

“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 had lain on his bed and tried to sleep, but his dreams had been 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” Caldmore offered, with some reticence as he did not fully understand the principle. “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 members of the Horse Nation 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 'me's, living different lives, all exploring the pinnacles of human endeavour."

"Your visitation was a success then?" Caldmore asked, relieved that his friend was not only unharmed, but had not had any untoward encounters.

"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 2<sup>nd</sup>, 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 over-ruling 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, perhaps 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.

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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. The Spanish Territories are the only places in North America that I am not a wanted man.”

“Do not worry, Captain,” Victoria informed him. “I have intelligence that will not only permit you to cross the border unimpeded but also enable you to travel secretly and safely 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 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1911, North of Memphis, New France**

It was the early hours of Sunday when they crossed the Mississippi, the border between The Protectorates 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, a few isolated buildings along the shoreline on the far side of the river. 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.

As he neared the light he could discern that it lit a hooded figure holding it. The figure walked, unconcerned by the airship above, 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. 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 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.

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

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

Carefully, so as to indicate she was not reaching for her own weapon, 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.”

## **Monday, September 4th, 1911, North of Memphis, New France**

It was no surprise in retrospect that Margreet Zelle was an agent of Her Majesty Queen Victoria. There had been clues. Zelle's involvement in the Jubilee Plot to run weapons to the Irish Republican Brotherhood, a plot instigated by Victoria. Caldmore had obviously been manoeuvred to go to New York by Victoria to take the blame for the theft of Edison's aethership plans, thereby enabling Zelle to remain at large and free to continue her work. Victoria had even declared her support for a competitive race into the aether, in order to drive forward progress and human competition, and this too coincided with Zelle's actions in stealing the plans to share with foreign powers.

All the evidence of Zelle being a double agent, not only working for the French but also secretly the British was obvious, in retrospect. She, and Victoria, had used him and yet he still needed them both to find Sterling. In fact, needed them to get out of New France.

The barn in which Caldmore had hidden the airship appeared to be on an abandoned farm. The farm building itself was dilapidated, windows and doors boarded up, but one room was obviously inhabited, with a small camp bed in the corner, and a table and chairs in the centre of the room. It was perhaps a secret base of operations for the Deuxième Bureau, or even MIO, if that secret service even really existed.

After a morning of keeping him in suspense, Zelle had called him to a basic déjeuner. Tesla had accompanied him and the three sat around the table in the farmhouse kitchen, lighted by the shafts of light falling between the broken boards at the windows.

"I know where Sterling is," Zelle announced. "Or rather, I know where he *will* be." She dropped down a manila folder onto the

table and Caldmore lifted it to the narrow band of light that crossed the room. Inside the envelope was a daguerreotype of a large building on a hill overlooking a river, together with some architects' plans.

"The Fort des Moines," Zelle explained. "on the Mississippi river too, but about 500 miles upriver. In the next few weeks a contingent of businessmen from Europe and from North America will be meeting there in secret. The fort may have been converted from a military establishment to a civilian facility but it's still heavily guarded and fortified. It will be very difficult to get in."

"So what is the meeting about?" asked Caldmore.

"That area of New France is going through some turbulent times at the moment," Zelle began. So what else is new, thought Caldmore.

"I know, I know," Zelle laughed, reading Caldmore's expression, "But the events you began with supporting the secession of Acadia and Newfoundland began the collapse of New France. Next the area south of Acadia seceded, and became an independent state called Canada, and it's now the turn of the land south of Canada, between the Mississippi and Ohio rivers to seek independence.

"The people there have a vision of forming another country they are calling Charlolina. It's workable. Together Charlolina, Canada, Acadia and Newfoundland could form their own confederation. Perhaps to rival New England or New France.

"Naturally everyone wants a piece of this new land. The English are negotiating with the rebels; the French are doing what they can to suppress it. And added to the mix are these people." Zelle threw another folder down dramatically onto the table.

Caldmore passed the folder of the fort onto Tesla, and picked up the second folder. The Hudson Bay Company.

“The only privately run country in the world is owned by the Hudson Bay Company. They own all of the area of north America north of Canada. They are backing the Charlottina separatists but only so that, once Charlottina exists as a separate state, they can step in and own it. With just the strip of Canada squeezed between their two landholdings, they see it as a step in controlling one of the biggest areas of land in the world. Massive untapped resources, the Great Lakes as a transport system. They would be the most powerful groups in the world, equivalent to any of the empires.”

“And Sterling is involved with these people?” Caldmore asked, horrified.

Zelle nodded. “They are meeting at the Fort to discuss how to finance the rebels, and how to wrest power from them once the new state is established. This is something neither New France, nor the Charlottina separatists want. Nor the British Government. However, none of them want to be seen to be acting against these people. They all have powerful friends. Influential. Wealthy.”

Caldmore could see it happening. A group of wealthy businessmen bringing the world down in flames, but no-one standing against them openly in case it meant a loss of profits. “So what’s the plan?” he asked.

Zelle continued with the dramatic flourishes, dropping another envelope onto the table. The picture was of a man in his mid-sixties, sporting a goatee, a bowler hat sitting tilted on his head.

“This is Al Swearengen, the owner of Fort des Moines. A local man, a crook, a swindler, a wife-beater. Three times divorced, possibly a multiple murderer. Thoroughly nasty. A bit of a recluse, however, word is he only leaves the fort under very rare

circumstances. We could get to him, and through him into the fort. Once there, we find your Sterling and extract the information we need. We find out who is involved in the conspiracy. We expose them, or we eliminate them. Either way their plans are over.”

She dropped another folder onto the table. Opening it, Caldmore saw another daguerreotype of the same man, though clean-shaven. He gave Zelle a perplexed look. She shook her head.

“*Lemuel* Swarengen. Al’s identical twin brother. Upstanding citizen. Unmarried. A member of the Charlottina separatists and so willing to help us overthrow the conspiracy of businessmen.”

“Another Lemuel. That could get confusing,” Caldmore observed.

“I know,” said Zelle agreeing with a nod of her head. She smiled ruefully. “If I’d know from the outset that we’d be using *this* Lemuel, I may have picked someone else other than you for the mission.”

“And how will this other Lemuel help us get into the Fort?” Caldmore asked.

Zelle smiled self-confidently. “We swap them. Lemuel Swarengen will pass for his brother and get us in.”

“But you said a moment ago that Al Swarengen never leaves the fort unless he has to,” Tesla pointed out.

Zelle’s smile broadened. “My speciality is this; knowing men’s weaknesses. One thing Al Swarengen prides amongst all other things is his reputation as a host. The best women, the best food, the best entertainment. We put on a performer in a local café who is so amazingly talented that Al Swarengen simply *has* to see her and recruit her to his company. That’s when we get him.”

Caldmore laughed. "That's a bit of a gamble. Who could you find that is such an incredible singer that you'd be *guaranteed* to lure a recluse from his fort?"

This was Zelle's final coup de grace. One more folder dropped onto the table.

"It's just so happens there is one. Right here in Memphis."

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That evening the Caldmore, Zelle and Tesla went for a night out in Memphis. Zelle had an automobile hidden in another of the barns in the apparently deserted farm, and once it had got up to a full head of steam she stormed along the narrow farm roads in speeds in excess of 30 miles per hour.

Once in the city, Caldmore's appearance gathered less attention than he expected. He had become used to the fine metal veins that criss-crossed his skin, but thought that others would not be so inured. However, the number of tattooed and pierced river men and sailors filling the streets made him feel quite inconspicuous.

Not so once they'd made their way to Beale Street, where Zelle said the singer was to be found. Not due to the copper and silver trceries in his skin, but due to the colour of the skin itself. He and his two companions were the sole white people there and were drawing many curious looks from other passers-by.

The café was little more than a hole in the wall in which were crammed perhaps a dozen patrons on seats around the edge of the space and a table at one end where drinks were being served. Sitting next to the table was a young black girl, with a guitar. She was perhaps 14 and was nervously waiting for some quiet before she began to play.

“The girl’s name is Kid Douglas,” Zelle told Caldmore, in a stage whisper. “A year ago she ran away from home, and has been living rough on the streets of Memphis since then. Three weeks ago, the owner of the bar let her play here, in return for 50% of any tips she made.”

The girl began to strum the guitar.

“He now makes more from the 50% of her tips than he does from the liquor,” she added.

What emerged from the fingers as they stuck the guitar strings did odd things to Caldmore’s head. It seemed like there were two or three instruments being played at once, so dexterously were the different contrapuntal rhythms played simultaneously, and those rhythms were unlike anything he’d heard before. They seemed to move in and out of any familiar beat, at twice the speed. Zelle leaned in to his ear to whisper “They call this music ‘Les Bleues’, it’s a melange of French folk music, African rhythms and probably some of the Mississippi thrown in the mix too.”

“It’s extraordinary,” Caldmore replied.

Zelle smiled knowingly, and whispered “You ain’t heard nothin’ yet.”

She was right. The girl’s voice sounded far older than her 14 years. It conveyed an unfathomable yearning, unbearable heartbreak, nostalgia for something you couldn’t quite place by turns, and then make you feel ridiculous for feeling anything but self-mocking coarse humour. In that darkened nook it felt like a light had been turned on. Caldmore looked at the other patrons, and they sat there too, dumbstruck and in awe.

At the end of the girl’s set Zelle and Caldmore squeezed their way between the other patrons and waited while she scooped up the coins from the plate in front of her.

“Miss Douglas,” Zelle started. “We’d like to offer you a proposition.”

The girl scowled at the word ‘proposition’.

“You can’t buy me, jus’ ‘cause you’re white folks,” she retorted and started trying to push past them.

“No you don’t understand,” Zelle protested. “Please hear us out. There’s no ‘funny stuff’, I promise you.”

Not really mollified, but prepared to give them the benefit of the doubt for a moment, the singer paused a moment.

“We’ve got a friend, runs a bar up north. He’s looking for performers, and pays really well. You’d only be away from Memphis for about a month, but you’d earn some good money.”

“I don’t know,” Kid Douglas replied. “I’m doin’ OK here.”

“They’ve never heard Les Bleues that far north. Imagine how you’ll blow them away,” Zelle persisted. It took more of Zelle’s enticements, but she was very persuasive, running through a range of arguments to try and convince the girl to travel with them. Eventually it was the idea of a river journey that really sold her on the idea.

And that was the next question. How were they to get there?

### **Monday, September 11th, 1911, Keokuk, New France**

John Briggs had been living on the Mississippi River for all of his 70-odd years. In that time, he had sailed up and down it, for almost its entire length hundreds of times, once all the way up to Lake Ithaca just to say he’d done the entire length.

This had to be his strangest journey yet, maybe even old Samuel could have turned it into a decent story, if he had still been around. The job had started off normal enough, someone approaching him to help them navigate up the river. Bits of it could be treacherous, and there were tributaries that you could lose your way by sailing up if you didn't know what you were doing. The woman who'd approached him wasn't French, but something about her said Bureau, and he'd been pleased that he could do his patriotic duty. Then she'd taken him to the ship they'd be sailing in.

It had looked a bit of an odd shape, its sides bowed out in a circular way, looking like the upper half of a cylinder, but the bit that appeared above the water looked like a boat, with masts and sails, and a quarterdeck. However, once he was on the gangplank and met the people he'd be sailing with he realised that all was not quite as it seemed.

The fellow in the aviator coat had introduced himself as Captain Lemuel Calmer, or it sounded like that, in a reasonable French accent, but evidently English, and his friend as Dr Nikola Tesla, who Briggs guessed to be German, though his French was better. Tesla had given him a small device and showed him how to use it by pressing a button and talking into it. His voice came out of a similar device the Calmer fellow held. Then the captain took him below decks.

The interior of the boat was far bigger than the river pilot was expecting; the shape was actually cylindrical, though for a boat design that made no sense. They climbed down a helical metal staircase that circled down through the centre of the craft then at the bottom they walked through a map room, though decked out like a library or study, and then through another door, to what resembled an aircraft cockpit but was completely submerged under water.

The Englishman had explained that this was normally an airship, and because they were travelling undercover, he would be underwater. Briggs had to call instructions over the Teslagraph to enable him to steer as there was no visibility under the surface. And of course, he didn't know the river.

That part of the job, calling out instructions to a steersman was familiar to Briggs, though the shape of the boat meant that there were fewer parts of the river that were navigable. Standing at the prow now, taking the occasional sounding, and calling out instructions to the steersman was how he usually earned his trade. The fact that he called it over a small metal device, and the man doing the steering was 20 feet below him in an aircraft cockpit actually made no difference to his role. It just took some getting used to.

For Caldmore, however, it had taken a lot of getting used to. For all the upper part of the airship resembled a sea-going ship, he had never immersed it in water before. Working out how far to open the Cavorite shutters had been enormously complicated, as he had buoyancy to take into account, as well as weight. The craft needed to be submerged sufficiently that the airship features were hidden below water, which meant he would not be able to see anything from the cockpit, however the river man was an excellent guide, calling out minor course corrections precisely and efficiently. The concentration it required was quite taxing though.

It had taken them a week so far, moving upriver, as Caldmore and Briggs had needed to take frequent breaks due to the concentration required to pilot the ship between them. It had been slow moving too, the sails not making a great deal of headway against the current. Kid Douglas had been an entertaining companion to take along; she had sat on the open deck, watching the other ships and the shoreline travel past, playing her guitar and signing. She and

Briggs had kept each other entertained particularly, Kid with her songs and the river man with his stories.

They had rested for most of the day in Cairo, where the great swathe of water divided into the Mississippi on the left and the Ohio on their right. On the right side of the Ohio was the native protectorates, on the left of the Mississippi the greater part of New France, and between them the contested land of Upper Louisiana, so soon perhaps to be Charlottina, another segment of New France's hold over the north American continent about to fall like the next in a chain of dominos.

Monday saw them arrive at Keokuk, another confluence point. The town stood between La Rivière des Moines, branching away to the left, and the Mississippi. Briggs guided Caldmore to a pier on the outskirts of the town, where perhaps it would gather less attention, and the five of them descended the gangplank and entered the town.

Briggs had an acquaintance in town with whom he had decided to stay, the niece of a childhood friend, and he made his way through the three-storey buildings of the town along the wide picturesque streets that led along the river.

The remaining four had another direction in which to travel. Further inland at the foot of the bluff overlooking the town was a less salubrious part of town known as Rat Row. Itinerant river workers and fur traders lodged there amongst the warehouses and back streets. Also here were the inns and occasional whorehouse that supplied them.

The bar they were heading towards was one of the large and more frequented of the establishments. Zelle's contact in the separatists had told her that the owner was a member, and would support them in their plan. Zelle had also decided to bring Kid into the nature of the plans, and despite the potential for danger, the 14-

year-old girl had been reassured, even excited, by the idea of playing secret agent. She hadn't been entirely convinced by Zelle's protestations that she had the Englishman didn't have improper designs on her, the idea that they would finance her trip up north entirely on their love of her music seemed far-fetched. That it was all a plot to uncover some conspiracy actually seemed safer, and far more believable.

It was when they reached the bar and met the owner, that the first upset to their plans occurred. Zelle led Caldmore, Tesla and Douglas into the darkened interior, partly subterranean as it was at the bottom of a flight of steps leading down from street level. The main room of the bar had a small stage, surrounded by ear horns to amplify the sound produced by anyone performing there, presumably because the sound of the patrons would otherwise drown them out.

Kid was dumbstruck by the size of the room, realising she would have at least a dozen times her usual audience if the room was filled. The owner had been arranging bottles behind the one bar that ran along the length of one side of the space, and turned as they entered.

Immediately, Caldmore pulled out the gun from his arm holster and pointed it at him.

Zelle looked at him in surprise, not only at the seeming unprovoked threat, but at the evident rage of the normally implacable Englishman. The barman raised his hands, looking to his side at the exit from the bar, evidently judging whether or not he could make a run for it, and deciding he couldn't outpace the beam from the weapon.

"Godvordomme ...?" Zelle swore, lapsing into her native Dutch.

"Howard Hughes," Caldmore spat the name. "I should kill you where you stand."

How will Caldmore and Zelle's mission to find Sterling fare? And why does Caldmore want to shoot Howard Hughes? Find out in

**The Machine Queen Part Four: Siege Perilous**

## **A Lemuel Caldmore adventure!**

Lemuel Caldmore has escaped to the lands west of New England accompanied by Nikola Tesla. He believes he is now safe to continue his quest, however the white tribe Caldmore and Tesla find themselves seeking succour from displays a trait even more threatening than that of cultural appropriation - complete incompetence.

Can the two stalwarts survive this new menace and continue without further inconvenience? All signs point to “Unlikely”.

The Machine Queen is a novella in eight parts, published occasionally, and distributed at various steampunk events. It recreates the cheapness, vitality (and poor taste) of Victorian Penny Bloods, in an episodic form.

Look for the first two parts of the adventure:

**The Machine Queen**

**Part One: The Heart of Empire**

**Part Two: The Colonies**