

The Machine Queen

Part Four:
Siege Perilous

by Mark Nine

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The story so far

Captain Caldmore is searching for a kidnapped girl named Gormuil Earhart, and his journey has brought him to North America. Along the way he has met with Nikola Tesla and the two of them have been wrongly accused of espionage. While on the run from the law they have come to New France, and have met with Margreet Zelle, a double agent working for both the French and Queen Victoria under the code name Mata Hari.

Zelle knows the whereabouts of Sterling, the man who kidnapped Gormuil. He will be attending a meeting of businessman at Fort des Moines, run by a man named Al Swearengen. The meeting is to support the local insurrectionists until they can wrest control of the rebellion and take the newly independent country for themselves. Zelle has a plan to get to Sterling to interrogate him to find out what he has done with Gormuil. This involves a mission that appears impossible, which involves bringing a young blues singer and guitarist named Kid Douglas to perform in a bar in Keokuk, near to Fort des Moines.

All seems to be going well until Caldmore pulls a gun on the bar owner, a man named Howard Hughes, and threatens to kill him.

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The Machine Queen Part Four: Siege Perilous

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

“Caldmore?” the barman asked, finally recognising the man through the bizarre metal-coloured markings across his face. “Caldmore, Lem, you have to understand. It wasn’t my fault. I had to.”

Zelle looked between the two men, confused.

“You two know each other?” she asked.

Caldmore nodded. “I used to run missions in the north of New France, always into Acadia and Newfoundland, but we had contacts with the separatists further south. There’s lots of people up here in the north who wanted out from under the Red Stick.” Douglas looked on with curiosity, she’d never really been aware of the politics of her country, being mainly focused on staying alive on the streets of Memphis. Tesla looked confused, however. Caldmore explained.

“The Red Stick is what the separatists in Acadia and Newfoundland called the government in the south. They felt they’d been beaten down by them for too long. Forced movements of populations, over-taxed, over-looked when it came to investment. They felt they were just resources to be used. The British Empire was supporting them, not out of any compassion, but for a chance to destabilise the government of New France.

“Anyway, we had a series of meetings up in Détroit , it’s a city up near the Lakes. Representatives from insurrectionists from the rest of Upper Louisiana were also there. Including this man,” he pointed to Hughes. “Someone sold us out, we were trapped by government men and had to shoot our way to our extraction point.

Two of us were killed, another two nearly died from frostbite as we made it back to safer territory. If Hughes is alive, then it must have been him who shopped us to the soldiers.”

Zelle reached out and gently pushed down the arm in which Caldmore held his gun.

“Perceval,” she admonished, “this isn’t the quest. Remember your grail, Gormuil. We still have your Siege Perilous to storm.”

She was right. The mission was to get to Sterling. The adage that had helped keep him sane when surrounded by so many things that were wrong, but he couldn’t put right, was “stay on mission, focus on that”. He holstered the gun.

“I had to Caldmore”, Hughes protested. “They had my family, they were threatening to hurt them if I didn’t tell them what they wanted to know.” The barman dropped his hands to his sides. “I’m sorry.”

Caldmore ignored the apology while Zelle introduced Douglas to Hughes. “Howard Hughes, this is Kid Douglas.”

Hughes was still unnerved by meeting Caldmore again, but managed a thin smile at the young girl.

“Pleased to meet you, Kid. I’ve heard a lot about you from Margreet here. I’ve got a brother and a sister who are both singers, so I’ve always had an interest in music. No talent myself though.” He indicated the stage. “Get set up and we’ll see what you can do.”

While Douglas began tuning her guitar, Zelle, Caldmore and Tesla found a table.

“Does that sound likely, that the Red Stick could have threatened his family?” Caldmore asked.

Zelle shrugged. “It’s what they do,” she confirmed. “From what I know of Hughes though, they all grew up in Keokuk but the others left to pursue their careers. He stayed and set up the bar here. As far as I know he has very little contact with them. He’s always getting into get-rich-quick schemes that never quite pan out. If the Red Stick had anything to hold over him, it would be money.”

Caldmore looked at the mousey, bespectacled man in his early forties, his eyes narrowed.

“Very well, Margreet. I’ll keep my hands off him. Until the mission is over. After that ...” Caldmore kept the threat hanging in the air.

Zelle shrugged in response and the three of them turned to watch the young girl start to play the guitar.

Saturday, September 16th, 1911, Keokuk, New France

Lemuel Swearngen was a quietly spoken man in his early sixties, his newly grown goatee identical to that of his evil twin. Quietly spoken that is, unless the subject turned to that of his twin brother Al, at which point his voice rose in anger and resentment, sparked by shame and, Caldmore theorised, not a little envy. Al seemed to have a thoroughly disreputable life, as a pimp, a murderer and a blackmailer, living with apparently no rules, and no conscience; and annoyingly, with no apparent consequences.

Zelle informed the Lemuels, Tesla and Hughes her plan. Once Al Swearngen came to the bar to see the wonder of Kid Douglas for himself, they would make the exchange. Lemuel, posing as Al, would take Zelle and Caldmore to the Fort, under the aliases of a foreign couple interested in joining the conspiracy of businessmen planning on wresting the insurrection from the hands of the separatists. Zelle had an alias in place for just such an eventuality.

The addition of a husband would simply be a minor updating of her cover. It was at this point that Lemuel Swearengen raised the first problem.

“My brother is always in the company of a bodyguard or two. You will never have the chance to make the switch.”

Hughes had suggested making the exchange when Al Swearengen used the outhouse. He could make the rear panels removable. There was a space behind them out of sight of the courtyard they stood in. They could sequester themselves there, and once Al was in position they could open up the back of the shithouse, nab Al Swearengen, swap his clothes to Lemuel and make the switch.

It was a sound idea, until another objection was raised, by Zelle.

“How do we guarantee he needs to take a shit?” she had asked.

At that Tesla smiled. “Let me handle that.”

Tesla’s solution, which he presented the following day, was a device he pulled from his pocket. It was about seven inches long, and resembled closely a thick brass candlestick. He called it his “mechanical oscillator”.

“If I point it at a subject it induces the urge to defecate within moments.”

Hughes had scoffed at this and Tesla, rather than protesting his veracity, had simply pressed a button on the machine and pointed it at the man. Within moments he had excused himself and hurriedly, but carefully, fled out of the back of the bar to where the outhouses stood.

The Lemuels had roared with laughter, and the Caldmore of the two had slapped his friend on the back. Tesla had looked very pleased with himself at the response.

“A remarkable empirical demonstration, Tesla,” Zelle had declared, pointedly not joining in with the males’ adolescent behaviour. “And what on Earth possessed you to invent that?”

“The physiological effects were an inadvertent by-product,” the scientist admitted. “As for the real purpose, I’d rather not say at the moment.”

Hughes refused to meet everyone’s eyes on his return to the bar, and had instead begun setting up for that evening’s clientele.

That had been Wednesday. Three days’ later Al had still not made an appearance. The bar was so crowded they might not have even noticed if he had. Briggs and his friend’s niece, whom he introduced as Jennie Clemens, had attended earlier in the week, when it was quieter. By the weekend the bar was packed to standing room only, as word of the young girl with the extraordinary voice, and exciting music, had spread throughout the town’s 14 thousand inhabitants.

On Saturday, Swearngen at last paid a visit to the bar. The similarity to Lemuel was astounding. He and his two bodyguards scanned the crowd and then took seats in one of the tables in a darkened corner, the two tall square men turfing the people out of their seats who were already sitting there.

Caldmore, Lemuel Swearngen, Zelle and Hughes immediately took their positions behind the outhouse. Meanwhile Tesla carefully positioned himself close to the table where Al Swearngen sat, trying to remove and point his oscillator as unobtrusively as possible. He didn’t want either of the bodyguards to see him and mistake the long brass instrument as a weapon. This was partly because that would alert them all to the existence of some plot, but mainly because the two guards were obviously armed, and being shot was not an outcome Tesla relished.

Slowly he took the device from his pocket, and surreptitiously pointed it in Al Swearengen's direction. He depressed the button on the side of the oscillator and waited for the results. Within a few moments Al Swearengen began fidgeting restlessly, then abruptly stood up and moved to the rear exit of the bar, following the sign marked "toilettes".

Minutes later, as Al Swearengen squatted over the hole that lead to the soil pit below, he began to realise that the urge to go had been a misleading one. He began to hoist up his trousers when the rear of the outhouse was pulled out and a hand clamped over his mouth. He grunted as more hands pulled him back, which only resulted in a "you OK in there, chief?" from the bodyguard, and then he was gagged and his hands held firmly. With a shock he saw his brother, who swiftly pulled off the trousers, conveniently already unbelted and round his ankles, followed by his coat.

Within seconds the replacement was complete. Al Swearengen was pinned to the ground, and Lemuel Swearengen entered the outhouse and replaced the back panel. He opened the door.

"Tricky stool, boss?" the bodyguard asked him. "My cousin swears by Purgen. She says it's 'the laxative of the future'."

"Your cousin can go and shit in Hell for all I care," Lemuel Swearengen responded, immediately and enthusiastically warming to his part. "Let's go an' see if that little black girl is as good as they say she is."

Of course, she was. Lemuel Swearengen actually managed to sit back and relax while listening to her. Even the bodyguards were having a good time, though they stiffened when Hughes, Zelle and Caldmore approached the table.

"Mr Swearengen," Hughes oozed unctuously. "This is the couple I was telling you about; the Conte and Contessa del Graal." Swearengen indicated they should sit next to him, and the three

engaged in their cover story for a while for the benefit of the bodyguards.

“I should take you back to the Fort now,” declared Swearengen, after Douglas’s performance finished. “I’m sure you’ll be a great asset to our talks.”

With that they left, allowing themselves to be led by the bodyguards to Swearengen’s car and the ride to the Fort des Moines. Siege Perilous.

Sunday, September 17th, 1911, Fort des Moines, New France

It was a short ride to the fort, and they arrived shortly past midnight. It was an imposing structure, converted from a military outpost. Armed guards patrolled the grounds, and as the car slid noisily onto the forecourt, several of them walked up to it, one opening the door for the governor of the fort.

Swearengen waved them aside, and opened the door for Zelle. She took his arm, and he led her up the steps to the fort, both playing their roles to the hilt. Caldmore followed behind, not as easy as the Conte del Graal as Zelle was as the Contessa.

Zelle, of course, had her own reasons for accessing the fort. Somewhere on the premises Al Swearengen would have kept records of business meetings, plans, co-conspirators, all of which would be of great use to the government of New France, or the Charlolina separatists, or (Caldmore was beginning to suspect) herself personally.

The group was met by a man whom they guessed was Swearengen’s manservant. They’d not been able to collect much intelligence on the household, but this man was on file. Gabriel Lajeunesse was approximately the same age as Swearengen, but

seemed far more broken down by life. He stood, head bowed as Swearengen gave his instructions.

“Take the Conte and Contessa to my study. I’ll meet them there. Bring drinks.” Lejeunesse nodded his assent and led the two spies away. Swearengen stopped by a guard, needing to allow the group to proceed ahead, so that Lejeunesse could continue to direct the way, otherwise it would be apparent that Swearengen did not.

“The visitors? Have any more arrived today?” he asked.

“Only that Sterling guy, chief,” they guard replied. “Oh and another Hudson Bay Company rep.”

“And which room did you put him in?”

“The Muir Suite, boss, but he’s still up. Enjoying the entertainment,” the guard grinned slyly and Swearengen nodded.

“I’ll be along shortly,” he informed the guard, and followed Lejeunesse and the others along the corridor they had made their way along.

In Swearengen’s office, Zelle and Caldmore were trying to appear relaxed while Lejeunesse prepared drinks for them. Swearengen attempted the same until the manservant had completed the task and left. Hurriedly he informed them of his news; “Sterling is here. He arrived earlier today.”

Zelle nodded. She was looking through drawers, trying to identify significant documents then gave up the search and answered; “Lemuel – Lemuels,” she corrected herself. “I’ll stay here and see if I can find the information we need. You boys run along and fetch Sterling. We just need to get him on his own for a good few minutes and this is as good a place as any.”

The two headed off as they were instructed, Swearengen striding purposefully ahead, though he did not really know where he was

going, but assuming that it would appear more odd for him to seem unsure of what direction to go in, than to end up in the wrong place. At one point he inadvertently opened a stock room in view of two guards patrolling the fort, and had to pantomime checking on some of the crates in there, before selecting a bottle of whiskey and removing it with an overstated “ah-hah”.

“Don’t overplay it, Swearngen,” hissed Caldmore to the other Lemuel, then he saw the barely concealed panic on the man’s face. “It’s fine, you’re doing well. Let’s just find Sterling and get out of here.”

The door at the further end of the same corridor was the right one. Entering it, the two men saw a scene of some debauch.

The room was large, with a table made from thick red oak at one end. It was so hefty and sturdily-built it must have been constructed *in situ*, it would have been impossible to move. Chairs stood around it, and during the day it was probably used as a meeting table. Now, however, it was abandoned, the chairs strewn haphazardly around it.

Nearer to the door were an arrangement of chairs, chaises longues and settees. A handful of men, all white, all older and all quite rotund, lay or sat on these. A sixth was flat out asleep in the area at the centre of the informal seating area. The design of the space was evident. The businessmen could meet during day at one end of the room, and then segue easily to the evening’s relaxation, without moving any real distance.

Three of the men were also passed out. Bottles lay interposed between the bodies, indicating that it may have been an excess of alcohol that had depleted them to such an extent. However, the presence of three near naked women, one similarly asleep, the other two still in the process of sleepily, but intimately,

entertaining the two still conscious men indicated that other excesses may have led to their exhaustion.

One of the men who was still awake, sitting with his head back on the back of the sofa while a woman sat astride him, her dress fallen to her waist, seemed familiar to Caldmore. He was pale-skinned, with red hair. Sterling.

The Lemuels crossed the room to where the shire-reeve sat smothered in the embraces of the courtesan.

“Sterling?” Caldmore asked. The man looked up with bleary eyes.

“Hhhmm?” he asked vacantly.

“Sterling, I have something for you. You need to come with us,” Caldmore said trying to entice the man away.

“No, don’ wanna,” he said, his intoxication slurring his words.

“It’s scotch, Glenrandom, 40-years-old. Single barrel, I’ve been saving it for this occasion.”

The man was tempted, then decided. He pushed the woman off his lap, and she fell half-comatose to the floor.

“Show m’th’way,” Sterling insisted and the two Lemuels helped him to his feet, then half-steered, half-carried him through the fort’s corridors to Swearengen’s office.

On entering the office, Sterling first saw Zelle.

“Wha’ hey. Totty’s improving,” he exclaimed, just before Caldmore’s fist descended on his head. The man, unsteady to start with, collapsed in a heap on the floor.

Barely containing his anger with the shire-reeve, shite-reeve, Caldmore thought briefly, he flipped him over and sat on him. Sterling’s hands came up defensively in front of his face.

“Whu’ whut’s the matter with ye?” he cried, still befuddled by the alcohol.

“Gormuil Earhart, where is she?” Caldmore demanded. Sterling looked at him blankly. “The girls you traffic. Some go to brothels. But there are special ones, aren’t there, you take away further?”

A knowing glint came into Sterling’s eyes, which he quickly concealed. He’d realised what Sterling was after.

“I don’ know what ye ‘r talking about,” he said, sober enough to lie, but too drunk to make a good job of it, his eyes darting uneasily. Caldmore slapped him.

“Tell me. Where do you send them?” Caldmore shouted. Sterling clamped his mouth shut, refusing to talk further.

Zelle crouched next to Caldmore, holding a syringe. “You could try this. It’s a truth serum. Inject it and he’ll lose his ability to resist. You need to be careful though. With the amount of alcohol he’s consumed this might push him into unconsciousness.”

“He might be a complete bastard,” Caldmore responded. “But he’s still Scottish. He won’t pass out from just a bit of alcohol.” While he held Sterling’s hands still Zelle injected the serum into him.

It took a few moments to take effect and then Sterling’s struggles ceased. Zelle nodded and Sterling sat back, watching the portly Scot lie on the floor, head moving from side to side as if trying to find his way back to consciousness.

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

“So many slave routes, don’ know what you mean?” Sterling replied, confusion on his face”

“The young girls, you take them out of the brothels for some reason. What do they want them for?”

Sterling was still finding the answers difficult to find, his mind too befuddled to sift through all the alternatives. Zelle leant in again.

“Try and be more precise,” she suggested. “His memory will work well, but his ability to process thoughts is compromised. Caldmore considered.

“There was a young girl, recruited for factory work in the London docklands and yet never made it there. Some of her group ended up at the Rose Cottage, but she was separated from them. She went somewhere else. Where and why?”

A wry smile appeared on the man’s face. He looked up at Caldmore with some clarity. “How old was the girl?”

“12, perhaps 13,” Caldmore guessed.

“Rose Cottage, they deal out pain there,” the man grinned. Caldmore anger knotted in his stomach. “It normally involves pain. Pain is key.”

“What do you mean?”

“There’s a call out. For everyone,” Sterling closed his eyes again, the drugs were taking more of a hold and he began to lose the coherence with which he was speaking. “Across Europe, mebbe across the world. All of us who have access to people. They want them to be young, but ... there’s a type. They can stand pain, focus it. Transcend it... We’ve been told how to recognise the type. We send them to ... There’s a”

“Who? Who has put out the call?”

“It’s a ... a”

“Who?” Caldmore demanded, screaming.

The door opened. Caldmore turned and looked into the barrel of a gun. Behind the barrel was Al Swaengen.

“Ah,” the man spoke. “I thought we’d find you here.”

Zelle and the Lemuels were relieved of their weapons by Al Swaengen and his guards, and they were then led into the meeting room at gunpoint, Sterling being carried behind. On the floor, in the space between the informal seating area and the huge red oak table sat Tesla and Douglas. More armed guards stood pointing guns at them. It looked like Kid had been crying and Tesla looked terrified. The businessmen, previously asleep or engaged in intimacies were now awake. All the women had been cleared out of the room. Also with the businessmen was Hughes.

Caldmore leaped for him. “I should have killed you when I had the chance.” A guard struck him down before he could cross half the distance between them. He fell to the floor at Hughes’s feet.

“I was made a better offer,” Hughes explained. “Once Charlotina is free of the Red Stick, and in the hands of these men,” he waved a hand at the surrounding tired-looking fat white elders, “I get a seat at the table. Finally, I get to be rich.” He looked down at Caldmore. “The best I could have hoped from you was a bullet.”

Al walked up to Lemuel Swaengen.

“And you dear brother, stabbing me in the back like this,” he said. “I didn’t think you had it in you. I am quite impressed. But of course, secretly you’ve always wanted to *be* me.”

Lemuel Swaengen laughed derisively. “What? Be like you? Too afraid to leave your fortress because you have so many enemies. The line of people wanting you dead is so long you have to live like a prisoner. At least I’m free.”

“Free? Too scared to give into your impulses, to take what you need from life? I’d rather live a day like me than a lifetime like you.” Al Swaengen responded.

“I don’t believe you. I think deep down you wish every day you could start over again.”

Al Swaengen dismissed his twin with a sneer, but it was evident Lemuel Swaengen had struck a chord.

“So what shall we do with them?” one of the Hudson Bay men asked.

Al directed the guards to round up his brother, the other Lemuel and Zelle and push them into the space between the seating area and the large meeting table where Tesla and Kid were already kneeling.

“We shoot them. Over there with the others away from the rug,” Al Swaengen declared. “Take no prisoners.”

“Not the girl,” Hughes protested, stepping in front of his recently acquired co-conspirator.

Al Swaengen glared at him, raising his gun again at the bar owner. “One thing you need to learn; no-one questions my orders and you’re still a nobody. Just be grateful you’re not joining those four on the floor.”

Hughes didn’t point out that was two things. He was learning how secure his place was with the people he had chosen to be the ones to lift him out of obscurity, and what he was worth to them. Both were very little.

“But you have a point. Why waste the chance for some entertainment,” he directed the guards to separate Kid and Zelle from the rest. “We can enjoy ourselves with them for a while. We can always have them shot later.”

Hughes obviously considered objecting again, but thought better of it. He watched the Lemuels were pushed over to where Tesla still knelt on the floor and the two females separated from them. Al Swarengen, and the cabal of Hudson Bay men and New France plutocrats looking on with anticipation.

At that moment, the lights in the room went off, and the sounds of metal shutters clamping close around the walls could be heard. There was a moment's silence afterwards and then Al Swarengen could be heard yelling "what in Hell is going on?"

The lights returned at half luminosity, and all looked at the figure that now stood by the metal-shuttered door.

Swarengen's manservant, Gabriel Lajeunesse, stood there, wearing a strange brass and copper contraption. Around his torso were strapped a multitude of capacitor plates, in parallel rows, these were attached behind his back to a metal pole, at the top of which was attached a large brass sphere. It looked ridiculous and very, very lethal.

The armed guards stated to move towards the manservant, but he called out for them to stop.

"If I let go of this," he held up a triggering device in his left hand, "then the sphere will discharge millions of volts of electricity into the air. The lightning might not hit everyone, but the closer you are the more chance you'll have of frying."

The men paused, looking at Al Swarengen for instructions. He waved them back and took a step closer to Lajeunesse.

"What's this all about Gabriel," he asked, attempting to invest his question with a soothing placatory tone, but failing to hide the menace in it.

The man was quaking with both rage and fear. Everyone in the room watched the shaking left hand nervously.

“Every week I see you here, with these powerful men, dividing up the world for their own profit. I’m not taking it anymore,” Lajeunesse’s voice rang out, redolent with desperation. “You all need to pay for what you’ve done to me, this is where it happens.”

Al Swarengen was genuinely confused. “What we’ve done? All I’ve done is give you a job,” he replied.

“Thirty years ago, the Red Stick decided that because of the insurrection in Acadia and Newfoundland the people who lived there should be divided up, relocated. I lost my Evangeline that day. Thirty years separated, I’ve lost the only woman I’ve ever loved.”

Swarengen’s confusion continued.

“But these men aren’t the government. We’re trying to overthrow the government,” he argued.

“Not for the people,” Lajeunesse railed. “For yourselves. So you can take power. You just use and use people. You’re all the same. The politicians, the bankers, the company men.” Lajeunesse lifted up his hand again. “Well now you pay.”

Swarengen backed away, his hands raised. On one of the sofas, Sterling raised his head.

“Whu ... where am I?” he asked. Around him the Hudson Bay executives and local businessmen started to answer him.

“Quiet,” yelled Lajeunesse. He was beginning to lose control of the situation. On the other side of the group from Lajeunesse, Caldmore took the chance to talk to Tesla.

“Could he do it? Would that device stand a chance of killing us?” he asked. Tesla nodded. He reached into his pocket and withdrew the mechanical oscillator.

“This might help,” he said.

“With all due respect, Tesla,” Caldmore replied. “We are all on the verge of shitting ourselves, I don’t think your device will make much difference.”

Tesla simply smiled and cautiously edged towards one of the pillars that separated the informal seating area of the room from the meeting area. He attached the oscillator to the pillar and pressed a button on one end of it, then returned to his previous position.

“Remember I said that the shitting impulse was a *side-effect* of the instrument?” Tesla said to his friend. “Well is the actual effect.”

On the other side of the room, Lajeunesse’s attempts to persuade Swarengen and his conspirators to listen had ended.

“If you were going to do it, you’d have done it by now,” Al Swarengen stated.

“I just want you to acknowledge what you’ve done before you die. You have to see how wrong it is. You use people like objects. You destroy everything good about the world for a little profit. Can’t you see ...” Lajeunesse pleaded.

“No, can’t you see,” Sterling interrupted, “it’s the way the world is. Everything is a commodity. You either use or are used. And you’re not up to being a user.” With that Sterling leapt at Lajeunesse and grabbed the hand holding the trigger, making sure the Acadian couldn’t release it.

Around them, the building was beginning to shake. The floor suddenly lurched and then again. Plaster fell from the ceiling.

“What is that?” Caldmore asked Tesla.

“It’s my earthquake machine,” the Habsburgian replied. “It causes the oscillations to get bigger and bigger, until everything shakes apart.” The tall inventor looked around. “We should find shelter,” that last was yelled over the roar that had begun around them.

Everything was pandemonium. The guards and businessmen were yelling at each other while vases fell from plinths and paintings fell from walls. Sterling and Lajeunesse still struggled over the trigger, while Al Swearngen, always a survivor, had looked around at the increasing devastation and saw the safest place was probably under the massive red oak table at the other end of the room. As he headed towards it, however, he was intercepted by his brother. Lemuel tackled him and pulled him to the ground, where they lay struggling.

Meanwhile Zelle and Kid had joined Tesla and Caldmore as they too had made the same decision as Swearngen. The three adults placed themselves under the centre of the table, sheltering the child between them.

The shaking was even greater. A beam fell from the ceiling, crashing onto the table. Then flashes of lightning filled the room, hitting the floor near to the table, impaling the sofas and chairs and sending small spires of smoke ascending from the burnt holes. Then with a single crash, the entire ceiling of the room collapsed, followed by the walls of the fort folding in, a cloud of dust billowed inwards from the open sides of the table, but luckily for the four sheltering under it, the firm Louisiana red oak stood firm.

It seemed like the echo of that crash bounced around inside the heads of the four crouched under the table for hours, but it was probably less than one before they moved, carefully edging out through the collapsed beams and piles of rubble. Above them they could see open sky, the last few stars still visible against the encroaching dawn. Around them, the dust still hung in the air.

Their first discovery was that of Lemuel Swearengen, or was it Al? His torso was crushed beneath that of a fallen beam, the brother with whom he had been fighting possibly nearby under a pile of plaster.

They picked their way over furniture fallen from an upper storey, and slates from the roof. From under the rubble there was some movement. Two of the guards emerged, dragging away one beam to lift out one businessman. It looked like two beams had fallen onto a sofa creating a small pocket in which they had managed to survive.

On seeing the four one of the guards abandoned the task of lifting the businessman out of the hole, and pulled out a gun, which he had somehow been able to hang on to, and pointed it at Caldmore.

“Stay right there,” he commanded. He looked more closely at them, Caldmore realised they might be difficult to recognise, if they were as covered in dust as the three men who had just emerged were. “We had order to shoot you before ... before this,” he waved absently at the chaos around them.

“At ease,” came a voice from behind them. They turned and there was Swearengen, bits of plaster still hanging from his hair. “I’ll take care of them from here, you two go look for help.”

The two guards crossed the rest of the heap, heading out towards the remaining parts of the building that still stood.

“Lemuel?” asked Caldmore. The other shrugged.

“Maybe. The idea of being either appeals to me, I just haven’t decided yet,” and with that he picked his way through the debris, following the two guards.

Tesla and Caldmore looked down at the businessman scrambling out of the hole. It was Hughes. On seeing the others, the barman lifted up his hands.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, don’t shoot,” he pleaded. Caldmore dragged him up and threw him onto the rubble.

“I should shoot you here,” Caldmore threatened. “That’s twice now you’ve sold me out.”

Hughes held his head in his hands. “I know. I know. I just ... I saw a chance to get ahead, to get on the inside, you know? I just ... wanted it so badly.” He began to sob.

Tesla shushed him. “I think someone else is alive down there,” he said. Caldmore looked into the hole.

He could see a pair of legs sticking it from under a beam, the owner of them evidently dead, his body lying under a girder. Towards the edge of the small secure space were two figures, close together as if locked in an embrace. Tesla and Caldmore pulled away some of the blocks that covered the confined space, and cleared away one of the sheltering beams, so that more of the growing light of day shone into it.

Stepping down into the widened hole, Caldmore saw that it was Lajeunesse, untouched by the lightning and only a wide gash on his temple to indicate any injury. As they lifted him out he burred “Black were her eyes as the berry” and then “her kirtle of blue” evidently describing the woman he’d been separated from.

The man who had been lying next to him was badly burnt, but Caldmore could see it was Sterling. In addition to the burns, a

metal spike, once holding the ceiling together, had impaled his chest. Caldmore knelt next to the dying man.

“You deserve this, you bastard,” he said, “all those women you’ve destroyed, lives ruined.”

The man looked up to him, eyes focused, being electrocuted and impaled seemed to have sobered him up. “You’re a damn liberal, Caldmore, yea’ I know who you are. Bloody socialist, thinking all people are equal. I was the fucking shire-reeve of that island, Caldmore. Those people were mine to do with as I bloody well pleased.”

A coughing fit shook him, and the little energy he had left seemed to leave him. “You have to help me, Caldmore,” he pleaded.

“Tell me where you sent the sixth girl, the one you took from Rose Cottage and I’ll stop the pain,” he bargained.

Sterling nodded. “It was a ...” he began coughing, blood dripped from his lips.

“It was a ... a what?” Caldmore practically screamed his question. The man mumbled something. Caldmore leant in more closely to catch the man’s final words.

“It was Alfonso.”

Alfonso? King Alfonso? Was that possible? Or was it another Alfonso? Caldmore climbed out of the hole and confronted Hughes. He felt relieved at Sterling’s death. On seeing the man was still alive he’d felt a moral dilemma. He’d killed men before, but in the heat of battle. To simply execute a wounded man would be barbaric. But to do anything to enable him to live would make Caldmore culpable for any atrocities he would then go on to commit. It was not a choice he would have wanted to make, and

luckily, the man's injuries meant he wouldn't have to make it. But now he had another decision to make.

He looked down at Hughes, a man so trapped by his avarice he felt compelled to do whatever he could to make money. But fate had taken one monster off the board today, and maybe two if the man currently rousing help from the rest of the fort was Lemuel Swearingen and not Al. And there were the crushed remains of the Hudson Company men and local businessmen all around him. He could let revenge take the rest of the day off.

"OK Hughes, you can go. But you owe me one. No. You owe me two. I might collect one day." Nodding gratefully the man got to his feet, and picked his way towards safer ground.

Tesla and Zelle had Lajeunesse supported between them, Kid followed behind them. The Acadian seemed able to walk, but dazed, possibly concussed.

"There's a few cars in the forecourt," Caldmore pointed out. "I think they owe us one."

The sun was fully above the horizon by the time they pulled into the hospital grounds. Keokuk had been the town that soldiers injured in the war with Britain had been taken and still had a strong military hospital tradition. Nurses swooped in to help the wounded man as Tesla and Caldmore lifted him from the stolen car. A pair of orderlies appeared with a stretcher and he was lowered onto it and then hoisted up. One of the nurses, a woman in her late forties or early fifties looked intently at him.

'Gabriel! O my beloved!' she cried, recognising him. She looked up at the men who had brought him to her.

“We were separated, years ago, during the Expulsion,” she explained. “I’d thought never to see him again. Where has he been all this time?”

Caldmore shrugged. “Fort des Moines. About 10 miles that way,” he said, pointing north.

The woman shook her head, obviously incredulous at the fate that had kept them apart for so long, even though they were so close to each other. “At least we were together briefly, before the end,” the woman, doubtless Evangeline, stated, stifling a sob.

“Before the end?” Zelle interjected, having heard the exchange on stepping out of the car. “Woman, he’s just got concussion. Oh my god, dying in your arms after half a lifetime’s separation would be melodramatic beyond belief. Talk about overwrought sentimentality.” With that she returned to the car, waiting impatiently for the two men to return to it.

With a few enquiries, the four found the house belonging to Jennie Clemens and made it to the household just as they were rising for breakfast. Briggs was overjoyed to be reunited with Kid, and after sharing breakfast, they made their way to the jetty where the partially submerged airship was moored.

A plume of dust and smoke could be seen upriver, the after-effects of Tesla’s localised earthquake. Just before boarding Zelle looked at it and as Caldmore passed beside her said,

“So did he tell you that he’d sold the girl to King Alfonso, then?”

Caldmore looked at her astonished.

“You mean you knew all along?” he accused her. She didn’t answer.

“Then why not just tell me, rather than making us go all through this?” Caldmore asked.

She turned and grinned at him. “If I’d told you from the outset, then all of that,” she indicated the plume of smoke far to the north, “wouldn’t have happened, would it?”

With that she walked the gangplank, ready for the journey back downriver.

Friday, October 10th, New Orleans, Louisiana

Caldmore’s airship was moored at the docks, partially submerged as it had been for their trip up and down the Mississippi. He waved John Briggs, standing by the tow rope with Kid Douglas, and walked up the gangplank to the entryway to his airship.

Briggs cast off the airship, and it slowly ran south towards the Gulf of Mexico. Once distanced enough from observers he would be able to take the airship up and out of the water then fly to the South West and the seat of power of the Viceroyalty of New Spain in México Tenochtitlán.

Caldmore reflected on what little he knew of the Viceroyalty of New Spain. He knew that it had become the seat of the royal family after the Napoleonic wars had ousted them from their homeland. They had ruled there, gradually extending their power throughout the western part of the Americas, until their rule extended from Oregon in the north to South America.

In 1885, at the age of 27, the previous king Alfonso XII had almost died of dysentery and tuberculosis. Numerous doctors had been called, but eventually he had been cured by an elderly curandero named Pedro Jaramillo. The revived king had been profoundly moved by this, and had thus begun a renaissance for the Aztec and Mayan cultures and peoples. The king had married his third wife, a descendant of Aztec royalty, and had a single daughter with her.

By the time of his death, fifteen years later, the royal palace had been rebuilt as a giant ziggurat. Aztec practices and rituals were reinstated and New Spain had become a resurgent power in the world. On his death, Alfonso XII's son, King Alfonso Moctezuma XIII continued these practices, even while marrying Victoria Eugenie, the grand-daughter of Queen Victoria. In fact, if the rumours were true, the rituals of bloodletting had become even more outrageous; Victoria Eugenie was a carrier of haemophilia and passed this onto their sons. To supply the princes with the blood they required necessitated the death of a single man each day. No educated person believed this, of course, but still the rumours persisted amongst the peasantry.

The airship continued drifting downriver along the Mississippi, the waves creating an undulating motion of the deck. Once Caldmore judged they were out of sight of New Orleans, he went below decks, heading for the control cabin.

Tesla was inside, in the forward compartment. The Habsburgian engineer had made the cabin, actually the map room, into his berth. He was bent forward over the large desk that occupied one side of the compartment, eyes closed, a metal cap worn on his head, electrodes attached to his temple.

The device was one Caldmore had gathered the designs for, in a dreamstate in which he had travelled to a meeting-place between parallel worlds. In this transitional space he had met a Tesla from a world in which the Roman Empire had never fallen. Once the details for the device had been dictated to him, Caldmore had conveyed these to his own Tesla, and the two now communicated frequently, passing on information and ideas between their two worlds. Their minds had almost become a single gestalt, so that Caldmore had nicknamed them the Teslata.

Rather than disturb Tesla, Caldmore left the man to his device and retreated to the aft compartment; the master bedroom.

Laying on the bed in his cabin was Zelle, engrossed in conversation on a Teslagraph. This was a recent invention of Tesla's which could use voice to communicate with Queen Victoria, a giant analytical engine erected on the banks of the Thames, and which housed the recorded intellect of Her Majesty on cogs, gears and punched cards. Billions upon billions of them.

The Teslagraph had been his, but Caldmore did not resent Zelle having usurped his role as agent of the Queen. In fact, he welcomed it, resenting the way he, and Tesla, had been manipulated to act as scapegoats for Zelle's theft of the plans for Edison's aethership. The Queen evidently prized the French-Dutch double agent as a less expendable asset, and saw Caldmore as little more than a taxi driver and patsy. Zelle had even co-opted Caldmore's Picture Telegraph, a small disc that conveyed images to the Queen. Again, the woman was welcome to it.

The loss of the communication devices also enabled Caldmore to keep secret from the Queen, and from Zelle, the existence of the parallel world with which Tesla communicated. He had sworn Tesla to keep the secret too. He wasn't sure what suspicion suggested the less either agent or empress knew of the Teslata the better, but that was one ace he wanted to keep up his sleeve.

Zelle saw Caldmore watching her, and coquettishly blew him a kiss. Despite himself he smiled at her, then ruefully considered that every action he conducted in her company was "despite himself".

"I'm about to take her up", he told her. She nodded focused again on whatever schemes she was embroiled in with Her Highness. He was about to leave her when she held up her hand, indicating he should stay. She listened to her Teslagraph for a while longer then placed it beside the bed, smiling at him.

“The Queen agrees. I have a plan to secure the release of your wee island lassie,” she told Caldmore, patting the bed next to her.

“Oh yes?” he replied joining her there.

“Well you didn’t think you could just waltz in to the royal ziggurat and demand her release, did you?” Zelle asked him beginning to caress his arm.

“I thought I’d appeal to the king’s conscience. If she’s there, and I tell him how much her family misses her, maybe he’d relent. Whatever he has her for he can’t hold her forever.”

“Oh my dear, Lemuel,” Zelle laughed. “The conscience of kings is such a small thing; it cannot be relied on to achieve anything. No,” she declared, “I have a much better thing to rely on.”

Leaving the bed, she crossed the room to her travelling bag, and took from it a small metal box. It was the device she had stolen from Edison, or rather, which the inventor had permitted her to take. On it was stored the plans to his aethership, a massive craft which he had built that would take men from the surface of the Earth and out into the realms of space. Anyone could take a set of Lovelace cards, pass them through the box, and they would be punched with all the coded information stored there. Transferring those cards to a plotter, it would then draw the engineering designs and enable anyone to replicate his invention. As it was designed to bestow a ubiquitous sharing benefaction of any idea stored within it, it was named a USB.

“I will offer this USB to the king in return for the girl. The Queen agrees. You know she will do anything to encourage a race into space. It is a win-win situation. New Spain will have their own aether fleet, forcing the people of New England to build another. The Great Game will spread to the stars themselves.” She returned to the bed and straddled Caldmore. “And in return you get to return the girl to her family. Is Her Highness not ingenious?”

Caldmore had to acknowledge, it was a brilliant plan.

“And so,” she continued, leaning in to kiss him, “do I get my reward?”

Later, much later, returning to the map room, Caldmore discovered that Tesla had completed his communication with his other self. Tesla acknowledged the entrance of his friend with a curt nod, and smoothed his full moustache.

“Fascinating. The more I learn of his universe, the more incredible I find it. For them the travel between the worlds is commonplace. And yet for all that, the people there have not learnt to abominate slavery, it is still acceptable to treat one’s fellow man in that way.”

“It still occurs here too, Nikola,” Caldmore reminded him. “The Texans, I believe, still practice it. It’s actually illegal there to free a slave.”

“Let’s hope we never end up travelling there,” Tesla responded.

“Well, we’re headed towards New Spain, they may not have slaves there, but I’ve heard of some very rum goings on there.”

“We’re off now, then?” Tesla shook himself from his post-Teslata malaise. “Rum or not, I’ll be glad to get away from this damnable water,” his trip up and then down the Mississippi had not agreed with the man, and he anticipated that the open waters of the gulf would be even less to his liking.

Caldmore nodded, and headed further forward, through the cabin door to the cockpit, Tesla following him.

Through the twin hemispherical glass viewports, protruding out and below the main hull of the airship, the waters of the Mississippi could be seen surrounding them. Caldmore pulled at

the levers either side of his seat and with a creak the cavorite shutters beneath the craft closed, cutting off the effect of the Earth's gravitational field on all matter above them. With another lever pulled, the helium nacelles extended beyond the nullifying effect of the shutters, their buoyancy providing lift. Like a monstrous insect, the airship emerged from the waters, the rolling effect providing a last-minute additional lift, and the craft with its three inhabitants took to the skies. Caldmore set the sails for a south-westerly direction, hoping that México Tenochtitlán would be the end of his quest for Gormuil Earhart.

Tuesday, October 24th, 1911, Eastern Coast of New Spain

Dawn was just breaking when the Cavoritocraft approached the coast of New Spain. Lush forest filled the land across the entire bay, and Caldmore extended the helium nacelles to provide some extra height to pass easily over them.

Caldmore left the cockpit, and as he walked through the map room he encountered Tesla, well awake and engaged in reading through some engineering designs. Caldmore nodded to him, but it was still too early in the day to engage in conversation.

In their bedroom, Zelle was still sleeping, but she opened her eyes blearily to see the land passing below them, the shutters around the lower part of the cabin were open to afford such a view. He passed her to the rear of the cabin, and up the helical metal staircase that occupied the aft section of the craft up to the galley.

He had just warmed the teapot for his first cup of tea of the day when he looked through the galley window. An airship filled the sky in front of him, and a loudhailer addressed him.

“Ximocahua. Parar y prepararse para ser abordado.”

It seemed to be a mixture of Nahuatl and Spanish, neither of which Caldmore spoke, but the meaning was clear. They were in trouble.

Ropes fell down from the airship and within minutes the deck had half a dozen Spanish airmen in uniforms occupying it, pistols drawn. Caldmore opened the door that led to the deck from the galley, pot in hand.

“Good morning, gentlemen, would you care for some tea?”

Communication between the airmen of New Spain and the airman of Britain had been reduced to glowering in one direction and disinterested disdain in the other, until Zelle had appeared on deck, roused from her half-awake viewing of the landscape by the continued absence of Caldmore.

In search of her morning coffee, she had encountered the occupiers with her nightclothes still in some disarray, and had distracted them by her half-hearted attempt to correct her *déshabillé*. Of course, Caldmore realised, she would speak flawless Spanish, and a smattering of the Nahuatl spoken by the Spanish court, and so had effected a resolution to the impasse.

The airmen were, naturally, opposed to any infraction of their airspace. However, Zelle had informed them that they were there as representatives of Her Majesty Queen Victoria, the grandmother of their own queen. After various communications, Zelle to Victoria via Teslagraph, the airmen to their base, and doubtless Victoria to the court of New Spain, the situation was resolved, and the airships that had previously been a barrier to their entry subsequently formed an escorting convoy.

As they neared the enormous city of México Tenochtitlán, one building more than any other occupied their attention. After the resurgence of interest in the Aztec culture, the New Spanish had

reflooded the basin in which existing city of Mexico had been built, reforming the great Lake Texcoco. The King ordered his ziggurat to occupy a large proportion of island where the original city had stood, and surrounding it, the royal gardens. The occupants of the city were rehoused along the banks of the lake. This Caldmore already knew.

What he was not prepared for was the size of the Royal Ziggurat. It stood more than a mile on each side, and close to that high. Of all the structures in the world, only the Great Wall of the Xin, the Walls of Benin and Queen Victoria herself were larger.

Caldmore was instructed to head directly towards the ziggurat, as he neared it, he kept having to recalculate the scale. The ziggurat comprised about 20 steps, which he presumed made it 20 storeys high, but as the craft neared it, it became evident that each step had five-storeys each, he could count the rows of windows from some as they reflected the sun rising behind him. The small blimps arrayed around the building were actually the size of the enormous airships that surrounded his small craft. Caldmore realised that Zelle had been mistaken at Hughes's bar when she'd called the Fort des Moines his Siege Perilous. This must surely be it.

Caldmore stood at the bow of his Cavaritocraft, watching the island draw closer, the airships of the Spanish fleet silently keeping pace beside him. Both Zelle and Tesla joined him. With the water rushing below, the creak of the sails, and the magnificent building and gardens ahead, it could have been exhilarating, if not for the trepidation he felt at what lay ahead. If one tenth of the rumours he had heard about the court were true, the island they headed towards was the stuff of nightmares.

Every fifth step of the ziggurat was a wider step, and on each of these wide steps were green parks, thoroughfares, concourses and airship stations. The entire building was a city in itself. The uppermost set of five was the most ornate and was evidently the

part occupied by the royal family. Caldmore surmised the lower parts of the building were government offices, embassies and so on. He could imagine the social climbing and political manoeuvring required to work one's way up through the levels to be as close as possible to the seat of power.

It looked as if they were to head straight towards the pinnacle of this social hierarchy, as their escort headed towards the flat space at the very top of the building. Caldmore kept in pace with them, and at the same height. As the flotilla descended he made out small figures below, a group of five, adults and children, with a set of guards around them.

They landed, and Caldmore lowered the gangplank which depended from the midsection of the craft. He preceded the other two down the steps and the three of them walked side-by-side to the small family group. The guards stood at attention as the adult male, reached out and shook Caldmore's hand.

"King Alfonso" he introduced himself "the thirteenth" he appended. "And little Alfonso, Jaime and Beatriz," he counted off the three children, all less than about four years old. "And Queen Victoria," he introduced a heavily pregnant woman. "The other Queen Victoria," he clarified.

"And you are the representatives of the Empress Victoria?" he asked, though barely paying attention as Caldmore introduced himself and his two companions. He took more interest in the picture telegraph that Zelle carried around her neck as a talisman.

"Ah and through this we communicate with Her Majesty?" he looked more closely and his wife reached to take it in her hand.

"Hello grandmother," Victoria Eugenie called. "Would you like to see your great-grandchildren?"

Alfonso led Caldmore and Tesla towards the edge of the roof of the building, where a walker cabin was settled. Behind them Zelle was showing the children the Picture Telegraph and was passing on messages from them back and forth to their great-grandmother, the Queen of Spain watching on amusedly.

It was a cheerful domestic scene, completely at odds with what Caldmore had been led to believe was lying in wait once he got to México Tenochtitlán. Despite this, Caldmore felt impelled to ask about the subject of his quest.

“Your Highness, I am here searching for a young woman, that I believe may have been brought here against her will, if I could ...”

“My dear sir, you have come so far, and travelled for so long, surely you can wait a little longer, while we observe some basic courtesies,” the King responded.

Somewhat rebuffed, and unsure about how to proceed, Caldmore allowed himself to be led to the cabin of the walker, where King Alfonso himself set the controls for the floor and entry point. Once the women and children caught up, he pressed another button and the cabin lurched to its feet, metal struts fitting into grasping points on the surface of the building, and began its gradual descent down the side of the building.

At the next narrow step in the ziggurat, the walker stopped, and the king ushered his family and visitors into what was evidently the royals’ personal space. Footmen were at hand, and when Alfonso instructed them, they took the visitors each to a separate suite of rooms. “We will talk later,” Alfonso told them, “at dinner. Until then please relax, recuperate, you must be tired after your journey.”

Caldmore half-expected Zelle to join him in his room, but she was evidently otherwise occupied. Caldmore examined the view, which was magnificent. The clear blue waters of Texcoco lay in the distance, but between him and it were the many layers of the ziggurat, most bedecked with gardens, and, spreading out from the base, verdant parks and woods. He then occupied himself wandering the corridors of the royal palace, always watched by guards, but apparently with instructions to let their visitors wander as they willed. He soon bored of his explorations, and frustrated that, so close to the conclusion of his quest for Gormuil, he had been stymied once more.

Finding a library, he removed a book and returned to his room to read it. He had selected it because there were several editions and one taken from several of the same was least likely to be missed. It seemed to be a torrid piece of yellow journalism by one Edward Prendrick, but passed the time.

Several hours later, he had made strong headway through the short lurid manuscript, when a footman appeared at the entry to Caldmore's suite, with an evening suit for him to wear for dinner. Caldmore bathed and dressed and then accompanied the man to an elegant dining room, the central table carved from Amazonian hardwood, the chairs similarly, but the sumptuousness of the hangings were belied, on closer inspection, by their subject matter. They were in the Aztec style, though woven with European techniques, and depicted scenes of various activities, some of which were evidently quite brutal forms of sacrifice.

In keeping with European sensibilities, however, much of the dining experience was automated. Caldmore sat on the chair, and as it did so, a clever mechanism integrated within the chair moved it forwards, so he was seated closer to the table. An intricate clockwork mechanism moved plates into position, poured drinks, and ladled soup into bowls. Caldmore looked around at the others

seated at the table. Although able to accommodate many more, there were only eight diners sat clustered around one end. Alfonso was at the head and to his right sat the queen, next to her was an elderly man, possibly in his nineties, who toyed uncomfortably with his soup, to his right sat Zelle, in animated conversation with the man to her right, a slightly portly man in his thirties with a thick moustache, that Caldmore would have mistaken for an office clerk if not for a sagacity in his eyes of a man far older.

The seat to Alfonso's left, Caldmore's right, was unoccupied, Tesla sat to Caldmore's left, opposite Zelle.

There was a movement behind Caldmore, and Alfonso and he turned to look. The person who entered the room was clothed from head to foot in a shapeless black covering, like the images of Moorish women Caldmore had once seen. Her hands were covered in soft leather gloves. Only a slit for her eyes revealed anything of the person underneath, and as she took the empty seat, the pistons moving it into place, she and Caldmore's eyes met. The eyes were large and amber, and held him for an uncomfortably long time in their gaze.

Turning to his dining companions again, Caldmore looked directly across the table at the elderly, gaunt man, and he was staring at the women with pride, and self-satisfaction, like an artist would appraise a sculptor he had created.

Alfonso stood, raising his glass to the others, motioning with his other hand that the others should remain seated. They did so with some discomfort, their deference to monarchy ill-matching the informality in the presence of a king with which they were now faced.

"Now we are all together, I will introduce you all to each other. I must admit," he smiled self-deprecatingly, "I am something of a collector of interesting people, and here," he circled the upraised

glass indicating all those seated, “must be the most illustrious collection of notables of our age.”

“My wife, Queen Victoria Eugenie of Battenberg, you have all met,” he smiled warmly at her. “Seated next to her we have the notable Sir William Gull, once Physician-in-Ordinary to Queen Victoria my wife’s grandmother, and our family physician for more than 20 years.”

Alfonso raised his glass to Gull, who nodded in response, and continued anticlockwise around the table.

“Mata Hari, envoy of ... several governments ... dashing and reckless heroine with many secrets, I am sure.” He continued to the young man to her right.

“Dr Albert Einstein, master of most of the natural philosophies, possibly the greatest scientist of our age, formerly of the Kingdom of Württemberg and now resident amongst us, I am proud to say.”

“Dr Nikola Tesla, another of our greatest living minds, and, I hope, our latest resident. Tesla has transformed the engineering world as Einstein has transformed our understanding of the cosmos. Welcome, Dr. Tesla.”

“Captain Lemuel Caldmore, formerly of Her Majesty’s Cavoritocraft and Airship Cavalry and Information Corps, what a mouthful that is sir. The CACIC’s loss is our gain. I am sure you have many thrilling tales of life in the air.”

“And finally, but by no means least, the princess Maria Estefania Tlazohtin Emanuela Quetzalxochitl de Borbón y Mexico-Tenochtitlan. Or Steffie as I have always known her. My sister.”

The cloaked figure did not show a response, but simply continued swirling her soup with her spoon.

“Welcome, all of you, may our shared adventures prove fruitful.”

All but the princess raised their glasses to the king. He sat and began talking to his wife. Tesla and Einstein began conversing immediately, both seemingly aware of the other's work and asking numerous questions. As the woman to Caldmore's right unnerved him somewhat, he attempted to strike up a conversation with Gull.

"What originally brought you to New Spain, Sir Gull?" he asked.

The man scowled at the impertinence of such a question, then relented.

"There were certain rumours about me, scurrilous and scandalous writings in the gutter press. I chose to depart England to escape them. That was shortly after the previous king's miraculous recovery." Caldmore placed the man then, 1888. There had been a handful of murders in Whitechapel, prostitutes murdered and opened with surgical precision. Forensic evidence newly invented had implicated Gull, but the charges were quashed. The tabloid press had made something of it, a certain chronicler of true crime stories had pieced together an expose in *The Strand*, and Gull had fled.

By coincidence 1888 had also been the year in which the narrative he had read in his room had taken place, the year that Edward Prendrick had been marooned on that island. Both incidents were cause celebres of their year and had made a strong impact on the teenage Caldmore. Strange how both should revisit themselves on him at the same day.

"I came here chiefly because I had heard of the remarkable recuperation of the previous king. I myself had suffered the early onslaught of a debilitating malady. Arriving here, I was cured by the same hand that cured the king, or doubtless one of the ensuing arrows of that disease would have found its mark." He allowed

himself a rueful smile, one of the few Caldmore would ever see him make.

“The strange way fate works, that if I had not been slandered in such a severe fashion, I would have remained in England, and perhaps would not have lived for more than a few more years.”

Caldmore murmured his concurrence that it was indeed a strange twist of fate, though now he had placed Gull as the mooted butcher of Whitechapel, he was even less easy in his presence.

“I delivered the good princess to this world, in fact, only a few years after my arrival,” he said cheerily. The response from the woman was a low throaty growl, which quietened him for a moment.

“And you, sir, what brings you all the way from the old world to the new?” he asked Caldmore.

“I’m looking for someone. A girl. Name of Gormuil Earhart,” at the name the shrouded woman stiffened. “I was told that she was here.” Caldmore turned to Alfonso, his patience finally wearing thin. “Your Highness, I really must insist you tell me whether she is here, and if she is, what you have done with her.”

“My dear Captain Caldmore, you really are like a bull at a gate,” at the word “bull” Gull shot a look at the king, and allowed himself another rueful smile. “Do not concern yourself, I have already discussed this with Mata and come to an arrangement.” Zelle looked up and smiled and nodded at Caldmore, reassuring him. “Tomorrow your mind will be put at rest. This evening ... relax. Your journey will soon be over.”

Caldmore allowed himself to be partly mollified, and as he returned to his meal the woman to his right reached out a gloved hand and squeezed his arm, though as a comfort or as a warning, he could not tell.

The rest of the evening carried on with somewhat strained conversation, between all but Tesla and Einstein whose animation more than made up for the others' reserve. Servo-servitors delivered the separate courses, the steam produced as a by-product of the need to drive pistons and gears in a simulacrum of stewards, used also to keep the food warm as it was delivered to the guests.

Finally, the autosomellier brought out the port, dipping in and out between guests, mechanical arm pouring expertly and precisely into the correct glasses, always moving to the left. The eight sat there, sipping quietly, finally exhausted of all polite conversations, then to the relief of all Alfonso bade them all good night. Caldmore watched as the princess left with her brother and sister-in-law, something lithe and sinuous about her movements which seemed inhuman. She looked back once before exiting the room at him, and he started as Zelle took his arm.

"I will leave tomorrow. We will spend one last night together, yes?" she asked, or instructed, him. He nodded his assent, and they left, leaving Tesla and Einstein still engrossed in conversation, and Gull looking into the middle distance. Thinking of ... what? Caldmore wondered, then banished the question from his mind as being somewhere even he did not want to venture.

Wednesday, October 25th, 1911, Royal Palace, México Tenochtitlán

The next day Zelle had left Caldmore's bed before he had risen, very unlike her, and had evidently returned to her own suite to bathe before breakfast. He met her, and the three scientists, together with the king.

"Lemuel," Tesla called to him. "Dr Einstein has invited me to tour his laboratory, would you care to join us?"

“A capital idea,” Alfonso replied. “I am so proud of the work the good doctor has accomplished while with us. I’d like a chance to share it with you all. Gull, will you come?”

The physician gave his apologies, proclaiming a new experiment he had to prepare for, so it was the four remaining breakfasters who made their way to the cabin of the walker.

The machine found its way to the nearest runner that crisscrossed the outer edifice of the ziggurat and was soon zooming downwards.

“The ziggurat is really four separate buildings, each set one atop the other.” Alfonso explained. “The uppermost one is the royal palace, and it and the gardens surrounding it form the roof of the next, which is the government offices, embassies, ministries and so on.”

“The building below that houses a whole range of laboratories, universities, accommodation and so on. It really is a hotbed of invention. When Dr Einstein came to us, fleeing the fragmentation of the Confederation of Germany, we snapped him up. His ideas were so revolutionary; we knew we had to support him as best we could.”

The walker had found the base of the next building down, it proceeded to free itself from its runner and crawl crabwise around the building, covering the flat surface that was both the concourse surrounding the university buildings and the roof of the bottom-most building. Finally, it stopped, and they exited, walking past the armed guards and through large doors into the building. They found themselves in an enormous open interior space, machines of unfathomable purpose and bizarre design surrounding them. Einstein strode purposefully through all of these, oblivious to the wonders around him, and the numerous people who attended

them, and entered a freestanding glass office at the centre of the activity.

Inside was a haven of calm. But central to the room was an hourglass shaped device, of about a yard in length, a toroid free-floating about the narrow waist of the machine. A cable ran from it to a control device, about the size of a suitcase. The machine glowed and buzzed with contained energies.

“This is the culmination of my life’s work. My life’s work to date, anyway,” Einstein declared. “This is my latest power unit, a Lambda device. It’s so-called because it draws energy from the very space surrounding us. To date we have built three of these devices, each one more powerful than the last. This device alone powers this entire building.”

“The energies contained in it are enormous,” Alfonso declared. “Without Dr Einstein’s precise balancing act, which siphons off just the correct amount of energy, the fields inside would collapse, causing all the energies to be released in one moment.”

“There would be an explosion?” Caldmore asked.

“My dear Captain, there would be little left of this entire structure. Needless to say,” he patted the device affectionately, “we take very good care of her.”

“This is most impressive,” Tesla commented. “I wonder if I could observe more?”

“Of course,” Einstein was effusive in welcoming the engineer. “I am sure you would be an enormous asset to the work here.”

The two went to a chalkboard at one end of the office, and Einstein began scribbling mathematical notation. Alfonso turned to Caldmore and Zelle.

“We shall leave them to it, I think. On to our next stop.”

Caldmore and Zelle followed the king back through the large doors out onto the concourse. Caldmore found the heat unbearable, and his patience again was wearing thin.

“Your highness, your accomplishments here are truly inspiring, but ... I have to insist. The information I have is that you have taken hostage a young girl I am seeking. We are prepared to trade you for her life, but please. Let us progress to some resolution of this situation.”

Alfonso considered. “Yes, a resolution, very well.”

Zelle lifted off the Picture Telegraph from around her neck, with which Queen Victoria could follow the images of what was happening. She dropped it to the concourse and ground it under the heel of her boot. Next she took the bag she carried over her shoulder, and withdrew the USB on which was stored the details of Edison’s aethership.

“The plans for the girl, that was the deal,” Caldmore stated.

“Err no, my dear Lemuel. The plans for this.” From out of the laboratory behind them, a guard carried a similar device to the Lambda device that Einstein had shown them, a second carried a control device.

“You’ll need the manual with that, if you are to avoid it simply exploding the first time you turn it on,” Alfonso warned. “Like its successor, this Kappa device needs precise management.”

“Oh and who is to say that is not precisely the result I want?” Zelle asked. Alfonso shrugged. It was a fair point.

She took the control device and placed it in her bag, and then hefted the power unit.

“I will need an aircraft to return home,” she stated.

Alfonso hesitated. “I am not sure this is an effective deal. Of course, the Kappa device is one we have spare, but it is an effective working machine, not simply a set of plans, and now a free ride on an airship in addition ...”

“You are forgetting the other part of my offer to you. Something to sweeten the deal.” Zelle pointed out.

“Ah yes, I remember,” Alfonso stated, feigning recollection. He snapped his fingers. Two guards stepped forward and grabbed Caldmore’s arms. Caldmore struggled ineffectually against them, then quietened when he realised he could not move at all. Zelle stepped up to him and kissed him on the cheek.

“Goodbye my dear captain. Please don’t take this personally. It’s just business.”

And with that she stepped into the cabin of the walker. It crossed the concourse to the nearest runner and attached itself, then sped upwards to the roof far above. Caldmore watched it ascend, left bewildered by the sudden change in events.

“Now you Captain, you will be heading in the opposite direction.”

The guards held Caldmore securely by the arms while another walker appeared then marched him into its cabin. It descended to the ground, and after some more lateral movement around the base of the giant ziggurat stopped in front of what appeared to be a hospital entrance. Men and women in white smocks waited for him next to a hospital trolley and he was lifted up and strapped to it.

Caldmore lifted up his head enough to see where he was going and saw that the trolley was being wheeled to the front of the building towards a hole in the wall. At the hole someone pushed his head flat to the pallet on which he was secured and then the whole thing, pallet, Caldmore and trolley was slid into the hole. A

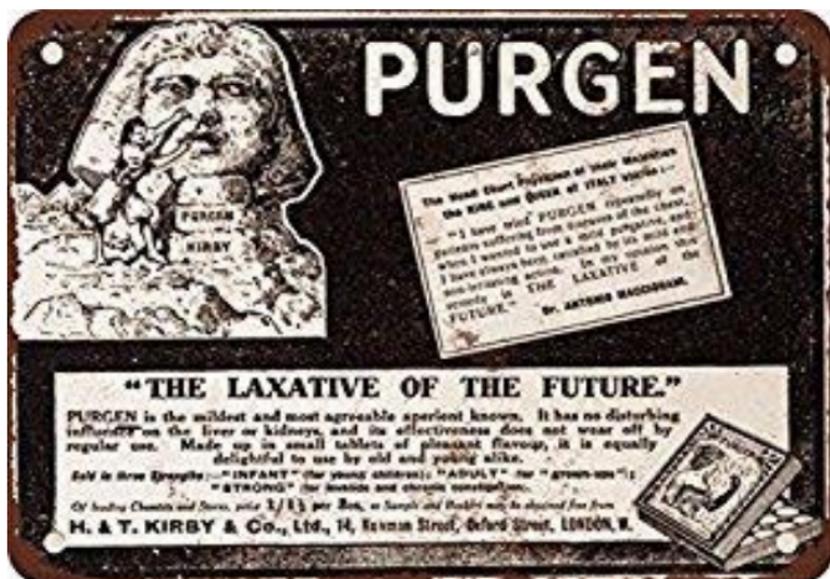
cover was shut above his head and then there was a feeling of moving at great speed, which seemed to continue for many minutes and then a cover at his feet was opened and the trolley pulled out. Caldmore looked up into the face of Gull, who bent over him and stated:

“Welcome to my House of Pain, Captain Caldmore.”

To be continued in

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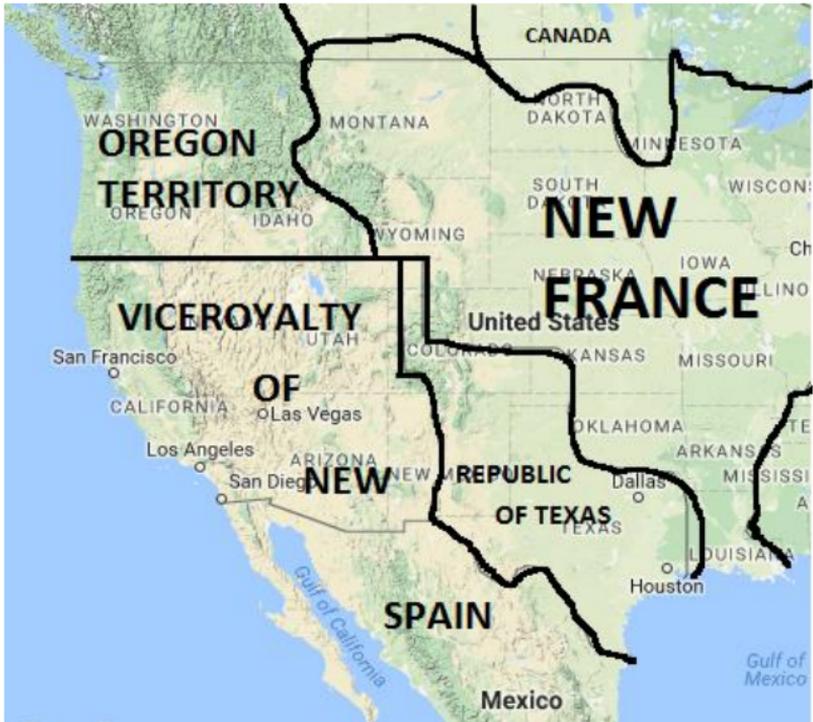
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