

The Machine Queen

Part Five:

Transformations

by Mark Nine

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The story so far

Captain Caldmore has been searching for Gormuil, a girl from the island on which he was living. While travelling to find her, Caldmore has encountered a tribe of British people living as Native Americans. Their dreams were being intruded upon by a visitor from a parallel universe in which the Roman Empire still exists. To contact this visitor Caldmore allowed himself to be infected with fungal spores that have left filaments of metal throughout his body. While in this interdimensional dreamworld Caldmore and the Roman version of Nikola Tesla encountered an insect people that were travelling between dimensions. The encounter did not go well.

Departing the tribe, he has finally found the place where Gormuil was taken to. It is the Royal Ziggurat of the Royal Family of Spain, in Mexico Tenochtitlan. Rather than rescuing Gormuil, he has instead been taken prisoner by William Gull, the King's physician. There have been hints of strange experiments going on, a mysterious cloaked woman, accounts of the experiences of Edward Prendrick in the library, and Gull's introduction to his laboratory as a "House of Pain." These hints are soon to make sense to Caldmore.

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The Machine Queen Part Five: Transformations

**Friday, October 27th, 1911, Royal Hospital, México
Tenochtitlán**

Despite the ominous welcome, the quarters in which Caldmore had been placed were very comfortable, there was a hospital bed, with castors and levers for it rise and fall, and someone had brought his belongings down from his room in the palace, including the book he had been reading. He had his own bathroom, a separate lounge, but no windows. It was clean, carpeted, and soulless. Like a combination of any hotel suite combined with the functionality of a hospital room.

He had been left alone for the rest of the day, and Gull had explained that their work together would not start until the Saturday, as the experiment required many preparations. He had been fed, but that the brief visits from the orderlies to bring him the food was the only contact he had.

The Monday, however, saw the arrival of Gull, with two orderlies. Gull gave a small curt bow to Caldmore and beckoned him to stand. Caldmore placed the book he had that moment completed reading on the table in front of him. Gull looked at it and nodded.

“Ah what excellent choice of reading, so apposite for the work we are to do. You will be much more informed as to the nature of our experiments. Please remove your clothes.”

The final sentence was so out of keeping with the rest of the physician’s conversation that Caldmore was not sure he’d heard him correctly.

“Your attire, sir. It is an impediment to our work.”

Caldmore hesitated again, but the orderlies moved in threateningly towards him, so he suffered the indignity the physician was imposing on him.

A third orderly wheeled a hospital trolley into the suite and Caldmore was again strapped to it. Gull accompanied the trolley as the group wheeled him slowly through the corridors.

“You have a remarkable skin condition, Caldmore, these metal filaments. They are natural or artificial?”

Caldmore was silent, fuming still at the humiliation of being carted naked through the wards of the hospital like so much cattle.

“Come now, Caldmore, as one Englishman to another. It is such a relief to have someone of my own race to converse with, I have grown tired of only having these d...s for company.”

Caldmore decided engaging with the man may invoke some empathy, perhaps even dissuade him from conducting whatever further indignities he was planning.

“It is a rite of the Natives of Northern America. Infecting a person with the spores of a certain fungus. The hyphae are replaced by trace minerals existing within the body. The person so transformed is able to travel at will through dreams. They say.”

“Fascinating. So you would agree that transformation of the flesh is a key to progress? To unlocking knowledge of the human condition?”

Caldmore refused to engage with this level of hypothesis. “What do you plan for me, Gull?” he asked.

“Such curiosity is rewarding, sir. It delights me that I may have a willing collaborator in my work. So few others have had the insight to see beyond their own petty misgivings.”

The man was silent for a while, recovering his breath, then began again.

“You know of Moreau’s work, from reading the account of Prendick. You also know that he never resolved the barrier of the limits of individual plasticity. No matter how much a being is modified, it will breed true to its original form, not its new one.

“Prendrick’s story came to light soon after I came here, and it fascinated me. My patron, too, shared my vision, and it became something of an obsession with us. How could we create a new species, not just a new single being? By good fortune I was in the only place whereby the process I needed could be obtained.” Gull paused again. “Forgive me, I am not as young as I was. I will require some rest before continuing.”

The trolley was motionless for a while. Caldmore turned his head and saw the physician sitting, looking frail and all of his ninety-something years. The image seemed at odds with the horrors he was describing. After a few moments, he stood again.

“We continue. We are nearly at the place of transfiguration. I hope you are excited as I am,” he paused, then continued in a declaratory tone, he must have been a very pompous lecturer.

“The indigenous peoples here have untapped some of the human potential that comes through their religious practices. Pain can unlock passages to the unknown realms that exist within the mind; clairvoyance, spirit travel, communion with animals. The royal family have perfected these rites, and all of them are familiar with the transfiguring effects of these practices. They have learnt to master pain, but so few others can. This is why we have trawled the world for those with the unique ability to endure, to transcend the debilitating effects of pain, even to welcome and relish it. Like the young woman you have searched for. Like you, yourself. Once

we were informed of your transformation in Vandalia, I was very keen to recruit you to our cause.

“Pain is the key, you see, Caldmore. But the door, the door is energy. By blasting the base stuff of both human and animal flesh with enough energy, and channelling that through the ability to harness and master the pain, the human form can be reformed. It is a fascinating process.

“And because the two beings are fused at a base level, the resultant transformed being can breed true. The limits of individual plasticity are overcome!

“This is why we invited Dr Einstein to come here. His Kappa device, which he was then working on, taps into the stress-energy of space itself. As you know, matter causes space to warp, and it is this warping of space that causes bodies to be attracted to each other; this warping can be used to create further energy. The man is a genius, in physics at least. He has already abandoned the device and moved onto other things. And he remains completely unaware of the majesties to which his Kappa device has contributed; he is oblivious to all except the next development of his science.” The man paused, expecting adulation from his audience. He was disappointed.

“I don’t believe you,” Caldmore said. “Such a thing is impossible.”

“Oh believe him,” said a new voice, one high pitched but with many lower-register tones. A face appeared above Caldmore’s, the amber eyes he had seen before, but not the face surrounding them. It was a woman’s face, that much was true, but it had the fur and colouring of a jaguar’s. The mouth was of human shape, but the teeth within were cat-like, as were the small pointed ears and the flattened nose, but the expression was that of a human. It was one of pity.

“I asked you not to intrude, princess,” Gull admonished.

“This man deserves our respect, our compassion. He’s not just a subject of your experiments. Are you going to furnish him with those things?” there was a pause in which Gull made no response. “Then let me provide them.”

Gull ignored her and turned to Caldmore. “You see, my dear Caldmore, the wonders we shall create? Is she not glorious? The living embodiment of Ix Chel?”

The orderlies had pulled Caldmore to his feet as Gull was speaking and he took in the view of the jaguar woman. She wore a one-piece garment, such as those M. Léotard wore, which revealed the lower part of her arms and legs. These were furred and also in jaguar colouring, yellow with white flashes and brown rosettes. Her limbs appeared human in shape however. The overall combination was uncanny, but not monstrous. The princess took a step towards him and guards appeared, weapons drawn. She snarled, but moved no further.

The next hour was one of horror for Caldmore. The orderlies pulled him into a room that was more laboratory than operating room, but had the strong antiseptic smell that indicated that there was some other scent to be masked.

He was strapped upright to one wall, positioned in front of Einstein’s abandoned Kappa device, brimming with energies drawn from the curvature of the space around them. Gull kept up a constant monologue, recording his observations into an Edison-recording device, mounted on a Franklin, those automated walking machines that could be adapted to all manner of functions. This kept pace with him while he counted off statistics and stages in his experiment.

Then the final indignity, Gull photographed him while he was in his state of undress, then began recording various of his body

measurements. At the point where Gull stated flatly, to the recording device, that these were in order to determine the extent of the transformation, the reality of what he was to endure finally broke through the barrier of disbelief Caldmore had been shielding himself with. He began begging with Gull, pleading with him not to go through with the experiment. Caldmore tried appealing to his humanity, to his standing as a gentleman. Gull's only response was to admonish him. "I would have hoped an Englishman would show more resilience. Where is your bottle, young man? Stiff upper lip."

It was about then that Alfonso appeared. He spared a brief glance towards Caldmore then handed a sealed box to Gull. Gull reached in with a pair of tongs then removed a small circular plate. This fitted over the end of the Kappa device.

"This is the sample we decided upon?" Gull asked.

"Better. This is from yesterday's tauromachia; the slayer of the famed Rafael González Madrid himself provided the tissue on that plate."

Gull harrumphed, indifferent to the fate of a matador, even one as acclaimed as Machaquito. Caldmore had no fight left. He hung still as Gull operated the controls to the Kappa device, and a beam of pure energy pierced him.

The pain was intense. He felt it burn, as if every cell in his body was exploding. It lasted for seconds, minutes, hours, aeons, he could not tell until finally Caldmore collapsed knowing nothing more.

When he awoke he was again on the hospital trolley. Gull was talking again to the recording machine.

“Hhhmm a lesser transformation on first exposure than the last taurine we worked on.” He paused, taking more measurements. “Perhaps there is a later stable configuration, but subjects reach that point through different stages. Hhhmm.” He reflected again. “Or perhaps it is the metallic traces in the skin that prevent the treatment.”

The measurements continued. “There have been some alterations to the physique though, notice neck, shoulders, pizzle, thighs. These all show some significant taurine characteristics. Alas no alteration to the facial features.”

The physician touched something on Caldmore’s temple.

“Hhmm neotenic horn growth. Perhaps sometimes the transformation will require multiple exposures.”

Gull had finished his inspection. Caldmore was drifting into unconsciousness again as the trolley moved away. The darkness was a relief from the pain and the fear. What had they done to him?

Sunday, October 29th, 1911, Royal Hospital, México Tenochtitlán

Gull did not visit him the following day, as Caldmore was in and out of consciousness, nor the day after, as he was a strong believer in keeping the Sabbath holy. Throughout the two days Princess Estefania stayed at his bedside, however, waiting to usher in his new existence.

On the second morning, he awoke to find her looking down on him, her large amber eyes filled with concern. He started with surprise at the part-human part-jaguar face, and struggled to shake off the dreams he had had while unconscious. Something about an

experiment he had been subjected to? Then he remembered that the nightmarish memories came from before he had slept, not during.

“What did they do to me?” Caldmore asked her. The princess helped him out of the bed and he staggered towards the mirror, his body feeling ungainly and heavy. He peered at his face, it appeared wider and flatter, but not at all as altered as he had feared. The threads of metal through the skin were more apparent than any theriomorphic mutation. The small knobs, one on each temple, were new however.

“Oh my good god, horns?”

The woman nodded. He looked down at his body, taking in the changes. Strangely, he no longer felt self-conscious about his nudity, perhaps because it no longer felt like his body he was inhabiting.

“I don’t think your old clothes will fit any longer, you’d better wear this,” she suggested, holding out a hospital gown. He pulled it on gratefully.

She held out a hand, still gloved. “Steffie,” she introduced herself.

“Lemuel” he replied, shaking it. “I gather you are my dinner companion of the other evening.”

She smiled, despite the large upper and lower incisors, it was a very human smile.

“We are now brethren, Lemuel. Cursed by the same hand.”

“And is there any way back for us?” he asked.

The princess shook her head. “I doubt it. For me it has been years since Gull experimented on me. I was his first successful result.

There have been many since,” she pulled him by his hand. “Come I will introduce you.”

Still hand-in-hand they left the room and entered the hospital hallway. This was a wide hallway, with several doors widely spaced. It was apparently a group of living quarters, perhaps for other test subjects?

“First, the woman I assume Gull and my brother intend to be your mate.”

Steffie swung open a door and Caldmore baulked at the horror within. This person seemed to have been infused with the same matter as Caldmore but its effect had very different results. She was a minotaur in all but sex, a bovine head sat atop a human but bloated body. She sat rocking backwards and forwards on the floor, of the plush suite, but it was a floor stained with excrement. The room contained a vision belonging more to an etching by Dore or a painting by Bosch, not a well-lit and plush hospital suite.

“We call her Tara, she has not adapted well to her change. I think her mind had been broken by what Gull did to her. Every day I try to get through to her, but so far ... nothing.”

“Tara?” Steffie called to her. The large bovine eyes turned momentarily towards the pair of them, then went back to blank oblivion.

Caldmore shuddered. “And that is to be my fate?”

“Perhaps. The process may take several stages, not all survive them.”

“So you are saying I will end up monstrous or dead?”

“Perhaps. Perhaps what is and is not a monster is a matter of viewpoint. Come, I have more to show you.”

At the end of the corridor were double doors, two armed guards blocking their way. At a wave from Steffie, they unlocked the door warily, and rushed the two of them through. On the other side of the door was a large space, full of woodland. Sunlight appeared to beam down from above but on a second inspection Caldmore discovered the light was artificial, and they were still inside the ziggurat.

“I come here for exercise several times a day. I like to run through the trees,” Steffie declared. Then laughed, a loud barking laugh “It’s in my nature.” She turned to peer through the trees.

“It’s also where the lobo pack live.”

From out of the woods a pair of human-wolf chimerae appeared, bearing a striking similarity to Mexican grey wolves, but walking erect and with human like limbs. Long tongues lolled from wide grinning mouths.

“Ola Steffie,” one of them growled. “¿A quién nos has traído a comer?”

“Juan, he’s not food. He’s one of us.”

The wolfman came closer, the woman staying back. He looked closely at Caldmore, Caldmore smelling the blood on the man’s breath. “Looks like man,” the being sniffed heavily. “Hah smells like beef. Maybe he’d be good eating anyway.”

“Take no notice, Lemuel, Juan is all bark and no bite.” She reached out and scratched him behind his ear. “Juan was the first of the Lobo pack. He’s sort of their leader. He was just a street child that my brother had kidnapped from the mainland. Suffering, hungry. He’s never looked back. And he helped the other children adjust after their ... transition.”

“You mean I should welcome it? What Gull does?” Caldmore protested. Steffie shook her head.

“No. No. It’s still a monstrous evil to inflict upon people, it’s just ...” she watched Juan lope back to the woodlands, “there are some compensations.”

She knocked at the door. It was opened warily by the guards, one watching with his gun pointed at the tree line as the other ushered Caldmore and Steffie through.

“There are fifteen of us. Sixteen now with you.” Steffie explained. “I was the first. I was half-Spanish half-Mayaztec. You know my father married a native woman after his ... resurrection. Together they founded a resurgence of the ancient ways, rekindled and merged Mayan and Aztec cultures. I was their only child, and my brother grew envious of the power I had amongst the peoples. I suppose because I represented that resurgence. In the end he could not have me killed, but he handed me over to Gull, he thought I would be a good subject.”

“There were no more successful jaguar people, something unique in my make-up I suppose, but the wolf-people were much more easily wrought. There are a dozen of those, and the first few are now pregnant. If those births are true-born wolf-people, then Gull has transcended the limits of individual plasticity. His next success was Tara, and he now plans to breed you with her.”

“That only makes fifteen altogether,” Caldmore pointed out.

“Ah yes. Did you not want to find the subject of your quest? Such a gallant story, the lone airman setting forth to rescue the stolen child. Here is the end of your journey, Lemuel.”

The next door opened onto another wild area, this with a large lake at its centre. There was a rippling in the water and a shape sped through it, then emerged. Caldmore saw white skin, but with a

mottled, almost scaled patina to it, long dark hair, a series of slits down each neck which opened and closed as if seeking air, fins adorned her sleek limbs.

“It’s about time you met our very special ceasg. Gormuil.”

Monday, October 30th, 1911, Royal Hospital, México Tenochtitlán

A ceasg, Lemuel was informed by Gormuil, was a type of mermaid that was native to Scotland. Gormuil missed her family, resented being taken away from the factory and her sister, had been scared by the journey to New Spain, and still recalled the pain of the experiments with horror, but the transition to what she was now evidently delighted her.

Gorumuil and Lemuel had sat at the edge of the lake and chatted about life in the Hebrides. She had been relieved to learn that Amelia was safe and that all the other girls were back home. She was also very touched that Lemuel had travelled all that way to rescue her. The talk was interspersed by her occasional diving back into the lake. It seemed she could both breathe in and out of the water, but being exposed to the air became laborious after a while.

She had been very disappointed that Lemuel was not taking her home. That he was as much a prisoner as she was. Her homesickness, and longing for her family, was overwhelming. She had books, she had mastered keeping them dry whilst reading them, and some clothes, though she missed being able to wear shoes as her finned feet would not fit any, but neither were enough solace to someone who longed to see the outside world again.

Seeing that she was safe, and suffering no more harm, relieved Caldmore to some extent, though he was angered that she had

been the victim of Gull's experiments. Still he had his oath to fulfil, to return her to her home. Even if he was further transmuted, that would not prevent him from freeing her. He swore as much to her before Steffie returned and informed him that the curfew was about to come into effect, and that they must return to their rooms.

That evening, Caldmore had lain in his bed, wondering if this were to be his last night as a recognisably human being, when the door had opened and Steffie had entered.

"Please," she had asked. "There is no-one who will share themselves with me. To all I am a monster. I had hoped that another monster would accept me." He had held her then, both in fear of a world that would never accept them, their lives twisted and remade by the arcane mixture of magic and science of the mad doctor's laboratory.

Now, as the morning began, and Steffie slipped away before the orderlies appeared, Lemuel felt more resigned to his fate. Steffie would help him through whatever was about to happen next to him, between them they would find some way to escape, and they would take the others with them. All of them would be free, and find some way to endure. Together.

The orderlies strapped him to the trolley once more, and wheeled him through the corridors. Caldmore closed his eyes, and remembered Steffie's promise to him to return to him that night, no matter what transformation had ensued.

Again Gull measured and photographed him, another tissue sample from the nameless killer bull was placed in front of the Kappa device. Again the device throbbed with energy. Caldmore thought how everything connected, the mass of the Earth forced the space around him to curve, the curvature of space caused space itself to endure stress, the energy of that stress was absorbed by

the machine, the machine used the energy to tear information from the tissue sample and rewrite the nature of his own body with that new script, and the pain he endured tapped into some mental transcendence of being that held it all together.

“More power”, Gull cried, “we must overcome the limits of his individual plasticity.” The fungus leaving metal hyphae through his skin, the metal becoming a barrier to Gull’s mad schemes to turn him into a half-man half-bull, the extra degrees of power thus required of the Kappa device, never before unleashed. The power and anger of the bull lifting Machaquito above his head and skewering him. Blood and curved space and pain and energy all blended into one. Caldmore’s last thoughts were “a leopard in a leotard, heheh” and he was no more.

Dies Lunae, Ante Diem III Kalendas Novembres MMDCLXIV, AUC, Eastern Xin Empire

Caldmore awoke, naked, amongst the ruins of an ancient ziggurat. Around him he could hear the sounds of a lake lapping against the shore. He was still on the island in Lake Texcoco he was sure, but the royal ziggurat had gone.

He stood, unsteadily, and touched his face. Still human. His body, still unchanged since his last metamorphosis. Something was coming through the air.

Three machines flew swiftly, deftly, with no form of propulsion Caldmore had seen before. They dipped, closing in on him, and from the base of one flew small devices, small boxes with rotating blades spinning above them, which hovered in a circling pattern around him.

A voice boomed out of one of the larger machines. Caldmore recognised the language from his service during the conflict

between the Cham and the Xin Empires. It was Mandarin. The Xin? In New Spain?

The machine landed and four men exited it. They wore uniforms of some metal substance, and each carried a large weapon. So far they weren't pointing them at him, which was a good sign, Caldmore thought.

"You? Where are you from?" one asked, again in Mandarin.

"My name is Lemuel Caldmore, I am from England," he replied, in the one text book phrase he had learnt in Mandarin.

"England. A province of Rome." The guard had switched to Latin. "What road do you travel?" The guard stepped closer, looking up and down at Caldmore. "You look like you may have come from a silk lab, they've worked a lot on" here was a phrase Caldmore did not know, it sounded like *genetic engineering*. "But these metal implants ..."

A growing suspicion began to dawn on Caldmore. Could it be possible? Had something translated him to the universe he had previously contacted only through the Dreaming?

"Amber. I walk the electricum road," he stated. "Take me to your Tesla."

They travelled north-west, as far as Caldmore could make out, and the land they covered all seemed to all be part of the Xin Empire, the Xin had evidently colonised the North American continent, the western part anyway. Caldmore tried to recall what Tesla had told him of this world. Although the great empires of Constantine's time still existed, they were not the true powers of this world. The trade routes that had existed then still held sway. Amber, spice,

incense and silk crossed empires and people gave their allegiance to them as much as to their own Emperor, if not more so.

He had evidently chosen the right path, the men sent to investigate the massive energy release in the ancient Aztec ruins owed their allegiance to amber too, though in Latin this was *electricum*, and from what he overheard, there was a facility on the border between Xin and Roman Empires that was neutral territory, and was where anomalies such as himself were taken.

The name of the facility seemed to be a source of amusement for his captors? Or were they his hosts? During the founding of the facility on their first meeting with their Roman colleagues, the Xin engineers had pointed to the main building and said “inside” or *Li* in Mandarin. The Romans had evidently assumed this was the number of the facility and so had adopted it. It was now known therefore as Area 51.

The base covered a large area. Massive gleaming buildings stood arrayed across the salt flat. In the distance a column of flame indicated an aethership taking to the skies, smaller but evidently more powerful than Edison’s design. Without the gap of centuries of the dark ages after the Roman Empire had fallen, the progress man had been able to make by this time was extraordinary. How would they view him, a man from the backward British Empire of another universe?

As a prisoner was the evident answer. Within moments of entering the building he was ushered into a small room and left there, the door securely locked behind him.

**Dies Martis, Pridie Kalendas Novembres, MMDCLXIV
AUC, Area 51, Border of Xin and Roman Empires**

The following day Tesla entered Caldmore's room. Apart from brief visits from people, none of whom spoke as they delivered food and a grey coverall for him to wear, he had been alone since arriving. This Tesla apologised for keeping him waiting, very reminiscent of Caldmore's first meeting with the Tesla from his own world.

"I am sorry, but there were all sorts of diplomatic efforts required before we could speak. The Xin people are still unsure about what your nature is, and although normally we share all information across the boundaries of Empire this is one area in which we all are treading cautiously.

"However, the significance, and perhaps danger, of recent events, requires dispensing with such barriers, and as I am the closest this world has to an expert on travel between timelines, it was deemed appropriate to include me, and for me to be completely transparent with all things.

"And it is very good to see you again."

"It is good to see you too, old friend."

"First perhaps you could tell me all that has happened in your world, and how you have come to be here. Your Tesla has remained in touch with me, but I understand it is more than a week since you were last in communication with him. And how you have come to be so physically altered since we last met."

Caldmore informed Tesla of all that had transpired since he had left his own Tesla in Einstein's laboratory and the Roman sat back considering this new intelligence.

“This explains much,” Tesla replied. “The Tesla of your world had been informed that you had returned to England. He thought that this was strange behaviour. I will inform him of the truth when we next speak.

“And the manner of your arrival, this also bears some explanation. It appears that the mechanism the Horse Nation implanted in you to mentally travel between one world and another is capable of physically transferring you, if sufficient power is employed. Fascinating. And a little difficult to believe.”

“All true my dear Nikola,” Caldmore responded.” However, you mentioned danger of recent events. I ascertain from that statement that all is not well here, either.”

“Indeed not. Pray, follow me and I will attempt to explain,” Tesla ended and rose, walking to the door as he spoke. They hurried through corridors, not unlike those of the royal ziggurat. However, as they approached doors they opened seamlessly, as if sensing their approach.

The room beyond had a long window taking up almost an entire wall. A one-way mirror Tesla had explained, people on one side of the room could look in on the next room, but not vice versa.

Through the one-way window Caldmore observed the inhabitants of the other room. There were three of them. They appeared to be little green men. They were short, reptilian, with green scaly skin.

“Human-animal hybrids?” asked Caldmore.

Tesla looked at him. “Well, given your recent experiences I can see why you might think that, but no.” He paused and looked at the figures through the glass. “From what we’ve been able to tell

from them, they are dinosaurs¹, incredibly advanced, from another timeline where the dinosaurs were not wiped out.” He smiled, admitting his perplexity. “This seems like a popular time for interdimensional travelling.”

“Can I talk to them?” Caldmore asked.

“Well I’ll have to get you clearance,” Tesla replied. “But given your unique circumstances, you may have a lot to contribute to our analysis.” He shifted awkwardly, obviously at a loss to know how to proceed. “Whether I am able to make this possible will depend on ... ah.” Tesla paused.

“Errm this is a delicate matter, please don’t take offence.” Tesla struggled again to articulate his concern. “Normally we can tell, we know someone’s ... ah ... status. I ... I’m not therefore sure how ... don’t take offence. But are you ...” he gestured with one hand “or ...” he gestured with the other.

Caldmore was at a loss to understand his friend, or rather the alternative dimension version of his friend, he reminded himself. He ventured to guess what was being implied.

“Ahh ... an invert?” Caldmore conjectured. Tesla shook his head. “A gander, a cunny-hunter, a Vandemonian, a thru’penny masher, a clenchoop, a clocksetter, a pot-head, a pot-faker, a pot-hunter? What? Out with it, man? Stop being so damn wristwatch.”

“A ... a citizen. Or a slave?” Tesla stammered. “It’s why everyone has been so ... taciturn around you. It’s not your unusual appearance, it is that they cannot place you. It makes it very difficult to know how to address you.”

¹ I know dinosaurs had feathers not scales, and were more like birds than reptiles, but it just didn’t sound as cool.

“Well in the British Empire there are no slaves. We’re all citizens, although, as I think Wells wrote recently, there are the two great informal divisions of human beings—the Secure and the Insecure. I suppose at the moment I would class myself as insecure.” Caldmore had narrowly escaped death from some mad medical experiment, and ended up in a parallel universe. Insecure would be a very appropriate word to describe his general status.

“Ah well here we are all secure, but some have freedom to choose what form of security they have and some do not.” Tesla paused. “Who was that writer you mentioned, should I know him?”

“Wells. Herbert George. I had assumed that so many things were paralleled here and in my world that most people existed in both.”

“I don’t think so.” Tesla looked again at the lizard-like people on the other side of the glass. “As you say, we cannot prove you are a citizen, and we should not classify you as slave. Perhaps we need a third category. I’ll ... I’ll look into it.”

Clearly setting himself a task to fix something had eliminated his awkwardness. He addressed Caldmore with more equanimity. “Well I can at least tell you what we know of the other visitors, follow me to my office.”

As they walked through the corridors Caldmore did notice indeed that the other people around him would not meet his eye. He noticed men and women, all colours and all ages. Some strode confidently, some shuffled deferentially, all seemed to be in very good health, but all glanced at him, then away, presumably unable to place him in their schema of humanity.

It was with some relief that they entered Tesla’s office. It was also refreshingly familiar, as the plans and sketches and piles of paper resembled the chaos of Tesla’s living space on the aircraft they shared, the map room which he had adopted as his quarters.

Tesla shuffled through some of the papers and came across his notes. "I know I should record all this on computer," he admitted, "but I think so much better with words on paper. The influence of the other minds from less advanced worlds perhaps." He smiled at the thought, then recapitulated what he had learnt of the reptilemen. "Sixty-six million years ago, a massive meteorite hit the Earth, wiping out the dinosaurs. In my timeline, and I assume yours."

"News to me, old man," Caldmore responded.

"Ah very well, anyway, in their timeline, a species of dinosaur evolved that was more intelligent than any in our timeline, not that much more, perhaps only half a million years in advance of the dinosaurs we know of. But that was enough to invent space travel, direct the meteor out of the way, and survive. They also had to endure a lot of volcanism, but again, they had the science to combat that. Although that science did nearly kill them off first due to global warming.

"So with 66 million years' head start on us, they were possibly far more advanced than we are. Though not by much, I think their reptilian brains aren't quite as sophisticated. But that's a huge head start on us."

"You said 'were'. What has happened to them?"

"Well, you remember those insect beings that infested the dreaming we entered?"

"The things that caught Tiberius?" Tesla nodded. Caldmore shuddered. He had entered the Dreamscape to contact a shadowy figure that had been preventing a group of people living as Native Americans from passing freely through their dreamworld. Caldmore had contacted the shadow, and found him to be from the Roman world he was now physically inhabiting. The dreamworld was a bridge between the two worlds. But while in

there, the space had become infested with a swarm of insect-like beings that had attacked the projected form of Tiberius, destroying the mind of the traveller. While there he had also met Tesla, and he had liaised between the Tesla of that world and the one of his to create a machine that enabled contact directly between the two worlds, without resorting entering the bridge of the Dreamscape. Which was just as well as it was probably now conquered by the insect people.

“The reptile men, they call themselves the Troöd, by the way, reported that somehow the insects had crossed over into their world. The Troöd never found the bridgehead, and the insects crossed in their millions, infesting the Earth of that dimension. The reptile people had found a way to pass between dimensions. They made one attempt previously to cross over, but although their ship crossed it was destroyed the moment it arrived, they never heard from the explorers again.”

“Did it cross over to here?” Caldmore asked. Tesla shook his head.

“Maybe it came to my world,” Caldmore paused. “If it was a large enough explosion I would have heard of it. How long ago?”

“Three years ago, somewhere in Russia I believe.” Tesla sorted through the maps in the room and pulled one out. He pointed to a place in the middle of nowhere. The Yeniseysk Governorate, nothing there except a river called Tunguska. Caldmore shook his head.

“Doesn’t mean anything to me. Perhaps yet another dimension has been pulled into this circle of events.”

“Perhaps,” Tesla admitted. The second mission was successful. Just before their world was completely overrun, they made it here. They had hoped to settle on one of the other worlds, but ... well they are all inhabited. We colonised them more than a century ago.”

“A contingent of the Troöd came down here, partly to ask for our help finding a place for them to live, and partly to warn us. They think the insects have broken into other dimensions, one of which is here.”

“And have they?”

“We don’t know. We’ve analysed images from all over the solar system. So far we haven’t seen anything. The Tröod have offered to look, but our governments will not allow them the freedom to do so.”

“So what can I do to help?” Caldmore asked.

“Perhaps your perspective as an interdimensional traveller might help us,” Tesla paused and then offered, “and is there anything we can do to help you in return?”

“I have to find a way back to my world. I still have an oath to fulfil. There are people there relying on me to free them. I just don’t know how.”

“When next I speak to your Tesla, I will tell him the truth about what has happened to you. Perhaps between us we can find a way for you to get back. Until then,” he stood, and Caldmore echoed the movement, “I’ll have someone conduct you back to your room.” He pressed a button and a short man appeared, the servile deferential manner indicating to Caldmore, now that he had been made aware of some of the indicators, that he was a slave.

However, as they walked from Tesla’s office to Caldmore’s quarters, he found he could not always tell slave from citizen from physical appearance alone. He would see a tall, smartly dressed male suddenly stop and step aside for a short, portly woman, his head bowed. Or one of the strange breed of immaculate tall well-proportioned individuals that inhabited this place, their skin flawless but with a slight sheen to it, their posture always

completely erect, who gave all indication of being of a well-born and prosperous family, take a reprimand from someone obviously physically inferior, and display no animosity in response.

Caldmore chose the moment when they reached his quarters to ask the slave to explain.

“It seems that everyone knows instinctively how to treat each other, yet often I can’t tell which is which. And Tesla said I make others uncomfortable because they can’t tell whether I’m a slave or citizen.”

The slave nodded, pleased to help a non-slave with information.

“At birth we are encoded, a small chip, here,” he pointed to his neck. “And in our eyes here, he tapped his eye, Caldmore looked closely and could see a small transparent disc covering it, “reads the disc for us, amongst many other things. Sometimes slaves would try to pass themselves as citizens, which is why they were invented.”

“And the person we saw by the power supply room, you know the one who had reported the fluctuations and was being yelled at. I have seen many people who resemble him, they seem very unusual.”

“The talo?” the slave asked.

“Talo?” Caldmore asked, “what are they?”

“Talos are artificial. Synthetic people” the man replied, surprised. “Have you not seen talos before?”

Caldmore was astonished. They had franklins in his own world, machines that moved like people, the Lovelace cards controlling their actions, but nothing anywhere near as sophisticated as a machine that could be mistaken for a human being. *Almost*

mistaken, he corrected himself. There was something uncanny about the skin, the posture, as if they were too perfect.

“But if you have a race of machine-men, these talos, then what do you need slaves for? Couldn’t the talos do all the work?”

The man was confused. “We aren’t slaves because slaves are needed to do work. We’re slaves because we *are* slaves. It was how we were born.” From somewhere a siren sounded.

“Excuse me, master, that siren means there is an emergency for and I must attend my station Please do not leave this room until the emergency has passed. You will be informed when it is all clear.” With that he left, hurriedly departing. The door sealed behind him.

It was the evening before anyone came to see him. One of the tall, flawless talos entered, Caldmore had begun to easily recognise them now, and presented him with a flat book with a glass cover.

“You’ve been granted ‘visitor’ status, without the full rights of a citizen, but a free person,” it, he, explained. “We can’t give you full access to the archive, but I have been given permission to give you limited access, via this.”

The talo passed the device to him and showed him out to tap on the screen to look for and read books. Caldmore sat at his desk and began reading. The small device wasn’t just one book but millions of them!

“I’m afraid we are still keeping everyone to their quarters, but in the morning we would like to begin planning a response to the Troöds’ warning. As one of our few experts,” here the talo smiled, with a lack of actual warmth Caldmore found unnerving, “on interdimensional travel, we would welcome your attendance.”

As a citizen he couldn't be ordered, it appeared, but he had the distinct feeling his status might not be maintained if he refused to help. The more influence he had, the more chance he had of getting back to his own world and rescuing Gormuil and the others.

"I would be honoured," he responded. The talo nodded and left.

With a whole library at his fingertips he was at first at a loss to know where to start. He looked up talo, and discovered that the human-like machines that appeared male were called talos, the female-looking ones were called galats. It raised the question of how they could be male or female if they were artificial, but the answer seemed to be very complicated and used Latin phrases he was unfamiliar with. Then he had the idea of seeing if the device could translate in to English. It appeared there was no such language in this world, though there was an obscure dialect of Frisian that came close. At a touch all of the repositories were translated into that language, and his reading became much speedier.

As he was being asked to help identify if and where the cockroach encroachment was taking place, he started by looking at news items and reports. However, little of what he read made sense without context, and context for the context, and very quickly, the enormous amount of new ideas he was facing became overwhelming, and he began to drift aimlessly through the information at hand.

One thing occurred to him that Tesla had said, that he had not read any Wells. Caldmore became curious about whether there was a writer called that in this world. The records on his device seemed to contain information about everyone on the planet, no matter who they were. Apparently, there was a Herbert George Wells, born 1866, but he had remained in obscurity because he had been born as a slave. He was working in service as a gardener as his

father had been, however, he still seemed to be compelled to write and his owner indulged him by allowing Wells access to the Library, and had added Wells's writings to it. The stories had never been formally published, but still resided in the Library, deletion being avoided through the goodwill of the family he gardened for.

Caldmore left sitting at the desk and lay on his bed. He alternated looking through Wells's stories and then musing on them, focusing on the lampshade beside his bed while his mind drifted. There was an idea there which he was close to, he was sure.

Looking through the writings, many of them were immediately familiar. There was the journal of Edward Prendick, but written under the title of *The Island of Dr Moreau*, and as fiction. As in the dimension he was from, there was the fictional *The Future in America*, set in a world in which the colonies of North America broke free of British control and became independent countries and *The War of the Worlds*. But here also was a book he did not know; *The First Men in the Moon*. In this book, as in his own world, Cavor had discovered the substance that cut off objects cased in it from gravitational fields, but in this book he had experimented himself, rather than sharing it with the British Government. Caldmore flicked through the book, noting with pleasure that his friend Tesla also was mentioned. Yet surely a provincial gardener would not know of the Roman government scientist secluded in a top secret facility a continent away. From where did he get his knowledge?

And where did he learn of Prendick's experiences that took place in another dimension completely?

Caldmore remembered something the Tesla from his own world had once speculated on. Tesla had suggested that perhaps other worlds existed, coming into being at moments at which histories diverged, a speculation that had evidently now been proven true.

Each divergence created a new timeline, a new universe, with every particle in one replicated in the other, and then continuing their separate journeys.

Tesla had also said that, according to Einstein, whom they had both now met, any particle thus split, would remain in contact with its twin; that they would be *entangled*. And since mind is formed from these quantum interactions, subconsciously each person's consciousness remains in communication with all the others. Caldmore realised this explained how Tesla, for example, could exist in more than one world, despite their histories being so different. Tesla's parents in this world would be influenced by their experiences in the other, and their choices would consequently be similar. They would be drawn to each other because of their experiences in another universe and still produce the baby Nikola, despite their worlds being so different.

Suppose, Caldmore conjectured, for some people that link was more than a suggestion, suppose those links manifested themselves, as dreams, or as stories. Could not one man so influenced, create stories that are fiction in one world, because his other selves have perceived them as fact? So in this world, Dr. Moreau is a fiction, and his monstrous creations, but in Caldmore's own, they were all true. And in both of these worlds, Martians invading in metal tripods is a fiction, but somewhere else this actually happened, and in yet another the North American colonies became independent.

Perhaps in some timeline, Cavor and Bedford really did go to the moon. He flicked through the story again. The description of the Selenites in that story seemed very familiar. The insects who had encroached on the Troöds had a long time while they had established a bridgehead in their dimension. The fear was they were doing the same in this world, but where?

And here Wells was writing about the exact same creature, infesting the moon. The image of the lampshade had held his gaze for so long while he had been in reverie, it now left an afterimage on his retinas as he looked up for the communication device in his room.

If the insects had invaded the moon in Cavor and Bedford's world, then would they not have done the same thing here? Caldmore was now convinced he knew where to find them.

All he had to do was convince someone he was right.

Ante Diem iii Nonas, Novembres, MMDCLXIV A.U.C., Area 51, Border of Xin and Roman Empires

The leaders in Area 51 had needed some convincing. Indeed, the more times Caldmore had to repeat his thinking, the less plausible it seemed to him.

“So this author, this gardener ...” Caldmore's interviewer asked, the stooped wizened man taking in a deep breath of incense from the burner on the desk to focus his mind.

“Right,” replied Caldmore, not adding, only a gardener because you slave-owning whip-handles wouldn't allow him to be anything else.

“... has written a fictional novel in our Universe ...” the interviewer continued.

“Uploaded to the Archive, not published,” Caldmore corrected.

“... which is true in your Universe.”

“Correct, in this Universe it’s called *The Island of Dr Moreau*, but Moreau was a real person in my Universe.”

“And because of this you surmise that everything this gardener, this Wells, wrote is true in some Universe or other.”

“Yes, our Dr. Einstein calls it quantum entanglement. Because minds were made of the same matter at some point, they continue to be linked even after the timelines have diverged. Only Wells is able to consciously pick up on these experiences.”

“Why Wells and no-one else?” the interviewer asked.

“We all have our different talents, why should consciously interpreting thoughts arising from quantum entanglement be any different?” Caldmore replied. Caldmore’s interviewer pinched his nose and winced. The incense wasn’t helping.

“And because he wrote another novel in which insect-people were found on the moon ...” the interviewer continued.

“*The First Men in the Moon*, you should read it, it’s quite excellent.”

“A book which doesn’t even exist in your universe.”

“No. Cavor existed but his life played out very differently.”

“Cavor?”

“One of the protagonists of the novel.”

“Indeed,” another sniff of incense was taken. “This Cavor discovered these ... Selenites ... which resemble the creatures you saw crossing the bridge between worlds.”

“In my dreams, yes.”

“Oh good grief. Do you want to take over?” the interviewer asked the Galat next to him. The Galat, a female artificial person, was tall, dark-skinned, with the impossibly flawless skin and posture that marked her out as artificial. Caldmore had given up trying to make sense of some artificial people being citizens, while many organic people were still slaves. Apparently it was obvious to everyone why some organics were slaves just as some synthetics were citizens, and *vice versa*. It was just how things were. The fact that when looking at this woman of apparently mixed African and European descent people saw “citizen” first, and “female”, “black” and “beautiful” second, and saw the portly adjutant standing by the door as “slave” first and “white”, “male” and “bulchin” second, might be an improvement on his own society’s tendency to divide people according to race, sex or attractiveness, but Caldmore would need to think about that a bit more to be sure.

The Galat was from a rival Route to the first interrogator. The world Caldmore found himself in had aligned itself along the four major trade routes that existed 1600 years earlier. 1599 years earlier to be precise. The vision the Emperor Constantine had had of four arrows standing for spice, incense, silk and electricum trade routes had persisted into the current time. Spice had developed into biochemical industries, incense pharmaceuticals and, electricum all manner of electrical inventions. The silk industries had continued their use of animal produce, but which had since required the development of a science which Caldmore’s schoolboy Latin translated to “manufacturing using the essential units of origin”. In order to defeat the insect-people the scientists at Area 51 had decided they needed help from as many people as possible, so they had given up one of their biggest

secrets to the competing Paths. They had not only revealed to them that other dimensions existed, but that travel was possible between them, and that visitors had already arrived. There was Caldmore, from a parallel timeline in which the Roman Empire had fallen, but another empire springing from Britannia had taken its place, and there were the Troöd for whom it was the *dinosaur* empire that had not fallen.

After Caldmore had first made his conjecture known to the scientists there, they had conferred with the Troöd, and it had apparently seemed very plausible to them. As Caldmore was then deemed to be an asset to the investigation, he had been granted access to the strange reptilian creatures accompanied by the version of Tesla in this dimension. Since Tesla had met the Troöd many times before and so felt that he could provide a reassuring presence to the Britannian.

Caldmore had needed that reassurance at first. The reptile-people were short and slight, approximately four feet tall, and had disconcerting birdlike mannerisms, their heads darting from side-to-side in jerky movements, their large eyes in their domed heads staring unblinkingly. Although all three were exactly the same in features and build, the colouring of their scaled skin was quite distinct. They were mostly green but had patches of brighter colour, one had a blaze of yellow running across the top of his head that made him look like a member of the Pawnee, another had purple splotches around the eyes, the third mottled orange patches across its torso. The Troöd had a communication device which translated their high-pitched chirruping into Latin, and which after their first meeting they modified to also translate into English. Quite from where they had developed the knowledge of English from, Caldmore could not discover.

After talking with them for a while, their differences became less apparent; they accepted his theory about some experiences passing from individual to individual without criticism, and their reptilian faces, although lacking in emotion, displayed a keen intelligence. And after all, had he not this week already met a minotaur, a mermaid and a pack of werewolves? And bedded a jaguar princess? What were a few reptile-men in addition to those?

And now, two days later, here he was, still trying to persuade the scientists of Area 51 and now this synthetic person whose trade was to make things from the units of origin – the Troöds translated this into English as “genetic engineer” though that made even less sense to him than his schoolboy Latin translation.

The Galat appraised Caldmore. Its, *her*, unblinking eyes and passive expression reminded Caldmore unnervingly of the Troöd.

“When you made these suggestions, were you aware that there had been disappearances on the moon?” she asked.

Caldmore was nonplussed. “I wasn’t even aware there were people on the moon,” he replied. The Electricum scientist was also surprised.

“Why were we not informed of these disappearances?” he asked the Galat, another confusing term thrown out by the Troöds’ translation machine was *robot*. Caldmore thought their machine could use some improvement.

“The information was not deemed to be relevant,” she replied. “Until now.” She addressed both men. “A team had been surveying some new craters at the north Lunar pole, the nearest base would have been ... Clavius. Then they disappeared without

trace. This was two weeks ago. A follow-up team investigating their disappearance has within the last few hours failed to respond to calls.”

“So ... you think I might be right about these insect-things being on the moon?”

“Correct me if I’m wrong,” the robot said, with no hint that she really thought that were possible, “but according to this man Wells’s story, they’re actually *in* the moon.”

Caldmore nodded.

“Then that’s where we’re going,” she declared.

Pridie Nonas Novembres MMDCLXIV A.U.C., Electricum Launch Facility, Border of Xin and Roman Empires

By the following day a team had been assembled to take the fight to the insect-people, if they had indeed colonised the interior of the moon.

The separate castes of humanity were clearly evident from the divisions within the spaceship. In quarters amidships were the observers from the four Paths. These four representatives were on board to make the key decisions, primarily to observe if the moon had indeed been invaded. On their say-so, vast armies could be mobilised to attack the invaders. Their quarters were decked out in lavish luxury, especially considering how space, and mass, were at a premium when every gramme had to be lifted out of the Earth’s gravity field at enormous expense. They had little to do

except observe and decide whether the menace was real and if to contribute warriors to combat it.

In the next rank down were the mission specialists. These were on board to investigate and put into effect the various test weapons that may or may not defeat the insect invaders. Here too there were representatives from each of the four Paths. Tesla and one of the Xin scientists, a small elderly man named Yin whom Caldmore assumed to be organic, represented the Electricum Consortium. From the Silk Path was the tall female robot Caldmore had already met, and another female, physically very similar to the other, but without the sheen to the skin that would have marked her out as synthetic. However, there was still something uncanny about her, a poise and precision in movement that seemed unhuman. The remaining four were evidently organic; they all had that reassuring human quality about them in common, transcending their mix of two Guptan (one male and one female) and a Susanian and a Himyarite (both male).

All Paths, all empires, both sexes and both synthetic and organic represented in such a small contingent. Someone had carefully planned the team, it seemed, to keep everyone happy.

At the bottom in social status amongst the mission specialists, though still included as part of the team, were Caldmore and one of the Troöd, the one with the orange stripe across his head. When Caldmore introduced himself (none of the others had) the Troöd had responded that he had no pronounceable name to offer in response. Caldmore had asked if he could use the name Dippy, a relative of the dinosaur-man that had recently become famous in the capital of the country Caldmore came from. The Troöd had

agreed, touched by the tribute, the communicator at his throat translating his squeaks and clicks into flawless English.

“This is a pretty pickle and no mistake, my friend,” the translator voiced after Dippy had emitted a particularly forlorn hoot.

Each mission specialist had their own bunk around the circumference of the cockpit. Between them they also formed the flight crew, navigating and steering the ship, as this was not considered a very technical task. It was close but not too cramped.

Finally, below all, were the slave army. A group of men and women, trained for combat, usually for gladiatorial games. They were all contributed by the Electricum Consortium, others had been promised if the rumours of infiltration proved to be true. They were squeezed in tightly together, spared no discomfort or humiliation.

The pilot of the craft shared the mission specialists space, which caused some of the others disquiet, as she was evidently not a citizen. Her synthetic nature was also evident, a coarsely constructed metal body, only token gestures of in the outline had been made to provide her with a distinguishable sex, and a mismatched head, which appeared to be constructed of amber. From the head extended eight thick braids of hair the colour of steel, about a *passus*² in length. The braids were in Spartan style, a hairstyle Dippy’s translator parsed as *dreadlock*, though that was no English word Caldmore knew.

² 4’10” or 1.48m, if you’re curious.

The motley-constructed robot's hands flew across the console, depressing buttons, adjusting dials until she was ready.

“Control we are go for launch”, she spoke to the engineers at the launch site – her voice surprisingly well-modulated when the rest of her design was so minimalist.

“Ita ut” was the response.

She turned, the amber substance was transparent, her eyes appeared as fixed jewels like rubies, the effect similar to a fetish or garish ornament.

“Brace for lift-off,” she told them.

Caldmore felt a great weight pushing him down, a massive roar assailed his ears, such as the aethership Edison had built, on the other side of the continent, in another Universe. The seat he was squashed into shook tremendously and he closed his eyes. The effect seemed to go on for a long age. But finally it was over. They had left the Earth.

The trip to the moon would take about 3 days. The others spent their time discussing strategies, examining pieces of equipment, checking calculations. Caldmore spent a large time on the first day adjusting to floating around the cabin weightless. The others seemed accustomed to it.

“Does this not disturb you, Tesla?” Caldmore asked, ungainly whirling his arms around trying to make contact with something as he drifted away from his bunk.

“Indeed not, Caldmore,” his friend responded, his feet hooked into a pair of the hoops that stuck out from the - walls, floor, ceiling - all had become interchangeable it seemed. “We have all been in space before, travel between the planets is not unusual. The moon itself is a common place to visit. Come join us. I think we would welcome your perspective.”

The others were conferring about the nature of the Selenites – they had adopted Wells’s name for the creatures – and had begun to speculate on whether the creatures were a hive mind or not.

“If Wells’s account is accurate, then the co-ordinating intelligence is this ‘Grand Lunar’. If so, then what is the nature of its co-ordination? Telepathy? Pheremonal?” the male representative of the Incense Cartel, a Himyarite, was asking.

“Is Wells’s account accurate? How can it be, Shammar?” his colleague, a female from the Guptan Empire responded. They looked at Caldmore. He shrugged.

“It seems that the Wellses of various dimensions access stories from between worlds, as well as creating them themselves. The narrative in this case is by someone called Bedford, in whatever dimension the events happened in. It’s therefore all second-hand at least; the Wells of this dimension picking up on the thoughts of another Wells who read Bedford’s account in that other dimension. I would say it’s not entirely reliable.” Though Wells’s novel about Moreau was very close to what Prendrick said had happened to him in Caldmore’s world, Caldmore thought, so perhaps not that unreliable.

“It would seem we can perhaps use it as a guide,” Shammar suggested, “but not more. We have very little to go on.”

“I can ask Dippy,” Caldmore suggested, “he must know more about how they operate.”

Caldmore struggled over to the side of the cabin where the Troöd was lying on his bunk, staring fixedly at the ceiling. Someone arrested his movement. It was the new representative from the Silk Foundation, the woman whom Caldmore could not place as organic or synthetic.

“It is probably best not to disturb him,” she cautioned.

“Why, is he ill?” Caldmore responded.

The woman shook her head. “No he is simply struggling with being in such close proximity to so many mammals.”

Caldmore could not contain his curiosity about the nature of the woman with whom he was conversing, and her statement presented an opportunity to broach the subject. “All eight of us mammals together in the same cabin must be quite a chore for his olfactory organs.”

The woman laughed. “No, it’s only seven mammals.” She smiled at him and eyed him with amusement, guessing his ploy. “You can ask.”

“Are you ... alive?” he eventually struggled to articulate awkwardly.

“As alive as you are.” She reached out a hand. “My name is Virga. So I would have been formally known as ...” she paused for a moment, “*Twig* in your language, or perhaps ... *Clone* if you prefer the Greek.” She looked at the other Silk Founder. “A little joke on my creator’s part.”

“She ...?” Caldmore was still unsure how to proceed.

“Melaina Beta is my creator. She is a Galat. I’m what you might call mixed race as I’m an organic-synthetic hybrid,” Virga attempted a bow, which perhaps only she could have pulled off in zero gravity. “A prototype. Part grown, part built. But enough about me, tell me about you. You’re a bit mixed too, aren’t you?”

Her openness was disarming, and Caldmore found himself telling her about his two transformations, his first infected with spores that lay filaments of trace metals throughout his skin, and which also interconnected his white and grey matter in his brain, and then secondly the process by which the mad physician Gull had attempted to mutate him into a half-human / half-bull creature. This second alteration aroused her curiosity more.

“Yes, this was partly what drew Melaina to Area 51 in the first place. Curiosity about you. Before she realised that there was indeed a genuine crisis. This process has only been partially successful with you,” she looked at his face, body. “Yes some adaptation of musculature and physique, but little bovine about the countenance. But the others, you say. Fully transformed?”

Caldmore nodded. He thought of the young ceasg in her pool, the pack of wolflike beings in their ersatz forest, the jaguar princess, hiding in her Moorish coverings when in public, the demented taurine girl morose in her chambers, intended as his mate. All trapped in the depths of the Royal Ziggurat in the centre of Lake Texcoco. It all seemed another reality from this spaceship with its clever weapons and smart artificial people. As indeed it was.

“Why would the Silk Foundation be so interested in me?” Caldmore asked. Virga tapped her nose.

“Ours not to poke our nares in where they’re unwelcome, eh?” She confided. “We might not be human, but we are citizens. It can be too easy to be downgraded. All too easy.” She cast a look at the motley pilot, constructed, it appeared, from too many separate parts. There was a story there too, which Virga appeared to be aware of.

During that first day Caldmore made one or two attempts to make conversation with the oddly designed pilot. It seemed inconsistent that the Electricum Consortium, so evidently competent at making robots that looked human, as did the Silk Foundation and quite possibly the other two Paths too, would make one so obviously not human. He found his overtures rebuffed.

In fact, once his knowledge of the Selenites had proven to be so insubstantial, he found himself largely excluded from conversation with all the others. Possibly his intermediate status as non-citizen but also non-slave led to his exclusion too. As Dippy had found, the presence of too many others in close proximity soon became overwhelming, and he retired to his bunk, deciding to use the time to further his knowledge by accessing as much as he could of this world, these worlds, from the Archive. This could well be the last quiet time before the storm.

**Ante Diem viii Idus Novembres MMDCLXIV A.U.C.,
Spaceship *Drusus*, Lagrange Point 1, Earth-Moon System**

The storm, it so happened, broke rather early. While still one day out from the moon, it appeared an insurrection had started. The cabin in which the mission specialists were housed had access to images from throughout the spaceship, and outside as well.

Caldmore had been looking at the moon, which was just beginning to be visible. Not only was the view fascinating, but the technology too was something he had never expected to see. Far more sophisticated than the picture telegraphs he had been used to, this showed every pinpoint of light, creating a mesmerising starscape. The image suddenly changed to one of the slaves' quarters. They seemed agitated about something, a group were clustered around the door controls. The door opened and they flooded out.

“Errm, everyone?” Caldmore called out to the room. “I think you should see this.”

The others clustered around the viewscreen. One of them changed the views and they could be seen passing through the service shaft that ran through the spaceship.

Tesla depressed a button and called to the group.

“Salvete friends, what passes?”

One of them turned to the speaker and responded.

“Tesla? This is where the revolution begins. We have chosen this moment to overthrow the masters. Fear not friend, we have no quarrel with you, unless you stand in our way. It is the overseers we will destroy. And when we have taken over control of this spaceship, we will take the battle to our brethren on Earth.” One of his compatriots leant in to address Tesla too.

“And sistren,” she added. The first speaker accepted the correction.

“Yes and sistren. It was you who awakened us to this idea of democracy, Tesla. We chose this moment to arise. Join us in our struggle, brother.”

Tesla looked rather abashed.

“Arthus, that’s ... that’s a noble idea, but this is a really bad moment to do it. We need them. We are fighting a more oppressive foe than the overlords. Without their help we are all doomed.”

It was true. The observers were needed to ratify the presence of the Selenites. Without their approval a mass action against the insect encroachment could not happen.

“So,” the rebellious Arthus sneered, “in the final act you are as much a collaborator as all those you condemn. Farewell ‘brother’”. The man rejoined the group as they floated along the central access shaft. Another switch of scene and the screen now showed the rebels beating against the door in which the four observers were sequestered.

“What are we going to do?” Tesla cried. “They’ll ruin everything.”

An incoming call from the observers echoed his panic.

“They are at the door. You must do something. They’re breaking it down.”

Melaina stepped to the controls and pressed various buttons. An alarm sounded from somewhere. A red light flashed ominously but she ignored it and hit a button, defiantly.

The sound of alarms increased, matched by the sound of air rushing past, like the strongest of hurricanes. On the screen the rebels flew past the camera, clawing at the walls to find a grip on something, but in seconds it was over. The central shaft was clear.

“What happened?” Caldmore asked, confused by what he had just seen.

“She blew them out the airlock,” Tesla responded, horrified. “Now we have no army with which to confront the Selenites.”

“On the contrary,” Melaina responded. “We just need to get the overseers there to confirm the existence of the Selenites, and they can call up their own armies. All is not lost.”

“We disagree,” a voice emanated from a speaker, evidently connected to the observers’ room. “What we have seen concerns us greatly. It appears there is a conspiracy, a slave revolution, and Tesla appears to be behind it.” The voice sounded a note of finality. “We shall turn the ship around and take Tesla into custody. Our priority is to get to the root of this rebellion.”

Tesla reached out and pressed another button, opening the door that moments before the slaves had been battering at. The whooshing sound could be heard again, and a series of images showed the four observers being sucked through the same passages as the slaves had been moments earlier.

The room was silent as the reality of what had just happened sank in to all those present. Finally, Caldmore summed up what they were all thinking.

“Well that’s us well and truly up the Khyber.”

For the story so far, look out for Parts One to Four. Search for Lemuel-1911 on deviantart.com for download links.



A Lemuel Caldmore adventure

The mad surgeon, William Gull, is continuing the experiments of Dr. Moreau, pushing back the limits of individual plasticity to create monsters. In the basement of the Royal Ziggurat of New Spain in México Tenochtitlán, Caldmore is subjected to these foul abominations, and meets the subjects of his previous experiments. It seems as if his quest may reach its end in unexpected ways. Or perhaps a new destiny is about to become manifest!

The Machine Queen is a novella in eight parts, published occasionally, and distributed at various steampunk events. It recreates Victorian Penny Bloods, in an episodic form.

Also look out for the continuation of

The Machine Queen

Part Six: The Battle for Luna

Part Seven: The Republic of Texas

Part Eight: Endgame