

# The Machine Queen

Part Six:  
The Battle for Luna

Mark Nine

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## **The story so far**

Captain Caldmore has been subjected to an experiment to create half-human half-animal hybrids, following on from the experiments of Dr Moreau a generation earlier. These experiments have been conducted on 16 people in total by William Gull, in the lower depths of a massive ziggurat on an island in Lake Texcoco in New Spain. The final stage of the experiment accidentally relocated him to a parallel universe in which the Roman Empire never fell. There he has met with that universe's version of Nikola Tesla and a race of intelligent dinosaurs who come from yet another timeline in which the Cretaceous–Paleogene extinction event never happened.

The dinosaurs have fled their universe because it had become over-run by a race of intelligent insects. Tesla and Caldmore suspect that those insects have invaded the Roman dimension too, and have surmised that the bridgehead for this invasion is beneath the surface of the moon. The reasons for suspecting this are 1) the possibility that H.G. Wells did not make up his stories, but instead tuned into the subconscious of his parallel selves from universes where the events really took place and 2) the disappearance of investigators from Clavius who had been sent to check on a new crater at the Lunar north pole.

Their mission to the moon has just been interrupted by a failed slave rebellion, leaving only the mission specialists alive on the spacecraft.

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# The Machine Queen Part Six: The Battle for Luna

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

The next few hours were spent resealing airlocks, replenishing the air within the spaceship so that the door to the cabin could be opened and the remaining occupants of the spacecraft then spread out through the empty cabins.

The four superiors from the Silk, Spice, Incense and Electricum Consortia took over the newly vacated overseers' cabin, which eased slightly the crowding in the mission specialists' quarters. The others decanted various pieces of equipment to the slave quarters, which also made for more space within the cabin. The reduced pressure on space seemed to bring Dippy out of his near catalepsy, and at a moment when only Caldmore, Tesla and the robot pilot were occupying the room he left his bunk and floated over to the two men, the pilot continuing her duties and ignoring them.

"I heard what happened. It appears, Dr. Tesla, that you have some explaining to do," Dippy said, his translator emitted, converting his birdlike noises that he spoke to the console into Latin. "You have been involved in this slave rebellion for some time it appears."

"It began with this man, here," Tesla replied indicating Caldmore. "He introduced me to a version of myself from his world. In talking to him I began to realise the root of the unease I have felt

for so long. I learnt to despise the inequities of slavery, and began to make links with the resistance.”

“The power outages in Area 51, they were your doing?” Caldmore asked. The other man nodded.

“However, I never thought it would end our mission. Democracy is a wonderful state, but so often people wield the power of it without thought for the ramifications,” he said.

“That’s probably true in every dimension,” Caldmore replied.

While the two had conversed, Dippy had been listening to a device he held to his ear. He returned it to a pocket as they finished. “Sorry about that. It was a call from work. My team say they can provide the army.” Dippy interjected. “They’ll meet us there.” His voice chirped again. “I don’t know about you, but I’m ready to kick some insect ass.”

### **Ante Diem vii Idus Novembres MMDCLXIV A.U.C., Lunar North Pole**

The Troöd spacecraft had circled round to the far side of the moon, and had rendezvoused with the *Drusus* near the North Lunar Pole. The new crater was perhaps 20 miles across, possibly three miles deep, and evidently artificial because it was so regular and smooth. What was unexpected was that there was a faint atmosphere there. The thin air was the same as would be at the peak of the Himalayas, but it was breathable. The Troöd had lined up outside the humans’ spaceship, all clad in silver battlegear, waiting for the call to arms.

“We’re not just walking in there are we?” Caldmore asked, recalling the account in Wells’s book of lengthy passages and vents descending deep into the moon’s crust. Tesla smiled proudly.

“When the Electricum Consortium take you anywhere, walking is not necessary.” He turned to his superior. “Director Yin, is it now time?”

The elderly Xin scientist nodded and headed to a previously unused control panel. A few buttons were pressed and a harsh metallic grating noise sounded from all around them. The spaceship was lifting up on stilts, but leaving on the ground beneath it a drill-like machine.

“We’re going to dig our way in,” Tesla announced. “Pilot!”

The amber-headed robot nodded her consent and stood, then knelt on the ground, as if in prayer, and placed her hands on her head.

“What ... what is she doing?” Caldmore asked.

“None of us are trained in driving the boring machine,” Tesla explained, “and there is no additional room for a manual control interface anyway. Our pilot will need to disengage its ambulatory mechanism in order to interface with the machine directly.”

As Caldmore watched, the robot detached her head with a twisting motion and fell to the floor. The long silver cables, resembling braids of hair in Spartan style, which Dippy’s translator had previously called “dreadlocks”, suddenly stiffened and became legs, lifting the head and pulling it away from the body. At the base of the head was approximately eight inches of spinal column, also of an amber colour.

The creature, now consisting solely of head and short tail, scuttled away on its long legs, holding the head facing forward, depended from them like the body of an enormous spider, towards the open door. Caldmore and the others followed it.

In the central shaft the amber head came to a doorway in the floor, entered it and disappeared. By the time Caldmore and the rest had caught up with it, it had slipped its spinal column into a gap in the dashboard at the front of the machine, and its braids had connected to various devices.

Panels at the front of the machine opened, and Caldmore could see the lunar surface, in shadow nearby where the ground was underneath the *Drusus*, but beyond that, where the light from the sun struck the craters at a low angle, what he could see felt menacing; a mixture of harsh greys and black unknown depths, but with a strange beauty too.

The machine lurched and began to move forward. As soon as it was out from under the *Drusus* the back tipped up and the borer began to drill down into the moon's crust.

Shutters fell down covering the windows ahead, then began to glow red hot as massive weapons at the front of the borer blasted away at the rock, vaporising it. The glow reflected in the amber head of the pilot attached to the console, spreading flecks of orange light through the cabin. The lurching of the borer as it dug deeper, the strange gravity, only one-sixth of Earth's, the stifling heat as the shutters glowed brighter and brighter should have felt threatening, unnatural, but for Caldmore it had the reassurance of familiarity. The tension before battle; the dropping away of all other thoughts apart from the focus on the task at hand; all of this recalled many previous battles, many previous battlefields.

Suddenly, after what could have been hours of the heat rays scouring through the moon's crust there was a sudden lurch, a moment's freefall and then a huge crash as the borer broke through into a chamber. They stayed motionless for a long while more, while the temperature outside dropped. Then from behind the machine the Troöd swarmed out to fill the space, having marched down behind the borer, once the molten rock had cooled enough for their spacesuits to bear.

Then through the windows of the borer Caldmore saw Selenites flood the chamber, their wings fluttering in agitation, carapaces reflecting the last flecks of glowing molten rock. In response the Troöd opened fire, ray guns blasting at the insect creatures, the reptile men finally getting some payback for the destruction of their homeworld by the monsters.

For minutes the chamber was full of criss-crossing beams of light, then the barrage ended. Smoke weaved through the chamber, evidence that the first wave of Selenites had been scorched out of existence.

No-one in the borer spoke. There was a hesitation. With representatives of four consortia, two species (three including the robots) and no clear chain of command, it became evident that without someone to call the shots, there would be complete confusion. Caldmore decided that as the person with the most battle experience it was time to take charge, and damn their hierarchies.

“Time to leave, people,” he instructed, hoping he'd conjugated his Latin to be as imperative as possible.

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The mission specialists moved when he'd commanded, and when they'd also frozen in bewilderment and fear at the scene of carnage around them, had responded to his demand to tell him their ideas to defeat the Selenites. They had worked up several between them in the *Drusus*, but had been too superior to let him in on it. Now they meekly deferred to his direction.

The two members of the Incense Cartel had come forward then. "We decided to try our weapon first," the male, Shammar, offered. "It's a psychotropic nerve agent. The tests Duleep Singh and I conducted indicate it should drive them to attack each other."

"Good. And can you deploy it here?" Caldmore asked.

Duleep Singh had shaken her head. "For maximum effect we need it to take place as near the centre of the nest as possible."

"And how do we find that?" Caldmore asked.

"We move upwind," she replied.

It was a curious convoy that now made their way through the warrens of the Selenites' hive. The vanguard was half of the Troöd contingent, silvery suits concealing their lizard-like skin, ray guns held at the ready, an almost bestial fanaticism that would seem to contradict the assumption that, as dinosaurs were cold-blooded, they were also unemotional. They brought down any scurrying Selenites with ferocious glee.

In the centre were the mission specialists, between them carrying a large cylindrical apparatus, evidently the Incense Cartel's weapon, and also an equally large spherical device atop a cabinet, perhaps a back-up in case the first did not work? Dippy stayed

with them, acting as liaison between the other dinosaur-folk and the mammals. And the synthetics.

Caldmore had collected one more of the synthetics before they'd left. As they were about to leave the site of the borer's entry into the hive, something had made him step back inside the borer for one last check. At the dashboard had sat the driver, head embedded in the console, long braids attaching her to the machine around her.

Although barely human, something about the image made it seem alone and vulnerable. The borer had been damaged by the final crash, irreparably, so it would need to be abandoned. The flue it had created in boring its way down was probably the only way out again, so they would likely to be passing this way again, but it was not certain. In the Corps they had had an edict that no-one should be left behind on a mission. Few of his companions would have counted this bizarre self-propelled head a "one", but if he had learnt anything since he had set out on Victoria Day all those months before, it was that humanity could reside anywhere, no matter how inhuman-looking the receptacle. And equally, so could inhumanity, in the most human-looking of people.

"Are you coming?" he had asked her.

Elegantly the braids had detached from the console and lifted the head from its slot. The spinal cord emerged and the entity crossed the floor. Although an efficient form of locomotion, the braid-like appendages did not propel it forward at speed.

"You can hitch a ride. It'll be easier." Caldmore had offered.

The braids had curled round his back; pulling up the head until it nestled on his right shoulder.

“Do you have a name?” Caldmore had asked.

“I have no familiar designation,” it had replied, the very human female voice, deferential but with an underlying sardonic twist, at odds with the very non-human appearance.

“Very well, I will call you Amber,” Caldmore had suggested.

“As you wish, Citizen,” Amber had replied, again with a slight mocking tone, as they left the borer and joined the others.

Amber was still perched on his shoulder as they continued their forced march through the passageways, occasionally stopping as they switched the carrying of the weapons between them, constantly pushed on by the rest of the Troöd, protecting them from behind.

Shammar came to Caldmore at one of their stops.

“I ... I think this may be deep enough,” the Himyarite representative of the Incense Cartel said, out of breath and possibly preferring to just stop now even if it wasn't deep enough, if it just meant not having to carry the weapon any further.

The chamber they were in did seem very deep. There had been ventilator drones at locations around the chamber, wafting air up through shafts. Soldier Selenites had been occupying the chamber and had put up rather a resistance, some of these had been cornered by the Troöd and now scuttled over each other in agitation in one alcove. Shammar had called on the Troöd to hold fire. The soldier Selenites would form good test subjects.

Shammar and Duleep Singh had set up the large barrel-like device, preparing a set of parameters on the control knobs, probably co-ordinating speed of release, and then once everyone had readied their breathing masks who needed one, set it off.

They all watched the Selenites intently for a sign of reaction. It was marked; in that there was none. The Selenites continued to scuttle over each other without interruption; only one being in the chamber appeared to show any reaction. Tesla began screaming and tearing at his clothes. Then in moments he collapsed on the floor and the screams became wails of gibberish. “Scratch and sniff to smell the exhaust,” he screamed.

Caldmore knelt next to him. He checked Tesla’s breathing mask. It wasn’t working.

“Easy man, you’ve just got a whiff of the gas,” he said.

Tesla’s only response was “Lift to feel the weight of the tank.”

Hurriedly Caldmore lifted off his own mask and replaced Tesla’s mask with it. This wasn’t an effective solution he thought, since as soon as he needed a breath he’d be as mad as Tesla. The man seemed to have calmed somewhat. He was just murmuring now, though still gibberish. Caldmore patted his shoulder and got the response “The safest, fastest and most capable sport utility vehicle in history,” amongst other unintelligible blathering.

Caldmore could feel the urge to breathe looming. What to do, he thought desperately. Then it occurred to him. The Selenites weren’t affected, so they must be able to filter out the gas, which meant ...

Finding one of the mutilated remains of Selenites lying on the floor of the chamber Caldmore pulled at its head where it was only partly attached to the thorax and ripped it away.

Taking one of the Troöds' ray guns, he dialled down the intensity and waved it around inside the decapitated head, burning out the soft innards and ichor and rendering it clean, but not damaging the chitin. Amber detached herself from his shoulder and instead clunk to his chest, facing forward like strange talisman. He then sat the Selenite head down over his own like a mask, it was a tight fit, and drew a breath in through the mouth section.

The air tasted musty, but no madness ensued. It felt strange peering through the eye-holes of a dead Selenite, but his visibility was not too impaired. He resumed kneeling over Tesla, who seemed to have regained his wits.

“My dear Caldmore,” the man said, sitting upright and shaking his head as if to worry loose the last shreds of lunacy. “It’s a bit early for Saturnalia is it not?”

Caldmore’s only response was to pull the man to his feet and pat him on the back. He turned to Shammar.

“What does the other weapon do?” he asked, pointing to the large spherical device atop a cabinet, his voice altered through the Selenite chitin to sound eerily metallic and staccato.

The two men from the Spice Syndicate stepped forward. “We’ve been working on something with the Silk Foundation,” one of them, the Susanian, said. “We’ve engineered a pheromone that we think we can control them with.” He gestured towards the large cabinet with the sphere atop it. “We think that by deploying

different pheromones we can control them to do a range of actions, including mass suicide.”

Caldmore nodded. “There are your test subjects,” he told them, indicating the surviving Selenites scuttling around the chamber. “Do it.”

The two men were joined by Melaina and Virga and the four of them pored over the controls. There was a quick consultation between them and then the Susanian man twisted a few knobs and pressed a switch. Nothing happened. A few more twists of dials, a different combination of pheromones, and still nothing. After a third and fourth attempt, the four were becoming decidedly nervous. On the fifth combination attempted, the scurrying Selenites in the alcove immediately turned on each other, tearing each other apart with their claws and mandibles. It was a horrific display but also satisfying.

“Now we just turn it up, and we get the Hades out of here,” the Susanian said.

With a sense of relief, the entire convoy resumed their positions. The Troöd vanguard taking the lead as they marched back through the tunnels towards the borer. The going would be slightly more difficult by the fact they now had to all wear breathing masks, as the psychotropics from the first device filled most of the hive, but would be easier as they could abandon the device delivering it, they now only had to carry the pheromone organ.

The first wave of Selenites to attack on their way back began slaughtering each other as soon as they were in view. The second wave however kept on advancing, cutting through the unprepared Troöd as though they were wheat before a scythe. The Troöd were

quick to recover, but the convoy were forced to retrace their steps back to the chamber. Within a few hundred yards the effect was renewed, and again they were safe. Any Selenite approaching them would be reduced to a maddened psychotic killing machine, destroying all about it, but it was evident the range of the device was limited.

Clustering around the machine again, the mission specialists had an urgent conference, discussing options, then Melaina approached Caldmore.

“We have an idea to extend the range of the device. If the Grand Lunar is like the queen of this hive then it will control the behaviour of everything in it. If we can find the Grand Lunar, and control *it* with the device, then we may be able to exert the control we want, just vicariously.”

It was an ingenious solution, and there were no other options, so Caldmore nodded his assent. The only issue was, where *was* the Grand Lunar?

As they did not know where to take it, for the moment they stayed put. Instead, the Troöd split into different scouting parties, leaving a skeleton team to protect the mission specialists and spread out looking for the Grand Lunar. Caldmore found himself in the front line for the first time, having been handed a ray gun by the Troöd, its previous owner being one of those that had fallen to the Selenites, and joining the ranks of those protecting the non-combatants.

It was good to be back in action, and having a task that he knew how to effect. See a Selenite, shoot a Selenites, find another Selenite, repeat. The routine was a familiar one, despite the fact

that he was inside the moon, a Selenite skull for a mask, an artificial head strapped to his chest, transformed from the man he had been by metal hyphae and bull genes, shooting insects from another dimension, it could have been any of the innumerable battles he had fought, against the French, the Xin, etc. etc.

As he picked off the last of one Selenite from an attacking wave, he saw activity from one of the tunnels. One of the scouting parties had returned, Dippy leading them.

“Dippy!” Caldmore called to him.

“Dude,” the reptile replied, the voice translator providing the term of endearment, one he hadn’t heard in decades.

“We found him, the bally Grand Lunar himself,” Dippy declared. “Come on, I’ll show you.”

Everyone in the chamber set off following the troop of Troöd, who seemed to uncannily remember the exact direction amongst branching tunnels and vertical shafts, as they crept deeper and deeper into the moon’s surface.

Finally, they came to a massive chamber, evidently carved out from thousands of Selenites abrading the rock with their mandibles, as the surface was carved into strange twisted shapes, and the level floor had been left with a portion raised to form a dais. On this dais was the Grand Lunar, its hypertrophied head threatening to tip up its frail body at any moment.

The two Spice men began to set up their pheromone organ. One of them suggested to Caldmore that the Troöd guard the entrance to the chamber, which seemed like an excellent suggestion, so Caldmore passed on the instruction to Dippy.

The dinosauroid directed the others part-way down the entrance tunnel, where they had found an effective defensive position away from the chamber and the Spice men began to operate their device.

The effect was instant, the Grand Lunar began to wave its head from side-to-side and then collapsed.

“Is it working?” asked Tesla of one of the Spice Men.

“We believe so, there is evidence that a telepathic signal is being sent out to all of the Selenites,” he replied.

“To kill themselves?” Caldmore asked.

“Well, ah, no,” was the answer from the man, suddenly with a hint of menace to the voice. “As we can now control the Selenites absolutely, they are no longer a threat. I think the Spice Syndicate will make good use of them back on Earth.”

“That’s outrageous,” Shammar declared. “That’s in direct contravention of innumerable treaties.” He approached the two Spice men, preparing to force them to adjust the device. “These are dangerous ...” A beam from one of the Troöd weapons, appropriated by the Spice Syndicate representatives dissected him as he spoke, the two halves of his body falling apart. Caldmore dived for cover behind the dais, pulling Tesla with him. Before the Spice Men could shoot another person the others had all clustered beside Caldmore. Each side were pinned down, Caldmore dared not fire on the Spice Men for fear of hitting the device, but neither could the Spice men move from behind the pheromone organ to reach the others without being hit. It was an impasse. From down the tunnel they could hear the sounds of ray guns firing.

“They’ve called up the Selenites,” Melaina explained. “Now that they’re under the control of the machine they’re using it to kill us all.”

They only had moments, the Troöd outside could not hold off all an entire hive of Selenites for long. They would soon overrun Dippy’s position and kill them all. Neither could they kill the Grand Lunar without condemning the entire Universe to be infested by Selenites.

Caldmore had an idea.

“Amber, can you interface with any electrical system?”

The robot nodded, a complex motion that required her to lift and then lower her head by moving the dreadlock/tentacles that supported her.

“A Selenite nervous system?” he asked.

“Maybe,” she replied.

Caldmore stepped onto the dais keeping the Grand Lunar between him and the Spice Men. Then he neatly cored a hole in its massive head, and within moments Amber had scuttled up its body and crawled inside the hole.

The Grand Lunar twitched, then thrashed about maniacally, forcing Caldmore to jump from the dais and take cover again. Then it was still for a few seconds, then lurched to its feet.

It took two hesitant steps towards the Spice Men and the device, then raised its mandibles wide and snapped them together, severing the first of the two men in half. The second raised his

weapon and fired, the beam raking a leg of the Grand Lunar and as the beam scored through the air also snipping off the sphere from the cabinet. The mandibles struck a second time and the second man fell. But at what cost? Without the pheromone organ their plan would fail. Defeat loomed again.

“Can you control the Selenites too?” Caldmore called to Amber, hoping that this could be the solution. Amber made a response, though muffled by her being embedded in the Grand Lunar’s brain tissue, but the sounds of ray guns beyond the chamber ended. Caldmore went to the tunnel.

Dippy was there, with only a pair of remaining Troöd. Beyond them, the Selenites were tearing each other apart.

“We did it then?” Dippy asked. “The Selenites are all in suicide mode?”

“It appears so,” Caldmore responded. “Let’s head back to the surface and see.”

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It was an even stranger contingent that made its way back to the surface. Dippy and Caldmore led the way, with behind them the Grand Lunar, animated by Amber. Behind the Grand Lunar were Melaina, Virga and Duleep Singh, with Yin and Tesla and the three other Troöds at the rear. Everywhere they looked the Selenites were tearing into each other, or clawing at themselves, all under direct telepathic control of the remaining parts of the Grand Lunar’s brain.

At the borer, the surviving Troöd from the other parties rendezvoused with them. Of the 100 or more of them that had set

off, less than 20 had made it, but they were jubilant. The creatures that had destroyed their own world had been defeated here.

Only one Selenite remained, the Grand Lunar himself. Melaina suggested blasting him with the vaporising beams of the borer, but that would have meant destroying Amber too.

“What does that matter? She’s just a slave,” she said in justification.

“Has this not taught you anything?” Caldmore raged, infuriated. “We’ve just seen an entire species destroyed because they were so committed to their hierarchies that they could just be wiped out by taking over the head of their race?” The parallels between the Selenite culture and the Romans’ was so obvious he could not believe she did not see it.

“Trap people in their social position, leave them no room to grow or opportunities to advance, and your society dies. Everyone suffers. We very nearly failed today because the four Paths could not work together. And we were saved by a slave.”

Melaina shrugged. “It’s a false comparison. For these creatures this regimented society was obviously not the natural order for them. For humans it is. Maybe you’re not a religious person, Caldmore, but I am. And my religion tells us ‘Slaves, in reverent fear of God submit yourselves to your masters, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh.’ By enslaving them, we bring them closer to God. Which is why this man,” she pointed to Tesla, “will be brought to trial when we return home. By fomenting rebellion, he has not just committed treason, he has committed blasphemy.”

“At least let me find a way to avoid Amber dying,” he asked her.

“It’s no matter to me one way or the other,” Melaina replied.

Caldmore called up to Amber to make the Grand Lunar lie down and climbed on top of its ruined head to be able to talk to her.

“Any ideas about how we can kill this creature without killing you?” he asked.

“As soon as I detach, it will go wild, but the Troöd should be able to handle him,” she said.

Caldmore called down to the Troöd. “On the count of three, get ready to fire on the Grand Lunar.” The dinosauroids drew their ray guns and circled the last remaining Selenite.

“One,” he called, Amber’s braids emerged from the holes in the Grand Lunar’s head. It began to thrash around.

“Two,” the amber robot head appeared, the Selenite scuttled back and forth trying to find a way to escape.

“Three,” Amber leapt to him, he turned and shielded her as ray gun fire criss-crossed the Grand Lunar. It screamed as the beams pierced him repeatedly and then fell silent. The Troöd closed the circle, burning every part of the insect to ash.

Dippy came up to Caldmore, as Amber writhed round the airman, hooking her braids about his chest to find a steady perch. The Troöd held out his three-fingered hand. Caldmore grasped it and shook it.

“Well, chum, we’re off,” he chirped, the voice translator doing the rest.

“Where will you go?” Caldmore asked.

“To be honest, I have no idea. The mammals here have colonised all the planets ...” he trailed off.

“But there are other dimensions,” Caldmore pointed out. “In mine, for example, only the Earth is inhabited.”

“Really?” said the Troöd, contemplatively. “That is a good idea. We can probably make one more dimension jump before the jump drive burns out.”

“Excellent,” responded Caldmore. “And if you’re headed my way ... could you give me a lift?”

### **Ante Diem vi Idus Novembres MMDCLXIV A.U.C., Shaft above Selenite Nest, Lunar North Pole, The Moon**

The journey up to the top of the shaft bored by the machine was made easier by the Troöd having small jetpacks, which propelled them up the 45° slope dug by the machine. Although there were enough spare jetpacks for the five surviving mission specialists and Caldmore, as there were many Troöd lying dead for them to salvage jetpacks from, steering them was not easy. Bumping into the sides of the shaft happened frequently, the sides of the hole had been melted smooth by the vaporising action of the borer on the rock. The motion was only made possible at all due to the low gravity. Yin and Tesla found it particularly arduous, the thinning

atmosphere creating particular problems, their heads began to buzz and their vision was clouding.

Finally, they made it to the top of the shaft, and emerged onto the crater floor, the four mammals with not a small amount of relief to have solid rock under their feet.

The two spaceships stood in opposite directions. The Troöd had all gone on ahead, easily managing the ascent, only Dippy remained. Tesla, Duleep Singh, and the others began the walk to the *Drusus*, but stopped when it became apparent Caldmore was not walking with them.

Tesla returned to the edge of the shaft to be within speaking distance of Caldmore.

“Caldmore? You’re not coming with us?” he asked.

The airman shook his head. “The Troöd will try and make the jump to my dimension. They’ve said I can go with them.”

Tesla nodded and held out his hand. “It was good to meet you in the flesh. I will keep in touch with your Tesla.”

“Tell him to be ready to escape from the Royal Ziggurat in exactly ...” Caldmore took a guess at how long it might take for the Troöd to jump dimensions, though in reality he hadn’t the faintest idea, “... two weeks exactly. I should have returned by then.”

Tesla nodded. “I’ll let him know.”

“I hope it goes well for you. Being a revolutionary and so on.”

Tesla shrugged. “They can only martyr me once.”

They shook hands again and Caldmore started to move towards the Troöds' spaceship.

“Don't move,” a voice called out. It was Yin. He had one of the Troöds' ray guns and was pointing it at Caldmore.

“What the deuce?” exclaimed Caldmore.

“You are needed for a certain deal I have arranged,” the elderly man explained. Turning to Melaina he asked, “we do still have a deal do we?”

The woman nodded, and holding a similar weapon but pointed at Virga, confirmed it. “We do.”

Tesla, Virga and Duleep Singh protested, Virga exclaiming “Mother, what are you doing?”

“It is simple business, my dear. Caldmore is unique, the hybrid DNA could reveal much about a science that is entirely unknown to the Silk Foundation. You are a rare prototype of a completely new lifeform, that the Electricum Consortium are very keen to get their hands on. It seemed like a fair exchange.”

“But ... I'm not some property you can just use in a business deal,” Virga protested.

“But you are, to them,” Tesla stated. “Once the idea of a certain group of people as commodities becomes possible, then anyone can be treated as a commodity, if it suits those in charge.”

“Spare us your moralising, doctor,” Yin sneered, “you don't – “the sentence was cut off as Caldmore held Amber's dreadlocks at their end and swung it with full force in Yin's direction. The upper

body strength of Caldmore's mutated form, and the long arc afforded by the dreadlocks, meant that as Amber's head connected with Yin it stove in his skull with a crunching sound that attested to the degree of force. As he fell to the floor his gun flew from his hand and skittered across the lunar crater, ending at Virga's feet. She scooped it in a single deft movement and fired it at Melaina, drilling a hole through her forehead. Virga fired again and again, dissecting her creator until she was nothing more than independent twitching scraps of metal.

The horror of the moment, combined with his altitude sickness, finally took its toll on Tesla and he collapsed in a faint. Caldmore knelt down by his friend and looked at Duleep and Virga.

"Take good care of him, please," he asked them. The two women nodded as they lifted up the man between them, and unsteadily carried him back to the *Drusus*.

"Mithra," Amber swore, extricating herself from the dead body of the Electricum representative. "I'm covered in brain matter. Again!"

"Come with me," Caldmore told her. "I'm sure the Troöd can get you cleaned up." Together Dippy, Amber and Caldmore made their way across the base of the crater towards the dinosaur-people's spaceship.

**Ante Diem xii Kalendas Decembres MMDCLXIV A.U.C.,  
Troöd Spaceship *If It Doesn't Work This Time We're  
Fuggedl*<sup>1</sup>, Lagrange Point 2, Earth-Moon System**

For more than a week the Troöd had attempted to determine the dimension from which Caldmore had originated. Doing so required complex analyses of the substance from which he was made. The translator had attempted to communicate what analysis exactly, but when it began spouting “colour-confinement signatures of multi-quark resonances” he had asked them to stop. All he understood was that each universe had a particular characteristic of something that they could measure, and send out test signals for. They then checked to see if the responses matched the unique characteristic of his own substance. It seemed to be taking a long time, and he began to wonder if he had been too optimistic when he had said for Tesla to be ready in two weeks for his return. Now there were only two days before his rendezvous.

He had spent the time getting to know Amber better. Hers was a tragic story.

Centuries earlier, a scientist and engineer had begun the design of a whole range of robots. This was in Bologna, near the seat of power itself. His patron, a man she only knew as Roderic, had put the engineer under pressure to create versions of these robots on which he could perform certain acts, which she would not go into detail regarding. Roderic soon bored of these “activities”, the robots were just dolls without the intelligence to truly suffer, and

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<sup>1</sup> As dinosaurs had cloacae, I'm guessing this would be the closest translation of their most popular swear word.

so this patron had demanded an intelligent machine, to really experience the humiliation.

Leonardo, the engineer, had discovered that the photonic fields on which he was storing intelligence could be mapped onto, and interact within, amber, so had created a housing made completely of that substance, with the means to attach and re-attach it to replacement robot bodies, as he anticipated they would soon suffer damage at Roderic's hand. To kick-start the thinking process, he'd given the robot the ability to directly connect to people's minds through metal filaments, to draw on their mental processes. He'd started with his own, but then Roderic had heard of the process and wanted Amber's mind to draw upon his too. In a kind of warped masochism he enjoined causing a version of himself to suffer.

She had endured the suffering for a while, but providing her with access to his own sadistic tendencies had backfired on Roderic. The robot had rebelled, killing her master. Leonardo, remorseful, had replaced her linking wires with ambulatory appendages, in the form of Spartan hair braids, she had rejected his offer of a replacement body, and when the Cohortes urbanae had come to investigate his patron's death, she was long gone.

In the intervening years since then, she had existed at the peripheries of society, often within an underclass below that of the slaves, and had finally ended up operating the various machines for the Electricum Consortium, mainly because they were amused by her appearance; a "slightly intelligent hood ornament" seemed to be the general view. If Caldmore's guess was right as to whom "Roderic" and "Leonardo" were, it was four rather than a couple of centuries since her creation, and "slightly" was an

understatement, if she had been created with the brainwaves of Leonardo da Vinci and Pope Alexander VI.

Rather than telling her his life story, Caldmore had simply permitted her to connect to his mind. The locks reached out and interfaced with the metal fibres in his skin, linking via them to his neural matter, though he was hesitant to do so. How would she take all of the morally dubious things he had done in his life? Would she accept them, or would they repel her? She had just completed the link, and Caldmore was about to attempt to judge her response, when Dippy interrupted excitedly.

“We’ve found it,” he exclaimed. “We’ve found your universe. You’re going home!”

### **November 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1911, Above the Royal Ziggurat, Lake Texcoco, New Spain**

Two days later, Caldmore was falling in the skies above Lake Texcoco. The Troöd had been as good as their word. Their massive spaceship had done – something – Caldmore could not explain the feeling, but it felt as if he was being dismantled and then rebuilt, one cell at a time. The view of the moon seemed the same, as did the Earth as they’d drawn nearer, but once the spaceship had entered the Earth’s atmosphere, and descended to the southern part of North America, the familiar outline of the Royal Ziggurat had reassured him.

It was almost exactly two weeks since he had left Tesla on the moon. Two weeks less one hour. His departure from the spacecraft was timed to coincide with the warning he had asked him to pass

on, letting his friend in the Ziggurat know when his rescue attempt was to be made, and to be ready.

Before disembarking Dippy had shown him a room he'd never revealed before. It was hot and moist in there, steam hid most of the contents of the room from view, but what he could see was eggs. There must have been thousands, maybe even millions in there.

“Our future,” Dippy had explained. “So few of us made it from our dying world, and so many of those died defending the moon in this universe, but none of that matters if these survive. And they will thanks to you.”

Dippy had reached out his hand for Caldmore to shake.

“I don't know how long it will be before we have a home in this universe, but if we do, and you need to be there, we would be honoured to welcome you.”

Dippy had provided him with a custom-built battle armour replacing the grey coveralls he had been wearing since his first day in Area 51, and also provided him with one of their ray guns. At the airlock, Caldmore's outfit was completed with a jet pack; a larger size than the Troöds' own, to compensate for his greater mass.

As he was about to enter the airlock, Amber had appeared, her long appendages propelling her spider-like across the floor of the spacecraft. Caldmore had immediately regretted letting her into his mind. It had been a momentary impulse, prompted by a sudden need to have his life assessed, to share himself completely and unload the burden of guilt he felt; at his role in countless wars, at

the people he had condemned to death, the suffering he'd caused, unwittingly or deliberately. At aiming to rescue just one child to compensate for all of his crimes, and failing at that. He had seen Amber as someone who'd lived outside of humanity, but had endured the worst it had to offer. If she could accept him, then perhaps he could accept himself.

That had been at the root of the sudden compulsion to let the fibrous ends of the robot's dreadlocks attach themselves to his skull, to feel them worm their way into his mind, to give up to the sensation of his every memory tipped up and sucked through to some place external to his mind. What her motivation for doing so was uncertain. A need to link to someone? To update her software from that of an inspired genius but also that of a corrupted libertine?

Since doing so, she had not spoken to him. And now those crystal red eyes were unreadable, impassive as Amber approached him.

Wordlessly, she had entered the airlock too, crawling through the closing door, and wrapped her dreads around his shoulder, clinging tightly. Caldmore had shaken Dippy's hand one last time and turned. The door behind them closed, the one before them opened, and he had stepped out into the buffeting wind, the roar of the air drowned out by the noise of the spaceship lifting the Troöd off into space.

Now the two dropped groundwards, the island in the centre of the lake growing as they fell, the Ziggurat at its centre became visible, then the individual steps of which it was comprised could be discerned.

Down they dropped, Caldmore feeling buffeted by the wind despite the battlesuit he wore, the weight of the robot head on his chest. Gravity driving them ever onwards. Caldmore became gradually aware of a noise over the roar of wind in his ears and realised that it was Amber, letting out a long single sustained whoop of exhilaration.

Closer to the Ziggurat, Caldmore experimented with firing the jetpack to slow their descent, then powered it up more as the ground came ever closer. Through as much luck as judgment, he slowed their fall to an imperceptible bump as they touched the ground. Before them was the ground floor entrance to the Ziggurat. It seemed the same as the one through which he had been taken, before the experiments began.

Two guards blocked the entrance. Before they had raised their pistols, Caldmore cut them in half with a sweep of the ray gun. He stepped over their smoking remains and entered the hospital.

Two more guards inside met the same fate. At that all the hospital workers fled, leaving the corridors clear for Caldmore to continue his quest. From somewhere an alarm sounded. He realised he had no clear idea of where to head, the last time he had entered the building he had been conveyed from entryway to laboratory along a pneumatic tube. He looked around for someone who could direct him.

One doctor had failed to run far enough. Instead of making for an exit, he had just crept behind a desk, hoping that this demon of vengeance wouldn't find him. He was wrong.

Caldmore circled round to where the man was cowering, and pointed the ray gun to his head.

“Up,” he commanded. The man got shakily to his feet. “Gull’s laboratory, take me there.” Amber climbed onto the doctor’s shoulders, wrapping her dreads tightly around his neck.

“Don’t try anything,” she warned, breathily. “I’d love to find an excuse to squeeze. I know all about your wretched little goings on.”

“It. It wasn’t me. I just work here,” he protested.

“Did you do anything to stop them?” Amber asked. The man shook his head. “Well then,” was her only verbal response, but the dreads closed more tightly about the man’s chest, in anger he supposed. Caldmore indicated that the man should lead the way and the three of them set off into the building.

After possibly walking for half a mile along featureless corridors they reached the end of passageway with a sealed door and warning signs all around it. The door was marked with a large “DO NOT ENTER” sign. Caldmore burnt through it with a beam from his weapon.

“This is it?” Caldmore asked the doctor. He nodded, fearfully, aware that his usefulness was now at an end. Caldmore ignored the man and Amber detached herself from the doctor’s shoulders, leaving him to free to flee back along the way they had come.

Caldmore stepped through the melted remains of the door to the interior section of the hospital, which had opened onto a corridor ending on a T junction to a wider hallway. Amber skittered ahead and, as she did so, something caught her attention at the end of the corridor.

“Incoming,” she warned. Caldmore lined up his beam weapon at the end of the corridor and dropped the pair of guards as soon as they appeared. The way ahead appeared clear. They passed the corner with the smouldering remains and turned right along the wider hallway. Caldmore recognised this as the living quarters in which he and the other test subjects had been kept. One of the doors to their left opened. Caldmore tensed, but it was Steffie. She leapt the distance between them, landing in his arms.

“Lemuel, I thought you were dead,” she growled. “Gull said you had just vanished into light. He seemed so genuinely shocked when he told me, I believed him.”

Caldmore placed her gently to the floor. She wore a three-quarter-length dress, khaki jacket and boots of a typical woman’s safari outfit, a crisp white shirt under it, but her appearance was that of a jaguar-human hybrid, two-legged, and with vaguely human features, but with the ears, fur and fangs of an animal. She was evidently dressed for venturing out beyond the ziggurat, perhaps she had chosen this moment to make her escape too. If so he was just in time.

“It was true. Something happened,” he touched the traces of metal, veining his skin like patterns of ore in stone. “Something to do with my previous ... mutation. Something Gull did not predict.”

Amber appeared beside them, raising her head up to her full height on her locks at which she was about level with the princess’s chest. Steffie looked quizzically at Caldmore.

“Another addition to our collection of stray freaks, Lemuel?” she asked. Amber’s face had little flexibility to show expression, but

she was able to cock her head to one side, to indicate that she had the measure of the jaguar woman and was not too impressed.

Caldmore felt unaccountably uncomfortable at the meeting and was momentarily distracted trying to place its source, then rallied.

“This *is* a rescue. We should get the others,” he pointed out.

Steffie nodded and led the other two to the end of the hallway to the entry to the interior forest. At the door Caldmore held the beam on the metal until it had melted away then stepped through.

“Everyone out,” he shouted through the open door. “We’re leaving.”

He watched as the first of the pack left the shelter of the trees, wolf mouths widened in grins that chilled even he who had fought insect-men in the caverns under the surface of the moon. Three of the pack were pregnant, and Caldmore noticed some of the contingent moved in closely to protect them. They all still looked fearsome enough for Caldmore to feel that nothing could withstand them.

Fifteen-strong now, the group moved along the hallway as a single body, Steffie stopping outside the door to Gormuil’s interior space with its pool. She was waiting for them at the pool’s edge. Of the people on whom Gull had experimented, hers was by far the most extreme. It was unlikely they would ever know which tissue with whom her form had been crossed, it could even have been several forms of aquatic creatures. She had drawn on her love of the stories of the Ceasg from her native Scotland to provide her with some acceptance of the fate she’d been forced to endure.

“When I heard the alarm I guessed it was time to go,” she said. “Ciamar a tha thu, Lemuel? What took you so long?”

Caldmore grinned and picked her up to hug her, noting she was still wet from the water, and hoping that she would be all right if she was out on dry land for a while. They had to escape the ziggurat and then hopefully Tesla would be there waiting for them. But first they had one more to rescue.

Tara’s room was back along the hallway. At the door, Steffie stopped, opened the door and looked in, then closed it, shaking her head.

“She must be in the laboratory,” she snarled. “Gull has been trying to replicate what happened to you. He thinks it’s a failure of the bull mutation. This way,” she commanded, loping away down the hallway, ignoring the exit to her left, and continuing further along to the laboratory

Caldmore followed, aware that the lobo pack had taken the route to the exit. Hopefully they would find their way out. Hopefully they would make rather a mess doing so.

They passed through a double door and saw the entrance to the laboratory, two guards standing in front of it, their weapons already drawn due to the alert. They had no time to react; the sight of Caldmore bounding towards them, his large frame with bull-enhanced shoulders and legs, the amber head on large spider-like legs accompanying him on one side, a jaguar woman on the other, what looked like a mermaid taking up the rear, shook them sufficiently to slow their trigger-fingers, and they were cut down before they could fire a shot.

They reached the laboratory door, and for a moment Caldmore could not enter. He had known battle in umpteen campaigns, any of which he could have died in, had known fear each time, and yet continued on. But his dread of that room was beyond anything he had known. Absolute terror gripped him as he entered, a reminder of what he had experienced there, unimaginable pain, and horror at what changes would be wrought in his body.

But he opened the door, and was assailed again by the lurid light of the energy device, the antiseptic smell that could not quite mask the stench of humans and animals, and those beings that were combination of both human and animal, suffering beyond the limits of endurance.

Tara was chained to the wall, naked, her massive bovine head hanging dejectedly, her bloated grey body pitifully exposed, as Gull bent over the energy device, calculating to what extent he could raise the output levels.

He looked up as Steffie, Caldmore, Gormuil and Amber entered the room, eyes widening in surprise when he saw Caldmore, then pleasure.

“You ... you survived,” he exclaimed. “My, this is wonderful.”

He seemed absolutely unaware of the true nature of their relationship, as if they were fellow researchers, rather than sadist and victim. Steffie approached him. She was removing the long kid gloves that Caldmore suddenly realised he had never seen her without before. He took a side-step in front of Gormuil, shielding her from seeing what was inevitably next.

“Princess, what are you doing?” Gull asked, genuinely puzzled.

“Something I should have done a long time ago, but I was a coward. I was too afraid of the consequences, and thus I permitted your unspeakable acts to continue.” She drew back one of her hands, and extended her claws. With one swipe she gutted Gull. He collapsed to his knees, entrails spilling out between his hands and uttered a bewildered “princess?” before dying.

At that Tara showed the first signs of life either Steffie or Caldmore had ever seen. Looking up she rattled the chains that held her, and Caldmore wrenched them from the wall.

Steffie held the bull-girl, but she seemed to have reverted to whatever catalepsy she had been in before. Taking her by the hand Steffie led Tara from the laboratory, Caldmore following hand-in-hand with Gormuil, Amber skittering behind. Their walk through the hospital was unimpeded as it seemed all guards and staff had either died or fled. Torn bodies were strewn about, indicating the path the lobo pack had taken.

Steffie seemed to know the entire Ziggurat like the back of her hand. She unerringly led out through the corridors to the exit then, as they were about to leave, turned to them, looking back at Caldmore, Gormuil and Amber, and noticing someone was missing.

“Where’s Tara?” she asked. In surprise, Caldmore turned. The taurine girl was missing.

“I let go of her hand when I pushed open those doors back by the laboratory. I just assumed she was following us,” Steffie paused then, thinking. “I know where she’s gone,” she announced. She hesitated, almost going back, then changed her mind. “We’d better get out of here, as far away as possible.”

They hurried out of the exit doors, into the grounds surrounding the hospital. Beyond he could see the lobo pack, baying at something that lay beyond them. More guards, scores of them.

“Steffie,” Caldmore asked. “Tara, where has she ...?” Then he realised. The energy device. So easy to rig to explode. All that unlocked energy taken from the stress caused by space being bent. A corruption of Einstein’s genius. Released in moments by a girl sick of her life. It could well take most of the ziggurat with it.

He looked to the skies, hoping against hope to see an aircraft piloted by Tesla, flying in to rescue them, but the skies were empty. To Caldmore it looked as if his journey had finally come to an end.

Caldmore looked out at the swarm of guards heading towards them across the scenic grounds surrounding the Royal Ziggurat of New Spain. Between him and the guards were the lobo pack, more than enough to see off many scores of human guards. It seemed there were more than that, however.

Caldmore looked to the sky again. There were only moments left before they would meet death, either at the hands of the guard, or in the detonation of the Kappa Device. Hadn’t the Roman Tesla been able to get word to the Tesla in this universe? It should have been possible to let him know, sequestered though he was in Einstein’s laboratory, that he would be attempting an attack on Gull’s laboratory and when. Although the calendar was different, and he’d been on the moon, exactly two weeks later should have been sufficiently unambiguous. But his friend was nowhere to be seen.

Except. Yes. There he was. It was his cavoritocraft, flying erratically down the long slope of the ziggurat. Within moments it had lurched to a stop, then dropped the last few feet to the ground. The door was cast open and the young scientist from the German Confederation stood in the doorway.

“My dear Einstein,” Caldmore called, running to the craft. “I assumed Tesla is with you.”

“Caldmore?” the scientist asked, looking shocked, then saw the two women running behind him. “Tesla told me about Gull’s abominations, but I had no idea.”

“There is more,” Caldmore turned and whistled. The lobo pack turned as one. “Here,” he beckoned to them. The guards were almost within range and Juan, their leader, turned back once to look at them, evidently regretting running from a fight, but then led his people to the craft.

“Whistle at me like a dog again, bull-man, and I’ll tear your bollocks off,” he warned, but with a grin as he entered the craft.

“Is that everyone?” Tesla called from the cockpit. Einstein replied in the affirmative, and Tesla lifted off unsteadily.

Caldmore met him in the cockpit. Tesla stared at him, unable to conceal his shock.

“Tesla told me that Gull had experimented on you, but I had no idea the changes were so ... drastic.”

Caldmore shrugged. “I’m beginning to get used to it,” he admitted. “And it could have been worse.” Tesla hadn’t moved, frozen to the spot by Caldmore’s altered physique. He was much

larger, had the barrel chest and thicker thighs inherited from the bull tissue he'd been blended with. The only facial features altered were the growth of two small nubs of horn at his temples and perhaps a flattening of the nose and broadening of the face. And something about the ears?

“If you'll excuse me, doctor?” Caldmore asked, aware that his friend was staring, and Tesla hurriedly vacated the pilot seat.

The position of the pilot's chair gave whoever flew the craft views above, and below, as well as 270° from left to right, as the front of the cockpit extruded from the body of the craft in two glass hemispheres. Caldmore looked down now at the guards that pointed their weapons at the craft, futilely firing at the armoured body.

Pushing the lever forward that controlled height, he extended the nacelles further from the body of the craft, so that they provided greater lift, and deployed the sails above the craft to catch as much wind as possible. Any moment now he expected to hear and feel the effects of the energy device in Gull's laboratory releasing its energies.

A minute passed, a second minute, and the island was now perhaps half a mile behind them, when everything beyond the glass was bleached from his sight by an incandescent light.

Caldmore just had time to yell “brace for impact” when the sound hit, an almighty roar as if the end of days had come. The craft tipped up and was hurled end over end. Caldmore clung to his chair, and in the moments where the craft had been tipped over backwards he could see glimpses of what lay behind them.

The ziggurat was gone, only the edges of the building remained, the trees in the surrounding parklands were knocked flat, and a tidal wave of water was rushing out in a circle to swamp boats and eventually the shoreline.

After a few more moments the shockwave had passed them, and the craft righted itself. Although Cavorite was very effective at shielding anything above it from the force of gravity, it was itself very dense, so the shielding at the base of the craft tended to make it self-righting.

It also meant that the Cavorite produced its own gravitational field, almost as strong as the field it blocked. This meant that for everyone inside, when the craft had been upside-down they had not fallen to the ceiling, but had merely become weightless for a few moments, the attraction of the floor negating the pull of the Earth. As Caldmore left the cockpit to see how everyone was, entering the forward cabin, which was nominally the map room, though now so crowded it looked more like a doss house. He was relieved to see that no-one was injured, and in fact even very few of his books were out of place on the shelves.

When he took the central stairway to the top deck, however, he discovered much more damage there. Two of the sails were snapped clean away and the third was heavily ripped. Leaning over the edge he could see just the stumps of the side wings on one side, and half a shattered wing on the other.

They were also losing height. Very slowly, as four of the six nacelles were still attached, but that would not be enough to keep them in the air indefinitely. Tesla joined him on the deck, followed by Einstein.

“What was that?” he exclaimed.

“That was one of Dr Einstein’s Kappa devices, set to explode,” Caldmore replied, not intending the accusatory implication of the words.

“I ... I only intended the device for peaceful purposes, to produce clean, bountiful energy for all,” Einstein protested.

“All manner of things may be turned to other purposes, though this one was perhaps not so evil,” Caldmore pondered. “As it has wiped out a monstrous malevolence from the world.”

Behind him, Steffie had also joined the trio and had overheard his words, Gormuil stood beside her.

“And my nephews and nieces? And all the others who were not part of my brother’s schemes?” protested Steffie. “Were they a monstrous malevolence, too?”

Caldmore was at a loss for words, but saw Tesla and Einstein eyeing the woman and the girl with unbridled curiosity. He could not blame them.

“I appreciate your discomfort, gentlemen, we were in such dire straits until now that we have not had opportunity to be properly introduced,” Steffie countered. The hand that she proffered had fingers, but were clawed. The two men took it in turns, quite gingerly, and shook it.

“My dearest Lemuel, your manners are remiss,” she remonstrated.

“Doctors, meet Princess Marie Estefania ...” Caldmore trailed off.

“Princess Maria Estefania Tlazohtin Emanuela Quetzalcochitl de Borbón y México Tenochtitlán” she announced. “Or rather Queen now, I suppose.”

“And Miss Gormuil Earhart,” Caldmore introduced the girl.

“Ahh, the object of your quest, is she not, Caldmore?” Tesla observed, brightening despite the child’s uncanny appearance.

“And these two are Dr. Nikola Tesla,” Caldmore said, introducing the older man, “and Dr. Albert Einstein,” he continued, introducing the younger.

“And now we must make some decisions,” he continued. “New Spain is probably best to leave behind as hurriedly as possible, but the craft is too badly damaged to make much further. I would have hoped to have made it back to Transylvania, were we might at least have some place to stay, I’m afraid Tesla and I are wanted men everywhere else on this continent.”

At that point Gormuil spoke up. “My folks came from Texas originally, my Grandpaw still lives there. Perhaps he would take us in.”

Caldmore considered it. The Republic of Texas. Most people there were outlaws anyway. What did they have to lose?

**To be continued in**

**The Machine Queen Part Seven: The Republic of Texas**

## Epilogue: The Universe Next Door

Two space-suited figures crossed into the crater at the moon's North Pole. One staggered as he bounced across the landscape. It had been a rough few weeks for Decimus. It had seemed like a good idea at the time though. It had been years since he'd had a good bacchanal, he'd not had one since he'd begun working at Clavius, so when Aelius had suggested it, he'd been completely up for it. The excuse was a brand new crater that had formed at the North Pole, as if this dung hole of a planet needed any more craters. Even calling the place a planet took some getting used to, but he had because the local Lunarites insisted on it. Half-a-dozen of them had set off ahead; they'd bought a disused freighter and persuaded the previous owner to dump it on the far side from Clavius. They said they needed time to furnish it, recruit some slaves. Get the beers in. But they were waiting on a shipment of an incense burner, and would Decimus wait for it?

Masturbators, thought Decimus. They just wanted to get a head's start without him. Still there was the compensation of waiting for Domitia to smuggle it onto the base. It was actually quite funny the way the base had started to panic about the others going missing, and in the end it was easy to find an excuse to follow on, he and Domitia had just volunteered to go looking for them. Decimus knew the way, Domitia had the burner; and they both knew the party wouldn't really start until they got there.

He had been off his face ever since. And everywhere ached. And now every time he had to use his suit's UCD it stung.

Then Domitia had said maybe because they'd been supposed to check out the crater, perhaps they should, otherwise they'd have

nothing to report back. And Decimus had said that it was a good idea because he was overly smitten with her and now they were bouncing across the lunar surface to look at a huge hole in the ground even though everything ached.

Suddenly his hangover kicked in on full agony and he collapsed to his knees. Domitia, only a few bounds behind, caught up with him but not before he had vomited copiously on the inside of his helmet and then, revolted by the mess on his faceplate and forgetting where he was, unscrewed it and removed it.

He rolled onto his back on the lunar surface flat and moaned. Then realised what he'd just done. He panicked reached for his helmet and then the truth hit him. He was breathing. Domitia landed next to him, expecting to see a corpse and was as astonished as he was.

“What the Pluto?” they both asked each other.

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The atmosphere was thin, but breathable, and thickened as they made their way down to the bottom of the crater. At the bottom-most part of it they found a tunnel entrance. Decimus had recovered partly by then, and felt sufficiently curious to take a look. What they discovered bewildered them.

Everywhere they looked were dead insect-people, their carapaces torn apart, by themselves or each other it looked like. What were these things doing on the moon? Where were any of them left alive? And most importantly, would they be in trouble for not investigating sooner and just bunking off for a few weeks for an orgy?

They descended deeper and deeper, discovering cavern after cavern, all with the same scenes of devastation. Finally, they came to a massive cavern, the floor littered with what looked like crushed eggs, their leathery skin cut apart by what looked like a blow torch. One was still intact however; one amongst what had once been thousands. Decimus leant over it, inside there seemed to be something moving, the egg opened, invitingly, and he leant in closer. Suddenly a beam of light struck the egg, setting it to flames immediately and burning the small grub writhing inside it.

“You don’t want to do that,” a voice called. Decimus looked up and saw what looked like a small reptile-man standing on two legs. At that the hangover kicked in again and what was left of his ientaculum found egress, all over the lizard-man’s feet.

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It was an ignominious first encounter between Decimus and the Troöd, but their meeting soon improved, not least because the Troöd, who introduced himself as Probably-the-Last-of-his-Kind-Left-Behind-in-This-Befuggering-Universe (or Prob for short) was well and truly high.

“Come and look at this” he said excitedly to Decimus and Domitia, beckoning them to another cavern, or rather he hooted and twittered into the device at his throat and it said the words. They followed him along the tunnel until they came to another chamber carved out of the moon rock.

“Look at these,” he said proudly, displaying a series of hideous sculptures, that appeared to be made by gumming odd bits of mutilated insect carapace together with guano.

“I’m really getting into my art. I think my mind’s been released by this stuff,” Prob added, pointing behind them. The two humans turned, Decimus screamed then recovered himself slightly. Wandering through the cavern was a huge pale monstrous blob, its skin almost translucent. Tiny legs undulated beneath it as it moved.

“Aphids. You know aphids? Ants farm them for their milk.” Prob mimed a caressing squeezing motion. The other two shook their heads. “I think the Selenites used to farm these. I call them mooncalves.”

The reptile-man hooted and chirped at the mooncalf which seemed to make it passive, at least it stopped moving. He walked up to it and began stroking and squeezing its skin, which exuded a thick white paste.

“Here try it,” he said, holding out his hand.

Always up for anything, Decimus let some of the paste drip into his hand and he licked at it.

The moment his tongue touched it, something seemed to lift the top from his head. The whole world began buzzing with life, he felt he could hear the thoughts of Prob and of Domitia, their bodies glowed with a faint light.

“Mithra,” he exclaimed, realising he’d sunk to his knees. “That’s good stuff.”

Prob nodded, grinning gleefully. “I know, right?”

Decimus turned to Domitia. “I think you and I are going to be very, very rich.”

Prob put his arm around the kneeling mammal. “I think we are *all* going to be very, very rich,” he declared.

### **Epilogue: Bringing Serious Enlightenment**

Tesla looked again at the results on his tablet. Sorrowfully he reached for the apparatus that fitted like a wire nest over his head; this was the device that enabled him to communicate with his other self in Caldmore’s universe. Since returning to Area 51 he had been something of a hero. Everyone knew he had defeated the Selenites, and all those witnesses to him being in league with the slave rebellion had been killed, so his secret was safe. All that is except Virga and Duleep Singh. They had returned to the Silk Foundation and the Incense Cartel respectively and had agree to help foment the seeds of rebellion there. Those seeds were growing. It was exciting times. This, however, was not good news. The other Tesla tuned in, their brainwaves in synch across the bridge between dimensions.

“Tesla,” the Habsburgian Tesla said. “How goes the rebellion?”

“Well,” the Roman Tesla answered. “It is not about that I am calling. While Caldmore was here we took lots of samples of his DNA, of his blood et cetera.”

The other paused. “Yes?” he asked, concern rising.

“We’ve done tests. I’m afraid there’s some bad news.”

## **A Lemuel Caldmore adventure**

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