

# The Machine Queen

Part Seven:  
The Republic of  
Texas

Mark Nine

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## **The story so far**

Captain Caldmore has rescued Gormuil Earhart, a girl kidnapped from the Hebridean island on which he was living, from evil experiments conducted inside the Royal Ziggurat in New Spain. These evil experiments have turned other people into animal-human hybrids, and he's rescued those too, including 12 werewolves and the Jaguar Queen of Spain.

However, in an earlier episode in his adventure, Caldmore and his friend Tesla were framed for the theft of plans for an aethership, so are wanted by the NYPD. This means they cannot return to New England. New France is also out of bounds, so they only have the Republic of Texas left to them as a place they can run to.

Also on his quest, Caldmore has become involved in a plot between MI5 and the Irish Rebels to kill Queen Victoria (an enormous AI device located on the banks of the Thames), each apparently believing they can take advantage of the other and use the collaboration to their own ends. This plot thread is at last going to pay off.

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

**Friday, December 1st, 1911, Eastern Cross Timbers,  
Republic of Texas**

The Republic of Texas nestled between the countries of New France to its east and New Spain to its west. It was rather an anomaly that it existed at all. It was founded by mainly English-speaking settlers who had headed west looking for land, and looking to be free of the strictures of life in New England. To get there they had had to cross the native protectorates of Vandalia and Transylvania, and the foreign power of New France.

The elders of Transylvania and Vandalia had permitted them to cross their lands; as long as they did not hunt, and took as short a time as possible, they would raise no objections. The Premier of New France had considered their petition to continue their journey west and also permitted it. Two factors weighed in the decision. The first was that the native protectorates had formed an effective buffer zone between New France and New England. An equivalent space to the country's west would similarly protect it from any expansion from New Spain. The second reason was that, as the travellers were largely dissenters from New England, doing anything to support them would profoundly irritate the leadership of the Colonies of the British Empire, and for the French, annoying the English was a sufficient rationale to do anything.

And so the caravans crossed the border into New France, and under the watchful eye of the Legionnaires continued their journey through that country and out the other side. And once they had passed on through, they settled and drew out farms on the map

and raised beef and planted plantations and created the only true republic that existed on the planet.

The terrain of the Republic of Texas had been passing beneath the Cavoritocraft for more than two weeks, and had been drawing constantly closer for all that time, until the point where it lay only a few yards below. The craft had managed to limp along with only the one full sail and one partial sail, and there was little Caldmore could do to improve their ability to travel. They had kept south to avoid the Palo Pinto Mountains, knowing they would not have the height to cross them, but now even the tops of the trees appeared about to snag the broken nacelles that hung limply from the side of the craft.

Caldmore had managed to find space for all of the occupants. Though it was a squeeze. The lobo pack had all decided to share the crew cabin on the aft upper deck. The hold at the fore of the upper deck was still full of Tesla's bits of scrap from his attempt at creating an aethership. It had crashed, and all that remained was some of his Tesla coils and the ion propulsion system. He and Einstein had also relieved the King and previous Queen of Spain of their Lambda device, another of the inventions of Einstein, this one producing energy from the vacuum energy of space. The Royal Family had been using it to power the entire ziggurat, but the two scientists had decided that if they were to escape from the place, they did not want to leave behind such a powerful contraption.

In talking about their escape from the laboratory in which they were practically prisoners, Tesla had detailed how he had found out where Caldmore's aircraft had been kept and then it had not been too difficult a task for men of their intellect to retrieve it at

the appropriate time. This statement gave Caldmore the opportunity to question his friend about their late arrival. The tall Habsburgian seemed genuinely surprised that they were later than expected. His alternative self in the other dimension had given him the precise time that they had appeared to the rescue. However, when the time had been arranged, the arrangement had been “exactly two weeks from now”. The Tesla in the other universe with whom Caldmore had made the arrangement had subsequently passed out, and had underestimated how long for, so that when the time for the rendezvous had been passed on, it had been late by almost 30 minutes. It made no matter. The two men had arrived just in the nick of time.

Gormuil needed to be immersed in water for a good proportion of the day, and as there was a bathroom located on the aft quarterdeck, she could have stayed there, but it was too isolated from the others, after her imprisonment the girl needed the reassurance of constant company, so Caldmore and Steffie had rigged up a bath in the master cabin where they slept, and a curtain to draw across the room at night. Steffie and Caldmore also felt comforted being in Gormuil’s presence, their separate mutations seemed less remarkable when they were reminded that there were others of their kin.

The two scientists shared the map room, in the lower forward compartment, and Amber spent most of her time piloting the craft, or simply sitting in the cockpit even when it did not require her guidance. The chance to control her own destiny, and that of the others, and seeing the scenery of Texas laid out below her, captivated her.

Not only were they running out of height, they were also running out of food. They would need to stop and gather supplies before long. They would have no choice other than to stop before long, once the aircraft had descended its few remaining feet above the Texan trees.

It was Amber who spotted the wagon train, heading east and pressing flat a narrow band of crushed trees as it made its way through the woodland. Caldmore joined her and decided that overtaking them and landing ahead of them some good ways off would be their best hope. They couldn't last much longer, and maybe the people on the wagon train had food to spare. If they weren't friendly, then they'd have to face that bridge when they came to it.

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The wagon train was pulled by a huge mechanical horse, its furnace stoked high with parts of the surrounding woodland. They'd stocked up with coal in Newcastle, now well behind them, but that had run out within a week. The horse pumped its massive iron legs, pistons belching steam, and took pace after pace, pulling the caravan of disparate wagons and buggies behind it.

Samuel W. Gumpertz had travelled across almost the entire continent with his wagon train. He'd started out in New England, touring his show, but the tide of public opinion had turned against putting people on display, and so he had set his sights further afield. Heading west he'd crossed into Vandalia, and then New France, but in both places the pickings had been slim indeed. It was in the Republic of New Texas that he'd found renewed success. Living on the frontier, he thought, must keep their minds

open to new experiences, and they weren't so squeamish and over-sensitive when they faced hardship every day.

Samuel W. Gumpertz dealt in the unusual, in the remarkable, in the frontiers of human experience and morphology, and so a frontier country was bound to have become his home. Gumpertz ran a freak show. The various items of human flotsam and jetsam were his stock in trade, but lately he had become jaded with the lifestyle.

He was tired of wandering. He wanted to set up shop somewhere, and have people come to him. This constant travelling did not pay the way. It was all well and good touring a few items of the bizarre, though, people would pay if the touring show turned up on their doorstep. To convince the audience to travel to him though, required more than a few freaks and some cobbled-together mannequins of the uncanny, it required an entire zoo of the monstrous. He had a vision, did Gumpertz, of an entire complex of buildings, housing the weird of all shapes and hues. He even had a name. Dreamland. It would be a place for people to come and dream about what twisted shapes nature could create. But the place really only existed in his dreams.

And then the answer to those dreams dropped out of the sky.

The strange metal brass and copper airship, blast damage charring it and its wings half-plucked from its body, crossed over his head. It resembled an enormous dragonfly, with its long tail, iridescent patina and the bulbous glass cockpit protruding from the front like two compound eyes. After it passed in front of him it turned and landed, a door in its side opened, and out stepped a tall figure, broad shoulders and thighs, wearing what seemed like a metal suit, small growths of horns protruding from his head, threads of

a shiny material, like veins of ore, running through his skin. Just behind him was a woman, wearing a safari dress and hat, but her face and hands were furred, and had the markings of a jaguar.

They stepped down and crossed the distance between them, at the door huddled a pair of figures that looked like wolves standing on two legs, a male and a female. It was all of Gumpertz's phantasies rolled into one.

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Their story was extraordinary, Gumpertz learnt. The occupants of the airship were the results of an experiment conducted in New Spain, which had been following on from the work of Moreau, nearly 25 years ago. A man and a woman had been crossed with bull stock, but the woman had died, another woman mixed with jaguar, and the girl with various sea creatures. Jigger his damn feejee mermaid, this child was the real deal. But most extraordinary were the pack of wolf creatures. There were 12 of them, seven males and five females. And three of the females were about to give birth. Breeding stock. Two men accompanied them. Normal human men. German, Gumpertz guessed. They could be clerks or even mechanics. Gumpertz couldn't tell. Good with numbers, though he'd bet. With any luck he'd be able to find a place for all of them in his company.

In turn he introduced the members of his own troupe. There was Olga, the Bearded Lady who'd been with him from the start, and then Lionel, the Lion-Faced Boy, Emma the Camel Girl and the Wild Man Zip. There was Fred Muller the Strongman, Ursa the Bear Girl, Rob Roy the Albino Wonder, Josephine Myrtle the Four-Legged woman, Isaac Sprague the Living Skeleton, Millie and Christine McCoy the Two Headed Nightingale, Felix Wehrle,

The Elastic-Skin Man, Baby Alpine - all 615 pounds of him, Amy the New York Fat Girl, Schrief Afendl the Human Salamander, and two men who stood over eight feet tall whom Gumpertz always just called the Jötnar as he couldn't tell them apart. There were the group of small people, recently reduced by one due to the demise of the General, but still consisting of Bonita the Irish fat midget, Princess Wee Wee, two-foot tall Baron Paucci the world's "smallest perfect man" and Leopold the Admiral Dot.

But pride of his collection of "wee folk" were the midget Siamese twins, Ang and Lee. Midgets were ten-a-penny in the sideshow business, Siamese twins not as common, but there were a few around such as Millie and Christine. But no-one before had ever toured tiny conjoined people. And these were even from Siam, or somewhere that way, Gumpertz thought. They were joined back-to-back, never having actually seen each other, though they seemed to understand each other perfectly, their every action in perfect synchronisation.

Gumpertz had made many other finds amongst his travels. There were various gewgaws and gimcracks from many, many collections throughout New England. Old curios shops and so on. He'd even made a trip to London to see what he could find. In one old shop he'd picked up the feejee mermaid, some shrivelled thing obviously sewn together from various bits of animals, but the punters fell for it.

He'd also found the threshing machine. Designed in Sheffield by a manufacturer of agricultural equipment, it had obviously been designed as a model for a life-size version. The thing overall stood about 6 and a half foot. But the actual one must have intended to be thrice that. Two men would have been able to stand inside the

cockpit perched on top and operate various pulleys. Its complex system of scythes, sickles, hooks and machine knives would twirl about cutting a swathe through any wood, or field. You could move them on the smaller version by pulling on the little levers inside the cockpit on the top with your fingers.

The manufacturers had been going since 1768, and they'd put so much of their effort into selling this, unsuccessfully, that they'd soon gone bankrupt. R & J Linacre's Cobner works now stood empty and their scale model prototype had found its way to that junkshop, where it had captivated Gumpertz.

And the uncanny thing was that Ang and Lee fitted just right inside it.

Watching them operate it filled Gumpertz with a sort of nameless dread; they could make its scythes and knives move in a coordinated action that made it look like a living being, but made of metal and sharp edges. Every night the two little men climbed inside it, in their crabwise way of moving, and it would whirl away into the night. They'd once found a tribe of Comanche, circling around their camp, and sliced into them, lopping limbs from torsos as the intended machine would have lopped limbs from trees. The two had returned with unrestrainable glee, and it was a long while before they could be persuaded to climb down from the shoulders of the bizarre animated sculpture of knives.

They named it then, the Scion of Scythes. Gumpertz had never feared attack from without after that day, though he treated the two small men with utter respect from that moment.

In his years as a showman, Gumpertz knew a good thing when he saw it. Despite their strange looks, despite the natural caution of

strangers when on the trail, and despite the fact he had a troupe of his own to protect, he did what he could for the strangers. They needed food and drink, and he shared his supplies with them, he made sure they felt assured of his good intents, even settling down their airship on a buggy base and attaching it to the wagon train so that it could be pulled behind the others. They weren't entirely trusting, he noted the big bull-like man stayed watch over the others. But Gumpertz wasn't to be put off by a bit of distrust.

**Saturday December 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1911, Eastern Cross Timbers,  
Republic of Texas**

Caldmore awoke partially, his body aching. He was lying on wooden planks and being jostled by some movement. Why wasn't he in his bed in the master bedroom of his airship, Steffie curled up against him? Another jolt from the moving planks shook him further awake and he opened his eyes.

He was in one of the wagons of the wagon train. Had he fallen asleep from too much of the alcohol Gumpertz had plied them with? Not possible. His constitution was far stronger now after Gull's experiment, and he'd only sipped a bit. He'd not trusted the showman at all, so had been cautious with becoming drunk. Anyone who would exploit his fellow human beings as he had done, even if he did appear to look after them well, was capable of anything.

He moved his legs under him and found that one was chained to a metal loop screwed into the floor of the wagon, a band fastened around his leg. He wondered if he could slip it off. Something odd had been happening to his feet. He was sure they were shrinking,

and hardening. Gull had speculated about gradual mutation, and perhaps this was one. Were his feet becoming hooves?

If so, his feet were still too human-like to allow him to pull off the band. But perhaps he didn't need to. Caldmore stood, gripping the chain he strained at it, using the newly created muscles in his arms and back to apply a greater force than he'd have thought possible, and gradually he worked the loop loose. Caldmore then parted the canvas at the back of the wagon and slipped down to the ground between the back of the one wagon and the front of the following one. As he turned he saw Gumpertz standing there. That weird contraption the Siamese twins operated standing next to him. The two diminutive figures atop it inside their little glass cabinet twisted and pulled at levers and it unfurled blades menacingly.

"My minotaur awakes," Gumpertz declared. "I do think you should consider very carefully before doing anything rash."

He beckoned Caldmore to follow him, and he walked round to the rear of the following wagon. Pulling back the canvas, Gumpertz revealed a cage beneath it. Inside the cage was Steffie and Gormuil. Someone had found a tin bath for Gormuil, so her needs there had been met, but on seeing Caldmore she left it and joined Steffie at the bars to the cage.

"Lemuel," Steffie cried. "What happened? Why are we locked up?"

"Gumpertz drugged us, something in the food perhaps. I think he wants to turn us into exhibits."

“Yer right enough there,” Gumpertz responded. “You’re my ticket to wealth and fame. People will come from all over the state to see my freaks, with you to add to the collection.”

Gormuil pleaded with him. “You have to let us out. My Grandpaw is an important man, way over in Atchison. I bet he’ll pay a lot for you to let me go.”

This impressed Gumpertz. “Atchison, eh? I know the place. On the wagon route out of Louisiana. What’s the name of your Grandpaw?”

“Alfred Otis. He’s the judge there.”

“Hhmm,” Gumpertz thought to himself. “Well we’ll see.” He turned to the small men atop the body of blades. “Lee, Ang, take the Captain here to the engine, lock him in the empty water tender. You know the one,” he added conspiratorially. He beckoned another person standing out of Caldmore’s line of sight. It was Lionel the Lion-Faced Boy. “Help the twins, boy” he told him.

Caldmore was led to the front of the wagon train, seeing the rear of the giant metal horse looming as he approached, all the time conscious of the mass of lethal blades behind him. There were three tenders behind the rear of the horse, solid metal behemoths of dull black metal. Lionel climbed up a ladder at the side of one of the tenders to its top and unscrewed a large cap.

Caldmore felt something dig into his back. In response he climbed to join the Lion-Faced Boy. He looked into his eyes, ignoring the long hair that coated the boy’s face, he tried to connect with the person beneath.

“You don’t have to do this. You can stand against him. Together we can overthrow him. We shouldn’t be treated like animals.”

Wordlessly the boy indicated that Caldmore should climb into the tender. Caldmore thought about jumping down to the other side of the tender and running, but that would leave him stranded away from the others. Once the wagon train set off, there was no way he could keep up with it. It would be best to stay close, and hope for an opportunity to escape later.

He stepped into the hole in the top of the tender and jumped down. He landed with a slight splash and the cap was closed over him. He was in complete darkness. In a few moments the wagon train began to move and the tender creaked and thrummed with the noise of the movement. From somewhere in the darkness he heard breathing, then someone, *something*, sniggered. He was not alone.

### **Friday December 8<sup>th</sup> 1911, Post Oak Savana, Republic of Texas**

Caldmore had endured six days inside the tender, though he couldn’t have taken any sort of guess at how long he’d been in there. There was no sense of time, no day or night, the only divisions creating discernible intervals were the brief glimpses of light when the cap at the top of the tender was opened and food was thrown in.

He took those moments to try and discern who his companions in the tender were, but they always retreated into the darkness at the ends of the space. There were two he guessed, maybe more. But two at least.

One held him down, gripping his arms as if in a vice. The other held the needle gun. It whirred, and he felt the needle puncture his skin. His Troöd battlesuit was cut from him, whatever shared his cell was intent on covering every square inch of him in tattoos. He could have shaken free of that grip, but whatever was covering his skin in designs would have done so anyway, and doing so in the darkness was likely to mean the job was done badly enough. At least if he was to become a human art gallery, he'd want the art to be as unimpaired as possible.

The three were thrown around every time the wagon train bounced over a fallen tree, and these were the only moments when the constant feel of the needle ceased, apart from those minutes when he was directed to a corner to relieve himself. The pain blurred into one, each moment was indistinguishable from the next, the darkness was unrelenting.

Then, there was a moment when the needle was turned off, one of the things in the tender banged, hard, on the inside of the metal container, the cap in the roof was opened for more than a few brief moments, and a rope ladder was pushed through for him to climb. Shakily he gripped the ladder and climbed out, collapsing exhausted on the top of the tender.

Caldmore blinked repeatedly, attempting to clear his eyes from the tears that filled them as the light stung his eyes. When, finally, he could make out the person next to him, he saw it was Gumpertz. He was pointing a pistol.

“It looks like Omar finished just in time. We’ve been missing a tattooed man since our last one, Captain Copp, went .... Well strange. The crowds will be expecting one and you’ll do now,” Gumpertz looked appraisingly at Caldmore. Caldmore sat up,

looking down at his body, taking in the newest of his transformations.

Whatever thing had been in the metal chamber had converted his skin to a coruscating display of jagged abstract images, like the entoptic images of a madman seeing in more than the usual number of dimensions. They curled in and around the pre-existing veins of metal in his skin, embellishing and layering them. Looking at them for too long hurt his eyes, he felt like he was becoming absorbed into them. They were both fascinating and terrible. Whoever, or whatever, was in the tender might have been human once, but nothing human could have created those designs.

Pushing the thoughts to the back of his mind, Caldmore climbed down the metal rungs on the side of the tender. Around them, the woodland had thinned out, and now tall grasses surrounded them. None of this was like the Texas Caldmore had expected, he had imagined arid plains. However, with no idea of how long he had spent cooped up, he had no way to tell how far they might have come. For all he knew he could be back in Vandalia by now.

“Your help is needed, Captain,” Gumpertz said, reaching into the bag he had with him. He tossed a shapeless piece of buckskin hide to Caldmore, which he wrapped round his waist in lieu of better clothing. One of Gumpertz’s tactics for keeping his charges in a state of obeisance was evidently to hand out dignity in as small as packages as possible. “This way,” he commanded climbing down the ladder on the side of the tender.

Out in the grassland a few score feet a tent had been hastily erected. At the opening to the tent stood Steffie, a worried look on her face. She looked aghast for a moment at Caldmore’s latest

change, then masked her reaction, smiling in relief at seeing him again.

“It’s Manuela, one of the Lobo,” she started to explain. From the tent arose a loud whine, like a dog in pain. Olga appeared behind her, running her fingers through her beard fretfully.

“She’s about to drop,” the woman said, “we need them now.”

“What’s the problem?” Caldmore asked.

“One of those wolf-things is about to give birth, and none of us here know anything about how to help her,” Gumpertz replied.

“I don’t know anything about childbirth either,” Caldmore protested.

“I guessed,” Gumpertz sneered, “but I think maybe one of the other wolfboys might. Instinct and all that.”

“So why not ask them?”

“I’ve separated them from their women for a week, fed them scraps, kept them cooped up. They’re not listening to reason. The only reason we got her out without being torn apart is that the two bitches we caged her with are too heavy with pups to cause much trouble.”

“So you’ve wound them up so much they’re a menace and you think I can reason with them? Why should I? What’s in it for me or them?”

Without answering Gumpertz turned and beckoned to Lionel, who was sitting on the step of the nearest wagon, looking out at the huddle of people around the tent.

Obediently Lionel walked over the sideshow owner, brushing his way through the long grass. When he was a few feet away from Caldmore and Gumpertz, the latter lifted up his pistol and shot the boy clean through the head.

He dropped, immediately lifeless, and lay twitching on the ground.

“You need to realise, bull-man, that you’re all just objects to me. Him,” he indicated the corpse lying on the ground, “I don’t need, I don’t need a freaky looking pretend wolfboy when I have the genuine articles all around.”

Gumpertz gestured towards Steffie with his gun, not deliberately pointing it, but it seemed even more threatening from the casualness of the gesture.

“You’ll bring the wolfboys on board because if you don’t I’ll go over there and put a bullet in them all, together with your freaky women and your two German buddies. Then I’ll have Ang and Lee gut you where you stand. You see,” he scratched his head with the barrel of his gun then pointed it at Caldmore. “You’ve all got much more to lose than me. If I have you all shot, for you that’s everything over, the end of your existence. For me? It’s just a career change.”

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One third of the wagon train was made up of animal cages. Once occupied by animals that had been part of the sideshow, life on

tour had not agreed with the various tigers, lions and bears which had gradually succumbed to sickness and died. Gormuil and Steffie were in one cage with the other two pregnant wolf women, Juan, the leader of the wolf pack was in another cage with the two remaining women, and the six remaining males were split between the two other cages. Gumpertz told Caldmore he wanted to release the two females and Juan, and for them to help deliver the cub. He wanted them to do it without any violence, and if they showed any, he had people on hand to massacre the others remaining caged, one cage full at a time.

Gumpertz had enough carnies on hand to accomplish it. The strongman could perhaps, but he seemed fairly amiable. The two blond giants that Gumpertz referred to as the Jötnar, Fafner and Fasolt, were possibly more dangerous, but the real threat was the twins in their whirling metal death machine. Possibly the entire Lobo pack could not take that on.

Caldmore was not a natural diplomat and the Lobo pack were not natural listeners, but despite being on the edge of homicidal rage at their week kept in captivity, they finally calmed down enough to accept what he was saying. Somehow he managed to get through to the human part of their psyche, though that in itself was thoroughly enraged. The wolf part knew it was caged, the human part knew it was demeaned.

Juan and the two wifewolves, Adelita and Beatriz, Caldmore learnt, snarled as the cage was opened but they controlled themselves and made their way to the tent, under the watchful eyes of the Siamese Twins. Gumpertz backed away from them as they approached, leaving the tent clear for them to enter, where Steffie and Olga cared as much as they could for the mother-to-be.

Caldmore left them to it, instead focusing on the people surrounding the tent, Fafner, Fasolt and Gumpertz all stood with rifles cocked and pointed watchfully at the tent. Juan left the tent and joined him, and began pacing back and forward as if he was still trapped in the cage.

Caldmore took a few moments to take in the beauty and stillness of the savannah. There were bird calls in the distance, and it was still warm despite the month. Then the peace was shattered by a howl from the tent, then another. The howl was answered by an animal far off, maybe a coyote, then the Lobo pack started up from their cages. They stopped suddenly as another sound was added to the scene, a small animal whimpering then yapping.

Adelita, or maybe Beatriz, exited the tent holding a small creature in her arms. Bringing it to Juan and Caldmore she smiled, baring her teeth.

Looking at the little being in her arms, it was a recognisably human-wolf hybrid, but in miniature. Small paws waved and it wrinkled its muzzle. Gull may have been a mad and inhuman sadist, but he had been a genius. Where Moreau had failed, Gull had succeeded – the limits of individual plasticity had been overcome and the evidence was here in this tiny beautiful cub.

### **Thursday December 14<sup>th</sup>, 1911, Atchison, Republic of Texas**

The wagon train stopped twice more in the following week, as the remaining two wifewolves gave birth. Caldmore was put in a cage with Juan. The five wifewolves and their cubs were given one of the trailers, Steffie and Gormuil another. Gumpertz may have

been showing some humanity in that action, though it was more likely he was protecting his assets. If the werewolf people bred true, then there would be a lifetime supply of them; an entire new species to exhibit. He could even sell some on and start a franchise, though not breeding pairs, as that could then enable a rival colony to be set up. Already he was thinking bigger than a single sideshow in one town, even one as prosperous as Atchison.

The founders of Atchison had settled the place more than 50 years earlier. They had made their trek, like so many others, across New France and would have stopped along the route. A spot near the Missouri river seemed right to them, but the Legionnaires supervising their journey were watching, and it was a land ruled by the hated French, so they continued on their way. Once into Texas they had soon found a place at the southern tip of the lake that formed the border between Texas and New France and founded their town there instead. It was now a sizeable town, neatly located as it was on one of the main settler routes.

The wagon train drew quite a crowd when it arrived. People travelled through all the time, but nothing had prepared the locals for this. They flocked out to see the massive metal horse, fuming large plumes of steam and smoke from its stacks, wagons linked behind it in a long trail, like a small town itself.

Gumpertz knew how to drum up a crowd. He led Amy the New York Fat Girl, Emma the Camel Girl, Olga the Bearded Lady, Muller the Strongman and Captain Caldmore the Human Tattoo Gallery through the streets on foot. At the rear of the procession, in a sedan chair hoisted aloft by the strongman in front and the wildman in the rear, were Steffie and Gormuil. They were hidden from view except on one side Steffie's furred left paw and on the

other Gormuil's finned right hand, poked through the coverings to wave at the crowd.

Caldmore resented being paraded like this, and he guessed the girl and the woman in the sedan chair did too, but held over them was the image of the three women and their small helpless cubs, at the mercy of Gumpertz. They would play along for now.

Gumpertz seemed to know where he was headed, Caldmore guessed he'd been this way before, and he led his small entourage directly to the town hall, standing proudly at the end of the main street.

Like any main thoroughfare, the street on which they walked was churned up by constant traffic from horse-led vehicles, the horses also leaving behind other detritus. Emma, who was used to walking on all fours, her knees bent backwards through ninety-degrees to create the "camel girl" look had also put shoes on her hands to protect them from the mud and other substances. The town hall, at three storeys high already a floor taller than any other building in the town, was raised still further above the filth as it surmounted a wooden platform several feet above the ground. As they climbed the steps up to the platform, water and brushes scrubbed furiously at their feet – all impelled by some ingenious mechanism concealed in the platform – until their shoes gleamed. As a contrivance it was clever, and helped keep the town hall clean, but its real value was in the message it communicated to the visitor: you are entering a place set apart from your usual paltry life. Know your place.

They ascended the steps, the sedan chair was deposited on the raised wooden platform before the door, and all of them entered the building. The woman at the reception desk appraised them

suspiciously, and a little fearfully, but Gumpertz responded with a deep bow and a flourish and asked politely if they could please meet with Judge Alfred Gideon Otis. On being informed he would have to wait, he took this with good grace and settled himself on the only available chair. Amy was wheezing after her long walk down the main street, and so lowered herself with great difficulty to the floor. The others stood, Emma righting herself upon her two feet, Steffie pacing fretfully back and forth like a caged animal.

Finally, it appeared that Gumpertz had had enough waiting. He called to Zip, to catch his attention, then said, very quietly, “Billy, do your thing.”

Zip had been born with a birth deformity which gave him a tapering skull, what was called in the profession a “pinhead”. Gumpertz displayed him as a “missing link” despite him being highly intelligent, and Zip played up to this, creating a wildman act that he could still put on with a lot of enthusiasm, even though he was now in his sixties.

Zip now went into full wildman mode, climbing on furniture, tipping over chairs, screeching and pulling at his hair. He gibbered at the receptionist until she went quite pale, and she hurriedly left and returned within moments with Judge Otis.

Otis seemed to be in his eighties, white hair, close-cropped, and a smart neat suit. He had little trace of infirmity, and his grip when he shook Gumpertz’s hand was strong, although the handshake itself was somewhat begrudging. Zip had immediately gone back to being quiet at the judge’s appearance and stood placidly in the corner. Otis motioned for Gumpertz to accompany him along the corridor to an office. Gumpertz turned to Muller and issued a commanding “bring her,” and pointed at Gormuil.

Caldmore had spoken to the strongman several times. The man was called Fred Muller, a Prussian in his forties, and seemed likeable enough, but there was an inherent threat in the way Gumpertz had ordered Muller to bring Gormuil along, which concerned Caldmore. All the attractions in the sideshow seemed reasonable people, with the exception of the malevolent occupants of the Scion of Scythes, yet Gumpertz held them all in his sway. It was either by force of personality or by some implicit threat, or perhaps simply money, and Caldmore supposed he and the other escapees from New Spain were no different in that, but it led to him always being on guard against some nefarious plot of the showman. With the image of the lion-faced boy, lying dead in the dirt of the Texan savannah in his mind, Caldmore pushed his way to join the group, not daring to let Gormuil out of his sight in the company of Gumpertz.

The five of them entered Otis's office. Otis sat behind his heavy desk, and looked with irritation at Gumpertz who had sat at the chair on the other side before waiting to be invited. The look was something normally aimed at something repellent found on one's shoe, which considering the state of the thoroughfare outside, would have to be particularly loathsome to be worthy of note.

“So Mr ...”

“Gumpertz, Mr Samuel W. Gumpertz at your service, Judge Otis.”

“And how may I help you Mr. Gumpertz?” the judge asked wearily

“Well it is how I may help you, sir. First of all, may I introduce you to your grand-daughter, Miss Gormuil Earhart.” Gumpertz indicated the young girl sitting next to him, her pale green skin

was starting to dry in the Texan air, Caldmore could see her gills closing and opening with the strain of continuing to use her lungs, but she smiled warmly and said “Hello gramps” to the old man.

His look of contempt became one of outrage.

“I warned my daughter what would become of her if she continued to consort with that man” he ranted. “And when she left home to go off to the back of beyond I knew she’d thrown her lot in with the devil. And now look.” He stood, leaning on his desk to give full effect to his condemnation of the girl he was reducing to tears. “God has visited His wrath on you all for your sins. Look at you, a monster, a freak. You are no grand-daughter of mine.” He turned to Gumpertz who sat silent, the air gone from his sails. “And you, were you hoping to blackmail me with this spawn of Satan? Was that your plan?”

Caldmore looked at Gormuil. The stress of being away from water for so long, and the emotional turmoil of being harangued by her grandfather was too much for her; she looked as if she were about to faint. Caldmore reached over and picked her up effortlessly.

“We need water. Do you have a bath I can place her in?”

Otis looked up at Caldmore, too distracted by what he saw to answer. A tall broad shouldered bull of a man, Otis thought, not realising how close he was in his summation. With curious growths at his temples, like horns beginning to grow, and a strange glistening threads running through his skin, like wire. And tattooed with designs that made his head swim to look at them, clad only in a buckskin tied round his waist. Surely a demon, he thought.

“Water, man. Do you have any?” That imperious clipped British accent cut through Otis’s bewilderment, quashing both his Christianity and his Republicanism, so often in conflict with each other anyway, in one moment. The judge indicated the door.

“Down the corridor and outside, a bathhouse,” he stammered, and Caldmore followed his directions, the Ceasg-girl in his arms, stepped down the wooden steps at the back and to an outlying shed, presumably the outhouse. In the outhouse he found a water butt and he dumped the girl into it. He turned to find Steffie beside him, Muller at the door, watching to make sure they weren’t up to anything.

“How is she?” Steffie asked. Caldmore looked into the butt, Gormuil was swirling the water round her, her skirt billowing out. She tipped her head back still under the water and smiled at him.

Reassured, Caldmore turned to Steffie.

“Gumpertz’s plan to use Gormuil as an incentive to let him set up shop here has backfired. We need to get out of here, quickly. We need to find a way to rescue the Lobo pack and the doctors.”

Steffie nodded and helped him reach into the butt to lift out Gormuil. With the girl between them, the three stepped out of the door. Surrounding the outhouse were a band of men, six of them, all with pistols pointing at them. Coming down the steps at the back of the Town Hall was Gumpertz, Otis following him. They were both smoking identical cigars.

Amiably, Gumpertz greeted them. “Sorry about the armed militia there, boy. But the Judge and I have to protect our assets. Isn’t that right, Alfred?”

Otis seemed disgruntled at the familiarity with which he had been addressed, but that didn't stop him from smiling avariciously at the three of them, then taking a long draw from his cigar.

### **Friday December 15<sup>th</sup>, 1911, Atchison, Republic of Texas**

Caldmore paced angrily around inside the metal cage that comprised Atchison's only cell. He had been separated from Steffie and Gormuil, the sheriff and his team had taken them elsewhere. Gumpertz had come by later to gloat.

"Well that didn't go as expected" he declared, "but the judge and I have come to an arrangement. Seems as how things haven't been going so well here in Atchison," he explained. "Wagon trains aren't coming through so much. There's only so much fishing to be done on the lake, and it doesn't keep all the businesses that were set up here running anyway."

He took a long draw on his cigar and settled into the chair placed just the other side of the bars.

"Seems like the town elders were looking to find something to get the people back. A tourist attraction, if you will. It seems like my idea of a Dreamland was just what he was looking for. I can have my group of oddities and what-is-its running around, for sure, but the real wonders will be my zoo of half-human, half-animal people. The bull man, the tiger woman and the fish girl. Oh yes, the judge was particularly keen on making an example of his grand-daughter. Seems that he sees her as quite the opportunity for a few homilies on the wages of sin." He smiled, oozing self-satisfaction. "And with those dog people whelping all over the

place, we'll be set for life. People will come from all over the country to see them, maybe even from New France too. We'll be rich."

He stood, stepping close to the bars and blowing his next cloud of smoke at Caldmore.

"Yes, my boy, it was quite a day when you landed on top of my wagon train. Quite a day."

Caldmore leapt at the bars hoping to reach Gumpertz, but Gumpertz was too quick. He took a pace back and tutted. "Now, now, captain. We can't have you misbehaving now can we? We have quite a superfluity of monsters now. Losing a few as a warning would do me no harm at all."

He left Caldmore then, waving nonchalantly as he did so. "Cheerio, old bean," he called, affecting Caldmore's accent poorly. Caldmore would have, at that moment, given anything to wring the impresario by his neck.

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Caldmore spent the better part of a day in the cell, alone for most of it, until he received a surprise visitor. It was Olga. She sat on the chair by the bars stroking her beard, evidently deep in thought and troubled by something.

"He wasn't always like this," she said.

Caldmore stayed silent. Where was she going with this? He wondered.

“Samuel. When he started. Originally he was helping us. Ursa, Fatima, Baby Alpine, Schrief. Me. We had nowhere to go. Nowhere where we fitted in. He made us a home.”

“By exploiting you? Bringing in punters to gawp at your deformities?” Caldmore protested.

“It can seem like that. But we had nothing else. Nothing else to help us survive.”

“So what happened?”

“This place,” Olga answered, gesturing around the room, perhaps meaning the gaol, or Atchison, but more likely Texas, or the world itself. The plaintiveness in her voice was replaced with anger. “There’s something about a society that encourages, no, *enforces*, slavery. When you can see one person as property, you can see anyone as property.” Caldmore knew what she meant. Though he had seen people used as property in the docklands of London, in a society in which slavery had supposedly been abolished, so the distinction was perhaps superficial. But her anger gibed with him. Wasn’t that what had started him on this journey in the first place?

“He began to turn on us, use us to his own ends. Omar Sami was the first to see the signs, I don’t know what happened to him. Then Fatima left. General Thumb died. And then he bought that awful mechanical thing for Ang and Lee. After that we were too scared to go against him. Captain Copp did but he disappeared. Bit by bit we changed from being a family to being in dread of him.”

“But you have to stop him. He’s mad,” Caldmore insisted. Olga looked hunted and withdrew, shaking her head.

“No, no, I can’t go against him,” she backed further away. “I ... he’d kill me.”

Caldmore stepped away from the bars too, giving up on the woman.

“That’s a pity. Because when this all falls apart, and it will,” Caldmore gestured around him, echoing Olga, “then you could have been on the surviving side.”

He took the only seat in the small cell as the woman fled to the street outside.

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That evening, the darkness of the cell was disturbed by a small glimmer of amber, reflecting the few stray shards of light glimmering through the gaps in the door to the room where the sheriff was stationed. Across the floor, scuttling like a monstrous, golden spider, appeared Amber, her eyes gleaming red, glowing with the fires of an artificial intelligence created in another universe. She reared up on her dreadlocks, face almost level to Caldmore’s where he sat on his stool.

“I wondered when you would get here,” he whispered, sardonically.

“It’s not easy, even for such a talented Galatea such as me,” the device spoke, soft musical tones matching his tone and belying the uncanny nature of her being. Despite having learnt, and now employing, English on coming to Caldmore’s universe, she used the phrase for female artificial being from her own timeline. “There are guards everywhere, and that scythe monstrosity is on

patrol constantly. Those two little irrumators seem to take it in turns to sleep.”

“So are you going to get me out of here?” Caldmore asked her.

“Be patient,” the amber head admonished, and once more moved through the room, hiding in the shadows behind the door. “Call the sheriff,” she whispered to him.

Caldmore did as he was told, and screamed in a panicked voice for the sheriff. Lurching slowly through the door, the fat inebriated lawman bellowed at Caldmore.

“What the hell is the matter with you?” he called, pulling his gun from his holster, then found himself enmeshed in silver metal tentacles. He pulled at them, trying to tear them away from his throat, but they were wrapped around him too tightly for him to get a purchase on them. The man sank to his knees, struggling for breath, then fell sideways to the floor.

Amber held on to him for a few moments more, to make sure the sheriff was unconscious, then let him go. One of her tentacle-dreadlocks prised the ring of keys from his belt and she then scuttled across the floor to pass the ring through the bars. Unlocking the cell took only a few moments. Amber climbed up onto Caldmore wrapping her tentacles around his torso as he looked about for a way out. The front of the gaol was probably patrolled, there had to be another way out.

The room had a variety of means to restrain prisoners. The cell itself was fashioned from a series of metal bars, creating a completely enclosing cage. On the opposite side of the room from this cage were manacles, attached to the wooden walls with heavy

metal plates. He pulled at the shackles and the plank they were attached to came away from the wall. Between the two of them they worked those adjacent to the gap to widen it. Caldmore stepped into the darkness at the backs of the buildings along the main street. Beyond, the prairie stretched as a pitch black solid as if cut out from the bright starscape overhead. With little idea of where to go, Caldmore followed the faint sounds that Amber made, as the tips of her dreadlock-tentacles pattered on the ground ahead of him. He took one behind him at the row of buildings from which he was escaping. He would be back. And there would be a reckoning.

**Tuesday December 19<sup>th</sup>, 1911, Just outside Atchison,  
Republic of Texas**

For four days now Caldmore and Amber had been staying out of sight of the town for the most part. Amber had crept into Atchison on occasion, trying to work out where the others were kept, and seeking out people who might be relied upon to help them with their rescue.

In the first three days they had not fared so well, however. Amber had not struggled, but Caldmore was beginning to fade from lack of food. They had found water in the surrounding brooks and creeks, finding sufficient food had been more difficult however. But early on the third day, Caldmore had encountered Fatima. Looking out over the lake on which Atchison stood he had seen a herd of creatures splashing through the water. There had been six of them, and they had looked like horses. There had been something odd about them though. Steam had risen from them, not just evaporating sweat, but plumes of white vapour. Light had

reflected from their surfaces, as if glossy in only the way that metal can be, not skin. Then Caldmore had realised; they were smaller versions of the giant mechanical horse that pulled Gumpertz's wagon train. Astride the foremost one had sat a woman, her skin as jet black as the darkest of the metal horses, although the one she chose to ride was a brass-coloured one.

Warily, Caldmore had stood, unsure as to whether this person was an ally or an enemy, but willing to take the chance. From the look of the horses, Caldmore had guessed that she was linked to Gumpertz, and he had also guessed, of all the names he had heard linked to the showman, but who had left, which one was hers.

The herd had slowed, and the lead horse trotted towards the bottom of the incline on which Caldmore was standing. The woman had cautiously eyed Caldmore from under her wide-brimmed hat. She had worn a full-length coat which she had pulled back, the more easily to get at the pistol hanging from the holster at her waist.

“Do I know you? You seem familiar,” she had asked.

“It might be these markings,” Caldmore had indicated the tattoos that now marked his skin. “Gumpertz had me illustrated to replace a previous Captain in his retinue.”

The woman's hand had touched the handle of her pistol. “You're with Gumpertz?” At that point Caldmore had shaken his head, and explained that actually he had escaped from Gumpertz, and now aimed to rescue the other people imprisoned by him. He had also suggested that she perhaps had the same aim, and that she was Fatima the Nubian.

The woman had seemed to be reassured by this, and had dismounted her horse. She had explained that she had escaped from Gumpertz, taking with her the mechanical horses to thwart any pursuit. She had followed the path of the wagon train, a task easily done from a distance as it left such destruction in its wake, and constantly looked for an opportunity to take on Gumpertz. She wanted him dead, and those that stood with him. By the time Amber had returned from her reconnaissance later that day, Fatima and Caldmore had allied themselves against the showman. Fatima had also identified for Caldmore sources of food, and he had at last been able to assuage his hunger.

That day had also seen a breakthrough for Amber. She had kept to the shadows for the first three days; lurking in the corners of rooms, spying on the people of the town. She had discovered the whereabouts of the Lobo pack, and Steffie and Gormuil. They were now in a huge building newly built on the edge of town called "Dreamland". Many of the townsfolk had come together to build it, as they saw it as their chance to make some money by encouraging visitors. Dreamland was part-zoo, part-bedlam, not only housing the new additions to Gumpertz's menagerie, but also the members of the existing entourage that Gumpertz identified as a "flight risk". Schrief was in there, and Zip and Ursa. A tiny version of a house had been created for Bonita, the Admiral, the Princess and the Baron, alongside a mausoleum for the General, also to scale. The first patrons of Dreamland had been the townsfolk themselves and they had flocked to it. Visitors to the town too, all had made the trip out to the buildings. All claimed the idea to be a great success. Prosperity beckoned for all.

The airship was in a barn also on the outskirts of town. The two scientists were confined to it, and by all accounts were unharmed,

and had been rarely seen by anyone, least of all the two lumbering giants tasked with their imprisonment.

But just as importantly, she had found collaborators amongst the townsfolk of Atchison; people resenting the iron rule of the Judge and the Sheriff. Chief amongst these were the town doctor and one of his patients. She had been covertly following the doctor, whom she had quickly identified as a potential agitator. While in his surgery she had overheard a conversation in which a woman named Jezebel had come to see Thornton. She had evidently undergone some horrific injury in the past, and the doctor had done what he could to patch her up, but she still had the scars to evidence the attack, a patchwork that covered her face and arms. Also from the conversation the woman was still angry that the crime had not been addressed because the perpetrator, her husband from what Amber understood, was a member of the council. Jezebel wanted revenge and the doctor was counselling her not to take any further risks.

Amber had dropped in on Jezebel later that day, literally, lowering herself from the ceiling of the room Jezebel rented in the local hostelry. Jezebel hadn't screamed, but had in a moment pulled the rifle from under the bed and pointed it unwaveringly at the disembodied head hanging from the long cord-like braids. At that meeting Amber had discovered there were many more on the edge of taking on the authorities in the town. Too many people there had lived in fear, or poverty, for too long, and felt injustice at the way the law had become subservient to the goals of the powerful. They were ready to rise up. They just needed a trigger.

During that Tuesday, Amber had returned to Jezebel, and begun to hear of her efforts in co-ordinating an uprising, on returning to

Caldmore to tell him the good news, she had discovered he too had found an ally. That evening the three made their plans. It would take a couple more days to co-ordinate the people in the town. While Fatima and Caldmore entered the town, attempting to initiate a traditional showdown with the lawmen there, the others who were on their side would move onto Dreamland. While the Gumpertz's henchmen were distracted Jezebel and her fellow rebels would free the people held there. If they could make it as far as releasing the Lobo pack, then the fight would be over. They agreed that they would pick midday at the winter solstice to make their move.

Low noon.

### **Thursday, December 21<sup>st</sup>, 1911, Atchison, Republic of Texas**

At 30 minutes to midday, Fatima and Caldmore saddled up. Fatima chose her favourite of the mechanical horses, the piebald. Caldmore chose the largest, which was the jet black one, as it seemed most likely to be able to bear his weight and convey him at speed. Its design was slightly different than the others, in that the chimneys venting steam were not placed along its neck as in a mane, but were orientated downwards from its nose, venting the vapour demonically before it. It was impractical, but Caldmore enjoyed the aesthetic, the horned metallic-veined man, with the mind-twisting tattoos sitting astride the hellsmoke-breathing horse. That ought to put the willies up them, he thought. Amber had gone on ahead, to prepare the troops. Fatima had provided him with a shotgun. He would have liked the Troöds' ray gun, but Gumpertz still had that, and a shotgun pellet could cause almost as much damage. They approached main street side-by-side,

watching warily for signs of opposition. Before they made it to the jailhouse, the sheriff appeared.

“That’s far enough,” he shouted.

“Nowhere near far enough, Sheriff,” Caldmore replied. “It won’t be enough until all the evil from this town is purged. You can step aside and let us do it, or you can align yourself with those who would oppress others. And die with them.”

“You mean the slaves here, don’t you?” the Sheriff answered back. “Well there’s no law against slavery. We’ll keep things just the way they are. No-one’s coming to my country and telling me what to do.”

“And what about the anomalies that Gumpertz has kept locked away. Where’s the law that says you can do that?” Caldmore asked him.

At that moment Otis stepped out from the jailhouse.

“What law?” he challenged. “God’s law. He made us in His image. You and those other freaks,” he gestured towards Dreamland on the edge of town, “offend all of His works. You are the product of sin, and you shall pay the price.”

Fatima leaned forward in her saddle. “We are all of us the product of sin, or did your parents produce you in an impassionate exchange of bodily fluids?”

The man blustered for a moment. “My friend here,” she indicated Caldmore, “misses the point. It makes no difference whether a law justifies something or not, or whether your God does. Right and wrong transcend the laws of God and man, and this,” she fumbled

with something on her saddle then pulled it free and threw it down at the Judge's feet, "is just plain wrong."

The object was a chain of slave collars, interlocked. She had evidently been busy in her travels following Gumpertz's wagon train, taking some time out from her pursuit to conduct some emancipation on the side.

The judge kicked at the metal on the ground before him. Then looked up. "The penalty for freeing slaves is death," he pronounced then called to the Sheriff beside him: "Arrest this woman."

The man pulled out his gun, but Fatima fired before it was half way to firing position. He fell down, clutching at his chest.

All around them was the sound of weapons being cocked. Caldmore and Fatima leapt from their steeds and sheltered behind a water trough. The judge fled back to the jailhouse under cover of the shots that rang out.

"This might not have been a good idea," Fatima shouted to Caldmore over the noise of gunfire.

"We just need to hold out here until the Lobo pack are freed," Caldmore replied, but then heard another noise joining that of gunpowder.

At the end of the street the Scion of the Scythes made an appearance. Within the glass cockpit at the top of the seven-foot tall machine, the two conjoined twins pulled levers expertly and in perfect co-ordination. Around the machine, blades rotated on extending and contracting armatures, in a complex dance of blades and hooks. It stepped purposefully down the street, heading

directly to the water trough behind which Caldmore and Fatima sheltered.

They considered making a run for it, but knew there were too many deputies and other of the judge's men in windows and doorways along the street, waiting to pick them off. And besides, they did not know how fast the twins could make the machine move.

It stood opposite them, the faces of the twins were forced to be side-on due to how their heads were joined, but their eyes looked sideways towards them, maniacally glinting.

Then from above a shot could be heard, and a small nick appeared in the glass canopy protecting them. They moved backwards in a protective gesture, but the second shot found the same chink in the canopy, sintering the glass slightly. Blades whirled in front of them but the third bullet found its way between them, producing a small dent in the glass. Uncannily no matter how the twins moved, a fourth and fifth bullet found exactly the same mark. Then with the sixth, the canopy shattered, the bullet continuing through to create an explosion of blood within the glass cockpit of the machine as it found its target in the head of either Ang or Lee.

Before the Scion of Scythes could fall, Amber, appearing from nowhere, had climbed up the body of the machine and torn her way into the canopy, now open to her attack. Briefly the street was quiet but for the screams of the remaining twin, then the canopy was ejected, followed by the tiny paired corpse(s) of the previous tenants. Ang and Lee hit the ground with the smallest of thumps, and lay there.

There was a moment's pause, as if the whole town held its breath, and then the machine erupted in a fantastic blur of movement, blades, hooks, scythes, pirouetting and interlocking, Amber controlling each lever in the cockpit dexterously with her prehensile silver braids. Amber-Scion moved away from them, towards the jailhouse. Wrenching the door from its hinges it ducked and entered. There was a second of screaming, suddenly cut off, and then the Scion of the Scythes emerged, blood dripping from only one of its blades, and it stepped lightly, almost prancing, to the next building.

Beside them Jezebel appeared, unheeding of any of the rifles that moments ago had been covering the street. The owners of those rifles would now be fleeing for their lives if they had any sense.

“Was that you shooting?” Caldmore asked her. He'd considered himself an expert shot, but that was far beyond anything he'd thought possible. The woman nodded, and half of her mouth twisted upwards in a smile.

“But weren't you all supposed to be freeing the Lobo pack?” Fatima asked her.

The woman shook her head. “They wouldn't. They were frightened of Gumpertz's men, and they were frightened of what would happen to them if they did free those wolf creatures.” She started to walk off in the direction of Dreamland. “I thought I might do some good backing you two up, so stayed here.”

“Damn, then there's no-one to protect Gormuil and Steffie,” Caldmore realised, beginning to run down the street.

There were open fields between him and the large new building. This was the route that wagon trains from New France would pass through from the East. Ahead he could see Gumpertz running to its door, at which stood the two giant men and Olga. Olga tried to stop the showman, but he struck her down and carried onwards. Caldmore guessed that, realising his plans had been ended, he would carry out the retribution he had promised, killing Gormuil and Steffie, and perhaps the women of the Lobo pack. Caldmore had much greater speed in his transmogrified body, but still he couldn't reach Gumpertz in time. The two giant men blocked his path, and from the side he could see the strong man, Muller run in to meet him. He could take them all on, but not defeat them quickly enough to stop Gumpertz.

From inside Dreamland a shot rang out. Then another. In shock and despair Caldmore fell to his knees. Gumpertz had killed Gormuil and Steffie. Everything he had set out to do had ended in failure.

Then stepping out of the doorway, smoking gun still in his hand, appeared Hopkins, his shattered leg repaired, a smile of satisfaction on his face. Behind him followed Gormuil and Steffie. As the three Gumpertz henchmen backed away from them the two women ran to Caldmore and raised him to his feet. Hopkins reached the group and peered at Caldmore quizzically.

“Caldmore, old man, whatever have they done to you?” he asked. Then remembering his manners, he held out his hand to be shaken. “Whatever, it's good to see you, I've had a hell of a job tracking you down.”

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The Lobo pack cut a swathe of death and destruction through the town of Atchison, Texas. They remembered each and every humiliation, every pointed finger, every stick poked at them, every rotten vegetable thrown, and they exacted retribution. But so too they remembered every tear shed in pity, every head turned in shame, and they in turn spared those who deserved to be spared. Their bloodlust was leavened with the unerring judgment of character possessed by every dog everywhere.

The wife who found the dismembered remains of their husband, scattered amongst the mud of the central thoroughfare of the town would kneel in sorrow, but also remember that the man had been a drunkard and a lecher, the sister who found her sibling with her neck sliced open, leaving blood on the veranda, would recall every slight and every moment of meanness during their lives together, and the mother who cradled her dead son in her arms would have her grief mollified by the thought that “well he was a complete shit after all,” and thus the townsfolk made their peace with the horrors perpetrated on their neighbours and kin.

And so, over the ensuing days, a wary truce developed between the were- and wifewolves and the humans of the town, and the simple bargains made that enable co-existence between locals and newcomers everywhere. The Lobo pack could display loyalty, they were unswervingly moral, and they brought the one thing that the townsfolk had been looking for without realising it. Their presence amongst them made them feel special. Maybe now they were free the town wouldn't attract so many visitors, but also maybe that wasn't such a bad thing.

## **Saturday December 24<sup>th</sup>, 1911, Aitchison, Republic of New Texas**

By Christmas Eve, people were beginning to think about the future. For Caldmore and Hopkins, however, there was some catching up to do. While Hopkins had been in the Dublin hospital, he'd been contacted by other members of his group in MI5. One by one, everyone connected with the Jubilee plot had been disavowed. Burn notices had been issued against them and there was a free-for-all with Unionists, Republicans, Deuxieme Bureau and other members of MIs 1 to 19 all out for blood. Within days every government agent who had known anything about MI5 issuing bombs and weapons to the Fenians in order to draw them into making a move against Queen Victoria, and thereby exposing themselves, were dead. And so Hopkins had taken on one of his cover identities, one even his bosses did not know about, and had tried to track down the one other person, apart from the Fenians, who knew about the plot. Caldmore.

Working out where Caldmore had been was not difficult. There was the theft of the aethership plans in New York, the destruction of the Fort des Moines, killing most of the board of the Hudson Bay Company and several key Charlolina businessmen, and then most spectacularly, the explosion in New Spain that completely annihilated the Royal Ziggurat. Since leaving him in the hospital, Caldmore had wiped out one royal family and brought down two governments. He was adding up quite a tally.

His contacts in the Pinkerton Detective Agency had aided his travel through New France, and by coincidence he had arrived at Dreamland just as Gumpertz had entered from the other direction. Not knowing any of the participants, he had simply seen a crazed

man about to open fire on a woman and a girl, albeit quite an unusual pair of females, and so had shot the man before he could do any harm.

After freeing the various Human Salamanders, Skeletons, Nightingales and Camels the two men had then released the Lobo pack and hoped, in vain, that the wolf-people's retribution would be restrained.

Caldmore and Hopkins had then travelled to the barn in which the airship had been stored. It seemed to have undergone some changes, all the sails had been removed, and a curious exoskeleton had been added to the tail. The men themselves appeared to be in excellent spirits, none the worse for their incarceration. In fact, the enforced imprisonment seemed to have energised them. Caldmore asked them with some suspicion what they had been up to, and their manner immediately changed to one of contrition.

"Never mind, old friend," Tesla had reassured him. "You will know soon enough. We are just not quite done yet."

In the bar-room for elevenses, Hopkins and Caldmore sipped at their coffee, both preferring tea, but making the best of the experience. Although not having parted entirely as allies, they were each possibly the only other person with whom they could confide about all of their activities.

"So Zelle was working for the Queen all along?" Hopkins asked.

"I think so, although she also at times seemed to be in league with the French and the Spanish. And the Irish of course," Caldmore reflected. "But all along I had the impression there was some underlying reason for her doing what she did."

“And you’ve not been in contact with the Queen for a while?” Hopkins continued.

“No, not since my mini-Marconi was confiscated by the Spanish. Even so ...” Caldmore paused, then continued, “I’d not really been informing her of what I was doing since leaving New England. I think I suspected her motives in putting me in touch with Tesla.”

“So what was that about?” Hopkins probed.

“We were framed for the theft of the aethership plans. Zelle stole them, I’m pretty sure under the direction of the Queen, and Victoria wanted us to take the blame so that Zelle would still be free to act as her agent,” Caldmore speculated.

“To do what?” Hopkins asked, his detective mind closing in on what might be an explanation.

“I think Victoria was concerned that the British were so complacent about their standing in the world that they wouldn’t put the aethership into production. If the French were building them, and the Spanish, then a race into space would drive the migration outwards that she sees as imperative. Also ...” Caldmore thought “Zelle exchanged a copy of the plans, and me, for one of the devices Dr Einstein invented. It was one of those that destroyed the Royal Ziggurat.”

“Why would Victoria want a massive explosive device? Something like that could take out a city block,” Hopkins asked.

Caldmore became silent, absorbed in thought. The feeling of having been a pawn, moved around a board by Victoria came back. But there was something. Something almost out of his

mind's eye. That final move to the end of the board that would make him a major piece. Maybe even another player.

“Do you know anything about what the Fenians were planning? How they would actually assassinate the queen.”

“We had given them recognition codes to enter London's airspace. We knew they wanted to bomb the queen, but as we knew they had the codes, we'd know what codes to look out for. When we received them we'd let rip with our own anti-aircraft devices. That was the trap. And even if they got through, none of the bombs we'd given them would be big enough to cause any damage. Her Majesty is a cube a mile on each side, with solid metal walls. Nothing could even make a dent.”

Something the Queen had said to him echoed round Caldmore's mind. He knew that once he recalled it, things would fall into place. His memory, once excellent, seemed to fail him. Then he recalled Victoria, in one of her first conversations with him, saying “I don't even know if I *am* Victoria any more”. Decoded from Morse it had sounded like a bland statement of fact. Imbued with emotion in retrospect, it could have sounded like despair. And then, in New York, she had said “my mere existence creates passivity and enfeeblement.”

“Nothing could make a dent”, Caldmore repeated, “except one of Dr Einstein's devices.”.

“But Zelle has that, and she's working for the Queen,” Hopkins protested.

“And if the Queen wanted to die, how else could she carry that out?” Caldmore offered, shaken at the words even as he said them, but he could tell from Hopkins's expression, that the revelation

appeared to the detective as the one explanation that fitted the facts.

“By god you’re right,” Hopkins exclaimed. “They’ll fly in, with the right codes, and get straight to the Queen. Anyone who was laying the trap for them is now dead. That bomb will take her out, and all of All Saints Poplar too, I should imagine.” His look of horror increased. “Maybe even the Houses of Parliament.”

“Any idea when the attack is planned for?” Caldmore asked.

“The only thing I know is the code name for the operation. It’s ‘Nullig Hunadit’. I have no idea what that means.”

“It’s Gaelic,” Caldmore informed him. “*Nollaig Shona Duit*. It means Merry Christmas. That’s when they’ll make their move.”

Hopkins pulled out his pocket watch. “Almost twelve. We have twelve hours to warn someone.”

Caldmore shook his head. “You’re forgetting London is ahead of us. We have six hours.

Hopkins sat back in his chair. The two men were silent, thinking of some desperate way they could make a difference. Whom they could contact, although both were hundreds if not thousands of miles away from any form of telegraph, and both were wanted criminals in most of the western world. It seemed hopeless.

“There’s no way we can make it,” Hopkins finally spoke, voicing both their fears. “London is doomed.”

**To be concluded in The Machine Queen Part Eight:  
Endgame**

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