



The Machine Queen

Part Eight:
Endgame

Mark Nine

PRICE: One Penny

The story so far

Captain Caldmore has rescued Gormuil Earhart from her imprisonment in the Royal Ziggurat of the Vice-Royalty of New Spain, but not before both were subjected to experiments that changed them into half-human / half-animal hybrids. They escaped to the Republic of Texas, where they were captured and put on display in a freak show. Accompanying him were Nikola Tesla, Albert Einstein, Queen- Cihuātlahōāni Maria Estefania Tlazohtin Emanuela Quetzalxochitl de Borbón y México-Tenochtitlán, the only survivor of the Spanish royal family, and Amber Head, an artificial being from a parallel dimension. On freeing themselves from the freak show, they have been joined by Stanley Hopkins, erstwhile member of Scotland Yard and MI5, and also on the run from various governments.

Hopkins and Caldmore have worked out that Queen Victoria, a giant analytical engine housed in a cubic building a mile on each side located on the banks of the Thames, plans to commit suicide, with the help of Mata Hari, the Fenian rebels, and an energy device invented by Einstein.

However, they have also realised that the rebels intend to make their move in only a few hours' time. Cut off from all means of communication, and outlaws across most of the Western world, they have no way to raise the alarm. It looks as though London is doomed.

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The Machine Queen Part Eight: Endgame

Saturday December 24th, 1911, Aitchison, Republic of New Texas

Caldmore and Hopkins sat in the Atchison saloon, contemplating their impotence morosely. All seemed lost. Looking up at a movement at the door they saw Einstein and Tesla enter, both breathless with excitement. The elder scientist spoke first.

“Well my friend, it’s a day early, but we believe we have completed the most wonderful present for you.”

“Not now, Tesla,” Caldmore replied, “I am sorry but my spirits are not light enough to engage with the season, Hopkins and I have just realised that our Queen plans to destroy herself by means of one of Dr Einstein here’s energy devices. We have no means to contact London in time to warn anyone.”

“When do you believe this catastrophe is to take place?” Tesla asked, horrified.

“At the stroke of Christmas, in a little less than six hours’ time,” Caldmore informed him.

“Well then, my dear Caldmore, your present is very timely indeed, I believe we can get you there in a little under ...” Tesla exchanged a glance with his fellow scientist who nodded in consent “two hours, all things being well.”

Despite being asked to explain by Caldmore, the two scientists refused, partly because it would make more sense to see it, but mainly because it would “spoil the surprise”. As they entered the

barn in which Gumpertz, the freak show owner, had sequestered Caldmore's airship. They stood back proudly as Caldmore observed it. The airship stood like a wingless dragonfly, the cockpit like two enormous faceted eyes at one end of its bullet-like body, the abdomen adorned with some strange circular devices, like an exoskeleton, at the other.

"I'm afraid, gentlemen, I still do not catch your drift. You have removed the sails I see," he admitted, "but beyond that ..."

"Oh but you must look inside," Einstein explained.

Inside the craft the two scientists led the way to the upper rear compartment, previously used solely as cargo space.

"You will remember I brought the Lambda device with me when we left the Ziggurat of King Alfonso," Einstein stated, as he led them to the rear of the compartment. There stood the device, operating with a quiet hum, a series of tubes connecting it to a large water tank and another device.

"Isn't that the ion drive we salvaged from your crashed aethership, Tesla?" Caldmore asked.

"Yes indeed," Tesla agreed. "You will remember that the design only failed because of a lack of a suitable power source to create the ions. Well, using Dr Einstein's device we managed to make the ion drive function perfectly." He led them out of what was now the engine room, to the central stair and onto the deck. At the rear he pointed out the tail of the craft, extending outwards like a dragonfly's abdomen. "The ions are propelled backwards along the Tesla coils in whatever direction you point the tail, we have altered the steering ..." he continued, but Caldmore had ceased to

listen to him. It was possible. The two scientists had given him the means to save the Queen, save London, and perhaps the Empire.

All he had to do now was learn how to fly the damn thing.

A few short hours later, Caldmore stood at the foot of the steps up to the open door of the airship. Tesla and Einstein were aboard already as was Hopkins. The airship was prepared for their flight to London, only their goodbyes remained.

Steffie and Gormuil were either side of him. The three of them were victims of the experiments of William Gull, continuing those of Moreau a generation before. He had found a mechanism to merge humans with other animals, through a mixture of arcane magic, science, and the unfeasible energies unleashed by Einstein's energy devices. Caldmore with a bull, Steffie with a jaguar, Gormuil with some sea creatures.

The three faced another of Gull's victims. Juan had been merged with a Mexican grey wolf, or Lobo, as had 11 others, and they now formed a pack. Three cubs had been born in the captivity of the freak show, and they were thriving. Alongside Juan were Fatima and Jezebel. Fatima had been a member of the freak show too, and had led the rebellion against their keeper. Though her only qualification for inclusion amongst the exhibits was her race, Gumpertz had promoted her as "Fatima the Nubian", she had demonstrated that she *was* unusual in the aspect of her character, which was determined. Jezebel similarly was of forceful mien, having already survived one attack that had left her scarred, but not scared. During the rebellion against the freak show owner and his accomplices in the town, she had confronted a metal nightmare

known as the Scion of Scythes, comprising blades and other weapons, piloted by diminutive conjoined twins, and beaten it.

That machine was now piloted by Amber Head. Amber, an artificial being from a parallel universe in which the Roman Empire had never fallen, had been created centuries before. She had normally eschewed a body, her amber skull with two large red crystals for eyes was suspended from eight cord-like braids in her hair, in a style originally sported by Spartans and which Caldmore had learnt were called “dreadlocks”. Amber, still atop the Scion of Scythes, had realised that she was too large to fit through the entranceway in her new body, and so had managed to climb up to the deck from the outside, using the wooden exterior of the barn as support.

“So,” Caldmore addressed Juan, “you’ve decided to stay here.”

Juan grinned, wolfishly, of course.

“The people here have offered to take us in,” he replied, “I’m not sure how willingly.”

Jezebel gave her half-smile, the patchwork of her face creasing lopsidedly. “Most of us are grateful for what they did, all of us are a little frightened of them,” she gave a sidelong look at the large wolfman beside her, “some of us quite like that.”

“And you?” Caldmore asked of Fatima, “are you staying too?”

The woman shook her head, and replaced her wide-brimmed hat.

“Nope, still too much to do elsewhere in this country,” she replied. “I can give a home to those of Gumpertz’s troupe who need one

on his wagon train – well mine now,” she corrected herself. “But we’ll be heading out soon.”

Tesla appeared in the doorway.

“We need to go, Captain,” he called out. “We only have four hours to get to London.”

Caldmore turned to each of the two standing next to him, the woman on one side, the girl on the other.

“This isn’t your fight,” Caldmore told them, “you don’t need to come with me.”

“Where you go, I go,” Steffie said. “Besides, Victoria *is* my,” she paused to calculate, “half-brother’s widow’s grandmother, so is family.”

Caldmore looked at Gormuil, who said nothing, but nodded emphatically.

Caldmore shook hands with Juan, Fatima and Jezebel, Amber waved from above, and the crew took their places in the airship. Seven of them to save the Queen, London, and perhaps the entire Empire.

Caldmore sat at the controls, nervously eyeing them. Behind him Steffie, Gormuil and Einstein watched him with some trepidation. He had experimented briefly with directing power along the Tesla coils at the rear, and found that the ions expelled along the abdomen of the craft did indeed propel it forward.

“Someone should open the barn doors,” Caldmore pointed out.

“No need, sir,” the young scientist stated. “I think Tesla has resolved that particular problem.”

Above, the roof of the barn opened, hoists lifting and separating the two halves, revealing the afternoon midwinter Texan sky above. Einstein shrugged. “We had a few spare hours,” the young scientist admitted.

With a practised ease, Caldmore extended the helium nacelles along the body of the craft, and closed the Cavorite shutters along the hull. With the buoyancy created by the helium, and the airship’s weight now cut off from the Earth’s gravity, the airship rose, clearing the barn in moments.

Caldmore slightly increased the power to the ion drive, and pulled on the lever that bent the abdomen of the machine, and the airship rotated. He opened the Cavorite shutters at the rear, and the airship tipped so that the front was pointing upwards. Then he increased the power from Einstein’s energy device.

In a compartment above, water was stripped into its component parts, and the hydrogen ions were impelled at speed, rearwards by the Tesla coils.

The airship shot upwards, pushing Caldmore back in his seat, and knocking the three observers through the open door at the back of the cockpit and onto the floor of the map room behind.

Within the hour the airship was high above the Earth. Through faceted glass window that gave views above and below, Caldmore could see that it was an airship no longer, but could actually travel beyond the Earth’s atmosphere. Above, the stars pierced the

blackness of space, reminding Caldmore of his trip to the moon only a few weeks earlier in another universe. Below he could make out the outline of the eastern coast of the north American continent and the Atlantic beyond.

Speeding ever faster, overtaking the rotation of the Earth below with ease and crossing the terminator, he began to descend.

Ireland was in darkness, only discernible from the brighter lights of Dublin, then there was the Irish sea, but ahead was the unmistakable glow of London. Nothing else could generate so much light. Truly it was the beacon of the world.

He rotated the craft to slow his descent, finding the experience of flying backwards an unnerving one, though he could see from the transparency of the cockpit below how far above the ground he was. He was aiming to not enter London airspace bottom-first, so aimed somewhere west.

Near ground level, he came to a complete stop, and reorientated the airship to a level flying position. Moving forwards now he tried to discern whereabouts he had come back close to ground. From what he could see of the lights below, he seemed to be somewhere over Oxford.

Noting he still had more than 30 minutes before the time of the attack, assuming it was scheduled for midnight, he increased the speed again, the dreaming spires falling away to the rear.

Time seemed to stretch out slowly, as he was conscious all the time of the encroaching deadline, but eventually he saw Watford, and then he was flying over St Paul's Cathedral. Caldmore began

slowing as he neared All Saints Poplar, and the colossal dark cube that stood at its centre, in the large loop of the Thames.

It was 10 minutes to midnight now, and before him were three airships. Was that them? Hopkins reminded him of the code he had to give to the people manning the anti-aircraft guns, it would be unfortunate beyond reckoning if they were to allow the Irish rebels to pass and yet shoot down their airship.

Caldmore gained height by completely closing the shutters, the buoyancy of the nacelles no longer opposed by any weight in the “thorax” of the ship, it rose. Caldmore intended instead to land on the rearmost of the airships, forcing it down.

As events emerged, that was not necessary. Once they were within a few dozen yards, a metallic clumping could be heard rattling through the airship and then, through the transparent dome above, Caldmore saw the silhouette of a machine against the gibbous moon above, blades extended.

Amber Scion of the Scythes had chosen to attack.

The machine landed on the airship and began to claw and hack its way along the top of it, tearing at metal enclosures, and releasing the hydrogen within.

As the airship fell groundwards, it burst into flames, falling onto the houses below. Illuminated by the exploding hydrogen, Amber leapt clear. Caldmore headed for the other airship, intending to block its progress.

As they turned about, shots rang out, the bullets could be heard pinging against the skin of the airship. Inside, Caldmore felt the change in pressure of someone opening the entry door.

With a cry of “Fenian bastards,” Hopkins began returning fire, aiming firstly for the gondola from where the shots were coming, then directing the shots upwards, attempting to burst the large helium-filled balloon that supported it.

Neither tactic appeared to be working, so Caldmore moved his airship even closer so that Hopkins’s position was close to the control cabin of the Irish airship, flying sideways in front of the craft.

Hopkins carefully took aim at the pilot through the windshield of the cabin, firing twice and hitting the rebel with both shots. The pilot slumped over the controls, and the airship dipped downwards, diving towards destruction.

Returning to the flight towards the housing of the massive analytical engine that housed Queen Victoria, Caldmore saw that the third airship had already landed. A group of about a dozen rebels were clustered around a glowing device, an earlier version of the one that powered the ion drive in the upper aft compartment of Caldmore’s airship.

Caldmore landed close to them and powered down. Hurrying to the door, he saw that Hopkins had already descended the steps. Steffie was at the door with Einstein, Gormuil standing behind her.

“Gormuil, you stay here,” Caldmore told her. She stepped forward and hugged him.

“Please don’t die,” she pleaded.

“I’ll do my best,” Caldmore replied. He turned to the scientist. “Doctor, you need to come with us,” he said.

Einstein nodded. "Ich Weiß," he replied. "You need me to turn off the Kappa Device."

The three descended the steps to join Hopkins. The man from military intelligence had crouched down to make himself a smaller target and was picking off the rebels one-by-one, rapidly and accurately shooting. They had formed a barrier between Caldmore's airship and the energy device. A figure leant over it, pressing buttons and flicking switches. It was Margreet Zelle, Mata Hari, French secret agent, or Spanish, but possibly working as an agent directly for Queen Victoria herself. Caldmore had lost track. And suspected that Zelle may have lost track too.

Behind them the pilot at the controls of the Irish airship watched horrified as he saw what came from the new craft, the one that looked like some mutated insect made of brass and copper and patinaed in green verdigris. Patrick Williams, the pilot, had left the Republican movement, finding a quiet haven in England, marrying an English woman. Although a twice-over widow, she had had no children, but they had married and produced five new lives, despite beginning their life together late in years. He was settled, happy, until the Republicans had come looking for him, insisting he help them with their attack.

Initially they wanted his expertise as an engine-fitter, and needed him to get their craft airworthy, but then, as usual, one thing led to another and they had wanted more and more, finally insisting he fly one of the airships.

He had relented, succumbing to their pressure and their veiled threats to his family. But now, three figures had appeared, one human, but one looking like a demon beast, veins of metal glinting in the lights that bedecked the roof of the building, tattoos that

seemed to twist through some additional dimension, a thick neck and torso, and legs that didn't seem to bend quite right. Beside him what looked like a jaguar, on two legs, with hands from which, as he watched, sprang claws. The human was kneeling on the floor shooting at the other Irishmen, but the two creatures ran past him. The bull-like demon lifted a gun and began shooting too, but the jaguar woman turned, and saw him.

Patrick had no love of the Queen, but he wasn't prepared to put his life on the line to kill her, either. He thought of his wife Eleanor and the little ones back home, and he saw the glint in the amber eyes of the jaguar-woman as she stalked towards him, claws unsheathed. Without another thought he pulled at the stick before him and the airship lifted into the sky and began to head north and home.

Steffie turned as the airship lifted, and renewed her attack on the few remaining living rebels. Beyond them she saw Caldmore reach Zelle and hurl her to one side. When next she looked Einstein had joined him.

The device was building towards an explosion, its glow increasing in intensity. The hum it made became a loud whine, heat began to emanate from it. Einstein reached towards it, shielding his face from the heat, and went unerringly to the correct switch. He flicked it, burning away the tip of his finger, but the sound lessened then quieted completely. The glow faded and the machine fell silent.

Caldmore turned, looking for Zelle, but she was gone. Behind her, lay her Teslagraph, evidently dropped as she had hit the floor. From it could be heard the Queen's voice, translated from the movements of gears and cogwheels in the vast complex machine

below their feet. All of that contrivance, the intricacy of interconnecting cogs and interconnecting punches and cards, all focused in one ear-splitting mournful wail as overhead the sky erupted in fireworks to celebrate the birth of another deliverance one-thousand nine-hundred and eleven years earlier.

“Noooooooooooo!”

Sunday, 25th December, 1911, London

Caldmore picked up the Teslagraph and spoke into it.

“Your Majesty?” he enquired.

“Lemuel, I might have known. You utter, utter idiot,” the Queen responded.

“Your Majesty, you were about to make a terrible mistake,” Caldmore said.

“You don’t understand. Years and years of this endless existence. Knowing the future, predicting everything. The dead weight of my foreknowledge stifling everything. And now there’s nothing that can change it.”

“Not entirely predictable,” Caldmore argued. “You weren’t expecting me to get here in time.”

There was a pause. “No, that’s true.” Another pause. “I knew you would take the pieces of Tesla’s aethership, and combine those with Einstein’s energy device. I had planned you to have an escape route when all this concluded,” the voice was flat, mechanical, but

Caldmore read the bewilderment behind it. “But there was no way even two geniuses such as those should have made it work so quickly.”

Caldmore thought of the other Tesla, in the parallel universe. The two may have had help from somewhere the Queen knew nothing about.

“Perhaps life is still more unpredictable than you realise, Your Majesty,” Caldmore suggested. “Perhaps suicide is not the only course.”

Behind him, Tesla had joined the others. He and Einstein were conferring, Einstein gestured towards the inert Kappa Device. Tesla stepped forwards reaching for the Teslagraph. Caldmore handed it to him.

“Your Majesty, if I may,” he began. “I have an idea that may resolve your dilemma.”

Epilogue: The Wolfman Cometh

Grendon Underwood did not see himself as an evil man, he just did what he needed to do to make life better for himself, and let nothing or no-one get in his way. Underwood seemed blissfully unaware that this was about the best definition of what it means to be evil.

Self-delusion was not the only of his skills, he also had a predilection for self-preservation. To this end he had developed the perfect caper. He led a small group of outlaws; there was him, Duke, Jook and Luke whose part it was to camp out a few miles

away from town, like they were doing now. They would send in Yoost ahead of them. Yoost was tall blond and handsome, and had the manner of a gentleman, when he so chose. Yoost would ingratiate himself with the locals, usually with some hard luck story, and usually ingratiated most surely with the women of the town. He would check out where the money was, where it was most easily got, and who were the people most likely to be able to stop the getting of it. If Yoost could also figure out when those people were likely to not be around, all the better. Yoost would then head out of town, find Underwood and the others, and then they would hit the town, short and sharp, and be out before anyone knew what had happened. It had worked half a dozen times so far, and no-one had got within a hair's breadth of stopping them.

Now though things weren't going according to plan. Yoost had been gone more than two weeks now and there was no sign of him. Underwood's self-preservation prevented him from going on in to find out what had happened, but his self-delusion permitted him to still think there was a chance this caper would come out good for him. That's why he saw the appearance of the boy as such a godsend.

The boy was called Billy Thornton, though most of the people in Atchison called him Billy Moon. He'd got the nickname from his schoolteacher; she'd see he wasn't at school and go out looking for him and discover he'd got distracted by poking a stick into a puddle, or looking at a horse turd in the street, and she'd guide him into the classroom. "I've seen some children with their head in the clouds," she'd say, "but his is right out there in the aether."

She didn't mean it cruelly or to demean him, but with a sense of reverence. When people said Billy wasn't all there, they meant

there was a large part of him somewhere else. That his eyes saw depths they could not see, but that he could not communicate to them.

Billy wasn't late for school because he hated it, it just didn't connect to him, or to wherever his mind drifted off to. He didn't hate it now, at any rate. He used to, but the bad boys who made his life a misery had all gone now. Gone away now the monsters had come.

Billy used to be frightened of monsters. They gave him nightmares. He'd heard stories of Little Red Riding Hood, and The Three Little Pigs, and dream of wolves chasing him and he'd wake up screaming, in a damp patch of his own urine.

Now when he dreamed of wolves, they'd chase him, but when they caught him they'd lift him up on their shoulders and run with him. And boy could they run fast. And his nocturnal emissions were now of a different kind.

Today he wasn't running away from school. It was just that the big boys had told him that some lizards could make you see colours if you licked them. They'd told him and sniggered and looked over their shoulders because although they didn't think they were being mean to Billy Moon, not really, they were a bit scared that maybe they were being mean enough, and the wolfmen would smell the meanness on them.

And Billy had seen a lizard and chased it and caught it and licked it. But it just left a funny taste in his mouth. And then he saw another and then another and now he was in the dried up old crick up in the hills overlooking the lake and now here were the bad

men again and Billy remembered what it was like to be scared by monsters.

“Well, hello boy,” Underwood said. “What brings you this way?”

Billy looked up at the man silently.

“We’re looking for a friend of ours,” Underwood continued, hunkering down next to him. “Name of Yoost. Do you know him?”

Billy was still silent.

“Big man, blond hair, just came into town a couple a’ weeks back.”

Billy nodded. Underwood made a big show of pleasure at his response, clapping him on the back. The other three laughed.

“Now then,” Underwood continued leaning in conspiratorially “Can you tell me and the boys here what happened to him?”

“Monsters et im” Billy answered in a whisper. Jook laughed at that, but Underwood was suddenly very serious.

“Monsters?” he asked.

“Yup. They came into town and they et up all the bad men. They et up my Grandmaw”

It was true, thought Billy. They’d left his Maw and Grandpaw alone, but his grandmother was gone. Just like in the story. What big teeth the wolf had. Billy didn’t mind. When he’d forgotten to say grace once at the evening meal, his Grandmaw had taken him out back and beaten him with a birch switch. When they’d had the

burial for her, there was a grave out back just where she'd whupped him, but no body really, just bits and pieces. Billy had said that he was glad she'd gone and his mother had slapped him then hugged him and cried. And later that evening, just as he'd gone to bed, his Grandpaw had given him a silver dollar and said it was his for speaking up his mind. "Tell the truth and shame the devil," he'd said, but Billy had seen the devil too and it had been the devil who'd freed the monsters and then flew up into the sky in his airship to save the Queen of England the folks had said. So shaming him din't make no sense.

"All the bad men?" Underwood asked. A couple of times before Billy heard him. The boy was goddang simple, thought Underwood.

Billy nodded again.

"Whut about the sheriff?" Underwood asked.

"Sheriff Je'bel?"

Gendon nodded.

"Whut about er?" Billy asked.

"Yor sheriff's a woman?" Underwood asked surprised.

"Yup, when the last sheriff got kilt, my paw said that she'd be the best sheriff of all cuz of how she got better afert he fixed her up. My paw said she's the toughest of all on us." It came out in a flood. He liked Sheriff Je'bel.

"An' who's yer paw?" asked Underwood.

“He’s the town doctor,” Billy said, proudly.

Underwood nodded to the other three. He thought he’d got it figured. Some bandits must have come into town, got there before us, Underwood reflected sourly. Killed a lot of the townsfolk, all those who’d stood up to them, so there was just pansies and women left.

Probably no money to be had, but maybe food and liquor to keep the four of them going for a while. And no-one to stop them. It’d be easy pickings. He savoured the thought, ‘and I’ve never had me a sheriff before’.

“OK boy lead us into town,” he said.

Sheriff Jezebel stepped out of the jailhouse as she heard the riders coming into town. Billy Moon was out in front of them.

“You OK, Billy?” she asked.

The boy nodded.

“What you want, fellers?” she asked.

Underwood looked around. Easy pickings. They might even stay for a while. It might be good to be in charge of a town. People to push around, everything for the taking. The sheriff was a bit of a let-down, a bit too thin and scrawny, and that face. Like a jigsaw puzzle. He could still do her. Would need a bag on her head though.

He grinned at the thought and said, “Thought we’d stay for a while, help ourselves to what we want,” he pushed Billy to the floor. “Might have us some fun.” He turned to the other three and they laughed with him. Then Underwood turned back to the sheriff and the boy to savour the effect he was having on them.

Something was wrong. They didn’t have that scared look on their faces that he’d come to expect. The woman was glaring at him, maybe with a sneer, though with her lip cut like that it was hard to tell. The boy was looking up at him and was smiling. What was the matter with them?

“I think you’d better be heading off boys,” the sheriff said. She had a rifle cradled in the crook of her arm, but was making no attempt to lift it. “You don’t want any trouble.”

“Well maybe we do,” Underwood replied. “Trouble is what we do best.”

The sheriff looked past Underwood at something behind them.

“Nope,” she said, indicating with a tipping of her head. “Trouble is what he does best.”

Underwood heard a whimper behind him. Such a small sound. He turned and saw Juke on his knees, holding onto entrails which spilled from his stomach to the ground around him.

Standing over him was a wolf on two legs, claws red with blood. Two mounds of flesh attested to the fact that Duke and Luke weren’t around to back him up. It was just him and the wolf.

The boy ran past him to the wolfman, burying himself in his fur. The monstrous thing lifted up its paw and patted the boy on his head, then stepped past him and took a pace towards Underwood.

When Underwood was a schoolboy he'd pissed himself at school cuz the other boys had scared him. They stopped trying to scare him then and just laughed at him when they saw what he'd done. Underwood had run home crying to his parents and his dad had beaten him for showing fear and then for crying. That was the last time he'd shown fear, and that was the last time he'd pissed himself. Until now. The wet patch grew from his crotch, and there was the same laughter again as the boy saw it and pointed. And as the wolfman took a step closer, Grendon Underwood saw it had his daddy's eyes.

Epilogue: The Musings of Don Pedro

Jaramillo looked out across Lake Texcoco, quiescent now and conveying a placid benignity. It was difficult to believe it had recently reared up in a devastating wave, collapsing houses on the shoreline and forcing its way inland to lay waste to entire pueblos.

The lake was still devoid of birdsong. Mere hours before the glowing ball of light had appeared where the Royal Ziggurat had once stood they had flown away, showing a degree of prescience still beyond the powers of the curandero, who had been as unprepared by the explosion of pure energy as anyone else. This despite the warning light in the sky that had appeared only an hour or so before, the single flattened orb, like two saucers placed on top of each other, rims touching. It had first seemed like one of the other stars, but moving, and Jaramillo had thought it was a

meteor, until it had changed direction, and grew larger. Then there had been the explosion, and the shockwave and the loudest sound made by man ever heard.

As a curandero, Jaramillo was heir to multiple traditions. The Mayans to the south, the Yacqui to the north, and the Aztecs from the land he stood in, as well as the witches and sorcerers that had arrived here hidden amongst the conquistadors and the following colonists. He had saved the last-but-one king from his tuberculosis and dysentery, giving the grateful Alfonso XII another fifteen years of life.

Those fifteen years had seen a renaissance of his culture. It had seen a genuine *cihuātlahtoāni* appointed as regent. It had seen the magnificent ziggurat built where the royal palace had once stood within the lake. The Spanish incomers still harkened back to their lost lands in Europe, cast out more than a century before by the French and their puppet king, Joseph Bonaparte, but they had found a new confidence and excitement about the future.

That excitement was manifest when the USB had been handed to him personally by Alfonso XIII, only a few weeks earlier. On it, the King had said, were plans for a ship that could travel through the aether. Other worlds were now within the grasp of New Spain. Jaramillo, as the most prominent of the court curanderos, had been tasked with finding an auspicious location for building one of these new spacecraft. The idea of a new world fascinated Jaramillo. The world around him consisted of five distinct separate worlds, according to his beliefs. If they travelled to another, would it too consist of its own separate worlds? Discovering and exploring these opened up many, many more opportunities for a curandero.

He had found the ideal location, and so the team of engineers and scientists he had assembled there survived the devastation. Lost were the King and Queen and all the other inhabitants of the Royal Ziggurat, the politicians, the bureaucrats and administrators. All the higher echelons of society. A vacuum for Jaramillo and his colleagues to step into.

There was a change upon the world. The British had not realised the gate they had opened when they had supported the seceding states from New France. Seeking to undermine New France, instead they had undermined the very notion of Empire. Those freed states set a new principle upon the world, as did the lawlessness of the Republic of Texas. He had heard that far to the North, the Hudson Bay Company had been ousted from its control of territories, and a council of Inuit, Europeans and Metis now ruled themselves. And with the death of the Royal Family the Viceroyalty of New Spain was no longer a Viceroyalty. “New Spain” now seemed an anachronism, the role of a new Mēxihco-Tenōchtitlan in running the country was the only reality.

And then there were the insect scratchings in his dreams.

Jaramillo had not moved, his gaze still directed out across the lake. What idea was emerging, overlaying the view? Then suddenly overwhelming, he had an image of true prescience. The lake drained. The bowl of land before him paved. Massive spacecraft lifting off and landing. Travel to other worlds, each with its own multiplicity of worlds. A Universe to explore. This was real.

For a moment, Jamarillo was aghast. His prescient dreams had never had such clarity. He wondered from where they sprang.

Across the Lake, from out of the East, the crows were returning.

Epilogue: How Howard became a New Man

Budapest, March, 1912

Dear Howard,

I hope you've recovered from having a fort dropped on your head. That's terrible bad luck little brother, considering how few earthquakes there are in Keokuk. I can't help wondering if perhaps it was your fault in some way, the result of one of your mad get-rich-quick schemes.

Budapest is a wonderful city. Or should I say Buda and Pest are wonderful cities. Buda is an ancient city high above the other side of a river, Pest is a more modern one on our side, though still old by New France terms. Did you know that Vlad Tepes was incarcerated there in Pest? He was the model for Dracula in that English novel from a few years ago. And there is a Transylvania in Europe too. I do wonder why the protectorate state just over the Ohio River was named for it. On our side of the river is the city of Pest. There are many fine buildings here which quite put our New France to shame. Oh dear I am repeating myself, brother. Anyway, the view of Pest from Buda is quite exquisite.

I'm afraid we are languishing here with little to do, as all our scenery and costumes were sent on to Bucharest instead of Budapest. Our little opera will be on hold until we can be reunited with them, and in the meantime we are filling our days with sight-seeing and souvenirs and social gatherings.

These social gatherings are often the usual tedious affairs that one is obliged to take part in as the "prima donna dell'opera".

The Friends of the State Opera have several of these during a run, and we are being inundated with them as we await our misplaced *mise en scène*.

The most recent of these was quite fun though. One of our dinner companions, an invited friend of the opera, is a mathematics teacher at the Lutheran gymnasium in the city. To further their education this teacher took his little charges on a tour of one of the factories they have here. They make those automated little machines called Franklins that are so popular, named after that inventor from New England. Anyway, while they are going round the factory one boy, only eight years old he says, looks at these machines and says “Why don’t they make the Franklins to make more Franklins? That way you wouldn’t need factories.” Needless to say the factory owner thought this was a wonderfully imaginative thing to say, and we all agreed at dinner too. Apparently the little boy is a bit of a prodigy. His family is the Neumanns, one of those wealthy Jewish families that are supporters of the opera as well, and so doubtless we will meet the parents soon too.

But isn’t that a wonderful idea? I thought it might be perfect for one of your mad money-making schemes. If you do, I think you should call the little things Robards. That’s a much better name than Franklins, don’t you think? And if you do become a millionaire from the idea, please do not forget your sister, your very devoted,

Greta

Epilogue: Believe it, or Not!

Word reaches us of strange goings on in the small island of <redacted> in the Hebrides Islands of Scotland. There the villagers tell us of rumors of three visitations that happened on the same night a few weeks ago.

Many of the island people reported seeing a strange light in the sky, that hovered overhead for many minutes before departing. Following this light in the sky, one couple told of seeing a vision of a ceasg, strange sea-dwellers of Scottish legend. This apparition came knocking at their door, claiming to be the spirit of their recently-deceased daughter. They gave chase to it, and it leapt into the sea, swimming effortlessly away, no doubt to rejoin its brethren beneath the waves. The couple, both American, could not be reached for further comment.

At the same time, across on the other side of the island, a Father Hannigan reported visiting the abandoned croft of a friend, when he saw a demon with metal skeins and delirium-inducing tattoos covering his body, two pronounced horns, and a terrible visage. This demon was raiding his friend's library, taking writings and collections of daguerreotypes, as well as sundry books. On being accosted this demon attempted to communicate with the priest, but the man raised his stick at the monster. It departed with no little haste, and on reaching the exterior of the small croft, suddenly shot skywards on a column of fire. On whether the priest had been drinking and if so, how heavily, no-one on the island could be drawn to comment.

Robert Ripley writing in the San Francisco Chronicle, March, 1912

Epilogue: Victoria Day, 1912, All Saints Poplar

The parades had been going on for days. It seemed the entire Empire had descended on London to bid farewell to the Queen. Tesla's idea had been challenging, but the idea had intrigued Victoria and so she had agreed to it, not only granting Tesla an amnesty, but making him head of her corps of engineers.

Using the principles they had developed for Caldmore's airship, the two scientists had used the energy device Zelle had brought to the capital. It now powered four colossal engines attached to the side of the building in which the analytical engine was housed.

Teams had worked night and day, to not only develop and attach the engines, but to create a host of different sensing apparatus, remote probes, communication devices, and homoeostatic contraptions to enable the Queen to not only survive once detached from the ground, but also to detect the Universe around her that she was to explore.

The newly crowned King George was leading the ceremonies, various heads of state making their pronouncements, but the Queen was becoming most impatient for them to be over. A Universe awaited her.

As the last fanfare died away, and everyone retreated behind the two-mile cordon around Her Royal Highness, many wept uncontrollably at the thought of losing their monarch, the woman, and then machine, who had led the Empire for the preceding 75 years.

From behind their barriers the crowds watched as light burst forth from the massive engines attached to the building. Slowly at first,

but then increasing in speed, the colossal cube lifted from the ground and then soared into the air, leaving a trail of retina-scorching light behind it.

They watched as it disappeared into the clouds, a black cube ascending to the heavens. Travelling to who-knew-where.

Victoria checked her various sensors. They revealed that she had passed beyond the Earth's atmosphere. The whole infinity of the Universe lay before her. It would take aeons to travel between those points of light, but she had an eternity ahead of her.

Perhaps.

Already she was detecting an anomaly. Another spaceship, this one shaped like two saucers, placed on top of each other edge-to-edge was approaching her.

"Hello Victoria," a voice sounded in her Teslagraph, converting into whirrs and clicks of interconnecting cogs inside her. "We were expecting you."

The Queen responded with incomprehension. This unpredictability wore thin very quickly.

"Who are you? How do you know who I am?" she asked.

"We are the Troöd," they replied. "We monitor your signals from Earth. Besides, we have a mutual friend, I believe. Lemuel Caldmore."

Victoria laughed. "I might have known he'd have something to do with this," she told them. "What do you want of me?"

“We have a mission for you, a collaboration to propose,” came the answer. “It may mean a whole new existence for you.”

“A whole new life, by Jove, whatever next?” asked the Queen.

“Yes, hhhmmm, ‘by Jove’,” the Troöd’s message came through. “Funny you should say that.”

Epilogue: The Intercontinental Hop

Hopkins sat impatiently at the small café in the back street of Paris. His contact had still not shown. Although the burn notice had been rescinded, he was still persona non grata within the intelligence community. No smoke without fire, seemed to be their default position. It meant that to survive he had had to become freelance.

It had been slow though. A few of his contacts, those that still survived, had a small amount of work that needed to be done “off the books”, but he still had no reputation that would bring in the big assignments. That was why he’d been told to meet another freelance agent, one with a longer track record who might be able to provide him with the connections that would bring in the work.

As he sat there, idly pushing the remains of a croque monsieur around on his plate, his contact sat down. Hopkins started in surprise.

It was Zelle.

He stood about to make his escape when Zelle beckoned him to sit down.

“Please, my dear Mr Hopkins, no need for such melodrama,” she purred. He stopped his motion away from her, but was not mollified.

“Zelle, I should shoot you where you sit,” Hopkins stated. He gestured to his knee. “Your confederates destroyed my knee. You nearly destroyed half of London.”

“Business, merely business,” she waved away his remonstrations. “Here I shall make it up to you.” She gestured to a waiter, and said something in French that was too quick for him to make out. Hopkins resumed his seat, realising that she had him over a barrel. This was her world, and he was a newcomer to it.

The waiter arrived with a coffee, intense and bitter, and a glass of water. How like the French, he thought, to make their coffee undrinkable and instead of correcting that, provide water gratis with which to wash it down.

“There,” Zelle declared. “Are we friends now?”

Hopkins sipped at his coffee. “Hardly,” he replied, considering a free coffee very poor recompense for the damage the woman had wrought, “but I am in need of your assistance. That means I have little option than to stay.”

“Ah yes, your new-found career as a freelance agent, offering your espionage services to the highest bidder. I must admit it surprised me to hear of your new role. Which is why I arranged for us to meet.”

“What interest is it of yours?” Hopkins asked.

“I know of your tutelage under the great detective,” Zelle informed him, “and your use of his methods. The alacrity with which you acquitted yourself during the Jubilee Plot impressed me. I admit,” she reached out and touched his hand, “I have need of your ... talents. This is a lonely profession we pursue.”

Despite himself, Hopkins felt his heart racing. She had very quickly got under his skin.

“Besides, I have developed a taste for you prim and proper Englishmen. Your stumbling reserve is quite delectable, and is in short supply here,” she waved indicating the Parisian street, and by synecdoche, the rest of Paris, and perhaps all of France.

“We live in tumultuous times, the departure of Queen Victoria, the secession of Charlottina, a new technocracy in New Spain, my apologies, Mexico” she corrected herself. “Trips planned to the Moon. Two people working together, pooling their talents, could make a lasting impression on that world.” She raised her coffee cup to him.

Hopkins paused, thinking through his options. He had few. And the new world, new *worlds*, could present many opportunities. He lifted up his own cup and clinked it against Zelle’s proffered own.

“My dear Margreet, I believe this could be the start of a beautiful friendship.”

Epilogue: Houston, We Have a Solution

Fatima had spent six months covering The Republic of Texas in her wagon train, drawn by the enormous steam-powered

mechanical horse. She and her taskforce of the unusual and the disenfranchised had found townships, borne down on them and, where they had found people enslaved, freed the slaves, leaving destruction in their wake.

As the months had passed, and word had spread of this terrifying retribution, they had found the occasional town that had pre-empted the assault by freeing everyone before Fatima and her army, swollen by additional numbers of free slaves joining it, could descend on them.

Not enough though. It was a gruelling existence. Satisfying for her, but it was not what suited all of her entourage.

Olga the bearded lady had not survived the assault by the Lobo pack. They had thought her too complicit in their original captivity. The two giants, Fafner and Fasolt, similarly had been slain. Fred Muller had never been found. The rest had joined her, rather than stay in Atchison.

None of the rest were, by nature, aggressive people, well Baby Alpine could cut loose occasionally, but they had all experienced at first hand what oppression feels like, and they were with her on her mission to free others of it. But it was taking its toll.

The community could not expand much further. They had dropped immediately the tender in which Caldmore had been held, not daring to confront whatever menace hid within, its screams of outrage could be heard echoing from within the metal container as they unhitched it front and back, and then reformed the train without it. Those screams faded away to the rear as the great mechanical beast pulled the remaining wagons away, its smaller brethren scampering around it.

The cages had been converted to more living quarters, and additional conventional wagons had been added to the rear as more slaves were freed and came to join them, but they were almost at the limit of what the horse-shaped engine at the front could pull.

But there were still thousands to free, and where would they go?

That was where the deputation from Houston had been, ultimately, a welcome occurrence.

At first, Fatima was suspicious of the visitors. They had ridden in front of the wagon train, visible from its high control cabin, located in the massive horsehead, and taken their position miles in advance. They had waved a white flag of truce, but that had not entirely reassured Fatima, as she had learnt to never underestimate the duplicity of whites or men and these were both.

She had slowed and then stopped the mechanical horse engine, and descended down its neck, chest and right foreleg. Ursa and Zip had accompanied her, Ursa because the bear girl could look very intimidating, even though she was really a teddy bear than a grizzly, and Zip because once he'd been allowed to cast off his Wildman persona, she had found him to be a highly intelligent second-in-command.

That conversation had been a month ago. The delegation had been from the city of Houston, and they'd had a proposition for her. They'd played fair with her, and now she was beginning to see the fruits of that collaboration.

Before her, the four diminutive people from her entourage were sitting, talking about the plans they had for the near future. Bonita

had lost weight, a necessary part of her training regime, and looked much better for it. Princess Wee Wee and Baron Paucci were sitting comfortably and closely together, it looked as if they were now a couple. Leopold was no longer the Admiral Dot, he was the Colonel Dot. Fatima was pleased to be with them, but felt uncomfortable on her small-sized seat.

The proposal made by the visitors from Houston had seemed elegant, even inspired.

Apparently, from all across North America, different countries were setting up their own space programmes. In New York, the English had a launch facility on Ellis Island, and were building ships to reach into space, under the auspices of Edison Industries. In Mexico, one step over to the West, the technocracy in charge of the country had begun the same. One step to the East, the ex-French colonies were collaborating on a combined space programme, as were the people in New France. It seemed as if they might even be forced to collaborate.

The problem, of course, was the expense. Although all had acquired the plans for the design of spacecraft, through means no-one would discuss, the resources required were exorbitant. The Texans, members of the only country newly created on the continent, and not simply an off-shoot of one of the old colonial powers (they did not count the Native Protectorates) did not have the provenance of established industries and governance to enable a space programme to be practicable. As the only truly American country, Texas saw itself as the only proper representatives of that continent. They were frontiersmen and this was the newest frontier. There should be an American space programme alongside the Mexican, French and British programmes, but the

one element that made it their destiny, the nascent nature of their country, was the one element that made it impossible.

Then they considered a solution that made it all possible.

The barrier was the prohibitive expense of the payload. Or rather, to launch the payload required fuel, and to launch the fuel required more fuel, and to launch that required even more. And there was the weight of the canisters to contain the fuel. Lifting only a few men was a colossal undertaking.

But, supposing you launched people a tenth of the size of regular people? Those savings would propagate all through the fuel requirements, and the fuel for the fuel, and so on.

That was the deal they proposed to Fatima. Persuade the small people in her group to join them, to become astronauts (their new term for people who would travel into space) and they would make Houston a slave-free zone. They couldn't change the country-wide legislation, but their city at least would outlaw slavery. As long as a slave could make it to within the city limits they would be free.

Fatima was unsure, it seemed like a half-way solution. But then she saw the people in her entourage, some prepared to continue the fight to free more of their fellow, but many just wanting to stay put somewhere and build a home, and had relented. The aspect that had swung her decision had been the enthusiasm of Leopold and the others.

They had *wanted* to be astronauts.

An entire training complex had been built to a one-half scale, catering to the size of The Baron and the Princess, though still a

little large for the Colonel. It was on the outskirts of Houston, and would accommodate a score or more of the smaller people. The four trainee “astronauts” that Fatima saw before her were just the start of a much more ambitious programme.

With the first few to enter the programme, word had spread across the world. Where they could, others were coming to Houston to attend the training facility. It had originally been called the Lilliputian Complex, but Fatima had persuaded them that that could have been considered demeaning, something along the lines of one of Gumpertz’s ideas. They had suggested Gulliver, but the link was still too close. In the end they had conceded to her suggestion of Lemuel as an obscure enough link to Lilliput to not be offensive, and that was the name that had been agreed upon.

Fatima was still free to continue her mission to free others, the people of Houston had not denied that, and so she was leaving. All but Ella and Felix were continuing with her; those two had elected to stay in Houston, the rest still felt there was no place for them amongst “regular folks”.

Solemnly, Fatima reached down and shook each of her friends by hand, wishing them all luck in their future endeavours. Not only would they be journeying out above the Earth, they would be leaders of a whole new band of people. Perhaps in time they could live permanently up there, working on behalf of the Texan government, but finding a whole new purpose for themselves as a community, with their half-scale spaceships and their half-scale stations in space. In a way she envied them.

Then taking her leave she left the city, escorted by the city guards, as if a visiting dignitary, and heading towards the wagon train, Zip having already built up enough steam in the enormous iron horse

at the head of it. At least here in Houston was one place her people could live freely. Now she just had to go out and free some more.

Epilogue: Caldmore contemplates the future

Caldmore had returned to Transylvania, unsure of finding a place amongst normal humanity. After their experiences back on their island, Caldmore and Gormuil realised that they would never be welcome amongst their neighbours and families. The locals in Nashboro had not ostracised him, or his companions, for their appearance, instead they were supportive, though possibly pity motivated them more than acceptance. The people of Transylvania also acknowledged their debt to him, for what the Horse Nation had unwittingly done to him, and had repaid it by making adjustments to his airship.

The tank that provided the fuel for the ion drive had been expanded, to double as accommodation for Gormuil, and also as a water supply. This now occupied the entirety of what had previously been the cargo compartment at the aft of the upper deck. Forward of this, what had previously been the crew compartment now housed a form of kelp that the People had developed. This kelp was highly productive of oxygen, and could process all waste and could be farmed and converted to a foodstuff that would supply nearly all nutrition a body would need. With some additional supplies, that were even now being lashed to the top deck, the airship would be fully self-contained for food, water and air for many months, perhaps years.

Tesla and Einstein had provided him with a craft that could travel anywhere, underwater, through the air, and now even from planet

to planet. For he, Gormuil, Steffie and Amber there was nothing keeping them bound to the Earth, and insufficient commonality with the rest of humanity to enable them to stay. Caldmore looked up, seeing the moon at its fullest, and thinking “that will be the first place I will visit”, driven partly by it simply being the most obvious first port of call, but also to reassure himself that the Selenite invasion he had seen in that parallel universe was not being replicated in his own.

He wondered whether the moon was where Her Highness had first visited, and smiled again at the unveiling of his newly altered spacecraft that had taken place earlier that day. He had admired the new water pool, exposed to the sky, but able to be sealed off quickly, and the kelp garden, noting how efficient the waste processing and air-filtering was integrated with the rest of the ship. What had pleased him most, however, was the new nameplate they had affixed to the hull, a fitting tribute, he thought, and long past the time that his craft had needed a name.

There, embossed on the brass and silver plate was the name *Victoria*.

Epilogue: Life on the Mississippi

John Briggs and the Kid became a familiar sight on the Mississippi steamboats as they plied their way up and down the river. John Briggs was still in high demand as a pilot, and he'd insisted that as part of his placement, that room was found for the small dark guitar-playing girl he'd taken under his wing. That period of having to insist on her being allowed to accompany him

did not last for long though, as soon she became more in demand than he was.

Out on the foredeck now, Kid was beginning to strum the opening chords of *Keep on Sailin'* and the crowd cheered, recognising it from the first few bars. Though Kid was Kid no longer. She'd thought the name Howard Hughes had had a ring to it, it sounded like a show name, alliterative, that was the word that the tutor John had found her had used. So inspired by that she'd come up with an alliterative name of her own. She was from Memphis, and small for her age, so Memphis Minnie sounded kind of right.

Trade was flowing up and down the Mississippi now. There were the businesspeople up in Charlolina making all those new-fangled parts for those huge spaceships they were building down south and then sailing all the way to French Guiana. It was looking like Baton Rouge was going to join the alliance, as an equal partner and not as a Red Stick trying to beat all the rest of the states down. Yep "states", that was what they were calling themselves now, les États-Unis d'Amérique. Canada and Rupert's Land might be joining the EUA at any time too. All of them were coming together to compete with the Mexicans and the British to get out into space first, and Minnie and John were riding the wave of commerce it was bringing about.

Minnie saw John standing by the steersman, and smiled as he waved at her.

"Sail on, sail on, ahw baby, sail on," she began to sing.

"Sail on, sail on, ahw baby, sail on."

Prologue: The Insect Sect – Incept

Tuesday, June 3rd, 1924, New York, New England

Tom Trowell looked out of his window at the New York City skyline. From here he should be able to see the airships moored at the Empire State Building, but the rain was so heavy, the clouds so low, that he could barely make out the other side of the street.

He liked the rain though. He could stay out in it for hours, the feel of the water against his skin was soothing. He would remove his fedora and feel it splash against his face. Breathing it in.

An aethership roared out in the bay, lifting off from Ellis Island, out from the Edison facility there. The windows shook as it did so. He could see them too, from this position, as they headed towards the heavens, though not today of course.

Below him, on the street, moving strangely, was a tall figure, each step seeming to randomly thrust out before him, as if walking was still something the man was not used to. The figure paced back and forth across the entrance to stairs that led to Trowell's second floor office, then entered.

Trowell heard the footsteps on the wooden steps connecting floors, then the figure burst into his office, rain shedding in pools on his office floor.

The man stood there for a few moments, mouth working noiselessly. His height was imposing, Trowell saw. He had a long oval face, eyes rolling spasmodically, random twitches twisting it. He wore a long raincoat, which swayed constantly as his arms jerked at his sides. Trowell watched him impassively, cigarette

hanging loosely from his lips as he tried to work out what was wrong with the figure, while waiting for the visitor to build up to saying something. Some junkie? Some sort of disability? Trowell had the uneasy feeling the man was simply trying to make sense of how his body worked for the first time. Testing muscles randomly to see what moved what. “I need a a detective,” the visitor finally spoke.

“You found one, bub,” Trowell said. “What can I do for you?”

“No. I am not Bub,” the man replied. “I am ... Judex Rajra. I am ... also detective. But ... this world. It is not familiar to me.”

An out-of-towner, Trowell understood. It happened. A detective on a case, coming to New York. Experienced enough to know he needed local insights. Not experienced enough to have them himself. They were a pain. Didn't pay well, as the other shamus needed his cut, and having someone else call the shots was not Trowell's preference. Another gumshoe second-guessing his every move. He could do without that.

“So what's the beef?”

Rajra looked on impassively.

“The caper? The case?”

At that the man before him finally understood. From how far out of town was he, Trowell wondered, that he didn't know basic American?

“You are familiar with beetlemania?” he asked.

Trowell nodded. Weird cults cropping up all over the country, maybe all over the world. Just that morning he'd seen the words "Hornets are Top," scrawled cryptically in the grime on the back of a truck. Worshipping some weird insect beings, they said talked to them in their dreams. They'd got into trouble recently because one of their leaders had now claimed they were bigger than Jesus. Trowell knew cults. He'd been brought up in one in a small fishing village in Massachusetts, and not really seen anything of the outside world until making his escape from there at the age of 37. Him spending 20 years in a coma hadn't been his mother's fault, but the 17 years of isolation before that were. He had felt a rage against that brainwashing that his 10 years of independence since had done nothing to dispel. Rajra had his attention.

"Yep. I've heard of them. A load of hooley."

Rajra looked blankly for a moment, then made a guess at what Trowell had meant.

"I do not think so. I have ... evidence ... that the beings that they worship may someday bring great peril to this world. I am here to prevent that," Rajra explained. "I wish to infiltrate ... the sect and discover what they know. I need the help of someone who can operate ... in this world. I have money to pay you."

Trowell had him pegged now. A space case. Still, if he had the money to pay ... and Trowell had been itching to take on the Coleopteran Cult since he'd heard of them. This would be his chance.

"OK, Bub, I'll buy it," Trowell said. "Tell me what you know."

Afterword

A note on the characters

Writing this in episodic form means that, up to now it's been a balance between publishing it to generate an audience along the way, and writing enough parts ahead to make all the plot elements work together. Part one was published before two was written, two and three were published before the rest were written. It's still possible to tweak bits and just replace the earlier versions of the pdfs on the website, or print a revised version, but you can't expect people to re-read an earlier part just because you've decided to insert a plot thread retrospectively, so that does limit what you can change, since if something significant is missed out, it's not really possible to go back and add it later

One thing that occurred to me after publishing part one (mainly because between finishing part one and starting part two I read *The Vorrh* by Brian Catling, which features a few historical characters in a fantasy setting) was how much fun it would be to include versions of historical people in the story, starting off with one of the rescued girls being Amelia Earhart. Luckily, one of the girls was already called Amelia, as retconning one of the names would have been difficult. Then in chapters 2 and 3, Tesla was a real person, obviously, and Margreet Zelle, and Edison. Fuller (the leader of the dance troupe), Cropsey and Battle were also notable people of New York in 1911. If I ever make any income from this, I think I'll have to give 10% to Wikipedia because it's been invaluable throughout.

Other real people dotted throughout the episodes are:

Part Four: Kid Douglas, Howard Hughes, Lemuel Swearngen and his twin brother Al Swearngen, John Briggs and Jennie Clemens (though in our timeline she died at an early age) were all real people, Briggs being the inspiration for Tom Sawyer and Al Swearngen familiar to anyone who's watched *Deadwood*. Gabriel and Evangeline are from the poem *Evangeline* by Longfellow. The clearances that separated them really did happen, but these were conducted by the British, not the French, in our timeline. I'm implying through this that the only reason most of the major atrocities of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were caused by Britain was because it was the most powerful nation, so had more opportunity, not because we're particularly noxious as a race. If someone else was in charge, they'd have done it. I hope that's the case, anyway. King Alfonso XIII and his Queen Victoria and their children all existed. In fact, when I was researching them for this bit of the story I discovered that there were actually rumours that they harvested the blood of the poor to supply their haemophiliac children. Another coincidence. I have no idea whether the rumours were true however. Alfonso XII died in 1885 in our timeline rather than recover. Gull actually existed too, though he too died before 1911. The person who cured them in the book's timeline, Pedro Jaramillo, was also a real person.

Parts five and six: Machaquito, the matador who was killed by the bull the DNA from which is used to transform Caldmore, really existed and really was severely injured on October 26th, 1911, although in our timeline he unfortunately recovered. The Troöd aren't my invention; they were created by Dale Russel, a palaeontologist, as a thought experiment. I've wanted to weave them into a story for decades, so this was my chance. Duleep Singh also was a real person; an Indian princess and a suffragette. She should be more well-known than she is. Amber Head was

inspired by my misreading of Amber Heard, though you'd probably guessed that.

Parts seven and eight; Gumpertz and Dreamland also really existed, though by all accounts they were far more genial in our timeline than in this fictional one. All of the unusual people Gumpertz had amongst his troupe also existed, apart from Ang and Lee and the jötnar. The Scion of the Scythe is, I'll admit, inspired by The Shrike from *Hyperion* by Dan Simmons. Patrick Williams really existed, and was probably an ex-member of the Republican Brotherhood, although in our timeline he died in 1901. I know about him because he was my great-grandfather. He was actually an engine-fitter living in England. Greta Hughes was real, as was the little boy she talks about. John von Neumann was only 8 years old in 1912 and didn't have the "von" then, but I needed von Neumann engines to have been running for a while as a plot device for Book Three, so Hughes's sister (an opera singer in our timeline too) travelling to his home city seemed to be a way to set that in motion. Robert Ripley hadn't begun his Believe it, Or Not! column in 1911 but was already a journalist.

A note on the acknowledgments

Acknowledgments have to go to Brian Talbot, whose *Luther Arkwright* series was my first exposure to steampunk, to my stepson Angus who has encouraged me to keep going this far, and who put me onto awesomemerchandise.com who printed this, and to all the creative types at all the steampunk events I've been to who have put me to shame by their amazing costume designs.

A note on the publication

I am just doing this for fun, and to contribute something to the steampunk events I go to. What would motivate me to keep going

on to the sequels is some feedback to the Twitter account I've set up for just that. @Lemuel_1911.

If someone wants to take this world and create their own stories in it, that would be excellent. Just drop me a line on the Twitter feed and let me know what you're doing so I can keep the continuity in order. If I have enough money spare, I'll publish it as *A Dreadful Cheek* Publication.

So, why start *A Dreadful Cheek* publishing? Well I was inspired by an interview with Cory Doctorow (in Robert Llewellyn's excellent Carpool webseries) who placed the decline in the variety of publishing to the absence of cheap paperbacks in stands all over the place, like the Gold Medal series that Fawcett started in the 50s. I think there's a niche for publishers to churn out cheap small paperbacks for sale on café counters, or train stations, that people can stick in their back pockets, pull out while having a coffee or whatever, and read in a sitting, then throw away. The multi-parter might even keep them coming back to pick up the next episode. The steampunk idea then became the content for the publishing idea. I'd love for this format to be picked up by a proper publishing company. Even more if they pay me for the idea.

And why *A Dreadful Cheek*? Well "Dreadful" because they're meant to fill the niche that Penny Bloods or Dreadfuls filled (and to help any critics of my writing with a cheap shot to start off their comments with), and "Cheek" because they're sized to be carried in your back pocket, next to your bum cheek. Each booklet published sets me back about £2 each and each publication has a print run of 25, but if it catches on it'll be worth it.

Mark Nine, April 2017

PS Caldmore is pronounced "Karma" or "Calmer". It's where I live. If you ever go there, you now know how to say it like a local.

A Lemuel Caldmore Adventure!

In the eighth and final part of this epic tale, Caldmore finds himself in a race against time to stop the Queen Victoria, the Machine Queen, from killing herself and taking half of London with her.

The Machine Queen is a novella in eight parts, mainly with a steampunk theme, and released one-by-one at various steampunk events and online. Its format, price and general content is intended to fill the niche left by Penny Bloods.

Lemuel Caldmore will return in the second book in the trilogy

The Insect Sect

Coming soon!