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DIESELPUNK

ePULP SHOWCASE

NINE AMAZING TALES!



Dieselpunk ePulp Showcase 2

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WELCOME

In life, you can choose to be a creator or a consumer. I can turn on the telly and find something tolerable to pass the time, or I can let my discontent guide me to a better place. You see, I'm a dieselpunk. I'm not content with the contemporary, but I'm also not satisfied with reenacting the past.

The strange thing about discontent is you have to respect it like an explosive. Pack it deep inside and you'll blow yourself apart from nuts to knuckles. Find a way to guide that explosion, and you'll change the face of mountains.

The brave souls who donated their words and ideas to this ePulp are the creators. They're shaping how you think about dieselpunk, pulp, and speculative fiction. They're leading our world by example.

We learned a lot about our community from the 2013 volume. This year, we have twice as many entries, and our worldwide audience is still expanding. From sky captains and private eyes to the stars beyond, The ePulp Sampler: Volume Two is our gift to you.

Why?

We want to wake up one day knowing it was us who shaped the mountains.

For the future,
-Tome

Tome Wilson is the owner/operator of Dieselpunks.org, an online magazine and social network devoted to inspiring dieselpunks and steampunks around the world.

WILD MARJORAM

The title 'WILD MARJORAM' is presented in a bold, black, sans-serif font. The word 'WILD' is positioned above 'MARJORAM'. The letter 'O' in 'MARJORAM' contains a detailed illustration of a tree with a dense canopy and a visible trunk. The entire title is framed by decorative elements: a jagged, lightning-bolt-like line arches over the top, and a horizontal line with a central diamond-shaped cutout runs beneath the text.

THE BIRTH

Created By N.R. Grabe

Raindrops tap along the tin roof of the building and even though he struggles, he can hear a faint meowing as a door opens. The light voice, a dazzling piano prance by the squeaky hinge, appears and talks to the animal. A can of deep sea turkey opens, the fishy scent mingling with gasoline and garbage. Raincoat rubbing swishes in the corner and falls, clinging to the floor.

“I found him outside, poor thing,” the voice floats through the dingy air.

A second voice echoes in the ceiling, more confident and stronger than the first gliding intonation, “We are not taking him back with us. You always collect strays.”

“It’s freezing outside, Honey. We could keep him for a few days and see if anyone wants a pet.”

“If you wish, I suppose. You look cute with that feline curling up to your neck. I should take a photo. I got a camera from the scaly one, the latest thing. Takes photos in the dark crystal clear.”

A fired camera flash lends its sulfur stench to the room. Double titterings of pleasure pepper the area as the camera’s gears crank into motion.

“See, the picture paper comes out here. It develops before your eyes. The toast of 1919’s Oddman’s Invention Market,” the stern voice explains.

“Remarkable, we must show my employees how to use it.”

Melodic notes whisper by his naked ears, yet there is no acknowledgement of his presence in the room. He ghosts along as if in a delusion. The chair clasps his arms. He tries to count sheep to pass the time, but he is not sure if it’s been minutes or hours. A blindfold forces his eyes into damp darkness. A tiny bit of water quavers from a metal funnel over his tongue into the back of his mouth. He moves his head and finds the device isn’t attached to anything he can feel. No hoses, no wires.

“Do you really want to do this?” cascades the first voice down his eardrum. The man tries to note any characteristics so he can tell his men once he frees himself. A dullness causes his ears to fail one moment and focus the next. An underwater plugged sensation leading to clarity. It could be a dream.

The second voice sinks low with conviction, “Of course, I don’t have a

doubt in my mind. Do you?”

“Won’t we become like them? Remember the Battle of Portland?” the voice has released the cat, who is purring and meowing, walking closer to where his chair is. His legs can’t move. Belt-like attachments, could be leather. Strong.

“You can’t compare that to this. Do you have the tools ready? Are they clean?”

“Amazingly so, given the squalor of this room.”

“Give me the butcher knife and the metal board. It will fit into the chair’s arm. And see that drainage area there...that’s genius, that will catch the blood.”

The man sits and listens to the voices. He tries to communicate, but his words mumble out and he sucks in a toxic, metal taste.

“There really isn’t anything you can say. You shouldn’t talk. Didn’t you take away communication from her? She can’t even talk now,” one of the voices addresses the captive man and his mind digs into his past.

The room rockets with a biting coolness as his ears dial in on the dual voices. One seems to be taller than the other. One is in command. He’s breaking down, his mind wandering instead of trying to hone in.

The taller voice remarks, “I have the tranquilizer ready.”

“Don’t give him too much of it. Enough to stop him from moving, but not enough for him to not feel pain,” the shorter voice answers. Is this the

ringleader?

A large needle injects into his popping vein, trailing out of his left arm. It makes him feel at peace. A sudden calm comes over him at the moment the butcher knife hits his wrist. It cuts most of the hand off, but the arm is still tied fast. Tears flow down the blindfold and around the edge of the funnel's bandage on his mouth. The desire to scream and curse his captors burns from his brain. It releases as a grumble, muted.

"I thought you said you wanted to hear his words," the lower voice reasons.

"What would they be? Telling us we don't have the right. Put-downs? This is much more zen. It is what Dragon would say. Zen. Get the cauterizing wand. He's losing a lot of blood fast."

An engine fires in the room and chugs to a stop.

Smoke and gasoline pour into his mouth in particles from the night mist bonding with the miasma. The voices sound less strong now. He fades a bit and can't differentiate between the people talking. It's like a flood of sound. Neutral neuter voices. Who's Dragon? Someone in the service?

"Blazes!"

"What?"

"The engine isn't working."

"Well, pop it again."

“See, this is why I need a proper lab. Here, I’ll try it again. Hold the wrist with this towel to stop the blood flow.”

“There it goes...wait.”

The engine runs and then peters out.

“Why today of all days? This is Redcrown garbage. We always make bad trades with them.”

“Anyone who makes a trade with a gangster called ‘Itchy Index’ ought to know better.”

“Hey, there it goes! Aren’t we lucky?”

The stagnant engine launches into a roar and revs into full power. Its bombardment of sound makes the cat screech and it runs across the captive’s ripped pant legs with fear, leaping onto the floor and heading into the unknown, the claws making the man’s legs twitch.

Distracted, the man feels a hot blast to his dead wrist from the makeshift weapon. The phantom hand still moves in the mind of the captive, though he smells smoke and knows the deed is done. He mumbles out as fingers push the funnel-gag in further, so he stops making noise. The claws linger. Time moves so fast.

“Poor baby,” the higher pitched voice wails. “If you wouldn’t do what you do, your hands could still be yours.” He hears a plop in a basin where his hand hits.

His mind runs foxlike. Battles have done that. He remembers following

her, gaining her trust. It wasn't hard, even with the war. She remained lovely even after her accident. He should have kicked her more.

“I need to empty out this basin. Where do you want me to put the hand?” the voice enquires intently The Maltese Spectrum.

“In that canning jar of formaldehyde there on the table.”

Another swish as he waits. A spark of feeling, other than pain, comes back and he tries to knock over the chair, finding it firmly screwed into the floor.

“We thought of everything, my sweet. Sit back and enjoy the show. Isn't that what you told her?”

“You can nod your head. You did tell her that, right?”

The man nods a “yes” without thinking. It was training. Why put him in this place? He should have gotten a purple heart for this, from the burns he received from battle from her. He shifts from side to side, trying to release the bonds.

“It is so nice you can be disgustingly forthcoming,” the higher pitched voice states. The blade sits lightly on the second wrist cautiously, patiently, so he can feel the next swipe coming even before it falls. “You did art before the army, right? Oh wait, you still took photos and newsreel footage too...we found those films you did.”

“There was no doubt it was you. You left nothing private and it was like an instructional movie.”

“We burned the copies. It was hard finding them all, but I am not sure why you would let that be in this world,” the voice informs, as the blade moves up and down the wrist. The skin parts to bone and warm liquid starts to lightly drizzle down the chair’s weather-beaten, oak arm. “I wish I could do this slowly, but you would die. The key here is to keep you alive to go back to your boys and tell the tale.”

“You don’t think of the retribution of this?” the other voice debates. The man sits still, listening to them, without a comment, thinking this has to a whimsy of his mind, if not for the burning, if not for the puddle of warmth down his arm, if not for the foul-smelling lake forming down his legs in fear. Be brave, he says in his head. Don’t let them know you are cracking.

“You think they think of retribution for what they do? They think it is glory. Bring the basin over. I am breaking the skin right now and he’s bleeding out. I need to chop the thing off now. If thy hand offends thee...” the voice lilts as the man’s ears start to feel plugged and ring from the clamorous machine pattering in the background.

A basin clunks and the blade sweeps. The pain thunders in. The fuzziness parades into his visible darkness, but the voices pour water on him and then the burning of the stub makes the tears flow again. A whimpering ripple, collected by touch and echoes. Life runs past and upon itself, foaming waves, memories swim by, churning buoys, red impulses, firing. Shaking and trying to pull his dead hand up, he goes passive in panic and his arm goes numb. Dead flesh is in the air. Soot. It reminds him of barbecue. He begins to black out.

He’s there at the camp and scans the vividness of its ruins, its dirty cells against the clean, white offices of sergeants, with their expensive wooden

furniture and maps. The charred scent reminds him of what they did to her. Ironing, they called it. They had ironed her. Her muscular legs kicked to release the grasps of guards and then the iron came, a brass iron, and her blood became a ribbon around the circumference as it did its job. No screams came. The guard's hand was over her mouth and she knew that screaming meant nothing. That no one would come to her aid. She became like the dirt, particles of a human, twirled into coiled frame, clutching herself with a soiled bed sheet, agonized by cauterized pains and fists beaten into her. Sobbing pathetically, a mouse thrown about like a tomcat's catnip toy. Never a sound, her mouth agape, motionless, finished.

It was the first step of many to control. First, working up trust. Second, giving them good food, work, and money. Third, rounding them up in the night to be rushed to the camps. It was protocol. They were young. If they ironed them, they would suit the purpose more. Though a few were spared for obvious reasons. They had to suckle and make milk until they found a way to create a substitute. It was their fault for saying "no", having an opinion. It wasn't for them to say, only to do...not even do, be. Seeing them as people only created more paperwork. He hates paperwork. One time, he had to fill out a whole stack of forms because that sad sack of a doctor intervened. Humanitarian. We'll get him back for stealing the next time he comes into our borders, the captive man imagines. It's a kingdom with barely a population to stand on, but it is still ours.

That city. It was hardly a city anymore. It was empty. Did these voices know how crackled their NYC was, how destroyed? Of course, they didn't. A wall had been built. That girl bemoaning her beau, Yves. She cried more that day than when the iron came down. They could have been happy if they hadn't joined the service. She was a vision with her dyed blonde hair and blue weekend case, the brass handle pulled with both her hands tight up to her chest as he picked her up to get on a train for the big

city. It wasn't always bad. His jokes made her eyes sparkle. Then her eyes fade to visions of the thunderous beating to her bust that once curved lusciously over the top of her ribcage. Puce bruises, pink trails of faded claret. Her body served as canvas for their bouts of raising broodmares. She was being punished for not being pure enough. Pure enough in blood. Now they only went after the natural blondes with blue eyes. The men had learned their lesson. All the years of non-stop war had made his band the enemy. Those Germans who had the strength to come here and make parts of the East Coast their own. He sides with the strong.

“Yeah, I want the tongue too,” a laugh rings out.

He can't tell the voices apart again. He runs to the safety of his inner sanctum, but the intense agony flows into his brain, throbbing.

“You will have to take the funnel-gag out. I don't want you to have a bad experience,” the first voice says to the other.

“It's ok,” the other responds, hesitant.

The funnel-gag is pulled free. Its metal cone pops free of the man's lips.

“Why are you doing this to me?” the man says. “Everything we did was for the government, the greater good.” The words mix with wails and sniffing. Water comes out of his nose and down his chin. Snot dangles from his reddened nostril down to his burned chin.

“You don't even know why you are here?” one of the voices demands like a sadistic radio game show host.

“I assume you are with the Resistance,” he pants. He can barely ease the

words out of his tight throat. He is trying to think of a funny radio show, anything to get out of this world and into his head, trying to make the host voice pleasant, human.

“You know Beryl Duiker?”

“Beryl, who?” fakes the man as the sweat on his forehead beads. The voices won’t let him go. They are as tight as the straps that lock his life away.

“I’ll be danged. They gave them numbers, not even names, right? Or letters?”

“Camp 923. You called them Field Cows eventually; she would have been FC 9237821. Kept in barracks #4931251.”

Finding the courage to speak like a soldier, the captive man says, “Yes, Madam or is it Sir? We had her help us with photography at first. Newsreels. We thought the girls could be put to use weaving film together. She was a good one. Hated to put her into the program. It was an order though. I did enjoy her. She was carrying one of mine.”

“She still is,” the higher voice says to the captive man.

The captive man whispers, “She’s alive?”

“Yeah, even after the violence you inflicted on her. Do you have any final words?” the voices merge again in the man’s ears.

“You are going to kill me?” breathes the tied man in a whisper as a tear lingers in the corner of his eyes under the dusty blind.

“Ha! What? And let you die? How humane. Save that for the little puppies and kitties and orphans who go hungry on the edge of The Knife. We aren’t humane here anymore. We used to be. But slowly we found out you army men only speak one language. If you felt anything for her, you could have helped her escape.”

“I was doing my job.”

“You won’t be doing that any time soon. Once we get the tongue out, try directing your screening crew or your underlings. Try to use a squeegee. She will most likely never create again. We rescued her, comatose. She woke up rambling and crazed. Why should you get the pleasure of using your hands when you abused her so with them?”

“There are two of you here, right?”

“Can’t you tell any more?” the voices layer.

The captive articulates, “No. Everything sounds murky.”

“I notice not once have you asked to be let go.”

“What would be the point of it? You wouldn’t release me. We are taught to handle pain. Look at my face, these burn scars. She did this to me. That woman blew fire over me when she escaped. Pain, I can take.”

“Are you handling it now?” the voice sounds like one person to him, even though it is two. He makes out a slight higher note from one of them, but they fuse like Siamese twins in a murky womb. Two headed Angel of Death. Hadn’t he heard of this before? Them? His nerves fire through his

dizzy brain trying to make a connection.

“It is intense. I am surprised I am not passing out.”

“We are keeping you awake.”

The captive man tries to think of the voices and their conversation with the camera. It seems it’s been hours since. His heart pounds as he states, “So, it is still a we? Only two?”

“Angel-makers from the Killdeer Gang.” The voices ring.

“I remember hearing a story where you cut the heart out of a man. That is worse than what we do?”

“So, that is worse than attacking helpless women? Wait, not even women. Girls on the edge of being women. Underage. Admit Beryl was your special project and maybe I’ll spare your tongue. Are we supposed to sit submissive and let these things happen?”

Trying to catch his speech in order to save himself and then failing, the tied man informs them with a serious tone, “I didn’t do what any other man did. We ironed them young so their breasts didn’t grow, but that created a problem once we wanted to farm them. We keep some to be cows with their milk. We’d have parties. It was fun. We’d play cards, then pick some girls out. The goal was to conceive. They needed to be broken or else we’d have to force them. I didn’t mean to hit Beryl on the head. She was acting up. Free-thinkers.”

He sighs. Why not speak the truth at this point? His game is almost over and he feels like Beryl herself is pushing him to talk. He did love her.

One of the voices instructs, “More.”

“We actually took oaths to keep our property safe. It’s like they didn’t know their role. Stupid. I am sure that baby will have my blue eyes. You know women can’t get with child unless they want it. I am not sure why you feel it wasn’t good for them, even the ironing. It was for their own good, so no one else desired them enough to rape them. Beryl was deformed, but I gave her a child anyway.”

“She kept a journal.”

“How?”

“On tiny scraps of paper. We found them when we raided as well as the films.”

“Did she mention me?” his tongue whips out in hesitation.

“I really need to yank your tongue out. You say that like you are a lover.”

It was the higher voice now; he could hear the anger behind it. They merge back into one being as he tries to hang on.

“I thought well of her, I cared for her. I made sure no one killed her.”

“So you could torture her and make her raise a forced baby?”

“It is as close to love as we got.”

“Sadie, maybe we should do this. I can’t have this waste of skin tell me

how raping and beating up a woman is love. How many times?” the voice speaks sternly to the man.

“Maybe a dozen. She never would stop her monthlies. They thought she couldn’t conceive and I told her I would keep trying. Eventually, she would even kiss me during.”

“To collect the iota of humanity she could grasp. I’ve watched these films. There is no romance there - only broken girls and insanity.”

“I brought her gifts. Little baskets of herbs for her food. Marjoram was her favorite. We got it from across the ocean. She’d spent all day smelling them, of course, we kept them in cells. She told me how she liked to read, but I couldn’t bring her many books. After she got pregnant, she was moved to a little room with a bed. I tried to feed her as best as I could. I want to be a father to this baby; how can I be a dad without hands?”

“We don’t know if Beryl is going to pull through anyway. She’s eight months along now. It’s so horrible. I remember her being so full of life.”

“Me too.” the voices begin to separate again. One high, one low. A Janus creature brimming with double-talk.

A clamp clicks over his dry tongue, causing the captive man’s mouth to throb. Reasoning fires in. “I will do anything. Please don’t do this.”

“We need to send you back as an example. Don’t mess with women. We are in gangs now. Remember the names Killdeer and Redcrowns. You will have to grind them into the ground with your stumps. You read a lot of Shakespeare? I got this idea from the classics. You can have sticks for hands and a pool of blood for speech!”

There is nothing he can do but grab with no fingers at the chair while the tongue slithers out of his mouth. The blood falls down his throat and he chokes slightly on the wooly pad of cloth they force in to stop the bleeding. Some of the blood gathers on the blind and as it saturates, the captive can see a tiny bit of light, dots of outlines framing his captors.

“He’s like a work of art. You used to be an artist, now you are perfected.”

“Honey, he ain’t that much of an artist. He made propaganda that showed how the Apple was succeeding and altruistic. ‘Girls, Be True to Your Country and Join The Helping Hand Corps!’ Remember that poster? You give him way too much credit. He’s no Fritz Lang. I’ve seen *Die Spinnen*, I know.”

“It was a metaphor. I wanted to end deep. Can you get the knockout so we can put him in the trunk? And seriously, German film? Why don’t you watch *Broken Blossoms*? It’s being shown in New Canada. It is the film mecca now.”

He is injected again and the pain pounds. Waves and waves of anguish. Only then, he feels a small amount of empathy, spouting along his brow. The ironing must have been painful, even if we treated them like cows, his thoughts whirlpool. In Rome, they used to dump unwanted girl children. At least, we were using them for a goal for the common good. The orphans in *The Knife*, those dirt-covered girls with their rancid jump ropes... Lillian Gish girls...ha, ha, those creatures he worked for would eat them for a snack, like a wolf-grandmother, like a fairytale; he planned those frail beauties’ demise inwardly and his temples pounded with the fantasy. The voices creep around him and he imagines not two people, but a large reptile with horns that has two heads and is biting his body apart.

He dips into unconsciousness in-between quick sprays and hacks of blood. His Flyer God is not there. No service at the altar.

“Get Drago to bring the car around. We will dump him in a field outside the city with his tags. I am sure he will be found. I want to write a message on his skin, that the Killdeer will succeed. I want them to know it was us. They can come for us, I am ready to fight until the end.”

“Victoria, are you sure what we are doing is right?”

“No, but it is justice all the same. They think they have a sense of duty to break us. We won’t be broken anymore. We aren’t seen as citizens, but that has to change. It’s my initiation, Sadie. With this, our gangs are joined. Our pact begins. I’ll get ahold of ‘Itchy Index’.”

“I never make violence personal,” Drago trumpets as he opens up the trunk in the backseat of his armored Rolls Gunmetal Ghost, a crossbred product he delights in.

His army gang shipped it to him over the waves for some crates of cigarettes, whiskey and coffee. Running his finger across the black paint, he ponders his trip to the Sutyagin House. Those Russkis are capitalists at heart, as was he. The shoddy house appeared one day in an abandoned field, filled with codes. It chills the bones to think of it, Drago daydreams, how the walls spike with splinters, how it curled into the atmosphere like a tunnel to the stars. A Tower of Babylon. Sacrilegious.

The boys look after Willow Run and its wave of imported novelities, now taking over Chrome City with help from those fur-wearing bastards. St.

Louis will pale in comparison. Gotta go where the money is, Drago's old man used to tell him. He could almost see his deceased dad in the lines of the shiny paint until he saw it was his own face in the moonlight luster of the Ghost.

"Isn't it personal? Gunning down someone seems personal to me. You still with me, Dragon?" Victoria snaps her fingers by Drago's hairy ear and he pops into reality to catch her eyes. Opening the cluttered trunk, she looks at the field box close to where they parked.

Drago sighs, "The two of us think differently. I have a strict code of honor nonetheless. For one, I would never lay a hand on a woman. Despite your suffragette upbringing, I still find the female sex physically weaker. No offense. But it is, really."

Seeing Victoria's stare of death, he tries not to further stick his foot in his mouth, "That is why I wanted to stand by your cause. The idea of the oppressed leading is why I started what I did. Sick of people putting immigrants down. I'd show everyone a thing or two."

"I tend to find your blasé attitude towards killing more disturbing than what I have done. Help me here. Grab a handle," Victoria motions impatiently as the pair pull up the box and their arms buckle with the weight.

They sit the box down in the converted hunting area that now serves as an off again on again training ground for the returning army. There is a chill in the air.

She clicks the trunk open and looks at her handiwork.

“Maybe I should leave a note?” Victoria smiles. “Or leave him as is. It’s hard though when the messenger can’t speak.”

“Did you have to violate him like that?” Drago’s face twists up.

“Oh, you mean the penetration rod? That is Sadie’s machine. Just the tip. She vamped up a cauterizing tool to an engine she found. That woman is amazing. If she had better opportunities, I am sure they would have her making Gunmetal Ghosts or working on a Traveling Disc.”

“But did you have to put it inside him?”

“Yes, to make a point. Plus, I infected it with syphilis. The pox. Yeah, Guy here, oddly fitting, is afraid of needles so he probably won’t bother getting the cure. Maybe he will enjoy the craziness, maybe not.”

“Did you have to do it in the meatus? At least, zip him up. I like the fact you put gloves on him anyway as some sick joke.”

“I added switches to his mouth too. See there, a combo to open. They can slowly find he doesn’t have a tongue once the puzzle is solved. Numbers for numbers.”

“Remind me to never mess with you,” Drago shudders. He wants to flip the numbers embedded in the army man’s mouth but recoils.

Victoria gives him a soft brush on the cheek with her lips and chimes, “Never Drago. I see you as a good man, whatever that means, nowadays. You probably don’t want to see my handy work elsewhere under the pants.”

“What is that symbol on the torso?”

“A Killdeer one. I was trying it out,” Victoria slams the lid back down and puts the keys on top. She informs, “That knock out drug did its business. I need to send Sadie to doctor school.”

“Make enough green with me and you can run your own school.” Drago turns to walk back to their car. The field is empty but tomorrow it will be filled with soldiers.

“What did you do with the hands?”

“Guy’s hands? I put them in jars. I thought Beryl would want them - the tongue too. Reminders of victory.”

“How is she doing?”

“Doctors say she might come out of the coma. The baby should be fine. She’s quite along, but you wouldn’t know it. You’d think these people would feed mothers. Such a sick experiment. Our own boys.”

Victoria looks out into the field, the straw smashed down. It was an army cornfield in the summer, and now, in autumn, it was crunchy straw and buried aspirations, all breaking under her leather, buttoned boots. Drago locks with her big green eyes. They are the color of the leaves in spring or spinning underbrush that you see when an animal has its foot in a trap.

“I am meeting with Shorter later today. He is Beryl’s main doctor. Sadie recommended him to me. He wants money for a project. Something hush-hush on the side of what he is doing for the war.”

“I want some of my boys to go with you. You shouldn’t be alone. Not now.”

“Ok, Drago, you win. I wish I could have saved Beryl from the street before they did what they did to her. She should have stayed overseas with her family. The wild jungle seems tame to the supposed civilization of our city. There has got to be a way to bring peace here, if only a scant ounce so that women can walk down the street without being kidnapped.”

“A single woman. I was encouraging all of youse to get married. Say ‘yes’ and I’ll have a priest out at my house by noon and flowers galore and anything else your little messed-up heart desires.”

“That’s the problem. They are only taking single girls, sometimes young ones, because they aren’t owned by a man. By the way, don’t call my heart little. It is as immense as a dancehall.”

“Down, Vixen. All I am sayin’ is they aren’t takin’ fathers into effect and that offends me.”

“We shouldn’t be property at all.”

“I read the vote will pass, Kitten.”

“Just because the vote passes doesn’t mean everything is instantly done. There will be backlash like before when we wanted to own property and be citizens. I grew up in a world where I wasn’t seen as a citizen. I feel the start of the twenties will put an end to that.”

“Hey, if your skirts keep getting shorter, you will start an earthquake.”

“Hogwash.”

“I do like it when you are mad.”

“You should see me at work, but I call it justice, not being angry. Anger can fuel it.”

“We need to go. Say your goodbyes to Guy and I’ll drop you off at the doctor’s once we have some time together.”

“The sun is coming up now,” Victoria says watching the layered colors of blue, orange and pink stream up the horizon. “We have a few hours to celebrate.”

“You are not going to dye your hair darker, are you?” Drago says, “I like your hair blonde.”

“Not just yet,” Victoria smiles. “I don’t have the docile manners of a blushing innocent blonde, Drago. It should be the color of flames.”

When they go out on the town, Victoria is all beaded flapper gowns and long cigarette holders. Curiously, he asks her, “Why are you trying to make a trend with the Symington Side Lacer?”

Victoria adjusts the suit she is wearing, which is a pair of men’s tweed pants with a protective apron over her blouse, spiked with blood spurts and explains to the older gangster, “The flattened chest, Drago, didn’t you put it together? Beryl. I am trying to make a trend for her since she was ironed. So she won’t feel alone.”

“You are all for women, yet you want to look like a boy.”

“Do you still want to kiss me with that mouth of yours?”

“Yes, Vixen. I’ve killed for that mouth. But let’s get you out of the leather apron and into something I can see through,” Drago smiles and opens the car door for Victoria. “Chivalry isn’t dead,” he continues.

“Is that why you always let me be on top in bed?” Victoria taps him on a fedora. Despite the smell of drying plasma, he manages to look down her top as she takes off the apron and throws it into the backseat.

His grey-toothed mouth shifts apart in what he calls, “The Attack”. That’s the shocker he gave Victoria’s old beau back in the day before his goons filled him so full of lead you’d mistake him for a pile of buckshot, he muses. A victory grin. Now that’s love. Her barely grown-up presence made him amatory as she demanded to be wined and dined by his worn wrinkled flesh and balding hair, always hidden under a hat.

“I don’t care about opening doors like that. I care about the bigger, chained doors. I want to run this city better. Run it right,” Victoria says as she flips her long, dusty fingers through her Eton bob and sits as Drago walks around the car and gets in, spiking the engine with a well-polished, sorrel leather shoe. The Ghost zooms into the dawn and back into the streets of Chicagoland.

A few weeks later, Victoria grabs the bouquet in her gloved hands. She walks into the room where Beryl is slumbering. Slapdash and barebones, it contains a bed and equipment to keep her breathing and monitor her child. Beryl hears Victoria enter and opens her eyes, slowly as objects blur from

orange shapes and shadows into forms.

“How you are doing?” Victoria asks happily.

“Awake,” Beryl slowly replies, the word drawn out with a cough that sprays a few pink drops into a white cloth that Victoria holds for her.

“I am so sorry for what happened to you.”

“You shouldn’t. You offered me a place to stay and I wanted to run outside with the other orphans, like that life was freer. Even at seventeen, I still don’t feel it. We thought we were strong; we aren’t.”

“Beryl, you are strong,” Victoria touches her hand. “We got you out. You got yourself out. You’re a fighter.”

“I want to die, Victoria. For a year, I’ve wanted to die. I thought once I was out, I would feel life again in me. But, I don’t feel it. The thing is, she won’t let me die.”

“Who?”

“The girl inside of me.”

“You know it’s a girl?”

“I am sure of it. Did you kill Guy?”

“We took care of him.”

“So, he is dead?”

“He probably wishes.”

“I thought the army had brainwashed him.”

“He was just plain evil. I know he’s your baby’s dad...”

“I didn’t say I loved him. I hate him. I want a story to tell my daughter that isn’t a tragedy. When she gets older and asks about her dad, am I going to have to make something up? Lie about it? Make up a pretty story? And me, I am ugly and disfigured. I jump at the slightest noise. I should give her up for adoption. Look at me, Victoria, I can’t even suckle my own child!”

With the exclamation, Beryl coughs a few fleshy-colored blobs of blood and takes the lacey cloth from Victoria, admiring the skill it took to make and this calms her for a second. It’s her mother’s, Beryl thinks, how did it come into Victoria’s possession?

“We have found people to help. Perpetua and Azalea are here.”

“How?”

“They heard of your struggle. I know you got separated when the war came. I harbor hope your parents are alive since they saw them before they came here. Despite their darker skin, they have performed in secret clubs here. You know, drink is being made illegal here and Drago’s on the edge of scoring big making his own and he feels Perpetua and Azalea could do an exotica show and bring the house down. Azalea just had a child and she can feed yours once it comes. How far are you along?”

“It should be any day now. I used to make marks on the wall. If you can tell them to attend to me, they could oversee the birth. I saw women giving birth like giraffes overseas. I wish I could show you where my parents lived. It’s so different than here. Where did you get that cloth?”

Victoria ignores her question, “Should I fetch them?”

“Please.”

“Ok, I will be back. Do you want any food or drink?”

“Could you find me these herbs...red raspberry leaf and some other ones? I wrote them down. Some you will have to get in Asiatown.”

Victoria grabs the list and chokes up her guilt of Beryl’s defaced body as she turns over in the bed. She whispers, “Anything for you. We need this child healthy. Asiatown is close to The Knife, right, where Drago was born?”

Beryl shakes her weak head “yes.”

Victoria grabs her iridescent emerald purse and matching coat. She touches Beryl’s hand and then walks to the door.

This girl of yours will get your revenge, Victoria thinks to herself. We need her on our team, to raise her as a warrior. But I fear her. What if she becomes daddy's girl?

The door closes behind Victoria. She thinks of Drago’s new alcohol

named after her: Chokeberry.

Victoria Chokeberry wasn't her birth name. She chose this new name and lifestyle. She knew she might have a problem with the midwives when she ran into Drago. He funds the gig, she processes, as she looks down the bleak hall, covered with bits of paper and the dry remnants of birds' nests.

"Beryl wants to see the dark girls," Victoria says, lighting up a cigarette as soon as she is down the hall from the room. The hall is being converted into a club and Victoria thinks the sawing and pounding maze is the worse place for a woman to give birth, but then she reflects to a cold dank cell and takes back her thoughts.

"I don't know, Beryl. Those girls, they are great entertainers. People will see them far and wide because of their look. Dark with violet eyes. They already wowed France and with the French population influx here, they are a sure thing. But I hear their chanting. It reminds me of a voodoo jazz song I once heard. The devil's music. It ain't right," Drago sparks out and shakes his head.

"But they worship the same saints you do as a Catholic. Plus, Beryl says they can bring on the birth with such chants and dancing. I want her child to have a good entry into the world."

"One of them is named after a saint. Blasphemy."

"I don't feel anyone's faith is better than anyone else's."

"You have thoughts that would serve better a hundred years from now."

"Someday I'll build a time machine," she dreams and hopes for a future

where they can fix things in time.

“I’ll get the girls, send them up. But I do wonder what Beryl’s parents were up to. They weren’t the missionary type. They were up to somethin’ secret. Who else travels with two companions like those dancing girls?”

Enlisting Sadie, Victoria drives to the Chinese marketplace to find her list of foreign herbs, some she can’t pronounce. The store they walk into is musty and dark. Jars of roots and animal parts litter the shelves. A statue of a goddess holds its hand up in a salute on the corner of the large dusty counter. A bell sits by the register, reflecting the afternoon sun and causing Victoria to shield her jade eyes to get a better view.

“Kwan Yin,” Sadie says pointing at the statue, hitting the bell. No one comes. Her rounded shoulders shrug and she hits it twice.

Still nothing.

“Maybe the third time’s the charm?” she beams with curiosity and dings it, releasing its cobwebs to the air.

A wooden door sweeps upwards from the planks on the floor, making Victoria draw her gun. The man ducks under the door. “We’ve paid you this month,” he says, shaking. His thinning grey hair sticks out of the bottom of his traditional red satin hat as his eyes glaze over, scanning the room for his rifle behind the counter.

“Sorry,” Victoria states, aiming the gun at the floor. “Gut instinct. This place must be watched by Drago.”

“Yes, Drago. He doesn’t charge us very much. Treats us good.”

“So, can you treat me good and get me these herbs?” Victoria purrs as she motions at the man.

The man climbs out of the basement and looks at the list.

“A baby is coming, huh?” he remarks as he starts looking through jars.

“Yes,” Sadie says.

“Some of these are very powerful. Do you know how to use them?” he intones and observes Sadie reading some of his birth language, her pale hand resting on her ample hip. He asks her, “Can you read that?”

“I like languages. It talks about strength here, right...um, what’s your name, my good man?” Sadie runs her finger over the characters.

“Feng is my name, but now that I am in Chicagoland, I call myself Albert. What you are looking at, this is more than strength. This is to empower the baby with spirit. But it can be good or bad depending how the ritual is done,” Albert states, wrapping up a few roots in newspaper.

“Thanks, Feng. I think Feng suits you more. You shouldn’t give up who you are because you moved to a new land. Maybe Drago is right, these voodoo women. What if they mean harm?” Victoria says to Sadie, as Feng weights the herbs from the list carefully on a rusted, once gold-coated scale. The weights are tiny red-scaled dragons and the scale tips back and forth before resting.

“It’s Beryl’s kid, her body. Aren’t we all for letting women do what they want?” Sadie reasons out.

“I just don’t want her superstition to be the death of her, after all she’s been through.” Victoria answers, finally putting her gun back in its holster under her green jacket.

“If it works, it is said the baby will be a good leader,” Feng starts punching numbers into a jerky register. Victoria sighs at the price, “It better be worth it.”

“What is this?” Sadie points at a jar, bending over the counter. Victoria scans Sadie’s gold dress and its curves benefitting someone almost ten years Victoria’s senior.

“Tiger testicle. Very potent for love,” Feng smiles and his wrinkles bend.

“I’ll take two.” Sadie laughs, but then makes her way to the jar. “For my girls.” She adds, “Gotta feed the wolves at the day job.”

“I do know who you are. Lily Wu is in your service,” Feng acknowledges.

“Yes, our dragon lady that performs for the men with her razor fans. She makes a lot of money,” Sadie answers.

“She tells me you treat her well and you are trying to find a way to fund a school so women don’t have to, how do you say, sell themselves?” Feng puts two tiger’s testicles in a blue cotton bag.

Victoria grins in a way that the Chinese man can feel it where he feels he shouldn’t, “That’s the plan.” She takes the blue bag and taps him lovingly

on the shoulder, informing, “I’ll tell Drago you don’t have to pay for his security this month.”

“Xie Xie,” Feng bows slightly but stops half way.

The store’s hallway chimes as the two women walk into the street. It isn’t far to their car, but an impulse buzzes in Victoria’s mind. She scans the area for the unknown, poised, her ears following a reflection out of place.

“We aren’t alone, Sadie. We are being followed. I really wish you would have armed yourself,” Victoria says as her eyes witness a flash from above. A shimmer from sun hitting metal, up in the windows of a dying, ashy skyscraper.

The impact of bullets on the car occurs before the sound. Victoria’s instinct is to pull Sadie behind the car while she fires and gets to the driver’s seat. Her grip is fast and saves her comrade.

“They are shooting down from that building? Damn, can’t a woman even buy groceries anymore without being shot at?” Victoria yells.

Sadie climbs though the rumble seat trunk to the passenger side, keeping her head down. Victoria takes good aim into the sky and fires. Glass breaks and the firing stops.

“I am not used to this,” Victoria says with a slight laugh.

“Who knew trying for peace for women would end up with so much murder?” Sadie nervously rambles.

“Omelets, I suppose.” She starts the engine and with a few turns of the

steering wheel chimes, “They might have hit the poor lady a few times.”

“You still call cars ladies?”

“Throw back via Drago. But I am learning from the best.”

“There will come a day when men learn from us.”

“They already do. Maybe not so much where you want to be. I know even if you got a degree, men in surgery would laugh at you. But, you can work for us, right? Taking care of your own. You teach everyone.”

“Do you think of the people you kill?”

“Yes, I think I saved them from shooting me. Let’s get back to Beryl.”

A crowd of children runs through the street as they head back to Drago’s soon to be speakeasy and the dilapidated birthing hospital. Six girls play charades in the street. Grime clings to their hands and faces. The alley is their home and they decorate it like a demented version of what domestic life would be: a picture of a landscape nailed above an old couch by the garbage bin, a broken oven and a toy box filled with games and matches. Victoria’s head reels with thoughts of Beryl. She stops the car.

“You girls should come with me,” Victoria commands.

“What is it in for us?” one of the girls taunts.

“What’s your name?” Victoria says.

“Catherine. But people call me Cat.”

“Are you leader of these girls?”

“I would like to think so. I’m the oldest. It’s my right. I am almost fourteen.”

“I can give you jobs and a place to curl up at night. I know I’ve seen some of your girls around and your numbers keep getting smaller and smaller. Come with me.”

“You aren’t going to sell us to them? Make us work doing...you know?”

“Have you heard of the Killdeer?”

“Yes, of course. Everyone has.”

“I lead them.”

“Really?”

“You girls will never see a hard day with me. I will try to give you jobs you can do, food on your plates. All you need to do is get in the car. It isn’t a gaff. We won’t make you perform for men.”

“We should Cat, I am hungry,” one of the other girls replies.

“It has to be better than the streets. Maybe we could have a pet wherever the Killdeer are. Could we have a dog?” Cat enquires.

“Of course.” Victoria says, smirking at the odd request.

“Could I learn the piano?” another asks.

“Yes, there is one in the parlor.”

“I miss having fruit,” a small voice seasons the air.

Cat thinks for a while and pauses. “It’s against my better judgment, but I am tired of sleeping with one eye open. I don’t want to be kidnapped and that threat is all around. It’s time to trust someone.”

Victoria guides the kids into the vehicle, not sure what to do with them. All six are so skinny they fit in the back of the car and the rumble seat.

“Great, more mouths to feed, just when Shorter has gotten The Pill down,” Sadie reels.

“The Pill, the one to defeat what our enemy is doing to us? With the flu? I mean, it’s only been a few years, but it’s killed so many people,” Victoria states, keeping her eyes on the road.

“I have three of them in my pocket,” Sadie sighs. She starts to explain, “The scientists are putting it in the Big Apple water supply to try to scare the Germans back into the ocean. The French can help us. We promised them land in exchange. Shorter says these pills not only cause a woman not to carry children, but it makes their bodies stronger in the long run, due to his new formulation. Imagine those hausfraus running the land with a stiff hand and metal bones. Glad the flu took them out before that could happen! But these are experimental.”

“Maybe I should test it on someone here,” Victoria says.

“You don’t mean the girls in back?” Sadie whispers.

“No, Beryl.”

“Why Beryl?”

“Because her body can’t produce milk and won’t be able to go through the strains of childhood again. Does she really want that baby? I wonder what happens if you give it to a pregnant lady.”

The noise of the shot-up engine makes it hard for the girls in back to hear anything. Cat wonders if she made the wrong choice.

Sadie takes the herbs they bought at the medicine shop and runs them through her hand. She cautiously holds the jar over bumps as she takes a pill out of her hand and smashes it in the herbal mixture. She states, “I don’t feel right doing this, but you know in my heart of hearts, she will hate that child because of the ravishing that happened to make her. My science side makes me feel like I can report it to Shorter. Am I becoming like everyone else in the war?”

“No, Sadie. We just want to make things better. A little violence can’t be helped.”

“This commotion is driving me crazy!” Drago yells, over the combined ruckus of hammers and the chanting that has risen from Perpetua and Azalea in Beryl’s room. A drum thunders in the space. Dames, Drago says, but then tries to change his thought. Cacophony wins. He says a prayer to St. Dismas in his head.

“We are back,” Sadie announces. “I should get this to Beryl.”

Sadie knocks on the door. The chanting stops.

A voice demands as a dark arm extends out the cracked door, “Give me the herbs, now!”

“We can’t come in?” Victoria asks.

A thunder comes from the door slamming on rusty worn hinges. Victoria reaches for the doorknob, to force her way in with her leggy frame, but it is locked.

“I guess not.” Sadie adds, her charming smile showing off her dimples, “Maybe it is for the best, Dear?”

Drago storms into the room, hearing the chorus of yelling and booms. Where are his boys? His goons? Clearly, he is outnumbered and he fumbles for his cigarette pack. Black market cigarettes were the best. This room was already impacting his immaculate grey suit.

“What is it with all the ragamuffins in here?” Drago lights up a smoke.

“They are acting like they own the place!”

“I adopted them, so they are our kids now. Our happy family.” Victoria smiles.

“These kids will be raised Catholic, none of this jungle mumbo-jumbo. It makes me uneasy,” Drago tells her, giving her a little hug. He blows a line of white smoke and sighs, “Ah, the pitter-patter of little feet. Some of these look like they could be ours. Or mine.”

“Do you have some explaining to do to me?” Victoria flirts. “Sadie just opened her business and they can sleep there.”

“In a house of ill-repute? Are you serious? I mean, you aren’t going to make them work there? Some of these girls look twelve or under,” Drago plays with one of his large rings as he remarks. He straightens his tie and fixes his hat.

“No, not at first. I mean, once they get older they can choose. But I thought with Sadie around, she could be a teacher to them, teach them science and math. I could teach them art. Despite our business, we can give them a good home,” Victoria reasons.

The girls explore the insides of the building while they talk. Sadie motions to them and they follow her to Sadie’s new business upstairs.

“Orphanage-brothel. How are you going to keep those things separate?” Drago asks.

“We will manage.” She puts her arm on his shoulder. “Don’t we always?”

“The room is quiet.” Drago says.

“I hope nothing went wrong!” Victoria rushes to the door. Barging in with all her weight, the door hinge bends and breaks as Victoria gets her way.

Azalea is holding Beryl’s baby girl. The room is full of blood. It is everywhere: on the walls, the floor, even some of the ceiling, sprayed up messages from a red fountain. Beryl isn’t there. Neither is Perpetua. The baby seems large for as thin as Beryl was. She already nurses at Azalea’s

chest. The child has a necklace around her neck, dangling loosely under her face and tiny feather wisps of silver-blond hair that snake from the top of her head. Marjoram emits a cry for the mother who isn't there.

“Where's Beryl?” Victoria demands.

“Her and Perpetua are gone. They are inner-adventuring. I don't know how to explain it to you Americans. There was something powerful in those herbs. They gave up so much blood and they got faint like ghosts. Beryl said something about revenge and they disappeared into the ether. I feel a saint is leading them,” Azalea informs her.

Sadie tricks the orphans into cleaning up the bloody mess for a pile of chocolate chip cookies and milk. She holds Azalea's son, Felicity, in her arms, as a place is made in one of the bordello's rooms for a nursery. Azalea swaddles the baby girl. The two children have the same metal charms around their necks, Sadie notices. She tries to run her hands under the necklace Azalea's son wears. It looks like the sketch of a plant. Azalea's arms gracefully move along the edge of the baby girl's cloth. Her lithe arms encircle the child like a dance move of an ingénue, yet Sadie senses something older under the flesh. Sadie's fingers move to touch the necklace on the ebony boy in her arms, trying to read the symbols. A child so young shouldn't be wearing jewelry, she thinks to herself and her polished nails walk toward the clasp.

“Never take it off!” Azalea yells at her, her violet eyes flaring. “If you want the next generation to make the faults of the ancestors right, you need to follow our rituals. Beryl followed them.”

“So, why not make Beryl appear earlier? Before she was deformed and ravished? If you have power, why not use it when it would work the best?”

“It isn’t mine. The saints don’t work by human rules. They work when they want to. At the end of it, I saw their eyes turn dark grey, like they were the dead. I was surprised this baby doesn’t have them too. But hers are blue as the sky.”

“Does she have a name?” Sadie puts Felicity down. She rakes her fingernails over the girl’s necklace. “It looks like a Marjoram plant with script on it I can’t read.”

“Beryl wanted to name her that.”

“Why? Why not Marge? Or Margaret? Maybe I shouldn’t be asking this of a woman who names her male child Felicity? Why not Felix? That would be the obvious choice, right?”

“And you women are supposed to be fighting for freedom, when you bicker about name choices like old housewives? Ha! I named my son Felicity because I called a spirit inside of me. I married a spirit and that spirit gave him life. He said to name the child Felicity. Perpetua and I were afraid of Beryl’s child. I thought a bad spirit had entered her, to make her feel pain in the worse way, to make the child evil. We will fight it with charms and kindness.”

“That is why Victoria feels the way she does.”

“What way?”

“That this child shouldn’t live.”

“Every child should be able to live. It isn’t written in stone and I promised to my saint I would raise Felicity and Marjoram in a place that wasn’t a whorehouse.”

“Where would you go?”

“Beryl told me of some uncles she has. They run a garage. They will take us in. She said they can get me a job doing a hard days’ work.”

“And you don’t want a easy day’s work being a dancer? You could make a lot of money with your look?”

“Maybe I don’t want to exploit my looks anymore. Maybe Beryl didn’t want me to show Marjoram that looks are the only thing that matters in being a girl,” Azalea rocks the baby in her arms.

“This country isn’t as liberal as France, New Canada or some of your more wild countries, like where you are born. It’s hard for women, especially dark ones.”

“I have to try. Why would I lock myself up in a prison of my own making? Victoria and you fight hard. But some of us don’t want to. We don’t want to suffer.”

“The suffering now will make a bright future, right?”

“I am sure Victoria will give her blessing to see us gone. I am listing her as godmother with our church.”

“Church?”

“I am Catholic.”

“A weird type of Catholic.”

“We can have a talk sometime about it if you wish. I see you as a strong woman. You are a madam and treat your girls well. You won’t let those orphan girls be taken advantage of. But, it isn’t my life or Beryl’s. If Victoria wants to read it, she can have Beryl’s journal. I can barely read English myself.”

“You speak well.”

“I was born here. My sister in our homeland. She worked with Beryl’s parents.”

“Were they ever found?”

“No. Perpetua and Beryl are trying to find them.”

“Where did they go?”

“I don’t know. Give the book to Victoria. Maybe it is best we leave soon. Could you drive us to this address—32 Hornet Avenue?”

“I can take you there. Collect your things. If you ever change your mind, there is a room here across the city. Free hot meal whenever you need.”

“I am sure Victoria will see her bloom into a lovely girl, that might take time. Where I am from, time is a different thing, a feeling. Not clocks.”

“An enigma,” Sadie says puzzled and looks at Felicity and the symbol on his necklace that strangely looks like a tobacco plant.

“I have my bag packed. I don’t have much.”

Sadie pulls a large wad of bills out of her purse and asks, “Do you have money? Here, I insist.”

“You are kind, but, no.”

“I’d feel better if...at least buy some Chicagoland style clothes, so you will fit in. Immigrants are looked on badly here and though I love your kanga, a conservative suit would make you less of a target on the streets.”

“Thanks for your concern,” Azalea comments, looking at her brightly patterned purple dress, swirling with black dashes and white flowers, handmade by her mother. She continues, “But I have my traditions and they have to ring true. I am shocked you know what a kanga is, though it has a different name where I am from.”

They leave the rooms of velvet pillows and vivid satin couches of Sadie’s cathouse to climb into a beat up cobalt Dorris and head to the address on Hornet Avenue.

There is a sign there. Paul, Saul and Raul...PSR Automotive. Sadie idles the engine while Azalea gets out.

“You know the address now, don’t be a stranger. Get Victoria to read that

book and she will understand,” Azalea waves as a man comes out of the side door. Sadie sees the brown hair and green eyes of the man, though his face is covered in a beard. He takes Marjoram in his arms and they walk inside. Sadie comfortably sighs and fixes her curled black hair in the mirror of the car. Her brown eyes follow the family to their living room window and she drives off, satisfied.

Two months later, Shorter stands in Sadie’s stopgap lab room. Admiring him, she tries to adjust his glasses, which have a slight crack in one of the lenses. They are green glass lenses that supposedly help his vision problems.

“So, you ok we gave those pills to your girls?” Shorter enquires, wiping his large hands on his jacket after he has washed them. He comments, “I need to figure out if they work. New formulation.”

Sadie gazes at his hairy palms, “Yeah, most of my girls took them without protest. They decided the life I gave them was easy, if they didn’t get pregnant or the pox. You said The Pill cures both, you ain’t kiddin’.”

“It was the best place to experiment. I am sure you didn't say what it was, right? That is making me guilty. It must be making you feel guilty too. I see you purchased a new piano and a French bulldog for the orphans. What are you going to name the dog?”

“I’ll let the girls name him. They squeal playing catch with him. I just wanted something that wouldn’t scare the johns,” Sadie says with a pause and then states hesitantly, “Eric, I’ve been thinking of taking it myself.”

“The Pill? Why?”

“Because us women create horrors.”

“You think that way?”

“Humanity is a cesspool. Look at all the war, the crimes in the streets. All of it can be stopped by us.”

“So your world domination plan is to take humans out of the picture?”

“We can end it.”

“By a Lysistratan oath you can never return from? What if the war is over in ten years and we want to settle down and have kids?”

“We will adopt, Shorter. You see all these kids around? I feel the depressed and downtrodden are my responsibility. You told me you thought the war wouldn’t end. And see, the Germans flew zeppelins over the sea with strange machines you thought were from outer space. They are still here.”

“Blimps are menacing, but they can be shot down easily. So it is with the invading force. My pill is to stop their numbers, not ours. I received the final pieces to make our women, well you and yours, stronger. It was in a Travelling Disc. I found it in a field, thinking it was the virus, but it was something more.”

“I want to stop the camps we have. Who is the enemy anymore? If we can’t trust our own soldiers to not hurt our women, where else can we go but to pull the literal plug out of the human race and not make more of them?”

Shorter brushes a loose curl off of Sadie's forehead, "This is why I love you. Your thoughts are completely your own. But you listen way too much to Victoria. She will rally troops to her, the gangs too, she will change things. But it will be so much blood spilled. I feel women will gain rights anyway. I feel the baby camps are a backlash to women who refuse to be in the kitchen."

Sadie grins as she kisses Shorter lightly, "You should call The Pill, Lysistratrix."

"It's a good name. I want to get more of this component, Sadie. The downside is that I see it causing liver disease in the long run, all that metal. But this new component, it creates strength. Not only would the people who take it never get liver disease, they wouldn't get diseases like cancer either. It's worth my life to try to get my hands on it."

He turns on the radio and its waves create outlines of people on a tiny screen. It shows the war effort in fuzzy form. Green analog lines. The announcer fires out detail about the Battle of the Stem, the nickname for Germany landing on the islands of NYC. How the French have created a New Canada from defeating them...how they have immigrated in record numbers to get land promised to them by the Americans, if they can make America free from the Nazi influence...it's a new term they haven't heard before.

"One day, they will move into Chicagoland and take it over. When I was a kid, Shorter, I could play in the street without fear a bullet would hit me or I would be kidnapped by devils. On either side. I thought life was supposed to get better. Remember those ads for the City of Tomorrow?"

“Well, they still are there.”

“Partially destroyed. My favorite one is where it broke right where the family’s smiling heads were. A decapitated group of bodies, playing in the sands.”

Shorter puts on his out of fashion hat and wool trench coat and remarks, “They want me to make sure this gets into the water supply, but only theirs. You don’t have to take it.”

“I know.”

“The second version will be better. It only has a bit of that strengthening element in it now. I beg of you to not until I return. You and your ladies will only get this second version, not the army. Who knows what this new strengthening element would do if it got into German hands?”

Sadie kisses him and gives him a long hug, whispering in his ear, “Take my ring. It will fit on your pinkie.”

She gives him a ring with a ruby stone in it.

“Listen to the radio often. I will send you messages in code. If you want to work in my lab, it is yours. You are selling yourself short with the brothel. You have so much more to give. You have a mind as lovely as your eyes. Once I get the formula down, you will create it with me.”

Shorter walks out of the building and Sadie watches him from the window of her business. An army truck awaits his journey and a crowd has gathered to watch it leave. He knows Sadie's heart, her deeper soul, is not with him. He palms the ring anyway, sighing for what could be.

Surrounded by a regal uniformed troop, he is a hero. Outside, but never in. His lips want to ask if she is true, but memory desires her doe eyes to be that romantic vision he has seen in darkened theaters, not the reality of her withdraw or yelling back at his accusation. There is no more time.

“Do you want to do this with me?” Victoria moves her red bangs out of her face and presents two pills.

No messages from Shorter. It’s been a year. Sadie feels the tears in the back of her eyes but stops them. She ponders the birthday party she will have for Marjoram instead. Victoria has gotten use to the girl being a good soul, she assumes, as she scans the room to reveal a present that Victoria brought for the child, along with colorful balloons and a cake.

“I couldn’t think of sharing this moment with anyone but you,” Sadie leans in to kiss Victoria on the lips. Victoria returns the passionate movement. “I should feed you The Pill,” Sadie licks the corner of Victoria’s mouth.

“If Drago ever found out about us...”

“It’s Drago, Vic. He would think it was his birthday, a ménage a trios gift. And no, he wouldn’t mind it.”

“Then why don’t you tell him?”

“Some things are better secret and besides, there is Shorter to consider. He sees you as a blushing bride, Sadie.”

“I don’t think he is coming back. I think the war will claim him or has.”

Victoria changes the subject, “Can we choke it back with whiskey?”

“I am surprised you don’t want to use your namesake liqueur.”

“It’s way too sweet, much like you are,” Victoria purrs, as she touches her on the arm and moves to bite Sadie’s ear.

Sadie moves back from the bite, “Shorter says it doesn’t matter. I really wish we had the new formulation. This isn’t stable.”

“It is this or nothing, Sadie, choose.”

Sadie’s face lies inanimate for a few minutes. She reflects over Shorter and then looks at Victoria, in her low-cut dress and beckoning gloved arms. No message came. Not a single one. Perhaps he found a nurse to snuggle up against in an army bed. At least, he would be alive then.

“Ok.” Sadie’s face revitalizes. “If he is dead, he’d want us to do this, even if it wasn’t perfected. He’d want me to be happy and with you, I am happy.”

Victoria hands her a lowball glass of whiskey, “We will do it on a count of three...one, two, three.”

The women down the pills and the whiskey. They clink their glasses.

“Here’s to revolution!” Victoria smiles and they kiss again.

“Let’s go see Marjoram and let the party begin!” Sadie laughs and feels

stronger. Perhaps it is already working? Her eyes seem like the brown is merging with steel in her compact as she opens it, but she quickly closes it. The two women pack the car with gifts for Marjoram's first birthday and head down to the garage.

THE END

N.R. Grabe fights the good fight on many fronts. She has currently written an article of tea, its history and rituals for “Steampunk Magazine” and is a freelance writer by trade, yet this runs hand in hand with her revamped yet fledgling film making career, having been both co-author and video editor on the 2013 film short, “From Grace”. She lives in the intoxicating yet dilapidating land of broken dreams and palm trees with her hyperactive satyr and robotic kitten. The totality of her work offers a complete sensory experience. You can fill your mind, tummy, nose and imagination with her creations. Sniff, drink, read and escape.

Visit N.R.'s savory sundry shop, NyxWorks, on Etsy for a custom perfume or tea, for a loved one, yourself or persona from a different dimension. She also takes her show on the steampunk and dieselpunk roads to conventions to teach people about custom tea and perfumes. See the link below for announcements of a workshop near you!

www.etsy.com/shop/NyxWorks

If you'd like to learn more about N.R. or see more of her work, you can visit her on Goodreads.

www.goodreads.com/nrgrabe

You can join Wild Marjoram on another adventure! Be sure to check out the whole five part serial *The Uproar in the Broken Apple Road Trip*. This series contains the first two novellas, *Wild Marjoram: The Vote* and *Wild Marjoram: The Detour* out currently, the upcoming battle for NYC called *Wild Majoram: The Sptifire*, to be released in 2014 and the future novellas that will tell both the Fate of those who fought the battle for NYC and their sojourn into the prosperously gleaming alternate Detroit called Chrome City. Please also peruse the short story, “The Pill” found

in the free *Epulp Sampler Volume One* to learn more about WM's dystopian yet hopeful world.

Search for Wild Marjoram on your favorite eBookstore and download your copy today.

N.R. Grabe's other ebooks include, *Slave to Marshmallows: A Steampunk Novella in Three Parts* and *Pussyfoot and Poppycock: Post-Future Poetry*.

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THE MALTESE SPECTRUM

Created by Rick “Paladin” Pratt

The first time I met Mr. Richard Devon was when my secretary showed him into my office. He was a man of middling height in a plain but meticulously cut gray suit. His stiff formal posture made him seem taller than he was, and with his short well-coiffed gray hair and stern dark-eyed visage, he exuded the air of a successful, confident man of business.

I rose to meet him with an extended hand, which he took in a firm but not overly strong grip.

“You are Mr. Grant?” He asked.

“So they tell me,” I said, straight faced.

A slight look of consternation crossed his countenance.

Oh well, I guess big shot business men can’t afford a sense of humor to go

along with their expensive suits and chauffeured cars. One of these days my sarcasm was going to get me in a real jam.

I gestured to the chair facing my desk.

“Please have a seat, Mr. Devon, and tell me what I can do for you.”

He hesitated for a moment then seated himself. From his breast pocket he removed a gold cigarette case and a telescoping cigarette holder. Placing a cigarette in the holder he lit it with a lighter that looked like a gold nugget.

I had already dropped into my chair. I shook a Lucky Strike out of a deck and struck a match on my desktop to light it. Looking at him through the smoke, I waited for him to begin.

“I want you to find my daughter.”

Straight to the point, I like that in a client.

“I am a widower, Mr. Grant. My daughter Cynthia is my only child, and I have perhaps been over indulgent with her whims as a result. She has become a headstrong and willful young woman, and I have sometimes been at my wit’s end attempting to cope with her fiery nature.”

“I own a house on the north shore of Long Island,” He continued. “While staying there this summer, my daughter became involved with a man much older than she. It began one night, when we attending a garden party at the estate of a business associate. It was then that we made the acquaintance of a Mr. Gerald Osbourne. Mr. Osbourne struck me as a man who was, ahem, new to his wealth. He had not the manners of a proper gentleman. In fact, I would go so far as to say that he gave the impression

of having made his money by dubious means.”

“You mean he’s a gangster?” I asked.

“Perhaps,” He answered, “perhaps so. In any event, my daughter was apparently charmed by his common, uncouth behavior. She spent a great deal of time speaking with him, far too much time. It was completely improper. I attempted to take her aside to discuss her behavior, but she became enraged and threatened to make a scene. I managed to remove her from the party, and we returned home. I had hoped that within a few days the matter would be behind us, but it was not to be.

Cynthia refused to speak with me. She locked herself in her rooms and would only venture forth to take her meals. I was somewhat angered by her behavior and I attempted to confine her to the house, but she apparently found means to sneak out without my knowledge.”

“I eventually became aware that she was meeting with this scoundrel; they had been observed together in town by my driver. I attempted to put a stop to it at once. I forbade her to have any further contact with the rogue, and I sent a man of my employ around to dissuade him from attempting to contact her again.”

“I guess your man wasn’t quite persuasive enough, or you wouldn’t be here talking to me now,” I interjected.

“Quite right,” he said. “The villain absconded with her. I’ve been able to learn that they traveled here to Manhattan, but I have been unable to discover their whereabouts in the city.”

“Assuming they’re still here,” I interjected.

“I have reason to believe they are,” he said. “Mr. Osbourne claimed to have extensive business interests, as well as a permanent residence in this city.”

“How old is your daughter?” I asked.

“She is twenty one,” He answered.

“You do realize,” I said, “that she is legally an adult. She can run off and marry any damn fool she pleases.”

“I’m aware of that,” he said. “Yet, I am also aware of your reputation, Mr. Grant. I am quite certain that your investigations of Mr. Osbourne will bear fruit, and that in light of these revelations you can convince him that it would be in his best interest to cut off his relationship with my daughter. Once this has been achieved I believe Cynthia will return to me of her own accord.”

“You’re sure Osbourne is dirty?” I asked.

“Quite certain,” he said with conviction.

“Well then, Mr. Devon, I’ll take your case.” I leaned forward in my chair.

“There is of course the matter of my retainer.”

“Of course,” he said. “Would five hundred dollars be sufficient?”

My eyes opened a little wider. “Quite generous! Although in all fairness I have to tell you I was only going to ask for a hundred.”

“No matter, Mr. Grant. I wish to see to all your needs now. This way, should any unforeseen business expenses arise during the course of your investigation, you would not find it necessary to contact me. I should like to keep this matter as discreet as possible.” As he was speaking he removed an envelope and some photographs from his breast pocket and slid them across the desk. I looked at the photos first. One was a group shot at a party. Devon reached over and pointed at a tall thin dark-haired man in the second row. “That is Mr. Osbourne.”

I glanced at the second picture and tried not to whistle. Cynthia Devon was quite a looker! “Redhead?” I asked. She had the look, but of course you can’t tell in a photograph. Devon nodded.

“I left my card with your secretary. Please contact me when you have found both my daughter and the evidence necessary to separate her from Mr. Osbourne.”

He rose. We shook hands, and then taking his hat, he left.

“Penny!” I called to my secretary. Then I opened a desk drawer, took out a bottle and two glasses, and set them on top.

Penny came into the office; her eyebrow rose in a questioning manner. She saw the bottle and smiled; then sauntered over and sat in my lap crossing her long legs.

“We have a case?” She asked.

“We do.” I leaned forward to pour us a couple of drinks and her long blonde hair brushed against my cheek. “And a five hundred dollar

retainer.”

She stopped in the act of lifting her drink and stared at me open mouthed.

“Drink up, Sweetheart,” I said with a lopsided grin.

She downed it in one shot. Then she jumped off my lap and said excitedly, “Well what are you waiting for? Get out there and solve this case!”

I sighed and then swallowed my own drink. “You sure know how to kill a mood.”

“Never mind that. Get out there and earn that five hundred bucks.”

Shaking my head and chuckling, I stood, and walked over to get my hat. As I passed her, I gave Penny a playful swat on the bottom. She yelped, then turned with her hands on her hips, and fixed me with a stern glare. I gave her another grin then beat a hasty retreat.

Out on the street, I climbed up to the platform of a gyrotaxi stand and pressed the button on the pole to hail a cab. The light on top of the pole began to flash, and after a few minutes I saw one swerve down towards me. I stepped back against the rail as he came in for a landing, holding on to my hat so the wind from the prop and the top rotor didn't blow it away.

I climbed in, and the pilot turned around to glance at me. “Where to Mac?”

“Eighth and Fifty Third Street,” I said.

As the gyrotaxi took off and began to navigate the congested canyons of the New York streets, I settled back in my seat to think. Finding someone in a city of almost two million people was not an easy job, even with a photo and a name. But I had a good idea of how to go about looking for Ms. Devon and her shady companion. The Black Orchid Ballroom was a popular nightspot. A wealthy young woman who was fond of parties and night life would be almost certain to go there at some point, and the owner was a friend of mine.

Even if they didn't go to the Orchid, chances were that they wouldn't be the stay-at-home types. I would just have to visit all the bars and dance halls until I found them or someone who had seen them.

The cabbie dropped me off on the platform I had asked. I tossed him a fin and told him to keep the change, then took the elevator down to the street. The Black Orchid was in the middle of Fifty-Third. It was the middle of the day so the place was closed, but I knew that Tom would be in. I knocked on the delivery door and Tom himself answered. "Johnny! What are you doing in this part of town?"

"Business, Tom," I said as he lead me into his office. "I'm looking for a girl."

"Ain't you always," he laughed.

I smiled. "Yeah, well this time I'm working on a case." I took out the photograph of Cynthia Devon. "Have you seen this girl?"

He took the photo and studied it for a moment. "Yeah. Yeah, I seen her. She's been here a few times. She was here just the other night with a

fella.”

Bingo! “A fella huh? Was it this guy?” I passed him the other picture.

“Yeah, that’s him. Nasty piece a work that guy. I seen him here before.”

“Oh yeah?” I raised an eyebrow in interest.

“Yeah. I don’t know his name but I seen him with Vinnie The Finger.”

I whistled. Vinnie “The Finger” Carpone was a big man in the city’s underworld. He had a “finger” in every form of illegal activity; from prostitution, to gambling, to bank jobs. If it was illegal and there was money to be made, Vinnie had a piece of it. If Osbourne was one of his boys this business could get really ugly.

“Do you think he works for him?” I asked.

“I don’t know for sure. It ain’t healthy to know too much about The Finger, if you know what I mean, but I don’t think he does. The couple of times I seen him with Vinnie and his soldiers he didn’t come here with them, and one of Vinnie’s goons patted him down before he was allowed to sit at the table.”

I nodded. Probably not one of Vinnie’s boys, but maybe an associate. I could check on that later. “Thanks, Tom, I’ll be by tonight to drink some of your rotgut.”

Tom laughed then turned serious. “Fine, Johnny, but if you’re gonna be working-”

“Don’t worry,” I said. “If they’re here all I’m gonna do is watch them.”

“I hope so,” he said. “I just finished cleaning up after the last time you worked in my joint.”

I gave him my most sincere grin. “Trust me.”

I grabbed a gyrotaxi and headed over to Times Square. It dropped me off on the platform at the north end at the corner of 47th. It was early, and the neon splendor of the square had not yet awakened to its nighttime brilliance, but it was still busy. They say the place is the “crossroads of the world,” and that everyone comes there eventually. I don’t know about that, but there were sure a whole lot of people there. It was all I could do to force my way down the sidewalk. It would be a hard place to find someone if you didn’t know where to look; luckily for me, I did. Around the corner in an alley off of 42nd street I found my man.

Jimmy Parks was a lanky sallow-faced punk in a dirty newsboy’s cap with a cheap cigarette pasted in the corner of his mouth. He was a small time crook and pimp, and he was one of my regular informants—though not by his own choice. I had some really good dirt on old Jimmy, dirt that would earn him a pair of cement shoes if I whispered it in the right ear.

As usual, he wasn’t very happy to see me.

“Jeez, Grant! Are you tryin’ to get me killed? What are you doin’ here in broad daylight?”

“Relax, Jimmy,” I said, placing my hand on his shoulder. “Why don’t you

step into my office so we can talk in private.” I shoved him down the alley then pushed him behind a dumpster.

Jimmy responded with a couple of words that would have gotten a mouth full of soap and a ruler across the knuckles in a good Catholic school. I just backhanded him across the face.

“Watch your language, Jimmy, I have delicate ears.”

“You can’t just come down here and slap me around!” He was getting himself all riled up. “I got friends see! I know fellas who can take care of you!”

I didn’t have time for one of Jimmy’s tantrums. I grabbed him by his tie and slammed his head against the brick wall a few times then pulled him up on his toes, his face close to mine. I can look really mean and ugly when I put my mind to it, and I gave old Jimmy boy the full effect.

“Listen up slimeball!” I growled in his face. “The only reason you’re still sucking air is because you sometimes make yourself useful to me! If the cops stuck you behind bars or your boss threw you in the river it wouldn’t mean a thing to me! You’re just a low life no good pimp! So if you want to keep breathing you better try real hard to keep me happy!”

His eyes were big and round with terror, I think he actually wet his pants. I tossed him back against the wall. His legs gave out and he collapsed to the grimy pavement.

“Get up!” I barked in disgust.

He pushed himself shakily to his feet.

“I didn’t mean nothin’ honest,” he gasped. “I was just kiddin’. Really I was! What do you need, Grant? I’ll tell you anythin’! Anythin’ you want!”

I stared at him with my evil face for a little bit longer just to make sure, then I took out the picture of Osbourne and showed it to him.

“You know this guy?”

His eyes got wider for a moment then he looked back at me and flinched.

“Yeah,” he said, looking down at his feet. “I know him.”

“Well?” I growled.

He flinched again. “His name’s Fletcher, Adam Fletcher. He’s a fence. Deals mostly in high-end merchandise; expensive jewelry, artwork, stuff like that.”

I kept up my level stare. “How do you know so much about him, Jimmy? That’s not your usual racket?”

“I-I did a job for him. Me and a mick named Sean. He gave us the lowdown on a Park Avenue apartment. He paid off the help to get us in and we robbed the joint. It was a funny job. All he wanted was this crate that was in the safe. That’s what Sean was for; he’s a first-rate cracker. So we gets him this crate and we get to have the rest of the take. Jewelry, dough, silver and gold plates and candlesticks! All sorts of stuff! It was the best haul I ever seen! All he wants is this one lousy crate!”

“What did this crate look like? How big was it?” I asked.

“It was about the size of a suitcase, but it was heavy. Oh yeah, it had writin’ on it, words and numbers.”

“What did it say?” I asked.

He made a face. “I ain’t never learned to read. I dropped out of school in the third grade.”

I sighed. “All right, what else?”

“Well, like I said it was the best haul I ever seen. We moved it down the freight elevator. Fletcher had a truck waitin’ for us. I figured when he saw all we got he’d change his mind and want a cut, but he just smiled and said good work. Then he took his crate and left. So I figure I’ll take my half and retire. Move south or somethin’. Sean and me was laying low in an old warehouse waitin’ to move the loot. We stayed together to keep an eye on each other, you know. So one of us didn’t try to cheat the other.”

I nodded.

“Well, I had gone down to the corner to get somethin’ to eat, when all of a sudden I hear a bunch of shootin’ comin’ from the warehouse. I look outside and I sees a whole bunch of cops in front of the place and more goin’ in the doors. So I beat it, I figured after they got Sean they’d come lookin’ for me. I found out later that the stupid mick got hisself killed tryin’ to shoot it out with the cops! At first I was afraid that Fletcher had set us up. I found out later that it was Sean’s fault. He’d pulled a bank job a couple of months before but he’d screwed it up. He missed a bank guard and the old duffer had gotten some shots off at him. Sean only got away with a small bag of dough from one of the tellers and it was marked! The

stupid bum had been spendin' it all over town! The cops didn't know nothin' about me or our loot when they raided the place. They thought they was just goin' after one mad dog killer of a bank robber. So I lost it all for nothin'!"

"Tough break," I said. I wasn't exactly consoling about it.

He gave me a sour look but he went on with his story. "I went to Fletcher to see if he could help me out, seein' as I'd done the job for him in the first place, but the cheap bum told me that if I couldn't hold on to my money that it was my problem not his!"

He looked at me and his face was hard. "If you want to take him down be my guest! I done that job for him and I ain't got nothin' to show for it. Arrest him, kill him for all I care!"

I went down to the Automat and got myself the afternoon paper, a sandwich, and a cup of coffee. I thought about the case as I drank. It was shaping up nicely. I figured I had enough dirt on Osbourne or Fletcher or whatever he wanted to call himself to convince him to back off. Still, there was something about this case that bothered me, but I couldn't put my finger on it. Something just didn't feel right. I chased my thoughts around through two more cups but I couldn't pin down what it was.

Then I looked at the paper.

Hitler had invaded Poland.

Not again! Dear God not again!

I remembered the last war well enough, far too well.

I remembered in 1918, when we thought the war was about to end. Then the German land ironclads had come rolling over no man's land, blasting the British tanks into so much scrap metal and pushing our lines back to the breaking point. It had taken another four years of hard fighting and that crazy young officer, Patton, President Roosevelt's golden boy, to finally beat them. He'd convinced Teddy to buy those weird tricycle tanks from the Russians. They were light on armor but Patton used them like the old horse cavalry, and they ran rings around the land ironclads, shooting out their tracks then swarming them, like wolves taking down a bear. Even after the President died in 1919, no one could argue with Patton's success.

We'd won. Yes, in the end we'd won.

But we'd had to wade neck deep in blood to do it.

The paper's editorial column was a fiery piece in support of America's policy of neutrality. "The American people," it said, "had had their fill of foreign wars."

They wanted no part in this one.

By the time I left it was dark outside. I went to the corner platform and hailed a gyrotaxi. The trip downtown to the Orchid took longer than I had expected. Sky traffic was heavy and Broadway was crowded with advertising dirigibles. Even so, when I got to the club the crowd was still light. I got myself a drink, found a dark corner, and settled down to watch.

The floor show that night was Professor Jaxon Sax And His Automatic Orchestra. The Professor was a crazy looking old fossil with wild white hair and a mismatched suit. His “Orchestra” was a gigantic clanking monstrosity. It looked like a piston engine from a destroyer that had gotten into a traffic accident with a trumpet factory. The professor was jumping around and waving his baton at the behemoth while it chugged along and blasted notes out its trumpet bells. Whether his conducting actually affected the thing or not I had no idea, but it didn’t sound half bad.

I turned my attention back to the crowd. It was the usual mix of city regulars and tourists out for a night on the town. I spotted an obviously “green” pickpocket trying his best to work the crowd and I discretely pointed him out to one of Tom’s bouncers.

It was going on midnight by my jump hour watch, and I was starting to think they wouldn’t show tonight when suddenly I saw her—Cynthia Devon, big as life and even better looking than her photograph. Her long red hair was fashionably pinned up and she was wearing a red evening gown that hugged her curves in such a way that I almost forgot what I was supposed to be doing. I finally managed to drag my gaze from her figure long enough to scan the crowd for Osbourne, or Fletcher or whatever he was calling himself, but he was nowhere to be seen. She took a table not far from the corner I was lurking in.

From the moment she sat down she appeared to be agitated. Was she waiting for Osbourne? Maybe someone else? She turned down a number of prospective suitors asking for a dance, and as time went by she appeared to become more anxious. After an hour had passed she stood up and headed for the door. I followed after her at a distance making sure not to lose sight of her. I knew that if she headed for a car or tried to hail a cab

or a gyro I'd have to move fast, but when she got outside she turned left and headed east on foot. I followed her to the end of the block, then she turned and started across the street towards an all night parking garage. I was just thinking that I'd have to find a cab after all, when I suddenly got that crawling feeling on the back of my neck. When you do this job long enough you start to get something, whether you want to call it instinct, premonition, or eyes in the back of your head: little things, sounds, smells, motion out of the corner of your eye, things that tip you off—if you're good, and live long enough.

Well, I had that feeling now so I sidestepped in to an alley, and just as I did I heard a gunshot. Chips of brick burst from the wall behind where my head had just been as a bullet ricocheted off of it. I dropped low, pulled my rod and worked the slide to chamber a round. I heard the girl scream and fall to the street.

“Stay down!” I yelled in her direction, then I turned and scanned the street. It was dark and the streetlights left large pools of shadow outside their circles of illumination. I stayed low and in the shadow of the alley entrance looking for some sign of the shooter.

Suddenly I saw movement behind a black sedan parked about five cars down from my position. I saw the muzzle of his revolver moving as he searched the shadows for me.

I fired. I didn't have a clear shot at him from my position but I blew out the window of the sedan and sprayed him with broken glass. He screamed and fell back. I ran in a low crouch between the parked cars, my .45 leading the way. He was scrambling around the front of the car I had shot. I fired again and he yelled and fell down. Then he was up and running again, holding his left arm. I started after him but as he got to the corner he

jumped into a sedan, which had apparently been waiting for him. Tires squealed as it sped off. I looked around for a cab but the streets were empty, so I walked back over to where the girl had fallen.

I found her crouching between two cars. She screamed when she saw me, and tried to run but stumbled against the car.

“Relax, Doll, I ain’t here to hurt you.” I holstered my rod and helped her to her feet. She looked at me warily, tears running from her bright blue eyes.

“Who are you?” She asked in a choking sob.

I held her shoulders to steady her, she was shaking like a leaf.

“My name’s Johnny, Johnny Grant. I’m a private detective. Your father hired me to find you.” I showed her my badge.

“My father?” She asked in a puzzled tone. “There must be some mistake. My father is dead.”

I looked at her closely. She was the girl from the photograph, no doubt about it. I took it from my breast pocket and showed it to her.

“Is this you?” I asked.

She covered her mouth with her hand and uttered a small cry.

“Where did you get that?” Her voice was almost a whisper.

“From the man who said he was your father, when he hired me to find

you. He said his name was Richard Devon and that you were his daughter Cynthia.”

“I am Cynthia Devon, but my father’s name was Herbert. He died three years ago. Tell me, Mr. Grant, was this man tall and thin with black eyes, salt and pepper hair, and a mustache?”

“Yes,” I answered.

“I understand now. You have been misled, Mr. Grant. This man is known to me, his name is Benjamin Downes. He and I were at one time, um, involved.” Her face colored bright red and she looked down.

I sighed. “I understand, Ms. Devon. I suppose you and Mr. Downes didn’t part under the most congenial circumstances?”

“No,” She whispered, still looking down. “We did not.”

“He told me you were with another man; a man named Osbourne.” Her breath caught and her eyes widened slightly, but she regained her composure.

“I am no longer on speaking terms with Mr. Osbourne,” she answered rather stiffly.

I decided to try a different line of questioning.

“Do you have any idea who could have been shooting at us?” I asked.

“No I-I don’t...” She fell against me and I caught her before she could fall to the ground. I felt her shiver as she began to cry.

“Shhh,” I said. “It’s alright, it’s over.”

“I...,” she began hesitantly. “Nothing like this has ever happened to me before.” She began to sob against my chest.”

“Don’t worry.” I tried to sooth her. “You’re safe now.” I held her and after a few minutes her sobbing began to slow. “Is your car parked in the garage?”

“Yes,” she said breathily. “I don’t think I could drive now though. Could you? Oh I hate to trouble you, but could you help me?”

“Sure.”

I helped her to her car. It was a sporty little three-wheeled roadster. She handed me the key and I helped her in. I climbed in myself and then started up the machine; then, after paying the attendant, we headed up town. She directed me to her apartment, still acting a little shaken, but as we drove she seemed to be getting herself under control. When we pulled up to the curb she turned to me.

“You have been so kind,” she said timidly. “I hate to be more of a bother to you, but I’m so afraid. Could you possibly escort me up?”

I looked at her. She was very beautiful, and her tears and her seemingly innocent request for protection only accentuated her beauty.

“Sure, it’s no bother at all,” I said.

I opened her door and took her hand as she climbed out, then, tossing her

car key to one of the attendants, I escorted her in to the building and to the elevator. The elevator operator eyed us curiously, but I gave him my best “Mind Your Own Business” look and he quickly turned away.

When we arrived at her door she turned and asked me haltingly. “Would you like to come in and have a drink?” She blushed furiously as she said it. It must be rough being a redhead.

“I know that sounds terribly forward, but I’m just so afraid to be alone.”

“It’s fine,” I replied, giving her my best lopsided grin. “Don’t worry, I’m just a big pussycat.”

She smiled back, then giggled. Laughing, we went inside.

“Nice joint,” I said looking around.

And it was.

Expensive leather furniture, art deco sculptures and expensive looking paintings. There was even a big marble fireplace.

I tossed my battered hat onto a chair and walked over to the bar. “I’ll handle the drinks,” I said. “Why don’t you sit down and relax.” She sat in a chair as I busied myself with gin, vermouth, orange bitters, ice and a couple of glasses. I set the drinks on the coffee table and then stepped around it to sit on the couch. Looking at her as she sipped her drink, I noticed that the slit on her dress showed a lot of leg as she crossed them and I tried not to let my eyes linger there too long. We drank and talked of inconsequential things, and drank some more. We were halfway through our fourth round of drinks when I asked her about the man who had hired

me.

“So, why was this Downes trying to find you?”

“He’s insanely jealous,” she said. “He swore that if I ever so much as looked at another man he would kill me. I suppose the man who shot at us tonight must be one of his men.”

“You don’t think it was Downes himself?” I asked as I refilled our drinks.

“No. He wouldn’t do that sort of thing himself. He would be somewhere very public with plenty of witnesses and send one of his men to handle it.”

“I didn’t figure him for the type,” I mused. “He seemed too civilized, too genteel.”

“That’s the front he puts on for people. He fooled me at first. By the time I realized my mistake it was too late.” As she spoke some of the frightened wary look began to return to her face and she gulped down the rest of her drink.

I went over to mix us up some fresh ones.

“So,” I said, “this Downes hires me to find you. He then has one of his goons follow me with orders to ice us both when I do find you. Or maybe...” I paused. I had been watching her carefully as I spoke. She was hiding something, I could tell. I wasn’t quite sure what yet, but I was starting to get an idea in my head.

“Maybe what?” She asked.

“Maybe he was only supposed to kill me,” I said as I handed her the glass. “After all he was shooting at me not you. Maybe he was supposed to bring you back to Downes.” She was looking decidedly nervous now, she tried to cover it up by sipping from her drink. Suddenly she moved from her chair to the sofa at my side. Her face had taken on a hunted desperate expression, her eyes glistening.

“I’m so afraid! Oh, Johnny, I’m so afraid of what he will do to me!” She burst into tears and threw herself against me, burying her face in my chest. I put an arm around her back and held her to me.

She was good, I had to give her that; she could let loose with the waterworks on cue. I almost half believed her.

Almost.

She lifted her head and looked at me, her blue eyes sparkling. “Johnny please help me, please keep me safe.” Her voice was a soft whisper.

She leaned closer and I let her kiss me. Then, grabbing her roughly, I pulled her soft curved body against mine. Her kisses were hot, passionate, and I gave as good as I got. Her gown made a rustling sound as she unfastened it and let it fall. I reached past her and turned off the lamp. The glow of the sleepless city through the big picture window bathed the room in a soft light, and her pale flawless skin was faintly illuminated in that ghostly radiance.

Outside, in that vast black sky, the flashing lights of airships and autogyros passed to and fro over the sleepless city.

When I awoke the next morning she was still curled up next to me, fast asleep. I got up from the bed and began to dress. She stirred and looked up at me sleepily, her red hair tousled around her beautiful face. “Where are you going?” she asked sleepily.

“I have to go out, Doll. I need to find the man who shot at me before he tries to do it again.”

“Please don’t leave me alone!” She sat up to reach for me and the bed covers fell away from her nakedness.

“You’ll be fine, Sweetheart. I won’t be long.”

She stood and wrapped her arms around me, her eyes frightened. “Please! Oh please! I’m so afraid!” I tried to comfort her but somehow that got us back in the bed.

About an hour later I got dressed again and kissed her goodbye. She was much calmer now. I promised to return soon, and then got out while the gettin’ was good.

Two blocks from her apartment I found a saloon with a phone in the back. Penny answered on the first ring. She didn’t sound happy.

“Where have you been?” She demanded.

“I got caught up in that case last night.”

“I just bet you did! I suppose that means you found the missing girl?” Venom dripped from her words, and I knew I’d have to tread carefully

here.

“I did.” I answered. “But the case has gotten a little more involved.”

“Oh really, just how involved have you gotten with her?” Her voice now colder than the South Pole.

I thought a little truth might help. “Involved as in as I was following her somebody started shooting at me.”

“Oh, Johnny!” she cried. “Are you alright, Honey?”

It truly amazes me sometimes how quickly a woman can change gears.

“I’m fine,” I said. “And what’s more, I’m pretty sure I winged the guy. I’m also pretty sure that he’s working for our client Mr. Devon.”

“Oh my God!” she gasped. “Johnny, Mr. Devon has been calling all morning asking for you! I told him you hadn’t come in yet!”

“Good. Listen, Doll, I want you to lock up the office and go home. Don’t answer any more calls. Have you still got that little .32 I gave you in your purse?”

“I always carry it,” she said.

“Keep it in your pocket, and keep your hand on it at all times. When you get home lock up and stay there. I don’t think anyone will bother you, but just do this for me, okay, Kid?”

“I will.”

“I’ll call later to check on you. If you see or hear anything suspicious, call Pete down at the precinct.”

“I will, Johnny. I...Oh, Johnny, I almost forgot! A man calling himself Jimmy Parks called looking for you. He said that he had important information and that you knew where to find him, but that you’d better hurry.”

Jimmy calling me at my office! Now that was something new.

I found Jimmy in his alley near Times Square. He looked even more nervous than the last time I’d seen him.

“Jeez, Grant I thought you’d never get here!” He looked like he was trying to watch every direction at once.

“Sorry, Jimmy,” I answered with a sneer. “I didn’t realize I was supposed to check in with you every hour.”

“This ain’t no joke, Grant! What the Hell did you get me in to?”

I was starting to get annoyed. “Are you going calm down and start making sense or do I have to slap you around first?”

“Fletcher’s dead!” He hissed.

“What! How did it happen?” I snapped.

“I got to thinkin’ after you came to see me,” he said. “I thought that if I could get whatever it was you was lookin’ for Fletcher for, maybe I could get some scratch out of you. So I went up to his place. I figured I’d ask if he had any more jobs for me, and then try to find out what it was you was lookin’ for.”

“What made you think Fletcher would tell you anything?” I asked suspiciously.

“He liked his drinkin’,” Jimmy said, “and when he was on the sauce he usually got to braggin’ about stuff. It was a long shot but I figured it would be worth a try. But when I got to his place nobody answered the door. I figured that whatever you was lookin’ for might be in his place, so I picked the lock and went in. I found him in the kitchen, sittin’ in a chair with his pants and underdrawers down around his ankles. Somebody had shot him in the side of the head and his brains was all over the wall!”

“When did you find him?” I asked quickly.

“Last night, around midnight.”

“What did you do then?”

“Me? I beat it! I didn’t know who had bumped him off and I didn’t want to know. Then I got to worryin’ that whoever’d done it might still be around, and maybe they saw me. I figured I should get ahold a you and find out what this was all about. Whoever done this, I don’t want them comin’ after me! Fletcher, he done some work for Vinnie the Finger, and Vinnie ain’t nobody I want to cross!”

I stood there for a minute deep in thought. Then I looked at Jimmy and

smiled.

“You can relax, Jimmy, Vinnie’s got nothing to do with this.”

“You sure?” he asked.

“Yes. Especially after what you just told me,” I answered.

“Then who did it?”

“Nobody you know Jimmy.” I said with a sigh of resignation. “Now tell me where Fletcher’s apartment is.”

Before going to the apartment, I went to check on Cynthia Devon. I gave the doorman a fin and he told me she had gone out. I didn’t have any trouble picking her lock.

I’ve searched many an apartment during my career. Some, usually those places that had been lived in for a long time, were hard to search. This turned out to be one of the easier ones. She didn’t have a lot of stuff to go through, and I got the impression that this place was an extremely temporary residence for her.

When I finally found something I could have kicked myself for stupidity. It was in the most obvious spot of all, the fireplace! It was a scrap of wood, mostly burned and buried under the ashes. A bit of stenciled lettering could still be read.

OP SECRET

ENT OF THE NAVY

01105M2

I slipped the scrap of wood into the breast pocket of my trench coat and left, making sure to lock the door behind me.

When I arrived at Fletcher's place the door was standing open. I could see two men in conservatively cut suits standing in the living room from my spot in the hall. If they'd had signs over their heads saying "G-MEN", it couldn't have been more obvious.

I knocked on the door frame.

They both spun around and started toward me, and I could hear rapid steps on the stairs to my back as their lookout hurried in to flank me.

"Who are you!" the first one demanded.

"Johnny Grant, Private Detective," I answered with a casual smile. "I figured I'd run into you guys eventually." I produced my credentials and he snatched them from my hand.

"So," I continued nonchalantly, "who's the agent in charge here?"

The one holding my badge gave me a dark look.

"We'll ask the questions here!" he barked, getting right up in my face. He had to stand on tiptoe to do it.

I continued to smile at him. “If you want to kiss me you should brush your teeth first. Your breath stinks.”

His eyes went wide, then he uttered a snarl and started to lunge for me, but his partner grabbed him and pulled him back. Just then another man came from inside the apartment. He was older than the others, and had an air of calm self assuredness that they lacked.

“Mr. Grant, I’m glad you’re here. It saves us the trouble of finding you. I’m Agent Blair, FBI.” He extended his hand and I shook it. He had a firm solid handshake. “Barton,” he said to the one behind me who I still hadn’t bothered to look at. “Get back on station. You two, get back in there and continue searching.”

I turned to my friend with the bad breath. “I’d like my badge back.” That earned me an even nastier look, but he slapped it into my hand without further comment.

Blair motioned me inside and shut the door behind us.

“So,” he began, “what can you tell me about the man who lives here?”

“Don’t you mean lived?” I said. “Is his body still in the kitchen?” At the hard look in his eyes I continued quickly. “Relax, Agent Blair, I didn’t kill him.”

He watched my eyes carefully for a moment then spoke. “Very well, *lived* then. And yes, in answer to your question, we have not moved the body yet. So what can you tell me about him?”

“Well,” I said, as I lit a cigarette, “depending on who you talk to, his name

was either Osbourne or Fletcher, but personally I'd put my money on neither. He was a thief and a fence, dealing in fine art and other expensive merchandise. He was a part time associate of the local mob, and he had a taste for expensive booze and young attractive women. None of which I figure is of much interest to you, but this might be." I took out the fragment of wood from my pocket and tossed it to him.

He looked at it for a moment then looked up at me, eyes hard. "Where did you get this!" he demanded.

"Softly, Blair, softly. We'll get to that," I spoke calmly.

"This is a matter of national security!" he went on in a cold harsh tone. "If you refuse to cooperate it could be viewed as an act of treason!"

"I have every intention of cooperating," I said, "and I'm fairly sure I can get the dingus that was in that crate back for you, whatever it is."

He paused for a moment, eyes still stern. "Go on," he said.

"I will," I answered, "but first show me the body."

He subjected me to that hard eyed stare for a few more seconds, then spoke. "All right. This way."

It was pretty much just as I'd expected.

The poor sap was sitting in a kitchen chair, which was facing away from the table. His pants and undershorts around his ankles. There was an entry wound in his left temple with powder burns around it and one helluva exit wound on the other side. His brains, as Jimmy had said, were mostly all

over the wall. As I examined him I sniffed, and then my eyes got hard.

“Well,” Agent Blair said, “you’ve seen the stiff. Now tell me how you plan to get the stolen item back.”

“Fine,” I said, “but in return, you’re going to tell me how it wound up in a penthouse apartment on Park Avenue. That’s the only part of this whole mess I’m not completely clear on. You promise to tell me that, and I’ll tell you how we get it back.”

He sighed then nodded his head. “Very well,” he said.

So I told him.

I returned to Cynthia Devon’s apartment at around six o’clock. She met me at the door wearing a pale blue silk robe and a worried expression.

“Where have you been?” she asked in a quavering voice, “I’ve been so afraid!”

“Relax, Sweetheart,” I said as I walked in and shut the door. I grabbed her around the waist and pulled her against me, it didn’t feel like she had anything on under that robe. I kissed her hard then let her down.

“But where have you been?” she asked again as soon as she got her breath back.

“Oh here and there, asking questions,” I answered as I tossed my hat and coat onto a chair. She had a nervous look on her face but was doing her

best to hide it. “Come on, Doll,” I continued, “why don’t you mix us up some drinks and I’ll tell you about my day.”

“Alright,” she said hesitantly.

Presently we were seated on the sofa with a bowl of cracked ice, some limes, a shaker of gin, and a couple of glasses. I poured and we sipped our drinks.

“So, where is it?” I asked.

She jerked in surprise. “What are you talking about?”

“The whatever it is that you and Downes hired Osbourne to steal for you. You know, the dingus that was in the crate marked TOP SECRET,” I continued with a smile.

She reached under the cushions of the sofa as if searching for something, and I pulled a .38 snub out of my pocket and aimed it at her.

“Looking for this?” I asked.

She froze, staring at the gun.

“Come on, Doll,” I said with a lopsided grin, “I told you I’m a detective. Did you really think I wouldn’t figure it out?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she said in a small scared voice.

“Of course you do,” I laughed. “You and Downes hired Osbourne, or Fletcher, or whatever his name is to steal something for you from the penthouse apartment of a wealthy industrialist who was developing this

thing for the navy. This guy, against regulations, likes to take his big projects home and tinker with them. He's also something of a notorious playboy, and I'm thinking that your first job was to seduce him and find out if he actually had the thing at home. Once you were sure it was there, you had Osbourne get it for you, which he did using a couple of small time crooks. Here's the kicker though, you also seduced Osbourne and convinced him to help you cut Downes out of the deal. Then once you got this thing away from Osbourne you hid it, and gave him the slip too. How am I doing so far?" She sat motionless and silent.

"Anyway," I continued, "Downes was still looking for you, but he had no luck looking for you on his own. So he came to me with that phony story about you being his lost daughter. Then he puts a guy on my tail with orders to knock me off when I find you. After that, this guy is supposed to take you back to Downes, but I was better at my job than he figured. You didn't know what to make of me at first, but I have to admit that you recovered pretty quickly. You're good, Sister and no mistake. Once you'd worked out what happened, you started to work on me right away. You figured you could use me to lead you back to Downes. So tell me why you still need him now that you've got the thing all to yourself?"

She still said nothing.

"Come on, spill it already," I said. "I think I know anyway, and besides," I reached out with my free hand and caressed her bare thigh, "I think I can help you—for a fair bit of compensation."

A faint smile touched her lips. "Alright, I'll play." She leaned closer and spoke in a soft sultry voice. "I need Downes because I can't get in contact with his buyer."

“That’s what I figured,” I said. “Now, here’s what I’ll do for you. I’ll contact Downes and give him an offer. I’ll tell him that if he sets up a meeting with his buyer, we’ll bring the item, for a fifty percent take. He won’t like it but he doesn’t have any choice, he’ll have to play along. Then, I’ll make sure that Downes doesn’t walk away from the meeting, and you and I split the take fifty-fifty.”

“Seventy-thirty,” she said.

“Sixty-forty,” I countered.

She nodded slowly.

I put the gun down on the coffee table.

“Why are you doing this?” she asked.

I smiled. “The dirty little so-and-so tried to have me shot. Besides, you’re a lot better looking than he is.”

She laughed, then leaned forward and kissed me.

After a moment I leaned back. “So tell me what this thing is.”

“Well,” she began, “according to Downes, it’s a device that remotely guides torpedoes by radio signal, so that ships can’t evade them. It’s supposed to constantly shift frequencies over a broad spectrum, so that it’s signal can’t be jammed by the enemy.”

I made a bewildered face. “If you say so, Sister. I ain’t much of a scientist myself. So who’s the buyer?”

“Some rich investors from Europe,” she said.

“You mean the Germans?” I replied.

“So what if it is?” she asked. “We’re not at war with them and we’re not going to be. Nobody wants another Great War.”

“No,” I said, “I guess they don’t.”

“So,” she said, extending her hand, “shall we shake on it.”

“I had something a little more enjoyable in mind,” I said as I reached down and untied the belt of her robe. She laughed and shrugged her shoulders, allowing the soft fabric fall from her body.

Downes was surprised by my call. He was reticent at first, but after some finagling I managed to convince him to set up the meeting. It was to be held that very Friday, at midnight, in a warehouse by the docks on the lower west side. That gave us three days.

I had some special arrangements to make before the meeting. One of those was picking up my special rig from the safe in my office. It was a double holster with space for a .45 under each arm. Not the most comfortable carry in the world, but considering the work I had in front of me, I figured I might need it. I also checked in on Penny. She was not in a good mood, especially after I told her to stay put for time being. She had some choice words for me, but in the end agreed to do as I asked. I knew I’d pay for it later though.

We also had to pick up the device. Cynthia had put the thing in a large safe deposit box at the bank of all places! We went down to the bank and took the box to a private room. When we opened it, I got my first look at the thing. It was about two feet long. A rectangular mass of wires, gears, tubes, and gizmos I had no name for, and it was damned heavy. I could carry it, but I wouldn't be winning any track and field events lugging it around. I had brought a heavy duty tool satchel to carry it in. Afterwards we went back to her place for dinner, and to wait for the meeting later that night.

At eleven o'clock we drove down to the docks in her car, with the device in the trunk. When we pulled up outside the warehouse she turned to me.

“John.” She asked nervously. “It's going to be alright isn't it?”

“Sure, Sweetheart, nothing to worry about,” I said.

“Are you certain you'll be able to kill Downes?” she looked at me searchingly.

“Don't worry your little head about it, Doll; he won't be the first man I've ever killed.”

We got out of the car and I got the tool satchel out of the trunk. The warehouse was dimly lit and almost empty with just a few small stacks of crates scattered around. At the far side, two huge doors stood open giving a view of the dock and the blackness of the Hudson River. In the distance I could just see the lights of New Jersey.

In the doorway stood two men. One was Downes, the other was a burly,

mean-looking palooka with his right arm in a sling. I looked at the arm and chuckled. He bristled and started forward but Downes put a restraining hand to his chest.

“Easy, Donald,” Downes spoke calmly. “We’re all friends here.” He turned a cold smile on me. A smile that never reached his eyes. “I’m afraid my man Donald is feeling rather cross with you, Mr. Grant.”

I shrugged. “If he goes around shooting at people he ought to figure that some of them might shoot back.” I gave Donald my best ugly grin. That earned me a snarl and a nasty look but nothing else. I laughed and looked back to Downes. “So, where’s our buyer?”

“He’ll be here presently,” He said. “Might I inspect the item?”

I pushed the heavy bag forward with my foot and took a step back. My right hand was in the pocket of my trench coat. “Go ahead, take a gander.”

Downes turned to Donald and motioned toward the bag. With a wary look at me Donald stepped forward and knelt to examine the contents. After a moment he turned to his boss and nodded.

“That’s good enough,” I said. “Now go stand next to your pal, and we’ll leave that thing right where it is until our buyer gets here.”

Downes shrugged. “Very well. Come here Donald.”

So we waited.

After about half an hour had passed Downes suddenly looked up and smiled. “Mr. Grant, Cynthia. If you would care to accompany me outside I

believe the last member of our party is about to arrive.”

I looked at Cynthia. She hesitated for a moment then started forward, and together we walked out onto the dock. As we neared the water I heard a bubbling sound, which grew steadily louder.

“Ah!” Downes said. “Here he comes now.”

The water bubbled and churned, and then a black metal bulk broke the surface and rose steadily up, rivulets running down its side.

It wasn't a full size U-boat, but some sort of miniature submarine, only about forty feet long. When it finished surfacing the top of the conning tower was about even with the dock. As it pulled up alongside a hatch opened on the deck and two men in green pants and work shirts climbed out. They each had a length of rope, which they fastened to cleats on the hull. They tossed the ropes up to Downes and Donald who tied them to the pilings. The two sailors retrieved some sort of collapsible gangplank from inside the sub, which they erected between the conning tower and the dock. When they were done the hatch on the tower opened with a thud and four black uniformed soldiers carrying submachine guns climbed out. They crossed the gangplank to stand in a line facing us. Then a man in a black officer's uniform and carrying a valise climbed out and walked confidently over to stand in the center of the line. Looking at Downes, he spoke. “Herr Downes, it is good to see you again. You have the item?”

His accent brought back unpleasant memories for me, and I had to grit my teeth to hold back a snarl.

“Certainly Colonel Schmidt,” Downes answered, gesturing toward the tool satchel. “You have the agreed payment of course?”

“Of course,” Schmidt answered. “One hundred thousand American dollars.” He lifted the valise. “But first I must see the item.” He nodded, and one of the soldiers walked over the satchel and opened it. He lifted the gizmo out and carried it over so that Schmidt could see it. He studied it carefully for a moment then his eyes widened and he turned and bellowed furiously at Downes. “What trickery is this! This is not the device!” He began to reach for his holster.

My guns were in my hands fast as lightning, and I put a slug in the chest of the soldier holding the bogus device. He and it fell over the side of the dock, and I heard a loud bong as he hit the deck of the sub.

Then all Hell broke loose.

Schmidt pulled his Luger and shot Downes, winging him only. Cynthia screamed and ran for the warehouse door. Donald shot at Schmidt but missed him, hitting one of the soldiers right between the eyes instead. One of the two remaining soldiers then took out Donald, with a full auto burst to the chest that sent him flying backwards in a spray of blood.

The other soldier was shooting at me.

I threw myself sideways and hit the ground rolling. I came up with both guns blazing, and the one shooting at me caught two in the guts. Schmidt and the last soldier were both bringing their guns to bear on me. We all fired together. I felt a bullet pass close to my cheek, another dug a furrow down my ribs on my left side and I grunted in pain. I hit the last soldier square in the jaw with a .45 slug and most of his face disappeared.

Suddenly the dock was bathed in bright light. Up in the sky, a searchlight

was trained down on us, and beyond it I could just make out the silhouette of an airship. Good pilot that one. He would have had to take the ship to a position far enough away that we wouldn't hear the engines, but where the air currents would have carried it into position above us, and then shut down and let it drift. Its engines coughed into life now, and then a voice boomed from a loudspeaker above. "YOU ON THE DOCK, FREEZE!"

With a curse Schmidt turned and raced toward his sub. I fired, and he stumbled and fell over the side. I heard him hit the water with a loud splash. I got up and raced to the edge, and got there just in time to see one of the sailors pulling the hatch shut. There was no sign of Schmidt, either he had gotten in the sub already or he had sunk under the water.

The hatch slammed shut and immediately the boat began to submerge. A machine gun on the airship began to fire at the sub, but she was under already and the shots had no visible effect. Behind me I could hear agents storming the warehouse. I looked back up at the airship, the spotlight was aimed at the water now and for the first time I could see it clearly. I didn't recognize the design. She was long and narrow, with *U.S.S. BROOKLYN* marked on the bow, and a large gondola, which had some sort of metallic frame superstructure beneath it. Four long silver cigar shaped objects were suspended from the frame, needle pointed ends down. They each had a tail rudder and stubby wings in the back. At first I thought they were torpedoes, but then I noticed that each had a small clear cockpit just in front of the rudder. Suspended under the stubby wings of each of them were objects that looked like mini torpedoes, four per craft.

As I looked there was a loud *CLANG*, and then the four cigar shapes fell from the airship, an instant later small parachutes opened behind each to slow their fall. They plunged into the water, cutting the surface like knives.

I watched the water, wondering what was going on under the surface. I could imagine those four needle nosed predators chasing down the German sub. Would they catch it? It was infuriating not being able to see the chase. I stood there waiting. Behind me I could hear agent Blair and his men taking Cynthia and Downes into custody, and still I watched and waited.

Suddenly, in the middle of the river, an explosion of foaming water burst into the air. The searchlights from the airship were on it immediately. As the water came cascading back down, objects made small by distance began to surface. It was hard to see but I was pretty sure that the German sub had been destroyed. The four silver mini subs surfaced a moment later and proved me right.

“Well that’s that.” I turned at the sound of the voice to see Agent Blair standing next to me. “Thank you, Mr. Grant,” he said, extending his hand to me. “You have done your country a great service.”

I looked at his hand for a moment, then I took out a deck of Lucky’s, shot one out, and lit it. “Sure,” I said, flatly. “Thanks.”

I turned from him and walked over to Cynthia.

She looked at me, black tear trails of mascara running down her face. “Why?” she asked in a sobbing, choked voice. “Why?”

“Why?” I answered, coldly. “There are quite a few reasons ‘why’. The simple answer though, the only one that matters is *semper fidelis*.”

She looked at me in bewilderment. “What does that mean?”

“It means *always faithful*.” I answered. “It’s the motto of the U.S. Marine Corps. I learned the meaning of that phrase in 1918 in a place called Belleau Wood. I learned it, while I crawled through mud and blood and the guts of my buddies. I learned it, while I learned to kill stinking krauts, like that bastard Schmidt, and I’ll be Damned before I’d ever sell out my country, and the memories of the men who died there for it, to him and his goose stepping pals!”

Downes spoke up then. “But how did you make a replica of the device so quickly? One that fooled even me?”

“I didn’t.” I hooked a thumb over my shoulder at the agents. “They did. I’ve been working with them since the day I figured out what was really going on.”

“How could you do this to me, Johnny?” Cynthia cried. “After all we’ve shared together?”

I laughed. “Is that what you said to Osbourne before you stuck your gun in his ear?”

“What?” she gasped. “Oh Johnny please don’t say such things!”

“Cut the act, Sister!” I snarled. “Osbourne helped you cut Downes out of the deal! He’d given you what you wanted! I’m sure you gave him something in return, but he was getting a little too bossy for you wasn’t he? Wanted too much of the take? Didn’t want to take orders from a dame? You killed him the night I met you, just before you came to the club. I went to his place the next day, and I found him just the way you left him. There’s only one way I can think of for a woman to get face to

face with a man when he's sitting with his pants and shorts down around his ankles! Close enough to stick her gun against his temple and blow his brains all over the wall! I could still smell your perfume on him! So don't feed me a bunch of nonsense about what we meant to each other!"

"Johnny, I love y--"

"Enough!" I barked. "I don't believe you, Doll, not one bit. I'm sure you said the same thing to Osbourne, and who knows how many others."

"But you were different," she whispered, holding her cuffed hands out to me. "With you, I meant it."

"Well, Sweetheart," I took a long drag, then blew the smoke out slowly, "I guess we'll never know the truth about that."

I threw away my cigarette, turned, and walked off into the night.

THE END

Dedicated to Caitlin. For all your love and support.

Rick “Paladin” Pratt is a new writer and *The Maltese Spectrum* is his first published work. Mr. Pratt has been a student of literature, theater arts, anthropology, history, and art history. He lives in New York where he is busily at work on the next adventure *Johnny Grant private eye*.

To find out more about Rick's work, visit him on Facebook

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PANDORA DRIVER

READY FIRE AIM

Created by John Picha

INTRODUCTION

Can you imagine a time without computers, the Internet, or TV? Telephones were connected to walls by wires, and a “cell” was a place to put bad guys. The daily news was delivered by a paperboy, not a cable. Laptops were where children sat to tell Santa Christmas wishes. Magazines were presented on pulp, not iPads. Entertainment in the

airwaves was received by vacuum tubes in a wooden radio, the centerpiece of the family room. And no one left home without a hat.

In October of 1942, men went to war as women replaced riveters in factories. Mary Marvel landed in *Fawcett Comics*, *Screwtape* wrote letters, and children began reading *Little Golden Books*. In the theaters, a fawn named *Bambi* lost his mother, *Mrs Miviver* explored class divisions, and Cagney became a *Yankee Doodle Dandy*. On the radio, Spike Jones lampooned *Der Fuehrer's Face*, Kay Kyser *Praised the Lord to Pass Ammunition*, and NBC debuted *People are Funny*.

In Europe, World War II escalated. The German army attempted to enslave the people of Stalingrad with advanced military might, but the partisan forces resisted the brutal military occupation with a fury that ebbed the Axis tide. Eventually, the war would cost the Soviets a 10th of their population.

In the US, over 5 million Americans enlisted or were drafted in 1942. Volunteers deemed 4F were left to resolve their guilt stateside, while deferments were offered to the sons of the connected or to men necessary in their civilian activity, like cops. They had a city to protect from its citizens...

CITADEL CITY, 9 OCTOBER 1942

3:23 AM

Officer Kirk of the Citadel Police force, feels adrenaline tugging at the leash of his better judgment. He holds his position against the interior wall and scans the other twenty officers lining the darkened, 6th floor hallway

of the Winchester Arms apartments. He looks for the familiar face of any other beat cop like himself, who has been shanghaied into this hastily assembled detail, but the high collars of specially ordered urban-flak-vests, and the wide rims of civil defense helmets painted black, cloak the men's identities in deep shadows. All badges and civilian uniforms are hidden beneath the additional combat equipment, and Officer Kirk wonders what kind of cops surround him. He knows that a group of policeman is called a squad, but this gathering feels more like an army.

Each man clutches a sleek, Reising Model 50 submachine gun, with a cyclic firing rate of 550 rounds per minute. Earlier this year, these proven man-stoppers had been requisitioned by the Coast Guard, then partially diverted to the Citadel police. Now, in the olive painted hallway, twenty well-oiled Reising barrels point at the sturdy walnut door on the left. According to the stakeout team, their target is behind it.

The target's name is Niles Weiss, the broker, and he's been on-the-lam since 1934. About an hour ago, the police got a lucky tip and assembled an assault team from available men. Many of them want their names attached to this celebrity collar. None of them have any intension of letting him slip away again, regardless of the cost.

Anticipating the order to invade the premises, Officer Kirk digs the hobnails of his jackboots deep into the interlocking zigzag pattern of the carpeting. His eyes dart from silent figure to silent figure, not really knowing where the order to 'go' will come from. He tries to tamp down his excitement with controlled breathing as the pulse in his gloved finger throbs against the trigger-guard of his weapon. He thinks, "The quality that made Wyatt Earp an exceptional lawman wasn't his skill with a six shooter. He was uncommonly cool during a shootout. That, kept him alive and prevented him from looking like a fool."

Kirk takes another calming breath and reminds himself, “Don’t think with your gun... Keep your mind one step ahead of the present.”

BA-SLAM

Suddenly, the walnut door collapses inward, and all bodies are in motion. Someone yells, “HE’S GOT A GUN!”

BRAKKA BRAKKA BRAKKA

The machine gun fire is deafening, as Officer Kirk is swept into the river of dark figures rushing toward the doorway. But something catches his attention, so he breaks from the ranks for a better look. Through the window at the end of the hallway, he can see a member of the stakeout team in a building across the street. He’s revealed his position and is frantically signaling to the team in the hall.

BRAKKA BRAKKA BRAKKA

Using his full arm, he violently points in the opposite direction of the assault. Kirk realizes, “They reported that the subject was in the room on the left, but their vantage point is the reverse of ours. When they said, the room on the left, they meant our right. Shit! We’re invading the wrong apartment!”

BRAKKA BRAKKA BRAKKA

Now, Kirk is alone in the hallway, and though he tries to warn the others of the error, his words are drowned out by machine gun fire and breaking glass. He turns to face the opposite door, then rushes it, throwing all his

weight into it.

KA-SLAM

The wooden frame splinters as the heavy door pops open. Kirk stumbles into the room in time to see the subject disappear through a secret passage in the wall. As Kirk cautiously approaches the hidden hatch, he can hear the other peacekeepers yelling across the hall.

“HOLD YOUR FIRE! HOLD YOUR FIRE!”

“It's not Weiss! It's just some colored guy!”

“Is he dead?”

“No, but we tagged him a few times!”

“What about his gun?”

“It was a slipper!”

“I guess, we should get him to a hospital?”

“Where the hell is Weiss?”

Kirk yells to them, “HE'S IN HERE!” He rips open the hidden panel. The cubbyhole is unoccupied, but it reveals a rough-hewn bridging tunnel, connecting to the long, brass garbage chute. Worrying he's about to get shot in the face, Kirk quick-peeks into the opening, then takes a second, longer look. He sees movement in the light at the end of the tunnel, five floors below him, in the street level garage.

The rest of the men stampede Kirk with weapons drawn. He throws his hands up, as he yells, “DON’T SHOOT!”

One of the larger men, grasping a smoking gun, demands, “Where is he, soldier?”

Kirk points and says, “I saw him go down there.”

He shoves Kirk out of the way to inspect the escape route. It reminds him of the large cowlings on a ship decks. Hoping to get the drop on the subject, he hops in, dangles his jackbooted feet into the tube for a moment before letting go. If he were only dressed in a traditional police uniform, he would have slid right down. Unfortunately, he gets stuck due to the extra gear he's packing. Looking like an angry Pooh Bear, he rages at the rest of the unit. “I'm stuck. Get me the Hell out of here!”

Laughter rolls through the group, as two sycophantic subordinates grab at his flailing arms to tug him from his confined fix.

Frustrated at the debacle, Kirk pushes his way through the rubberneckerers, abandoning the unfolding chaos for the hallway, where the entire mess began to unravel. He bolts to the window at its end and opens it. The cool night air finds all the patches of his exposed skin, as he climbs out onto the fire escape. Corroded rust blisters on the aged metal stairs, rupture into crumbs under his boot heels.

As he rapidly descends level to stairs, level to stairs, he can't help but notice glaring safety violations along his route; metal fatigue, cracked welds, and decapitated anchor bolts. The vibrations from his descent increase to a wobble, nearly causing him to lose his footing. Stopping to

steady himself, he realizes rust flakes are showering him from above. The other cops have exited the window and are following him down the rickety, metal cage.

Fearing it will collapse under their combined weight, Kirk opts to bypass the stairs altogether. He slings his Reising and climbs over the metal hand railing to a drainpipe that follows along side the fire escape. He slides down the pipe and building, hobnails shredding bricks as his momentum rapidly increases.

Nearing the ground, he releases the pipe, then strikes the cold sidewalk with a thud and tumble, rolling him in front of a set of red double-doors. From behind them, Kirk hears an unseen engine racing in the parking garage. It gets louder and louder as the sound barrels down in on his position. The doors vibrate.

VRROOOOMM KA-BASH

Kirk barely rises to his feet before diving away from the nightshade-blue juggernaut that explodes into view. Its heavy chrome bumper batters the doors off their hinges. High beams appear to levitate the doors up and over the sturdy body of a 1941 Buick Century Series 60 Touring Sedan.

SKREEEECH

Whitewalls scream as the car turns sharply onto the side street. From the fire escape above, police draw their weapons and fire wildly.

**BRAKKA BRAKKA BRAKKA
BRAKKA BRAKKA BRAKKA**

Kirk rolls to the wall for cover as the bullets rain down, chipping street bricks and sidewalk concrete.

SKREEEECH

The swift Buick swerves onto Hegira Avenue, escaping around the corner building. The gunfire from above ceases and Officer Kirk staggers to his feet as a fog of breath escapes from him.

Then, from out of the shadows, a large, second car emerges like something from a dream. It glides toward Officer Kirk with the confidence and grace of a shark across a dark, tranquil bay. The polished, black body reflects the city lights, slowly slithering over the streamlined form, like glowing quicksilver. As the mirrored driver-side window passes Officer Kirk, he's jarred by his reflection, a faceless soldier occupying the streets of his city.

Unknown to Kirk, on the other side of the one-way glass, Pandora Driver gazes at him from the dark confines of her car-of-tomorrow. The vehicle's night-vision glass peels away the shadows, revealing every detail of his dashing, black-Irish features. He has an aquiline nose, thick black brows, and 5 o'clock shadow that's darkened passed midnight. She stares into his boyish eyes for a moment that lingers like a photograph in her mind. She thinks, "Call it curiosity or call it a decadent pleasure, but I love to spy on cops."

Static crackles and whines as she adjusts a radio dial from the long dashboard of glowing lights. She thinks, "Tonight, I've tuned into the only radio show that broadcasts at this late hour. Thanks to the unique transceiver in my car, I've been eavesdropping on dispatches between Precinct 13 and its patrol cars. For the last half hour or so, I've monitored the progress of their top-secret operation at the Winchester Arms. I may

not be the world's greatest detective, but there are enough clues for me to piece together a story.

“From the excessive gunfire above, and the scene I just witnessed at the door garage, it's not too hard to figure out something went wrong. I know of the guy they are looking for, everyone does, and I got a good look at the driver, who nearly flattened that cop. It was Niles Weiss.

“I'm not sure if finding him after all those years is proof of police competence or incompetence, but there are skilled investigators on the force. That's the main reason I cop-watch, to learn from them. What are their methodologies? What do they look for? How do they operate? Over the past few years, I've discovered many unexpected things about them, and I want to know more.

“I may not be the world greatest detective, yet, but I am a unique problem solver with some special tools of my own.”

VROOOOOMMM

Kirk watches the mysterious, black car speed up and disappear around the corner of Hegira Ave in pursuit of the Buick Century 60.

Then, his trance is broken by an oafish blow from behind. The rest of the cops have caught up to him. Surprisingly, the fire-escape held the weight of the entire phalanx. He watches the stragglers round the last landing and stairs like a railway marble game, emptying to the sidewalk behind him.

A deep voice within the angry posse orders, “To the squad cars, men!”

Kirk starts running with the group, but he feels hampered by the restrictive

gear. He stops and thinks, “Got to get rid of this goon-suit, so I can move again.”

He sheds the dreary layer of gear to reveal his proud police blues below. Shiny brass buttons adorn his wool four-pocket coat. A Sam Browne belt with shoulder strap totes a holster. The wide collar accentuates his broad shoulders. A polished gold badge with a raised star shimmers over his strong heart. Feeling freed, he stretches and tastes the cool night air of the city he’s sworn to protect.

“Time to stop playing army and get back to being a cop.”

CLANK

He drops the black CD helmet next to the discarded gear. Kirk bolts toting the Reising and a web belt packed with ammo. He thinks, “Best not leave these for some kid to find on the way to school in the morning.”

The beat cop quickly gains on the militarized mob, but he runs outside the pack. They all race around to the front of the building, where four black sedans wait at a long concrete planter, like horses tied at a water-trough. The 1937 Studebaker 4-door Dictators have been customized by order of the Mayor. Of course, the cost was rolled over to the taxpayers.

Each car has been fitted with 10 gauge steel armor throughout the body, guaranteed bulletproof up to 45 caliber. The windows are 1 inch thick and sport chrome gun ports. The multi-ply tires have inner-liners for puncture reduction. Sturdy chrome sirens are mounted to the front fender nacelles. And each of the front doors is adorned with flying gold shields that read, “CITADEL POLICE DEPT”. The phrase “To Protect and to Serve” hovers over the emblem like a halo.

As they arrive at their Dictators, it's quickly decided that two men will use one of the cars to deliver the wrongly wounded apartment-dweller to the hospital. While en route, they will decide what he did wrong to get himself shot.

The rest of the men, including Kirk, anxiously crack open the remaining Studebakers suicide doors and jump in. Since there are more passengers than seats, a few good men are relegated to riding on the running boards. Three drivers hit their starters. Beneath horizontal chrome toothed grilles and triangular hoods, 217 cubic inch inline 6 engines roar to life. In unison, the overloaded cars rock backwards into a one-point turn, then peel out down Hegira Avenue.

BRAKKA

A few eager shots are fired into the night sky, signaling the mechanical, metropolitan Calvary rides. Over the 2-way radios, a confident voice orders, "Follow that Buick!"

The cool night air sucks the warm sewer stench, perpetually brewing in the bowels of the city, up through gutter grates. The sparse traffic of the hour is spilt between night owls, ending their day, and early birds, beginning theirs. Loaded drunks spill empty bottles of booze from taxicabs then fumble to their front doors. Elsewhere, milkmen deliver fresh bottles to metal boxes outside the homes of children still dreaming in bed.

VROOOOOMMM

The Buick Special slices between the cusp of yesterday and tomorrow.

The rushing wind beneath its undercarriage, rips settled moisture from street bricks into the air, leaving a trail of mist. Seconds later, the suspended vapor sprays the split windshield of the mysterious car in hot pursuit.

VROOOOOMMM

Inside, Pandora Driver straps herself in and prepares to ram the 4,000 lb getaway car. She scans the road ahead, looking for a vacant stretch of street. One arrives. She clenches her teeth as her gloved hands grapple the steering wheel. She stomps the accelerator of her weapon on wheels, and bears down on her quarry with the force of a freight train.

VROOOOOMMM

Suddenly, a passenger appears in the rear window of the Buick. It's a redheaded woman with frightened green eyes and a tight gag biting her mouth. Pandora realizes, "He's got a hostage!"

Seconds before impact, Pandora stomps the brakes with both feet, and swerves to abort collision.

SKREECH CLA-BANG

The hurtling car skids into a spin that's stopped by white walls and rims slapping against a high sidewalk curb. Sparks spit at the impact. Pandora struggles for, and regains control of her unwieldy vehicle, then continues her pursuit from two car lengths behind. She thinks, "Leave it to a monster to use a human shield as an insurance policy. Time to switch to plan B."

She yanks a small lever out from under the dash. It causes something

mechanical to happen beneath the floor pans. Then, she centers her car-of-tomorrow behind the Buick Special and thumbs a red trigger. A metal puck ejects from between her front wheels. It sparks a trail as it skips across the street bricks, before disappearing under the Buick with a clink. Pandora Driver reduces speed, letting her target breakaway. She thinks, “Now you can run, but you can't hide.”

She relaxes behind the wheel for a moment...then the Dictators arrive.

WEEEE-OOOOU
WEEEE-OOOOU

Three squad cars descend like gangbusters. Fender mounted sirens wail and flash, like red ray-guns, blasting the back of Pandora's car-of-tomorrow. Eager armed officers, hanging from doors, shoot around the moving obstacle at their target ahead of the pack, Weiss' Buick.

BRAKKA BRAKKA

A wobbled shot shatters the get-away-cars rear window, forcing the hostage to duck. Witnessing the close call, Pandora jerks her steering wheel to shield the Buick Century from the three squad cars. The 5-car pursuit procession weaves around horse carts, paper trucks, and L track supports.

Lobo, the square-jawed driver of squad car 13, activates a window-mounted spotlight and shines a bright white beam on Pandora's car. He notes, “It's got no plates”, before cueing up his PA system. He grabs a microphone from its dash mount. In a booming voice that echoes down the narrow street, he yells, “PULL OVER!”

In rebuttal, a woman's voice invades the interior of the police packed car, via 2-way radio. "Gentlemen, this is the big car in front of you. Niles Weiss is not alone in his..."

Immediately, Lobo switches from PA to transmitter and angrily interrupts, "THIS IS A PRIVATE POLICE CHANNEL! GET OFF IT, NOW!"

She responds, "Listen to me for a second. Weiss has..."

Lobo cuts her off again, "NO, YOU LISTEN ME, LADY! YOU'RE OBSTRUCTING JUSTICE!"

She tries to talk over him, "...tied up..." but is blocked by his domination of the airwaves. Spittle douses his mic as he rages, "GET OFF THE RADIO AND GET THE HELL OUT OF OUR WAY!"

"...no..."

"CARS 10 AND 21, OUR COMMUNICATIONS HAVE BEEN COMPROMISED."

"...but..."

"SHE'S AN ACCOMPLICE. IT'S SOME KIND OF TRICK! IGNORE HER!"

"...I repeat..."

"RIG FOR SILENT RUNNING!"

"...to get hurt..."

“AND FOLLOW MY LEAD!”

“...asshole...”

All three cars switch go radio silent. Lobo addresses his passengers directly, “I don't have time for this! Blast that bitch off the road!”

BRAKKA BRAKKA BRAKKA

Studebaker running boards aren't the best shooting platforms during a high-speed chase, but that doesn't deter the clinging Reising wielders from firing wildly from the bouncing and swerving vehicles.

BRAKKA BRAKKA BRAKKA

Sparks explode as a hail of hot bullets rain down on the car-of-tomorrow till clips are empty. To reload, the shooters stick their weapons through the open windows where their partners quickly swap spent clips for fresh ones.

BRAKKA BRAKKA BRAKKA

Observing from the back seat of car 13, Kirk thinks, “I always wondered if the Lone Ranger used silver bullets, so he'd be more cautious how he spent them.”

He sets his unfired Reising on the floor, then removes a Colt 45 from his holster and thinks, “The other guys razz me about my wild-west weapon of choice, but I like its weight and think the long barrel is easier to aim. Plus, when using a revolver, you've got a limited number of bullets, so it

forces you to carefully consider when to use them, and where you want to put them. Each bullet has to count, and I want to know where all mine end up. Bullets don't stop till they hit something.”

BRAKKA BRAKKA BRAKKA

Hundreds of rounds are fired. Many spark as they bounce off the black cars heavy hide, while others vanish into the night.

BRAKKA BRAKKA BRAKKA

The steed pulling Tom Haskell’s milk-cart rears as a wild bullet embeds into its leg joint. Later, it will be put down. Another round creates a glass spiderweb as it pops through a bedroom window, before stopping in a crib. A volley of lead shatters the block long display window of a five and dime, sending twinkling crumbs of glass tumbling into the street. Another splits the plank of a closed newsstand before entering the back of old Freddy Phillips as he leafs through a fresh *Western Story* pulp magazine. A streetlight globe explodes as a high shot passes through it.

Bullets riddle the quarter panels of Pandora Driver's car, in hopes of hitting a shrouded wheel. Through her rearview mirror, she watches the bloodthirsty keystone cops descend upon her. She does her best to protect the hostage in the Buick, from them, as they jockey to outflank her.

BRAKKA BRAKKA BRAKKA

The car-of-tomorrow is far faster than the three Studebaker Dictators. If this were a race, she'd leave them in the dust. Unfortunately, this contest is a matter of out maneuvering one another for the advantage, and she is out numbered 3 to 1. As she swerves left to block car 13, car 21 guns the

engine for the open lane on the right. As she cuts back right to block car 21, cars 10 and 13 break left in tandem. There are too many for her to stay in front of them all.

Lobo yells to his crew, “HANG ON!” then turns his wheel, jabbing his fender into her rear.

KL-BLANG

He tries to force her to spin out of control and bump her off the road. Inside, Pandora feels his contact and growls, “Ok, that's it.”

She stomps the gas pedal. The throttle gulps more air, and the car-of-tomorrow rockets away. For a moment, it looks like she's going to pass the Buick, but then, she slams on the brakes. She thinks, “You want to play rough? Here I come.”

SKREEEECH

The heavy, black car-of-tomorrow spins sideways in the street, blocking both lanes. Inside the squad cars, three jackbooted heels jump on break pedals.

Inside the heavy black car, Pandora Driver stares into six headlights and braces herself. Behind another wheel, Lobo sees what's coming but has too much momentum to stop...

SKREEEECH

Tires scream as five tons of Studebaker steel, slides synchronized over street bricks.

CRA-BA-BA-BASH

Cars 13 and 10 double T-bone the big, black car. Radiators burst. Headlights explode. Fenders compress. Chrome grills uncoil. And cops are launched from running boards and flung into the pile up.

CA-BA-BANG

The trailing car, 21, rear-ends its allies, bouncing them back into the black barricade like a deadly game of bumper cars. The Passengers bounce like loose bullets in ammo-boxes. Frames are bent. Batteries are cracked. More men tumble into the heavy metal and a litany of both mechanical and medical injuries are suffered.

For frozen moments in the aftermath, the only movement in the wreckage is the gentle hiss of steam escaping from cracked radiators. Surviving red lights continue to flash, as a sick sound of a siren loses pitch, fades, then dies.

Lobo's eyes flutter open and focus on a broken speedometer needle stuck at 43. His head arises from his steel steering wheel. His mouth feels different. He looks in the rearview mirror and pulls back his lacerated lips to discover his incisors are all gone. He coughs, spitting out a mouth full of teeth and blood.

Beside him the crumpled door is ajar, and he stumbles out clutching his Reising. Around him, those who can stand arise like the living dead. Bloody and bruised, they stagger to cover.

Through the steam, Lobo glares at the black car blocking his way and his

anger reignites. He's never encountered such an egregious act of resistance before. He takes cover in the V between the open door and the windshield frame. He lets out a strained scream, "FIRE GOD DAMN IT! FIRE!"

BRAKKA BRAKKA BRAKKA

Like a battering-ram of angry, lead hornets, hundreds of bullets pummel the streamlined barricade. All fire is concentrated on the driver-side window, but the bulletproof-glass, forged by super-science, holds. On the other side, Pandora Driver feels the force of the rapid-fire taps on the rattling glass, inches away from her face. Through the shower of hot lead and sparks, she watches as ricochets bounce back and forth between the impacted, armored cars. She traces the line-of-fire back to the shooters. The strobe of muzzle flashes ignite angry scowls, waxing wroth beneath black helmets, but she can't hear their curses over the deafening hail. As her eyes travel from face to face, she thinks, "On my cop-watch outings, I've discovered there are two distinct breeds of policeman.

"The first one becomes drunk on the power and privileges a badge can offer, and exploits them for his own benefit. I call them Bulls, because they follow the scent of the brass ring pierced through nostrils. Bulls want to be insiders, to lord power, and perpetuate the corruption of the monsters who un-pen them.

"The second type wants to help people. I call them Knights, since they appear to follow a Code of Chivalry; to protect the weak and defenseless, to eschew unfairness, meanness and deceit, to speak the truth, and to fight for the welfare of all.

She watches a cop reload.

“One tramples over us, the other walks among us. One asks, ‘What do I get?’ The other asks, ‘What can I do?’ One sees citizens as obstacles, the other sees us as allies. Sometimes you can spot them easily...”

Her scan stops on a hatless cop who's not dressed like the others. She recognizes his face as the man standing by the parking garage, before the chase began. For the second time tonight, he unknowingly makes eye contact with her. He's crouched behind a door for cover, but he's not shooting. He doesn't even have a gun raised.

Pandora concludes, “...But you can never be too sure.”

An armored angry cop asks Officer Kirk, “WHY AREN'T YOU SHOOTING SOLDIER?!”

Kirk responds, “I don't even know what we are shooting at.”

Kirk's heart pounds in sync with his comrades, and he studies the insane scene. Inside, he repeats the pledge he took at the police academy, not so long ago, “On my honor, I vow to protect the citizenry and property of the people of Citadel City. I will never betray my badge, my integrity, my character or the public trust. Without exception, I will have the courage to hold myself and others accountable for our actions.”

He never draws his gun, during the shootout.

Finally, the steady stream of police fire, subsides, then trickles, as magazines are depleted, one at a time until silence. The only sound on the street is the gently, purring engine inside the car-of-tomorrow.

Pandora throws her column shifter in reverse, peels back away from the

bewildered heaps that rammed her, then turns away, down the street, abandoning the scene of the accident. Dumbfounded, the police realize there's not a scratch on the mysterious vehicle without plates, as it disappears into the shadows of the night.

THE KANKAKEE RIVER

4:37 AM

The changing leaves of autumn rustle in the woods along the river road, an hour south of the city. Dense trees arch across the overgrown path from both sides, connecting canopies to form a natural forest tunnel. It ends at a clearing with an isolated cabin. Candlelight flickers from foggy windows. The moon reveals a nightshade-blue, Buick Century 60 Touring Sedan, hidden behind the cabin.

During the summer months, the cabins along the riverbank become popular weekend getaways for city dwellers, looking to escape the heat and pressures of city life. Before the crash of 1929, these woods were a sportsman's paradise for anglers and hunters. However, since the crash, the river's been fished out, and all the game's been depleted by hungry families struggling to survive the Great Depression.

The tranquility of the locale is marred by the series of heavy thuds rattling the isolated cabin. For the moment, it's become Niles Weiss' hideout.

No matter his mood, Niles Weiss has the type of face that always looks like he's smirking. His round head sports a bold hawk-nose and dark, side swept hair that looks slept in. He's dressed in blue anchor print pajamas, tweed sports jacket, and brown Oxford wingtips with no socks. Currently,

he's wielding a sledgehammer and destroying the interior of an isolated cabin in the woods. He's a far cry from the life he once knew on Easy street.

Niles Weiss was lucky enough to be born into a world of wealth and privilege, and he enjoyed all the spoils of his station. With the ample allowance he'd been given all his life, he fed the ever-fattening stockmarket of the 1920s. To him, it was work. He studied stocks like a gambler poring over racing forms. He learned the tricks of trading, like healthily buying on margin. That way, every dollar he invested became ten instantly. When you have a million dollars to play with, a measly ten percent gain becomes a \$100,000 profit. In the roaring 1920s, that seemed like all the money in the world, and he played and played. Weiss was a braggart and overtime he acquired more wealth than his father, who he let know in the most ostentatious ways. When the market was up, Weiss was the life of the party, but when it was down, he could be a real prick.

Then in October of 1929, his luck ran out, and he lost everything when the market crashed on Black Tuesday. All of his worldly possessions began draining into a black hole of debt. He begged his parents for financial support, but his father wished to teach the young man about frivolity, so he cut him off. He implied it was a life lesson, but in reality the elder's coffers were also dented by the crash. His father didn't feel it was prudent to share what was left with his son, and he ordered his wife to maintain that front. They kept news of Niles' financial straits private, to avoid embarrassment from their peers.

Niles was confused by how some other well-to-do families were able to maintain their standard of living during the crisis. He wanted what they still had, so he devised a plan to get it.

To outsiders, Niles seemed to be thriving. He acquired a larger mansion and filled it with the finest furniture and artwork. He changed new cars weekly. Others took notice of what looked like post-crash success, but they didn't realize how far he was getting himself in debt, and that all his newly acquired possessions were rented. It was bait.

From the pangs within him, Niles knew that greed wasn't the prime sin of the wealthy, it was envy. So, he threw lavish parties to show the moneyed just how much he appeared to have. Guests received opulent favors, they dined on the most exquisite foods from elaborate buffets, and they were served the finest wine and spirits. Each treasure and trophy in Niles' palace had a compelling history. As a quartet played, he presented slides of his adventures in, what looked like, the most exotic locations around the globe.

He was the consummate mingler and handily spoke in the tongue of the rich. He could juggle complex figures in his head, and in stock related conversations, he exuded the confidence of an expert broker. He joked that he had to open his own brokerage firm since all the others had shut down.

All the while he talked, he was actually waiting for someone to ask him a key question, “How are you able to grow your earnings during this Great Depression?”

It rang like a bell, which made his mouth water. It signaled him to ease into a well rehearsed, soft-sales-pitch that leaked out of him like a casual conversation. He implied he had connections in Washington DC and that he'd actually been asked to help draft a recovery program, but he wasn't at liberty to divulge its name. He claimed it exploited a loophole allowing shrewd investors a window of opportunity to profit from the economic decline, if they knew where to look and when to move. He hinted that,

from his connection, he had advanced knowledge of economic news, both good and bad, that he'd profited from both. He suggested that he was lucky enough to have special access to this inside track, and it continued to bear him fruit. At that point, his audience members' mouths were watering too. His internal script cued him ask with a wink, “By the way, have you seen my new car?”

The deal he presented sounded like a safe way for the wealthy to recover lost riches. The information came from a trusted source, from a good family. His possessions obviously proved he was telling the truth. Most importantly, he was one of their own.

Typically, Weiss excused himself at that moment to attend to nondescript matters, elsewhere. Later, the primed pigeons would find him, for a private chat about the possibility of joining his exclusive winner's club, before it was too late. Of course, Weiss would hedge, play coy, and add caveats. Sometimes, he'd make them beg before taking their money. In the end, the victims felt like they'd made a deal with their new best friend. They sealed their deals and fates at the same time.

Some jumped in with two feet. Others tested him, but all the participant's impressive dividend checks arrived on time, as promised.

While finalizing the details of each individual deal, he explained that his clients should keep this amazing system a secret, because if it became public knowledge, freeloaders would squeeze in and dilute the profitability, the first-comers deserved. However, inevitably, sheepish clients would call on behalf of their closest friends, inquiring if there was room for one more member? There always was. In order for his Ponzi scheme to work, Niles needed new cash to feed the dividends of the older accounts. He siphoned off the rest for himself.

His client list was a who's-who of the Citadel City elite. It included friends of his family, his father, councilmen, even the Mayor. Blinded by dollar signs, the participants hailed Niles as the financial genius, although he never invested a penny of their money. His cash-con ran for nearly five years. Eventually, the moneyed pools ran dry, and at the first hint of detection, Niles vanished.

As his powerful victims realized they'd been suckered and bled dry, they were FURIOUS! They orchestrated the greatest dragnet in the city's history. Nile's father and mother were forced to leave town, due to the scandal, but investigators and snoops kept an eye on them anyway.

The only other person of interest in the case was a voice on the telephone. Eventually, police were able to track it to a girl named Dolly. Though she'd had several meetings with the police, she knew little about Niles and nothing about his operation. She was merely an answering service, who Niles paid in cash. In turn, she gave police his appointment book, during her first tearful questioning. Unfortunately, it only contained contact information about the victims. There was nothing about accessories or possible hideouts. The investigators concluded that Dolly was an innocent girl, caught in Niles' web of deceit. So they kept her name out of the papers.

Since 1934, Niles enjoyed an extended holiday in Europe, until the war heated up and drove him back to the States. He drifted from coast to coast, until covertly returning to Citadel City eight years later.

Finally, two hours ago, a bored, stakeout team, monitoring a different subject, involved in unrelated crime, spotted Weiss inside the low rent, Winchester Arms apartment.

Niles spent the better half of the previous day demolishing the interior of the isolated cabin, in search of his missing treasure. To his dismay, the exhaustive hunt was fruitless. He needed help pinpointing its location, so with the help of chloroform he abducted the only possible guide, right in front of her apartment.

Now, his ginger-haired hostage is gagged and bound to a simple wooden chair in center of the pockmarked living room of the cabin. She's dressed in a disheveled periwinkle day dress, with a notched collar and front-closing, princess seam bodice that pinches at her waist above a gathered skirt that looks it was slept in. Kayeser hose smooth her long, supple calves into stanch, brown, block-heeled pumps with a leather bow. Beneath tousled red bangs, her big green eyes scan the mess surrounding her.

Before this moment, she had nothing but fond memories of this cabin. As a child, her family spent their summers swimming and boating along the river. As young woman, she enjoyed weekend trysts entangled in a warm lover's embrace, on a fur rug in front of a roaring fire, far away from the prying eyes of the city. She called the cabin her secret-special-place, and Niles knew it.

Her bright green eyes follow Niles as he approaches her. He removes a fallen lock of hair from her face, loosens the gag from her swollen lips, and gives her a long gentle kiss. Her eyes remain open. She freezes at his touch. He pulls back and sighs, "Please, tell me where the money is."

Dolly spits and screeches at him, "You think you can just breeze back into

town, whenever you want? Take whatever you want? How dare you?!”

Niles tries to calm her, “Don't change the subject, doll. I know how much I paid you for answering the phone, and it was a lot. I know you skimmed some money from me, but I'm not mad, because I know that, deep down, you know the missing money is mine. I earned it, and I want it back.”

She shrieks, “I don't know what you're talking about! I never skimmed anything, and the rest of the money I earned from you is long gone! I spent it all years ago!”

He laughs, “On what? You live like a church mouse. Look at the way you dress.”

He fondles her clothing. “What is this, Sears and Roebuck, or did you make this from a Woolworths pattern? You still live in the same crummy apartment you had eight years ago. I checked it out. There's nothing new inside.”

She pulls at the tight restraints and begins to cry, “I never wanted to be involved in any of this. I kept quiet, because I loved you, but you used me.”

Niles rolls his eyes. “Give me a break, doll. You didn't keep quiet out of love. It was for self-preservation. We're accomplices, and you know it... Look, I know you've got the cash stashed here, in your silly-secrete-place.”

She corrects him with an icy glare and tone, “It's my special-secret-place.”

He chuckles, “Yeah. Right. Whatever. I'll find it eventually, then I'll leave

you to the bears or something worse lurking in these woods. But if you just tell me where the money is, we can pick up where we left off. We'll disappear together, travel the world and live happily ever after, like we should have in the first place. I've missed you, doll."

She mocks him, "No, you really came back now, because you ran out of money, right?"

He says nothing.

She continues, "I always warned you to put something away for a rainy day, but did you listen? No. You never listen to anything I say. Oh boy, was you're daddy right about you! You are dumber than a peasant who spits at a king!"

His blood boils as he growls back, "God damn it! What happened to the skim?!"

She continues, "I don't know anything about any missing money. Maybe you should ask your whore about it. Maybe, if you wouldn't have spend so much on her, you'd have something left."

Niles parries, "Not that again. How many times do I have to say, 'I made a mistake?' I'm sorry. Margot didn't mean anything to me. Besides, I ended that years ago? I don't even know where she lives now."

Her eyes water. "You ran away with her eight years and three months ago and left me holding the bag!"

"No. No. No. It wasn't like that, doll. I had to move quickly, and I left alone. The cops were on my tail. I had to skip-town and lay-low until the

heat was off...”

She rolls her eyes, “Ok, whatever you say, Dillinger.”

“... And, I couldn’t come back to you, until it was safe. Doll, I haven't stopped thinking about you since they chased me out of town. You know you are the only woman I ever truly loved. We have passion. I can feel it right now. I've missed that feeling. I’ve missed you. Come on, Dolly. Tell me where the money is, so we can get the heck out of this mess.”

He moves in close to her, continuing in a disarming tone, “With all that cash, you know, we can start over and fresh, and live happily ever after, princess.”

He gently traces a line, from the pit of her neck into her décolletage, “You remember all fun we had, don't you?”

Her pulse races, but she looks away, “Maybe your whore can help you find your money.”

He grimaces stands up and growls, “So you're withholding my money to teach me a lesson? Is that it? This is punishment?”

She screams, “You finally figure that out?”

He hefts the sledgehammer again and swings, “Where the hell is it?!”

KA-THUD

The sledgehammer bites the bricks of the fireplace, and they chatter and collapse into a cloud of dust. No treasure. He returns to his systematic

search pattern of holes in the floor and walls and swings again, “I need the money.”

THUD

He grunts, “I can't leave without it.”

THUD

The head of the sledge gets stuck in the wall. He rips at the broken planks of wood with his bare hands, “Where is it? OW! DAMN IT!”

He examines a long splinter embedded under the skin of his blistered hand. He carefully removes it, and uncorks a trickle of blood. He watches as the running, red trail twists around his palm and fingers, before dripping to the floor.

He cautiously unsticks the sledge from the wall, then returns to Dolly.

Niles drops the sledgehammer to the floor on its iron head. The handle stands erect at his side. Then, he kneels in front of Dolly, gently removing her brown, leather shoe. Her cherry-red pedicured toes inside the hosiery, looks like candy in a bag and compels him to kiss her toes, before returning her petite foot to the wooden floor. Returning to his feet, Niles fondles the handle of the sledge and says, “Tell me where the money is, or I will crush your foot with this.”

He touches her face as he bends in and kisses her. He gently adds, “Please, don't make me do this. You know, I love you.”

She gazes at him through teary eyes. “I never told anybody anything.”

Niles eyes water. "I need that money."

He lifts the sledge with both hands and hefts it to a swinging position. He warns, "You better tell me. God damn it!"

He raises the sledge over his head. His eyes look to heaven as he begins to swing.

CREEEEEK

The noise of the front door swinging open startles him, interrupting his impending strike. He mumbles, "I know I closed that."

He chokes up on his weapon of choice and creeps up to the door. He listens for the sound of an invader but hears nothing but the pulse in his ears. He cranes his head out the door.

Pffft

Something stings his cheek. His body goes stiff. The sledge falls, and he collapses onto it. Niles lays motionless across the threshold as the door creaks all the way open. Dolly looks on with eyes wide. "Niles?"

After a strained silence, she hears soft footsteps on the porch. A shadowy, alien head with large, bug-like eyes peeks through the doorway and stares at the hostage for a moment. Dolly never really believed that Niles would have hurt her, but she doesn't know what to expect from this new threat. As a girl, she'd heard many campfire tales of ghosts, monsters and maniacs roaming the woods along the river. Her bladder feels weak.

The shadowy figure steps into a moonbeam, revealing the form of a woman in a hood and goggles. She enters the cabin. With a strange gun drawn, she quickly slinks up to Dolly. In a whisper, the mysterious woman asks, “Is there anyone else here?”

Dolly hesitates, before shaking her head, no. Pandora Driver holsters her strange gun, removes a pocketknife from under her cowl, and cuts the ropes.

Dolly looks over Niles fallen body, gulps, and asks, “Is he dead?”

As Pandora saws the twine, she retorts, “Not yet.”

The ropes snap away. Now freed, Dolly stands and rubs her rope burned skin and asks, “How can I repay you?”

“Help me drag this monster to my car.”

Feeling like a prisoner of a second, but unknown captor, Dolly complies with the macabre request. As the unlikely pair drags Niles' body through the dirt, Dolly can tell he's only sleeping. They quickly arrive at a big, black car hidden by the woods and thicket. Dolly thinks. “It doesn't seem possible that she was able to park so close to the cabin, without us detecting it.”

As he got a better look at the vehicle, she realizes it's the same car that trailed her as Niles escaped from the Winchester Arms. She blurts, “Wait a minute. You're the Driver, I read about in the paper? I thought you were a man.”

Pandora opens the passenger side door and stuffs Niles inside. She says,

“Well, I'm not, but this is a guy, and he's heavy, so help me push.”

As Dolly does, she adds, “Back there in the city, I thought you gave up on me.”

Pandora gives Niles limp form a last push with her black boot, and says, “I'm relentless.”

Pandora marches toward the Buick Century. As Dolly trails close behind, she remembers some of her more incriminating exchanges during the argument with her estranged lover. She cautiously asks Pandora, “How much of that madman's ravings did you hear, before you...did, whatever it was, that you did to him?”

“I heard enough to know he was going to hurt you. That was all I needed to know.”

Dolly lets out a relieved and tearful, “Oh, Thank you.”

Reaching the Buick Century, Pandora Driver removes a small, silver flashlight from under her long, black cowl, then drops to her knees to examine the undercarriage. Dolly asks, “What are you doing?”

Pandora frees her magnetic puck clinging from the bottom of the gas tank, and shows it to Dolly. “I used this to track you here. Some Europeans used it to trap me once, but by the time I was done with them, they didn't need it anymore, so I kept it. I've learned a lot from my adversaries.”

Returning to her feet, Pandora asks, “Do you want to keep the Buick, or do you need a lift back to the city?”

Looking back to Niles' crumpled up in the car, Dolly asks, "What are you going to do with him?"

Walking back, Pandora says, "Take him someplace, where he'll be put away for a long time."

Dolly asks, "If I go with you, will you turn me in too?"

Pandora climbs in behind the wheel of her car and presses the starter. She says, "You were never my target. I deal with monsters."

Dolly looks unsure. Pandora smiles and waves her in, "Come on. You've been through a lot. Let's get you back home, so you can put this all behind you."

Dolly complies.

CITADEL CITY, WEST SIDE

6:20 AM

It's hard to appreciate twilight on an overcast day. The early risers of Stoeger Blvd begin to appear on the narrow neighborhood street. Between the mirrored rows of shotgun houses, men in hats try to get the jump on rush hour as they navigate to bus and L stops. Bundled children are gently coaxed out doors for another school day. Women march to the local bakery for the first pick of fresh bread. And a sole police cruiser drops off a weary cop, who's pulled an all-nighter.

After a long night of story straightening, fact crafting, and paperwork with

other cops, Officer Kirk, now reunited with his eight point, peaked cap, is relieved to be home. A big yawn escapes him, before turning to the portly driver beside him. He shakes his hand and says, “Thanks for the lift, Elmer.”

“Anytime, partner. We cops got to’ watch each other's back, right?” He punctuates the thought with a knowing wink. Kirk nods and exits the vehicle.

HONK-HONK

Elmer taps the horn as he pulls away. Kirk searches his pocket for house keys as he walks to his front door.

Behind him, a heavy, car door unlatches and swings open. Someone steps to the curb. A new car has taken the parking spot occupied only seconds ago. Kirk turns to see a Caucasian female, 5 foot 2 inches tall, approximately mid 20s. She's dressed in a gray, body-fitting outfit with black stripes that start at her equestrian style boots, that trace the supple curves of her body before disappearing beneath a black, bertha-style collar that's long enough to hide her breasts. Her facial features are obscured beneath dark goggles and a black hood. Though her gloved hands are empty, she is armed with a covered, leather holster at her waist. It's snapped closed.

Kirk recognizes the glossy, black vehicle, parked behind her, from last night. It looks different in the daylight, but still makes imposing presence. Actually, it feels more menacing now that it's parked right in front of Kirk's home. In a confident tone, Kirk asks, “So you're the mysterious driver that's been haunting our city? I assumed you were a guy.”

She responds, "I get that a lot. You can call me, Pandora."

He asks, "Should I be worried about anything you're about to open?"

"No."

His probing eyes follow the sweeping lines of the 20-foot car behind her. He remembers what it withstood last night and notes that it's undamaged. He asks, "What type of car is that?"

She responds, "Unstoppable."

He waits for her to elaborate, but she doesn't, so he continues with his indirect interrogation. "Why did you help Weiss escape?"

She responds, "He had a hostage in the car."

He's startled, "Was she hurt? Where is she?"

"She's fine. She's not ready to talk to the police, but I am."

He responds, "Ok. What's on your mind?"

Pandora Driver explains, "Since the Japs attacked Hawaii, I've seen a disturbing trend in our city. The power elite have seized on the countries invasion fears, as opportunity to reshape the police into a private enforcement tool for their own use, and have been diverting military style weaponry to it.

"By militarizing the police, their job is redefined and a mindset changes. The focus shifts from keeping the peace, to waging a war, and who

becomes their enemy? The population of the city. Neighborhoods become battlefields, and innocent citizens become nothing more than collateral damage or secondary concerns to a mission. Laws lose priority, and reason is overruled in the name of winning a nebulously defined urban war.

“The elites issuing the orders don't see this as a problem, because the barrels of their private army always point away from them. So far, they've used it against public protests and to hunt their enemies, like Weiss. Having this power is a way for them to consolidate their control over the rest of us. And there is a certain breed of cop that thrives under those conditions. They embrace the power, instead of doing what's right. Maybe as an insider, you don't see it?”

Kirk has been listening intently. He says politely, “I'm not blind to what's been happening. I realize our enforcement tools have been serving vested interests more and more, not to the law.”

Staring into her vacant goggles, he asks, “And you're wondering what type of cop I am? Is that it? I believe police aren't supposed to be separated from the public. We are the public. We should be acting on all of our behalf.”

She retorts, “Did you fire your weapon this evening?”

“Not once.”

“Why not?”

“I never had a legitimate target.”

She reaches back into the dark confines of her car, then clumsily drags

Weiss' limp body out onto the sidewalk. She says, “Here is a reward for your good judgment.”

Kirk can see that he's breathing.

She offers, “This is me saying ‘thank you’, from all of the people you protect and serve in our city. I know what it means for the person who captures this high profile monster, and I want you to take credit for it. You can be an agent of positive change within the police force. You're smart, articulate, and handsome; use that to your advantage. Exploit all the glory that will be handed to you from the Weiss arrest to gain power.”

Kirk asks, “Why me?”

She sighs and confesses, “Unfortunately, my preferred solution, doesn't solve all problems. I can't make every bad cop disappear. There must be a cultural shift in the police force. My hope is that it begins with you.

“I believe you are a good man and a good cop. Please, prove that I'm right.”

BANG

Suddenly, the conversation is cut short as a bullet punches Pandora in the back. Her bulletproof costume saves her. She spins to see Elmer standing at the corner with his 45 drawn. He'd circled back because Kirk forgot a lunch pail in the cruiser. Recognizing her car from last night, and seeing the armed and dangerous driver confronting Kirk outside his home, Elmer took action. He assumes Pandora is Weiss' accomplice.

The women and children on the street stand frozen at the sound of the

gunshot. Kirk yells, “ELMER, DON'T SHOOT!”

Pandora Driver buries her face in the bend of her arm and runs right at Elmer. He didn't expect her to remain standing after the first. He pulls the trigger again, harder and harder as she closes on him. It's the solution he's come to rely on.

BANG BANG BANG

Within seconds, she reaches him and forces his pistol down. It fires into the sidewalk, launching exploding chips of concrete.

BANG BANG BANG

A shot skins his shoe and toe, and he drops his gun. She serves him a spinning kick to his neck, causing him to black out. As he collapses, Pandora whips around to face Kirk again. He's showing her his empty hands as he says, “Apparently, you're not hurt. I'm sure that was just a big misunderstanding! I didn't see him coming either.”

She marches back to her car to make an abrupt exit. Kirk moves to intercept her and fast-talks to regain her attention. “Ah, wait a second...”

She spins to face him with teeth and fists clenched. He gently inquires, “Did you know the Lone Ranger had a creed?”

Below expressionless goggles, her angry, black lips part as she blurts back, “What?”

The handsome officer chuckles as he explains. “Yes, the Lone Ranger had a creed that he lived by. It began with, ‘To have a friend, one must be a

friend first'."

The simple idiom penetrates Pandora Driver's bulletproof custom, striking her most vulnerable spot, her heart. Emotions swell, catching her off guard, but being the consummate actress, she reveals no sign of his words effect. She calmly says, "Go on."

Through a disarming, smile he obliges, "I guess, I want you to know that, you're not alone in your fight. Actually, you have more allies than you might think, right in this neighborhood, in fact.

He motions to the curious onlookers of the strange scene in front of Officer Kirks home. He adds, "I'm here to help...if you need it."

Her goggles fog on the inside, but Kirk sees no sign of emotion. He shrugs and asks, "Is any of this getting through?"

She lunges at him like a panther, grabs his head and locks her black lips against his. The seductive taste of licorice invades his mouth, as the power and passion within her, warms his body. He doesn't resist. The moment ends as abruptly as it began. Kirk opens his eyes in time to see Pandora, running back to the mysterious car. He follows her pleasing rump as it disappears through the passenger-side door.

A chorus of young voices in harmony breaks the beat cop's trance. "You've got a girlfriend. You've got a girlfriend."

He turns to see three, rosy cheeked boys dressed in trapper-hats and worn coats. They swing leather strapped schoolbooks as they perform a hip-wagging dance, accompanying their taunting tune. "Kirk's got a girlfriend. Kirk's got a girlfriend."

He smiles and says, “Get to school.” He offers a pretend threat to kick them away. They flee giggling, but soon stop to investigate the fallen bodies on the sidewalk. One of them asks Kirk, “Did you shoot these guys?”

He says, “No, they're sleeping.”

Then, he points to the body of his fellow officer and adds, “See that guy there? He's a truant officer.”

The boys run away screaming.

Kirk waves away the shocked pockets of adult gawkers, startled by the unusual events. “It's ok folks. Everything is ok now. Move along. Move it along.”

They disperse.

On the street, Pandora Driver's streamlined car-of-tomorrow slinks around the abandoned squad car, before disappearing downtown. The concrete canyons of Citadel City are painted by the glow of morning sun, blasting through the clouds. The peacekeeper takes a breath of fresh morning air as he strolls to his fallen comrade. Elmer is awoken by a series of quick slaps. Then, Kirk leads his groggy comrade, up the porch to his shotgun house, so they can call for a paddy-wagon to collect Weiss. As the dazed officer's memory refocuses, he asks, “Say, who was that masked woman?”

Kirk responds, “I don't know,” but in his imagination he hears a cowboy's twang say, “Why that there was the Pandora Driver.”

The following morning, the headline of the Citadel Sentinel reads, “HERO COP CAPTURES WEISS SINGLE HANDED!”

EPILOGUE

Niles Weiss betrayed the capitalist covenant he was obliged to protect by birthright. After a speedy trial, he is sentenced to a 130 years in prison. The power elite of Citadel City finally got the scalp they'd sought for so many years and violently wave it as a warning to anyone considering crossing them in the future.

None of their stolen money is ever recovered.

As a witness at his trial, Dolly didn't quite tell the truth, but she revealed enough to make sure Niles was put away for good. After his sentencing, Dolly decides to take a ride into the country, back to the family cabin he ruined. Since then, the leaves have all fallen, and the drive isn't nearly as pretty. As she arrives at the isolated cabin, and spots the abandoned Buick Century 60 still parked behind it. She thinks, “Now that’s mine too.”

She exits the black, 1939 Plymouth Business Coupe she's borrowed from a friend. She is dressed in a long, tan, gabardine coat and saddle leather gloves. Her red hair is tucked smartly under a forest green Stetson, cuff brim, plaza hat. She removes a snubnosed 38 Detective Special from a brown clutch then creeps up to the opened cabin door to check for deranged hobos who might be squatting, or worse, in her secret-special-

place.

Convinced she's alone, she exits the cabin heading to a shed out back. She removes a spade, then counts paces to the edge of the clearing. She jumps on the spade with all her weight to split the frozen earth. Digging the hole is harder than Dolly anticipated, but she sticks with it, until the spade hits a buried coffee can. Kneeling down in the dirt, she clears the top of it with her freshly manicured hands. She removes it and two more. Prying open the lid of the last, she frees the fresh scent of coffee beans, and cash. A smile creeps over her dark red lips and she begins to laugh and imagine of the new life she will have with the money she's earned. She tells the empty woods, "Never underestimated the determination of a scorned woman."

Pffft

Something stings her in the neck, and everything goes black.

When she wakes up the following morning, her stash is gone.

Those who suffered damages, during the police shooting spree on the night of Weiss' capture, got the runaround from various city agencies. Any associated lawsuits, experienced delay after delay. One-by-one each case was thrown out of court due to ill-fitting technicalities. Later, each victim received anonymous cash settlements, wrapped in plain brown packages, from a mysterious friend of the precariat.

THE END

John Picha was born on St. Patrick's Day 1968 in Joliet, Illinois. He was raised in Frankfort, a suburb of Chicago, but his mind always seemed to be elsewhere. The little Midwesterner was captivated by comic books, cartoons and animation, mythology and all things imagined. He made the world around him more exciting by pretending. A bicycle was a spacecraft, a bush became a dinosaur, and, of course, there was always a bath towel hidden away for a quick change into a super hero.

John is also the inventor of Thumbtraps for iPad and tablet gaming.

www.thumbtraps.com

If you'd like to learn more about John or to see his other work, you can visit him on the web.

www.takejohn.com

www.youtube.com/johnpicha

www.skyracos.com

If you'd like to read more adventures of Pandora Driver, simply do a search for her in your favorite eBookstore or visit her on the web.

www.pandoradriver.com



B L O O M

Created by Anita Dime

- Chapter 1 -

Beep...beep...flicker-flash...

“Bob,” - short, direct, down-turned: all curtness conveyed in Stan’s tone - an understood “you’re going to handle that aren’t you.” Period. No question about it. The incessant beeping had been carrying on for one too many cycles and was on Bob’s side of the control panel.

Beep....beep...flicker-flash...

Beep...

Bob rolled a yellow pencil between his palms, smiled a long “uh-hunh-yep-feel-the-burn” kinda smile towards Stan, and then clamped the pencil between his teeth. Teaming up for well over fifteen years now, these two ran operations at the Region 5 Port Terminus, a Water Company owned, mobile, mid-sized spaceport located in the Kuiper Belt, a prime aqua harvesting location.

Flipping a few switches, the exterior keying lights along the spaceport’s loading channels began flashing, queuing up the T1 *Taipai*, an Earth resource drop-off supertanker, to link into the receiving payload system.

Bob patched his comm-link cable into thirty-seven on the switchboard’s patch bay, connecting to Shipping-Receiving. “Carl, incoming algal crude,” he said. “Five cylinders. Prime the empties for return.” On-board, the viscous “pea soup” bio-fuel would be further processed into diesel to run the enormous Hedgehog power generators.

Beep...beep...flicker-flash...

Carl engaged the receiving spaceport payload doors, prepping the arrival of the coppery cylindrical canisters. The huge piston driven armatures opened the external doors, a system not unlike a revolver speed loader, enabling swift rotation of the empties out of the chamber and replacements in. “Copy that,” he responded. “The receiving crew is ready. Should I schedule the casting of a new buoy net?”

“Yeah, go ahead. Send out those ‘little boys’,” said Bob. Snovea buoys

were a one-time use kinda deal, balls compartmentalized with chemicals that when mixed, would create temporary gravitational forces, pulling space ships towards port. U-235 was a product of the massive endothermic reaction, which could be picked up by ships, like the T1 *Taipai* tanker, and used as a fuel source. Casting a new net of gravitational buoys would prep for the next algal crude delivery.

Thinking of the last shipment, Bob continued, “Have the lab run a QA spot check test from several tanks. Check that they haven’t been cut with something.”

“Yeah, sure thing.” Carl asked, “Hey, what’s that beeping?”

“If things check out ok, then add these to inventory and release twenty-five units to BioFuel Lab 108.” Bob paused, adjusting, committing various procedural system checks and locks. “And never mind the beeping.”

“Down to 15 percent,” said Carl. “Glad they’re finally here. We’ve been waiting on this shipment.”

“Yeah, no joke,” agreed Bob.

Carl asked, “Anything else?”

“Nope. All’s good. Take it easy. Out,” Bob cut comm and abruptly, swiveled his console chair, facing Stan. “Affectionately” he gazed at Stan, lovingly with anime-doe eyes. “Say it,” he taunted.

“Seriously?” rolled Stan’s eyes. “You do realize that that is the air control system alarm.” Bob was unmoved.

“Say it,” said Bob.

“Can’t you see I’m a bit busy here?” Stan wasn’t lying; he was busy, monitoring Lester and Walter’s routine harvesting procedure. Though, all-in-all, he really had a “koosh” job, one you could maintain with a cup of joe in hand.

Outside, in space, was a different story. Clamping down on the Aerogel hexie-combs, Lester locked them into place, retracted his cable, and snapped his spacesuit back into his longboard glider. Initiating the aqua-harvester alignment sequence for comet LONEOS 7, Lester dreamed of cigars and whiskey back at port. It’d been a rough week.

With a slight booster tap Walter narrowed his proximity to Lester, ready to manually support. Gracefully, he maneuvered, gliding through space, the distant sun gleaming off metallic particulates in the comet’s wake.

Within the spaceport’s control tower, a quarter of Stan’s control panel lit up, screaming panic. “Indicators within reach, thank God,” he thought. His attention snapped to his bank of four-inch monitors. After quickly reviewing the data, he voiced his concern, “Hey, come on now, Fellas. I know it’s late in the day, but pay attention. Harness those drafters right. Lester, LONEOS 7 was yesterday. This is NEAT 4, same routine, different coordinates. You get this baby out of alignment, and you can explain the space drift issues to Central.” The purple and orange glow from the square control buttons illuminated the lower base of Stan’s glasses. He shifted, looking more like a night radio DJ than a space aqua farmer.

Beep....beep...flicker-flash...

Beep...

“Yeah, OK,” acknowledged Lester. “Hey, what’s that beeping?” he asked.

“Never mind that annoying beep.” Clenching his jaw in his attempt to not raise his voice, Stan stewed and said, “Bob’s just flipping the switch, now – aren’tcha, Bob, ” he continued.”He’s then heading to the A.I.R. generators to swap out a few lichen filters.”

“Did I hear *Uncle*?” asked Bob, grinning and batting his eyelids.

“Yes, *Uncle*,” resigned Stan.

“You guys at it again, huh.” Lester shook his head. “Cycling through a few too many filters, aren’t you?” Lester asked with an aside, “Hey, Walter. Here, step in. I’m beat.” Effortlessly, Walter took over, like a synchronized swimmer completing the routine.

Don’t get it wrong. Lester’s a first-rate, harvest technician, clocking his second, ten-hour shift. Clive, who was recovering from some kind of bronchial infection, just couldn’t make it out of sickbay; he was still coughin’ up a lung.

“Fifty-nine,” Bob said, smiling as he stopped the beep, silencing the room. The ambient, mechanical *cha-chunk* of the spaceport hovered. He got up and popped out his earplugs, grinning, “You’re shy by four beeps, Buddy.” Opening the door, he began whistling and strolled out of the room.

“Ear plugs! You cheat!” Stan’s voice chased Bob down the corridor.

Focusing back on his crew, he punched up vehicle system diagnostics. “That’s what I thought,” he sighed. “Great, more forms.”

Forms, forms, forms – a huge part of Stan’s duties, filling out fleet inspection, employee health, and harvester incident forms - he pulled up the glider’s flight record and began to log the vehicle inspection request, prepping files to submit to Sid in Fleet Maintenance. “And Lester, you’re looping space dust on the right glider’s edge. Have Sid take a look when you get back to the docking bay. Don’t need no fin peeling out there next week.” Sometimes it took a small tear in the glider’s ultra thin wing to peel the entire panel away.

Walter swung the last armature in place, singing, “Alrighty, it’s aligned and secured. I think I’m done here; releasin’,” With masterful dexterity, Walter and Lester maneuvered their longboard gliders away from the comet tail and harvester, “and punching in port coordinates now, routing back home”.

“Copy that, Walter. See you two on Thursday. Get some sleep.” Stan logged time codes, vehicle VINS, and total man hours into the system. It would take over from there, relaying comet arrival times to the Region 6 Port Terminus, where they would gather the harvest of space minerals and water stores: filtering, purifying, and filling the water tanks to sell the crop over the counter to consumers.

From when it began, all the spaceports had grown considerably, as populations moved off Earth to re-colonize elsewhere. Water was a high demand resource. For this perihelion spaceport, Region 5 Port Terminus, most didn’t dream that it would be their final stop, becoming “home”.

“Roger that and out,” said Lester.

Stan sipped his coffee and hung his glasses off the front neckline of his blue-grey T-shirt. The collar sagged, revealing a bit of his white chest hair. He ran his fingers along the right side of his hairline, tracing the crisp edge; just yesterday he'd buzzed it back. He rubbed his eyes, blue with a tinge of tired.

His headset blipped, engaging. Stan chipmunked a handful of sunflower seeds into his cheek. "Region 5 Port Terminus, this is NACSE *Klondike*, requesting docking clearance."

Stan cracked a sunflower seed, shelled it, and savored the salt. "Vivian," he thought - her name as velvety as her voice. "Sing it again, Sweetheart," he thought.

"I repeat. Region 5 Port Terminus, this is NACSE *Klondike*, requesting docking clearance." Stan cracked another sunflower seed. *God, her voice was beautiful.*

Stan cracked yet another sunflower seed. "Well, hello there, Gorgeous," he beamed, "it's been a long time." Two seeds left. He paused. "NACSE, is it? When'd-you start working for the government?"

"Stan?" Vivian questioned. "Is it really him?" she thought; her fists whitening with tension. "Oh, God, here we go." She flatly started again, overcompensating for her growing anxiety, "Stan. Come on, Stan. Clear me for landing already."

Stan paused, remembrances on his lips, the salt of her on those balmy, Hawaiian nights. He loved her now, as he had then, and cracked another seed. "Have a drink with me? You can tell me all about the NACSE."

The control room door slid open and shut. Clicking on the overhead lights, Bob dropped into the neighboring chair, a timely return.

“Stan, where’s Bob?” Vivian’s irritation was brewing, percolating acid blips and daggered evil thoughts, “Bob still there? I know you two are inseparable. So, where’s he at? Get him on the line.” As Bob positioned his headset, Stan waved him down.

“Vivian, it’s just a drink,” soothed Stan. She emotionally spun out, like on a roller coaster ride, scared and elated of what might follow.

An agitated “Fine,” Vivian blurted. Followed by a “Fine!!” and a few extra exclamation points of surrender. “Now can I board?”

“NACSE *Klondike*, you are cleared to land at Docking Bay 3,” grinning in his most professional voice, Stan switched off his comm-unit and cracked his remaining sunflower seed, leaning back. “What was this feeling? Happiness?” he thought.

Bob turned towards Stan, “Pretty cheap trick there, Buddy.” He pulled a rotary controller from his console drawer. “NACSE? Not good.” He sighed, “Go on. I’ll take it from here.” He pulled the power knob and clicked-clicked the dial, turning to Channel 3, powering on the black and white TV and Atari system. “What? Just a little Warlords.” He shrugged, inserting his favorite cartridge.

Stan rolled out of his swiveling chair and raced for the door. “Later, Chum.” He winked, pulled out his imaginary finger gun, accompanied with that swell-guy teeth clicking thing, and then he skittered down the corridor.

- Chapter 2 -

Rushing with anticipation, Stan made his way through the crowds and makeshift shanties of the spaceport. People clambered on in the haze of bartering, which exhaled about the water coolers. The centrally located water coolers were selling stations, where people traded anything they could to fill up their ships' water tanks to move on from this port to the next and beyond.

This spaceport, well, all the ports were aging, but this one was an early installment to the rosary of ports that hung within key comet orbits. Company survey crews diligently mapped and remapped routes to track the gravitational drift of the short-orbital comets, aligning and realigning ports in order to keep harvesting production effective within the ring.

Self-sustenance was pivotal out here. Various technological features were implemented based on economical resources, time, system longevity, and governmental regulations; well, what small amount of regulation there was in this new frontier. Ports became a hodge-podge of things that you just had to make the most of.

Outfitted with oil refineries for diesel and kerosene distillate production from algal crude, the spaceport was a noisy, hot place; diesel took fewer processes to make the fuel and gave off more energy when burned – more bang for the buck. The toxic nitrogen and acidic, black *gooky* by-products for the most part were either cycled to the lower farming levels for supplementing the genetically multi-flavor-enhanced mushrooms or blown out into space. The equipment aged with everything else within the port; the CRT particulate filters and catalytic converters failed more frequently, leakage into the interior hull of the ship was apparent, but these processes

were a necessity for the sake of the power generators.

Central, the Water Company's main headquarters, flourished with business, wealth stock-piled beyond imagination, because come on, who could live out here without water. Inadvertently, the spaceports became trading posts, bazaars like Tokyo's once well-known Akihabara. This created several profitable side businesses for Central.

All that wealth went into minimal spaceport maintenance within the rosary and high tech ship development, which kept operations going by getting resources anywhere - weaver-ships, which traveled faster than anything out there, connecting remote terra-formed colonies, mining stations, and the like, but never served as commuter flights.

Rich, noncommercial spaceships would come and go, but many people got stuck in this middle-world. The poor dreamers aspired to live off planet, having depleted their savings to get this far - no money, no ability to pay for water. They became permanent port fixtures, odd-jobbers, saving to leave.

The lucky ones got employed by the Water Company, steady money, and then they became lazy, choosing to stay comfortably within the 'known.' They ran the refinery equipment, harvested water and mineral collections, flew longboard gliders within the fleet, machined maintenance parts, or clerked in Shipping & Receiving.

The somewhat lucky got hired on for scraping the inner hull, section by section, removing blackened gook, for water rations and food stamps. Their raccoon eyes gave them away; oily blackened rings from the respirators slowly tattooed their facial pores. Overtime, they created a network of snitchers, spying from above the marketplace; they watched

and noted all the daily transactions, quite a second income really.

So, the spaceport's headcount slowly accrued, and long chains of tethered, derelict ships 'bobbed' outside, waiting to be reclaimed to continue the journey.

- Chapter 3 -

Stan passed through to the docking bay, greeting Vivian as she removed her lipstick-red helmet. Her black tresses tumbling round her space suit. "Vivian, Baby, you're the *bee's knees*."

"Scrap it, Stan. *Geez*," Vivian flared all shades of crimson, flustering when he laid one on her. "Why you! Ooof!" She pushed him away, tripping on a diamond track edger, nearly falling, but he steadied her. Deep down, she was flattered.

"Nice Bugatti," he patted her compact, streamlined ship. "I like the retro-curves – pretty cool." He smiled.

Emphatically, he urged, "Come on. I'll buy you that drink." She was all act, and he knew it, taking her helmet in hand and grabbing her by the elbow. The landing crew would take care of her craft. Stan guided her through the crowds to Cargo's, one of the three bars in the joint.

Bioluminescent bacteria spheres floated within the small, circular moat, rhythmically pulsing blue with the mechanical hum of the port and softening the riveted, metal framework of the room. The Company had updated a few onboard systems like lighting, an easy, cost-effective improvement.

Setting her helmet on a stool, he nestled in around her at the bar. “Gin fizz and a whiskey sour, Billy,” ordered Stan, sweltering charisma.

Vivian fidgeted, looking first at the row of glowing bottles behind the mahogany bar, then nervously at her hands, studying her manicure. Feeling the weight of his stare, she rummaged through her hip pack for her electronic cigarette and ‘lit’ one.

“How long had it been?” Vivian thought, feeling his presence enveloping her, protectively cocooning her. “The familiarity,” she mused, instantly diverting to a new thought. The vaporous smoke swirl wrapped round her pinky, softly glowing blue from the cigarette’s tip. Resting her thumb’s cuticle upon her lip, she slowly edged her lip with her nail. “Damn memories,” Vivian cursed, zipping up her pack, hiding again.

Stan palmed her cheek, catching her off guard. Her eyes snapped to his, pupils sparking, dilating upon seeing his openness. He knew, if he waited in silence long enough, she would eventually settle in, and she did. “Ah, Stan,” Vivian smiled, warming, all mushy inside, “I give. I’ve missed you too.” An introspective thought clawed at her gut. Was that regret? Dwelling sucked, so she moved the conversation forward, starting where they had ended so long ago, “The job really turned out to be a chance of a life time. Look where I am now,” Was she convincing him or herself? Shaking it off, she continued, “Me, a lichenologist.” She glowed with pride of accomplishment.

Billy set the drinks down before them and moved to the sink to “tidy up a bit”, appearing busy and out of earshot.

Stan’s frustration was coiling, retracting within himself. “A lichenologist, working for the NACSE,” grouched Stan. Yeah, she had chosen the job

over him. The mechanical hum of the ship filled the suspended silence.

Vivian shifted uncomfortably, “Well, yes. Look, the Water Company has been cited a PSD - Prevention of Significant Deterioration permit.”

“Yeah, I know what it is. We were updated to the new air system twelve years ago and just inspected two,” Stan punctuated, “two years ago. You’re early.” He swirled his highball. The ice, a luxury, glittered with purple-green mica particulate – a club signature.

“The Clean Air Act has been amended with new NCIS field data, and a new mandate passed. Class I areas have been moved to a two year versus five year cycle.” Vivian unzipped the top section of her suit, unwinding into what she felt most comfortable with - work. “Population densities are getting heavier out here in this region of the Kuiper Belt, and they’re stepping up the detection of air pollutants in your atmospheric systems. Seriously, how many people do you have on board this station now? You got a parking lot of space junk tethered to eternity outside, and how is your doctor holding up? I wouldn’t be surprised if the logged respiratory cases are rising, or have you been asked to curb the numbers?”

“On or off the record?” Stan took another swig. All the work chatter had put a damper on his mood. “Yeah, right,” Stan slid sarcastically, “Clean Air Act –*bah*. You know it’s all a racket; they just want their cut is all. Since when did they really give a damn about people out here.” He took another drink. “They’re only squeezing more dough from the Water Company, forcing payment, or we risk being shut down.”

“I don’t know about that,” Vivian said. “You’re so cynical. Some agency needs to dictate laws for the well-being of the people, or we’ll be faced with new epidemics.”

She dragged the peanut dish closer and munched down a few. “Alright, different angle,” she postured, “I give a damn about people. That’s why I’m here and do what I do.” Silence fell heavy. “I’ll run a few tests; review the lichen bio-indicators tomorrow.”

Casually, Billy inserted himself into the conversation, like a host checking on his guests. “Your cigarette, you need any flavor cartridges?” Billy asked Vivian. “I’ve got tobacco, peach, and menthol.”

“Yeah, do I. Bit tricky finding them. I’ll take two tobaccos,” Vivian said, feeling Stan’s coolness.

Billy nodded. Turning his back to them, he concealed his motions, pulling two tobacco cartridges from the drawer: one from the main supply and the other from a slim black box with red flame logo. Closing the drawer, he paused for a moment, looking at the couple’s reflection in the bar mirror. “They didn’t notice,” Billy thought. Turning once more, his smile appeared, placing them on the bar. “I’ll add that to your tab, Stan.”

“Sounds good. Thanks, Billy,” acknowledged Stan, and Billy drifted to the backdrop.

Vivian downed half her gin fizz and shifted to other topics. “So, what are you paddling around in the Kuiper Belt for anyway?” she asked. “I figured you’d be terra forming or asteroid mining or something, but aqua farming?”

“Well, look. This gig pays a hell-of-a-lot more, Sweetheart,” Stan responded, “and I’m less likely to get stranded out on a rock somewhere. It’d be my luck that some company would close-up shop, save on

expenditures, and leave me out there. I'll learn from Emit's mistakes, thank you very much." He raised his glass to lost college friends.

"Yeah," nearly whispering, Vivian toasted sullenly. Emit had been her first love. He had impressed her with rock music and sushi rolls, carried a set of ebony chopsticks in his boots engraved with pink opal, cherry blossoms. "Look," she yielded, "I'm tired, Stan."

"Sure, of course. I'll show you your bunk." They downed the last of it, and he showed her to the closet-sized guest quarters, leaving her alone to the hum of the ship and the soft glow of orange, glowing lichen clusters upon her walls.

"Well, that was better than expected," Stan thought.

- Chapter 4 -

Day came too soon. Vivian followed the spaceport maps to the labs division. Donning grey coveralls and a respiratory mask, she began with sample retrieval from the airshafts, return registers, and atmosphere generators. The algae incept respiratory (A.I.R.) generators were huge, transparent, arching lichen tanks, which had replaced the bulk of the exterior ship panels, wrapping the outside of the ship.

Lichens' hardy survival skills in extreme environments beautifully leant itself for this adaptation in space. Cheap too in comparison to the active instrumented air quality monitors. Why not double duty, creating oxygen through the lichen's photosynthetic system, while sporting sensitive atmospheric safety features?

The fungal component within lichen's symbiotic relationship had been genetically modified to withstand the external forces of space, while the

algae gathered blue and red light waves from the distant sun. The lichen filtering system cleaned internal air supplies, using carbon dioxide and caustic nutrients to grow, producing oxygen – worked like a charm when in-balance.

Vivian spent the day studying floristic and element baselines, tissue concentrations of persistent organochlorides and watched the nitrogen dioxide levels spike dangerously outside of cautionary limits. Dismayed she pulled away from the equipment after seeing the pending doom. Solving the spaceport’s air quality control problems was going to be complicated and unclear.

It was obvious that the population needed to be decreased, but by how many and how quickly could it be carried out? With fewer people to support, all the other manufacturing could be culled back.

Vivian wrapped things up, unzipped the coveralls, stepped out, and tossed them into a laundry bin.

Walking the corridors of the port, she found herself in sick bay, interviewing Dr. Morrison and a handful of patients, all suffering from some sort of respiratory infection. She made copious notes on her recorder: dates, symptoms, longevity, fatalities – anything that could help her measure the severity of the situation.

Afterward, Vivian wandered towards the ‘belly’ of the spaceport where the bulk of the people mingled, trading wares and food. Stressed, she needed a walk.

- Chapter 5 -

The machines droned *chuhchung, chuhchung, chuhchung*. The active noise cancellation systems weren't 100%. Vivian walked through the spaceport looking at machine shops and craftsmen, grinding and cutting parts to repair the engines that made the spaceport 'go'. Gazing up to the ceiling of the inner ship's hull, she wished she could see her invisible foe, knowing those toxic fumes caressed everyone and everything.

Listlessly, she passed from vendor stall-to-stall, hands tracing across the capacitors, resistors, recycled copper wire, LEDs, and tin can music makers. People scraping parts from their ships to trade for food, a livelihood that they created from the lost dreams of abandoned worlds originally sought. "Ships that they would need now to flee this death trap," she thought.

She found herself at the control room corridor. Her badge clearance would get her here, inside the inner hallway, but no further. She slumped to the ground, flipped her recorder on and in her solitude began to dictate her findings, entering in PSD form details. Waiting, Stan was bound to turn up, to or from his shift; she bent her head over the recorder and continued on.

Twenty minutes passed before Stan appeared, "What's up, Buttercup? Hmm, you're looking a bit beat. Coffee?" He offered her his steaming mug.

"No, it's OK," Vivian pushed against the wall, standing. "You got a minute?"

"Sure, I was just starting my shift, but you're welcome to come in and hang out," he invited, badging through the control room door and flicking off the portal lights. Their eyes adjusted to the warm glow of the console

buttons. “Have a seat.” He lit a candle.

“Hey, Bob,” Vivian smiled.

“Heya, Angel, good seeing ya” Bob stood, wildly hugging her. “Been so long!”

“You’re like Heckle and Jeckle,” Vivian laughed. “I figured you wouldn’t go anywhere without each other.” The familiarity of it all, being back with the boys – felt good - fond memories.

“Well, someone’s gotta’ clean-up after this idiot,” Bob cajoled.

“Go on. Have a seat.” Stan dropped into his swivel chair, flipped on his headset, and began reading the system logs to catch up on the current.

“What did you find out?”

“Well,” Vivian began hesitantly, not knowing how to begin – not easy being a Death Angel of sorts. “Well, it doesn’t look good, Guys. I’ve completed my report. I’m just not certain what comes next.”

“And...” said Stan, hanging on her words.

“Stan, this port needs to be evacuated,” said Vivian frankly. “The air systems have reached,” she continued, “more than reached capacity. After talking with your ship’s doctor, it sounds like respiratory cases have been on the rise in the last six months, and I’m afraid the longer you limp along like this, the higher risk you take with everyone’s lives.” Vivian stared into the flame of the candle, watching the blue and orange flicker.

“Evacuation? How exactly does that happen?” asked Stan. “If these folks

had the means, they'd be outta here already.”

Vivian said, “I know. I know. All morning, I've been trying to get my head around it. I just don't know. Many have already stripped components from their spaceships in order to buy necessities. You can see it in the bazaar. How many of those vehicles floating out there actually run any more?”

Bob put away some random binders. “Stan, you think the Company would step in at all?”

“Ya' that's a joke. They hardly make repairs around here - didn't address any of the items from the last NACSE inspection. If anything, they'd abandon this port, pushing it out of orbit to drift and bring in a new high-tech port.”

Bob sulked in his chair, “cheaper to start all over than retrofit,” he said.

“It would contain any disease element there might be too,” added Vivian.

“Vivian, have you sent that report yet?” asked Bob.

“No, no,” Vivian said. “I wanted to talk to you two, first. Maybe you could introduce me to a decision maker around here so we could come up with a solution together?”

“Yeah, decision makers, right. You're looking at 'em,” snickered Bob.

“We're the highest ranking employees onboard. Everyone else is at Central, keeping their distance to reduce their risk,” said Stan.

“Stan,” said Vivian. “Maybe asteroid mining looks a bit better now,” she shrugged a half smile, a poor attempt at lightening the mood.

“A gathering. We’ll have a gathering. Bob, make an announcement will you? We’ll head down to the market place,” Stan proclaimed.

“Oh, goodie – a gathering,” thought Bob. He switched on the PA system and announced, “those onboard who want to live please report to the market place for a gathering.”

“Ah, great Bob, brilliant, no panic there at all,” Stan scolded.

- Chapter 6 -

By the time Stan and Vivian reached the market place, a frenzy buzzed through the crowd, a quelling panic or stifled cough about to erupt with mass body odor stoking the flames of discomfort.

“So, what’s going on?” rumbled the crowd as Stan and Vivian climbed upon a few crates. Billy, the bartender, pulled the gate down on the bar, moving towards the back of the group, saddling up next to Myra, a Snitcher.

Adjusting her goggles to rest upon her forehead, Myra scratched an itch on her cheek, smearing sooty circles beneath raccooned eyes. She *clonked* together the heels of her steel toed boots. Strapping her respirator to her tool belt, it sagged from the weight of her tools. Billy climbed up to the scissor-jack platform, sitting down and swinging his legs out over the edge next to hers. He pushed a Chiclet her way, which was eagerly accepted, of course. Myra smiled falsely; anger building inside of her, stating, “This isn’t going to be good news is it.”

“No, I don’t think so, Myra.” Billy leaned his elbows across the lower metal bar of the cage.

Stan looked at Vivian and vice versa. They just worked here like everyone else. How do you begin a calm doomsday conversation with a confused mob of people that will be losing their home?

“Quiet please, everyone,” Stan said. “I know, not the best announcement,” Stan apologized quickly and moved on, “so, this is Vivian. She is from the NACSE agency and has been inspecting the port’s air systems. Vivian, can you please share your findings?”

“Thanks, Stan. Sure.” Raising her voice, Vivian continued, “I thought this was going to be all routine stuff, but the indicators aren’t good. The port has reached its maximum levels. It’s a delicate situation, and there isn’t any other way to say it. People are getting sick; it can’t be put off any longer: one, the population must be decreased or we all die, and two, the machinery repairs must be a higher priority.”

A murmur filtered through the crowd, stopping upon a grey, stubbly man with a newsie-style woolen cap. “So who goes? Who stays? The Company going to send ships? The Government going to send ships or what?”

“Please quiet down,” Stan interjected, trying to calm the group, “My sense from the Company is that they will escort people out to their tethered ships and send you on your way,” not quite the right reassuring thing to say, he rushed on to the next bit, “but I understand, it would be a death sentence - starvation. You would have left a long time ago, if you could have. The Company isn’t interested in becoming a domicile, so, sending fast ships to evacuate people to where ever... I doubt it – costs too much.”

“Cheap ass bastards!” yelled Snitcher, drawing all eyes. Her voice carried over the crowd from her perch. “Can’t afford to maintain their equipment!” Myra knew the equipment inside and out. The power generator engines were top-notch and equipment stress levels could’ve been monitored. “They’re just cheap is all – Company not replacing worn parts or replacing at longer than intended intervals.”

The anger began to swell within the group, a white-hot rage of making due for too long – Company fault or no.

“I hear you. We’ll make it an internal priority. You seem to know a lot about the power generators and certainly not afraid to speak your mind. How about leading the maintenance crew in identifying failing equipment and task a scavenging crew?” Stan tried to remain calm, focusing on delegating work in constructive ways.

“2006 RJ103,” called out Billy’s voice.

Stan shifted his weight. “What’s that?” asked Stan, straining to hear.

“2006 RJ103,” Billy repeated. “There’s an asteroid mining colony on Neptune’s Trojan moon 2006 RJ103, and it sits within the Interplanetary Transport Network, so, well supplied. It’s getting there that’s the trick.”

A murmur of optimism circled the room and quieted at Vivian’s feet. “I’ve been there for air quality inspections,” she said. “It has the space and water resources, but for those who go, it would mean indentured servitude, hard labor in exchange for room and board with three square meals a day,” Vivian remarked.

“Mining. It’s a tough choice but between death versus death, I’d take this option,” a lanky fellow piped up. The crowd began to internalize options and silently, their conclusions divided the group.

“What about the children?” cried out a man’s voice.

Stan didn’t know what to say. Would he give them onboard preference? Who would care for them? Then mechanically, spilling forth, he said, “One child from each family may stay. Clans meet and choose a storyteller and a Nan to care for the children. I’ll see if I can get transport back to Earth for the remaining children.” Stan’s voice quivered, dividing families was never in his career plans.

Vivian grasped his hand, offering her strength, knowing the options sucked. “It’s pretty bad,” she thought, squeezing his hand. “If you don’t do anything, we will all die.”

Myra leaned in closer to Billy. “What about commandeering the port?” she whispered, meeting him eye to eye. “We’ve spent months planning.”

“I know. Timing is crazy, isn’t it?” Billy whispered back.

“Do we stick with the plan?” asked Myra.

“Yes, we’ll commander the port and push outside the rosary. Move to Neptune’s Trojan moon. This supply route is busy and unincorporated.”

“Maybe it’ll delay Company action.” Myra suggested, “Once we get out there, we can reevaluate. Yes?”

“Sure,” said Billy. “I suppose as long as this lady’s report hasn’t been

submitted, the Company wouldn't know what's coming." Billy lowered his voice, discreetly handing her the slim black box with red logo. "I didn't think I'd actually have to use this. The scientist, she smokes electronic cigarettes." Billy continued, "She bought two. So, I can't control when she switches to the spiked cartridge, but when she does, she's a goner." Billy paused. "May be it will buy us some time." Myra's face blanched; everything, their plans to commander the port, the severity of their actions, and the necessity to evacuate everyone, was accelerating, erupting like a toxic algal bloom in a sea of stars.

THE END

Read more **Anita Dime** short stories at www.anitadime.com. Visit her on Facebook www.facebook.com/anita.dime or Twitter [@AnitaDime](https://twitter.com/AnitaDime).



THE MORE THINGS CHANGE

Created By Grant Gardiner.

The 1920s. In a North America somewhat different to the one we remember.

A new town full of gambling saloons, far from the nearest safe zeppelin freightway. In the region that was once known as ‘Nevada’.

The thundering beat of hooves broke into messy disarray as he hauled up in front of the *State of the Union* saloon. By the time Shotgun had cantered to a halt the sheriff was out of the saddle, on the ground and tying the horse off on the veranda handrail. “This had better be good, Mister Burnham.” He swept around the black sedan his depu... *associates* used to get around town, then he started taking the steps two at a time. “It’s the Lord’s Day. And my little girl’s fifteenth birthday. If this ain’t worthy of the sheriff’s presence I’ll be *mighty* unhappy.”

Standing at the saloon’s front door was ‘Mister Burnham’ and his offsider ‘Mister Cerano’. Both were built like brick outhouses but clad in pinstriped black with matching gray fedoras. Apparently because that’s how Chicago manufactured its ‘accountancy officials’.

“Yeah, sheriff,” replied Burnham as the Texan reached the top of the stairs. “It’s a proper mess in there. And you told us we weren’t supposed to, you know, take things into our own hands no more, so...”

The sheriff halted just outside the doorway to look at the gangster. The shrug the hulking mobster gave was pitiful but the Tommy guns both ‘accountancy officials’ carried were anything but. “You did the right thing, Mister Burnham.” He took one more worried look at the submachine gun in the huge catcher’s mitt Burnham called his hand. “You did the right thing.”

There was a riot of yelling, crashing and cussing pouring out of the saloon. It was punctuated with a steady beat of smashing bottles. But no firearm discharges. Which meant, by city law, they couldn’t just haul them down to lockup for the night.

The sheriff growled as he looked in on the carnage. It didn’t make things any better that he was actually needed this time. “Is Mister Wong safe?”

The gangster nodded.

“Is he pressing charges?”

There was a pause and the sheriff tore his eyes away from the still developing crime scene. Burnham was looking at him, one eyebrow cocked high. “What you reckon Mister Wong is doing?”

The sheriff grunted. Of course Mister Wong was pressing charges. Not pressing charges would only save the sheriff’s time. And who cared about the *sheriff’s* time?

The middle aged Texan nodded and dragged his open duster back from the vintage Peacemakers holstered at his waist. Behind him the two gangsters cocked their Thompsons then followed in his wake as he pushed through the swinging doors and into the saloon...

•••

“You’re a damn *liar*, you Hollywoodland *stooge*. From a *nation* of liars.”

The diminutive little flapper in the tassled dress stood to her feet. “A no

good phony- -“ She heaved a bottle the length of the saloon. “From amongst a *herd* of no good phonies!”

The bottle shattered against the piano, spraying gin and glass everywhere. “Ha *hah!*” cried the ruffled but sharply dressed gent taking shelter behind it. He straightened in triumph, reefing his now ruined green cravat from his once expensive gray suit to hold it high in victory. “So you *admit* that the great nation of CaliModerna is, indeed, a *nation*.”

He ducked with a squawk as several more bottles rained down upon his position.

“It’s *sarcasm*, you ninny!” yelled the infuriated flapper. She picked up another bottle. “California isn’t a country. No matter *what* you name it.” She threw the tiny gin bottle with next to no accuracy. “Just cause a propaganda film says you’re a country, don’t make it so!”

A tall but paunchy gentleman was sheltering behind some tables in another quarter of the saloon. He was dressed like a southern landowner, his crushed top hat in one hand and monocle hanging from his waistcoat. But he too picked up a bottle and launched it in the direction of the bar the flapper ducked behind. “My de’ar, your hypocrisy is unbecoming.” The bottle shattered across the bar to get a squeal from the flapper. He smiled wickedly. “If anyone should be silent about *propaganda* it’s the residents of the state that claims to rule the so-called U-nited States of A-meri-ca.” He cackled with delight. “Even an unso-phisticated New Yor’k *hussey* like you should know that recent history proves *thinking* you run the continent don’t make it so.”

A chair leg rotoed past the startled southerner, sending him back behind cover. “Better them then *you*,” called a French voice. It’s owner stood up from behind a beer barrel in the corner. He was dressed in cowboy denims and boots but wore a leather flight jacket, flying cap tucked into his back pocket. “New York is better than *New Confederacy* any day.” And the cowboy launched another chair leg.

“Yeah!” agreed the flapper, standing as the dark-skinned cowboy launched

his last chair leg and a bottle at the Confederate. “He’s *right*. You could do a lot worse than us. If you’d only- -”

She ducked just in time to avoid a new delivery from the Californian, but in the background the cowboy began laughing uproariously. His latest bottle had caught the southerner’s top hat and sent it skittling. It’s owner, now covered in gin, retreated to a better defensive position while the cowboy cackled and slapped his knee. Then he stopped, spying someone cowering under a table on the other side of the room.

He pointed out the stranger as the latest salvo from the bar sailed past towards the piano. “Hey *you*. You never declared yourself. Where you from, son?”

Wide-eyed, the stranger held his hands up. “You can leave me out of this. I’m not American, I’m *Canadian*.”

“*Canadian!?!*” A stocky, older woman in a weathered poncho stood up behind the flapper’s bar. Her face was a picture of rage. “You said you were from *Seattle*.”

“Yeah, that’s what I said. I’m *Canadian*.”

The old woman swept back her wide brimmed hat to let it dangle by the cord around her neck. She completely ignored the bottle that sailed past her head to smash on the wall behind the bar. Instead, she only had dagger-eyes for the neutral-wannabe from Seattle.

A pointed finger slowly rose towards him with the gravitas of an oracle’s threat. “You... are *American*.”

The ‘American’ cringed as another bottle landed in his general vicinity. “No I’m not. I’m a citizen of the British Empire. And there’s nothing you can do about it.”

The old woman’s face went a deep crimson. “No. You’re. Not!” She turned to grab several bottles from the back of the bar. Then, with no regard to her own safety, she stood free of all protection, laying down glassware cover-fire on the hapless British-American. “You are American!” she bellowed. “You. Are. *American!*”

Seeing the American/Canadian suffering under the withering fire, the cowboy started laughing again in deep guffaws. He slapped his thigh several times, really getting into the comedy- -

Then stopped. The bottles were no longer flying...

His eyes panned right to see the old woman now pointing at him.

“You’re just as bad,” scowled the stocky, hard faced poncho wearer.

“You’re *worse*, you so-called *Mississippian*.” She pointed again. “You think you’re *French*!”

The cowboy dived back behind cover as a chorus of ‘hear hears’ from across the room preceded a fresh storm of weaponised alcohol vessels, even the Canadian/American getting in on the act...

•••

From his viewing platform two steps above the carnage the goatee-stroking sheriff shook his head. He drew a Peacemaker and pointed it at the ceiling.

BLAM!BLAM!

•••

Silence reigned over the bar.

The sheriff stepped forward, spurs clinking loudly in the silence. “For the sake of full disclosure,” he drawled, “my associates here are from

Chicago. That means they’re nationals of the MidWest Commonwealth.”

He gestured behind to Burnham and Cerano who stepped forward, Tommy guns raised from their hips. “Y’all have a problem with *them*?”

The room was transfixed by the stubby submachine guns.

The sheriff left the gangsters near the doorway, slowly stepping down onto the landing that ran around the main room of the saloon. “What about *me* then? Anyone offended by *my* nationality? Cause I ain’t from around here either.”

There was silence as the sheriff pulled up at the top of the two steps

leading down to the saloon floor. He scowled at the sea of broken furniture and the glass carnage that spread across the trashed establishment. He reached down to his belt, unclipped his star and held it up for all to see. “This here makes me the Law in these parts. And the Law is from Texas.” He lowered the star and glared at his scattered, bashful audience. “Any objections to the Lone Star republic?” There was utter silence. “Good. Now let’s find out how this whole mess got started, shall we?”

•••

The sheriff had long since resigned himself to the idea that his duty in this town was not to its people. He was hired to protect the businesses of this quickly sprawling warren of saloons and gambling dens and anything else was his own side project. However, only being held to ‘commercial realities’ didn’t make his job any easier. It took a good quarter hour to calm Mister Wong enough to get his version of the story. A full fifteen minutes. And in the end it wasn’t much of a story anyway: the details were missing but everyone was playing cards, someone apparently went in big – or lost the pot or their shirt or something – and the result was bad tempers and hurt feelings. Enough bad tempers and feelings to re-enact the Great War in the middle of the saloon. Having performed his commercial duty – reassuring Mister Wong that compensation was forthcoming – the sheriff hurried out of the *Union’s* back room to get back to the saloon floor. He had been occupied for *fifteen* minutes. Fifteen minutes in which his associates were left to their own mob-sourced devices. With nothing more than the vague, ill-conceived and now deeply regretted instructions to “Sort out this lot and... *Tarnation*, I don’t know. Get these fools squared away. Take their statements or something.” Bursting through the swinging doors the sheriff stopped to find... a quiet and orderly crime scene. All of the suspects were tied to chairs that had

been arrayed in a big circle covering the main floor. Most of the wrecked furniture and glass had been swept over to the piano while Mister Cerano held point in the middle of the circle with his Tommy gun, casually scanning each of his wards like a well practised jail warden. Mister Burnham walked towards the sheriff with a pencil in one hand, notepad in the other. Tongue between his teeth, he made a final note and nodded with satisfaction. Then he flipped over the pages and handed the pad to the sheriff.

The sheriff took the notepad and examined the top, scrawl-covered page.

“What’s this?”

“Their statements,” replied Burnham. “One page per perp. Dunno what usually goes into a statement so’s I figured I’d just ask ‘em what I thought would be, you know... *relevant*.”

The sheriff looked at the blank faced mobster and blinked twice. Then he had a closer look at the collection of documents.

Running his finger down the first rap sheet he grunted his surprise. The report was not what he expected. It was actually quite good. *Very* good. A thorough run down of every suspect, a brief description of what they looked like, their occupation, what they were doing when the brawl erupted and their personal details. He nodded slowly as he continued his perusal. “This is quite the report, Mister Burnham. Quite the report indeed.”

The big brute sniffed and looked at his feet. “Ain’t no need to pay your respects.” He stuck the pencil behind his ear, then reached over to a table to pick up his Tommy gun. “It’s a new fangled scientific world,” he shrugged as he hefted the submachine gun onto his shoulder. “Even an everyday mug like meself has to know his letters these days.” There was a shy pause. “But you can pay respects if you *want*.”

The sheriff continued skimming the document taking in all the details. “I can be quick to step forward, Mister Burnham. So I’m gonna be just as quick to step back. I apologise for lettin’ your other employment make me

overlook your skillset and promise that in future- -” The sheriff’s finger reached the bottom of the page and the entry for ‘Nationality.’ It was heavily underlined. He flipped through a few pages and noted the entry for each suspect. The sheriff swore, let the notepad drop back and began rubbing his eyes. “What was Wong thinking? He should have *known* this was going to happen.”

“You saw the nationality thing?” asked proud Burnham, the useful gangster. “I thought you might wanna see that. I thought it explained a few things.”

The sheriff nodded drily at the lettered gangster then threw the notepad onto the counter beside him. “Indeed,” he grumbled, then looked over the circle of former fellow citizens and shook his head. “Damn bless-ed politics is gonna be the end o’ me...”

The weathered Texan dug his thumbs into his gun holsters, chewed his bottom lip for a few seconds, then paced slowly towards the silent circle. He nodded at Mister Cereno who nodded back and stepped away to give him the floor.

The sheriff reached the middle of the circle and stopped. He began to turn, idly staring down anyone game enough to meet his eyes. He twitched his big moustache back and forth as he considered every one of them in turn.

Tying them to chairs was a bit extreme, but he had to admit it *did* engender a conducive interrogation environment. No doubt a trick his associates picked up back in Chicago...

His eyes came to rest on the sharply dressed man in the expensive but torn gray suit. He was the one Mister Burnham’s report had dubbed ‘Tuxedo Stooze’. The one from California. The sheriff knew enough about the picture business to recognise the man’s face. Couldn’t tell you who he was, but there was a good chance his little girl had an irrational crush on the quivering mess that cowered before him. Him and his ridiculously thin moustache.

“Well?” the sheriff demanded, scratching at the thick goatee that squared off his own chin. “The saloon you people have been destroying is an institution in these here parts. That makes it expensive. Worth a *lot* to a lot of people.” He stepped forward to look down at the quickly wilting thespian. “So the question I want answered is this: Who’s responsible for this mess?”

“Well it isn’t me,” whined the Californian. Without taking his eyes off the sheriff he tried to point, only to realise his hands were tied behind his back. There was a wide-eyed pause, then he pecked his nose in the direction of the flapper on the opposite side of the circle. “Ask *her*. She’s the one doing all the screaming.”

“*Screaming!*?! Why you no good, lyin- -”

The sheriff turned with a glare. The New Yorker’s mouth quickly snapped shut and she looked away.

The sheriff straightened and paced toward her. “From what my associate has noted, you were winning the pot, so you had the most to lose after a bad hand. Did you start the fight?”

“It wasn’t me,” she whined as he drew close. “Talk to the people who were leaving. I was winning and then they all started to leave.” Now she began pecking her nose back at the Californian. “He’s the suspicious one. He was leaving the game. Saying I was rigging the game and everything. Why dontcha go back to being in *his* grill?”

The sheriff turned back to look at the actor. He was vigorously shaking his head. “I may have been *suggesting* that I was going to leave but that doesn’t mean I was *actually* going to. Doesn’t mean anything of the sort. I was staying in the game. Until that crazy dame had lost every single dime.” He tried to lean out around the sheriff to get a line of sight on the flapper. “Then I’d be making you admit the greatness of- -“ He paused, as if waiting for a camera to dolly in for his close-up. “The continent’s *Premier Republic— CaliModerna!*”

“Oooooo,” wound up the flapper. “I’m gonna snot you, ya- -“

“Silence,” growled the sheriff. He turned back to the actor. “My notes say you were almost out of chips. You were about to be kicked out of the game and lose your only chance for revenge.”

The actor shook his head furiously. “Oh no. I have a line of credit. Just ask Mister Cerano. I have a line of credit from... some people in Chicago. They pay my way here. You just ask.”

The sheriff glanced over at Cerano who shrugged then nodded. “He’s got credit.”

The sheriff sighed. “Then who else was about to lose their shirt? How about you?” He looked at the short stocky woman who was still glaring at the American/Canadian. “You seem to have an axe to grind. You decide to start a fight? My associate believes that you happen to be a zeppelin pilot of some infamy.” He raised his eyebrows. “That was him being polite. In Texas we call you people *skypirates*. An’ that title carries with it a certain brand of behaviour.”

The stocky skypirate glared back as good as she got. “I answer to the Law the same as you.” She drew to her full, stumpy height. “I answer to the almighty *Constitution of the United States of America*, the once and future Law of this wayward nation. And it states that I’m well within my rights to protect my interests in my own way, whether on the ground or in the sky.” She scowled. “And I didn’t start no fight. Didn’t start no fight at all. I was the only one hell bent on staying *in* the game.” She crooked her head in the direction of the flapper. “Me and Miss No Self Respect here.”

“Heeey!” scowled the flapper.

“I wanted to play on. But these here cowards started retreating. Giving up ground. They gave up they did. Threw in the towel and let the ridiculous sequined monster here- -“

“Heeey!”

“- - take all the money. I was staying in and taking what was rightfully mine. Why don’t you ask the cowards? Ask *him!*” She practically jerked herself out of her seat, pecking at the American/Canadian. “He was the

first one to quit. Ask him!”

The sheriff crossed his arms and looked in ‘his’ direction.

“Wasn’t me,” retorted the subject of the old woman’s scorn.

“Sure it was you,” the skypirate replied. “You’ve got no spine, retreating like that. And it makes perfect sense now. It’s the sort of behaviour I’d *expect* from someone who crawled back into the enslavement and interference of the King of *England*. You’re a *coward* and I’m ashamed to have sat at the same table as ya.”

The proud citizen of the Empire sneered back. “Tell me this, *American*. Who’s been interfering with your drinking habits – the King of England? Or American politicians and your beloved and now defunct *constitution*?” He turned to the sheriff. “I *peacefully* quit the game because the stakes were no longer friendly.” He looked back at the proud American. “Then I enjoyed a custom legally available to citizens of the *civilised* world – a drink of beer from the bar!” Once more he turned back to the sheriff. “Just ask the barman.”

The sheriff’s crossed arms clenched tighter. This was getting ridiculous. A polite but officious cough from behind drew his attention. It was the Confederate. “Excuse me, sah. Like all Confederate gentlemen,” he gave the sheriff a conspiratorial wink, “I appreciate the need to maintain these he’re appearances,” he looked at his bound arms. “But now the preliminaries have been processed I do believe we are avoiding the, uh, *elephant* in our midst. Forgetting the... other *element* in the roo’m.” With this he began to not-so-subtly crook his balding head in the direction of the cowboy to his distant right.

The cowboy glared back at him. “Oh, so now you’re being subtle about it, are you?”

The proud Imperial across the circle nodded his head slowly, eyes screwed up in suspicion. “He is French...”

The Confederate, ignoring the cowboy altogether, frowned at the Canadian. “Not exactly the thrust of my argument, sah. There are... other-
-“

“What’s wrong with the French?” squawked the flapper.

“They’re *French!*” cried both the skypirate and Canadian in unison.

The Californian shrugged and nodded, as if conceding the point. “They have a point- -

“It’s really not what I was saying- -“

“Well *I* know what you’re saying about me and if there weren’t no sheriff here- -“

“If you hate the French you hate Paris and there ain’t nothing wrong with anything from Paris- -“

“You are all completely missing my point- -“

“Oh, I’m gettin’ your point loud and clear, you- -“

BLAM!BLAM!

In the renewed silence the sheriff glared at as many people as he possibly could. “Silence.” He holstered the Peacemaker again and pointed to the Confederate.

“Were you playing cards?”

The Confederate smiled. “Indeed I was, sah. And losing the shirt off my

back.” He feigned laughter. “Figuratively speaking, of course.”

The sheriff nodded and pointed to the cowboy. “Well that makes him innocent, then.”

The Confederate scoffed. “What do you mean, ‘It makes him innocent’? How is *that* a deduction of the... *suspects* innocence?”

The sheriff folded his arms again. “Cause I know that the fight was started by someone playing cards.” He leaned in closer. “You wouldn’t be playing cards if he was playing cards. So if you were playing, he wasn’t, which makes him innocent.” The sheriff looked to Burnham. “I’m assuming you came to the same conclusion Mister Burnham. That would be why you didn’t tie him up..?”

The Confederate’s neck snapped around to see the cowboy smiling at him with delight, reaching his arms forward to reveal that he was not, in fact, tied to his chair. He was only spectating.

Meanwhile, Burnham nodded his head with pride. So vigorously it almost became a curtsy. “I figured he weren’t responsible. But he was participatin’ so I told him he had to wait around.”

The sheriff nodded his agreement and Burnham practically blushed from the complement. The sheriff turned to the now outraged southerner. “Our mutual friend from

Louisiana didn’t start this fight. His participation was just... self-defense. Although he certainly didn’t help matters and will be paying his fair share of damages.”

The Confederate couldn't help taking another look at the cowboy who just grinned back at his still gin-soaked accuser, giving a hopeless shrug. "What else could I do? You were charging right at me." Then he snorted and guffawed as the southerner went red with rage.

The sheriff growled with impatience. "That still leaves you, *sir*. And my pool of suspects is getting shallow."

The Confederate spluttered with rage. "Me? Me!? How dare you, sah. How dare you? Why, if you weren't a member of law enforcement it would be my place to duel you, sah. How dare you besmirch my honour as a gentleman."

"That's right," chimed in the Californian. "You realise how damaging these baseless accusations can be to someone's reputation? And some of us have more to lose than others. Some of us are beholden to our reputation."

"And not much more," scowled the skipirate.

The Confederate, not hearing, nodded profusely with his newfound ally. "*Indeed*. At least there is one other gentlemen of honour among this den of scallywags."

The Californian nodded with finality. "There's careers at stake and I don't like the tone of this investigation. Especially without my lawyers present."

The sheriff tried to control himself in the face of the vigorously nodding Confederate and the defiant poise of the stupidly moustached Californian. But he was very near his limit- -

“Yees,” scowled the skypirate. “Now I see.” She was looking at the now worried Californian. “You’re avoiding the subject. Diverting, you are. Exactly the sort of behaviour I’d expect from someone so casually flippant with someone else’s money. Your use of debt as a crutch should have been my first clue...”

“There is nothing wrong with living in debt. It’s a fundamental plank of the capitalist system and one which the Republic of CaliModerna whole heartedly embraces and- - “He ground to a halt as his eyes met the horrified visage of his once strong ally, the Confederate.

The Confederate sputtered until he could find his voice. “But, but... That means you’re a...” He shook off his confusion, his face now a picture of affronted indignation.

“You, sah, are a *Democrat!*”

The Californian smiled. “Of course I am.” His face suddenly dropped. “You’re not?”

“No!” was the indignant response.

“Ah-hah!” cried the skypirate. “We have you now. You are guilty! You are the one who has caused this mess!”

“Waitamminute!” exclaimed the flapper. “Bein’ a Democrat don’t make you guilty. In fact it’s the opposite. Only a Republican would have the audacity to illegally rig the game when they were about to lose everything.”

Suddenly the room was filled with indignant voices as everyone argued

back and forth. The sheriff began to furiously rub his eyes as the noise rose to a cacophony.

The Confederate began to shunt his chair across the floor in a bid to get as far away from the Californian as he possibly could. "I will not associate," he grunted, "With the likes of you- -" grunt, "My good sah- -" grunt.

As his chair squeaked and squawked its way across the room and people continued to shout, the flapper noted the Confederate's progress toward her position and began to shunt her own chair forward. "Well if you're comin' over here then I'm goin' over there cause I don't want nothin' to do with- -"

As the two chair tied objectors passed each other crossing the floor the skypirate shuffled closer to the bar in order to make sure she wasn't further to the other side while the cowboy saw what was happening and presently stood up and wandered over to the bar behind the skypirate.

"What are you doing?" exclaimed the flapper, barely able to look back at him.

He relaxed back against the bar. "I'm a big believer in a government's responsibility to stay out of the way of its citizens."

The flapper gasped in amazement and continued her dog shuffle across to the Californian who was still yelling abuse at the skypirate while the Confederate finally made his way to where the flapper had previously been and began to shuffle around to face the right way. The two gangsters looked at each other then... went in opposite directions, both in shock that the other had not followed their lead. They took their place on either side of the circle and eyed each other suspiciously as everyone began arguing

about which side of the room the confused Canadian should cross to- -

“I’ve had *enough!*” bellowed the sheriff. He stalked across the circle, up the stairs and towards the front door of the saloon.

Burnham looked at him in shock, as the room’s arguments came to an uneven halt. “Where are you goin’, sheriff?”

“I’m going home!”

“But...” The gangster indicated the confused circle of armchair politics-aficionados staring after the sheriff. “What do we do with *them?*”

“I’m from *Texas,*” the sheriff bellowed over his shoulder in the renewed silence. “Do whatever you want to do. I don’t care!” He pushed on the swinging doors. “I really don’t care any more!”

•••

In the following silence the gangsters both looked at each other. Then, along with everyone else in the room, stared at the swinging doors the sheriff had disappeared through. In the distance was the retreating sound of hoof beats.

Burnham looked at Cerano. Cerano shrugged. He nodded and looked around at the circle of people tied to their chairs. His eyes came to rest on the flapper – the one who had been winning the card game. He raised his Tommy gun. “Gimme your wallet.

To a soundtrack of helpless protests, Burnham moved across the room to rifle through the Confederate’s jacket and ‘politely’ ask for the cowboy’s ‘spare change’.

THE END

Did you enjoy the story? Would you like to spend more time exploring the world of *The Aether Age*? Do you think that high adventure above the Caribbean seas with zeppelins, biplanes and skypirates sounds like your sort of story? If ‘Yes!’ then stay tuned in 2014 for the release of:



A pulp series in the grand old tradition of the 1930s pulp magazines, the serialised adventures of Tommy Thunder, as well as more *Tales of the Aether Age*, will be released soon. For more information, or to contact the author, go to

www.tommythunder.blogspot.com



ACE RANGO

BEDTIME STORIES ARE SO BORING

By Jose E. Cepeda

INTRODUCTION

It was in the summer of 1944 that invaders struck our planet without warning. They came from the distant heavens in huge invasion fleets, bringing a wrath of hate, destruction, and death. They had carefully crafted up diabolical and sinister plans for the conquest and colonization of Earth. Some called them demons or banshees from another galaxy. To most people, they looked a lot like ugly lizards from someone's worse nightmare.

The lizards had been studying our planet for years by monitoring our radio signals, waiting for the most opportune time to strike. They didn't have to wait long. The world was at war, with nation against nation. At first, it seemed that the lizards had the advantage with their superior technology and advanced weaponry. Slowly, the tide of battle turned in favor of the humans, who put aside their differences by banding together to fight a common foe. Eventually, Earth built their own space fleets and took their fight to stars. Thus was born, the Star Corps.

Men, like Captain "Ace" Rango, and women, like Lieutenant Maria Rodriguez, joined the Star Corps to repel the lizard invasion. These dedicated crews spent so much time in deep space combat that they lost touch of daily life on Earth.

While their patrol cruiser was in dry dock for repair and resupply operations, Ace and Maria were granted shore leave. Now they were about to find out how much life had changed on Earth during their absence. Ace had a family obligation to visit his spoiled rotten niece; he would rather fight a hundred lizards instead.

"I didn't know that you had a niece." Maria was surprised. Lieutenant Maria Rodriguez was wearing her space dress uniform. She sported it well which earned her extra looks and drew nods of approval from the gentlemen on board her bus. One poor man that glanced at her too long too long received a whack from his wife.

The patrol couple was on their way to visit his brother as they rode a crowded forty-passenger bus in downtown Denver during the winter.

They had been in outer space so long that they missed Earth's simple pleasures of being under a big open sky, feeling the warm sun rays on their faces, breathing in fresh air, and walking on its surface with real gravity. This was a welcome escape from shipboard confinement of cramped spaces, recycled air, and artificial gravity. It felt good to be on Earth once again.

"You never asked," Rango slyly replied. Captain Jason Rango was attired in a formal space uniform, which was standard Star Corps policy for shore leave. He was glad to escape for a few days from his command to spend some time with Maria. She was everything he dreamed of in a woman; attractive, smart, and fun to be with. Maria brought real meaning to his life and purpose to his heart.

Their bus drove past numerous charred, burnt, and pulverized buildings laying in ruin. Broken windows, shuttered store fronts, and missing roof tops were a common sight, as the two continued their conversation.

"What other dark and sinister family secrets are you keeping from me?" Maria winked and teased back.

Over their many adventures together, they had grown closer. For a while, they had harbored a secret shipboard romance from the crew. Finally, Rango proposed to her during an awkward moment when they both faced the possibility of a violent and horrible death. She was actually crazy enough to say "yes," when her very future was highly doubtful.

Their weathered bus drove past a large recruiting bill board: "Join the Star Corps Now and Stop the Lizards." On the sign was a picture of man and woman dressed in space battle gear. Underneath the picture was the quote, "They did their part. Do yours."

“Let’s set a date,” Rango suggested. He was all business and considered marriage to be the next logical step. Rango came from a seafaring family. He remembered how his favorite uncle deeply regretted losing his *true love*. Being a deep sea fisherman, it was ironic that this uncle never made *the Big Catch*.

“If you want her, then go for it. Focus on your objective. Plot a course and set sail. Don’t let another friendly gentleman will snatch your prize.” His uncle’s words echoed in his mind, as Rango looked out the bus windows at the snow covered trees. It was nearing December, as Jack Frost painted icicles on the tree branches. Spring and summer weddings are always good.

“Don’t push it,” Maria gently resisted. “Good things take time in their own way.” For now, engagement was enough to her. She had no desire to rush into planning a wedding date. There was plenty of time for that. She remembered how her Mother deeply regretted marrying at such a young age and missing out on the whole courtship experience. Maria had taken her Mother’s advice to heart. She wanted to savor each moment and take things slow and easy. The enchantment of courtship can be a good thing.

“Why not?” Rango pressed. They were both in love and now she plays hard to get?

“Don’t go jumping the gun until I say I’m ready,” Maria said firmly.

“Excuse me. I thought you were ready?” Rango was confused. He thought it was a done deal.

“You don’t seem to understand,” Maria countered in a sweet soft voice.

“When things are right, it will happen.”

Rango began to realize that he might never truly understand women. Just when you think you understand them, they shift directions on you, like the winds on the high sea. If life was about timing, then he felt out of synch.

Their dented bus came to a complete halt in front of a large Denver bus terminal. Since the Great Lizard War began, public transportation greatly increased as fuel for privately owned vehicles became scarce. America’s love affair with the automobile was put on hold. The bus doors hissed open, and everyone began to step off. An unfamiliar voice called out to Rango.

“Hi, Ace. Can I get your autograph?” A thin elderly gentleman eagerly asked, as he approached the couple. He was dressed in a tattered suit with sewn on patches and worn out shoes. The tired and hungry look on his face revealed a poor man that was simply down on his luck. He handed Rango a wrinkled newspaper with his photo on the front page. The newspaper headline read: “Ace Rango Does it Again.” With each new lizard kill, Rango’s celebrity status grew.

“Sure. Who do I make it out to?” Rango took a pen out of his uniform pocket.

“Make it out to Mark Cunningham,” the senior man happily replied. “I’ve been following all your exploits, Captain. Truly amazing lizard kills. You’re the best. You’ve been an inspiration to all of us. I use to serve in the Star Corps, before they threw me out for a bum leg. I can’t go blaming them. I wasn’t much use to them after the lizards shot me up so badly. You keep up the fine work you’re doing. Continue to make us proud.” He patted Rango on the back.

“To Mark it is,” Rango smiled and signed the wrinkled newspaper with a personalized message. “To a special Star Corps brother in arms. Signed, Ace Rango.”

“Give the lizards hell, Ace.” The old man proudly urged, as Rango handed him an autographed newspaper with a crisp twenty-dollar bill attached. “God bless you, sir.” He gave Rango a snappy salute. “It’s been a long time since I saluted and wore a uniform.” He smiled. “It sure feels good to do that again. It’s just like the old times.” He paused to wipe a tear from his eye. “I miss the service. Thanks again.” He stuffed the money in his coat pocket, tucked the newspaper securely under his arm, and walked off whistling. Lady Luck was smiling on him. Ace’s signature would gain him enough money to live good for a while through the cold Denver winter.

“You did the right thing, back there. But don’t let your Good Samaritan deed all go to your head, Skipper.” Maria gently punched him in the arm.

“Don’t call me skipper. I’m your fiancé now,” Rango shot back.

“As long as I’m in uniform, you’re my Skipper,” Maria teased back. “Got it, Skipper?”

“Of course, Lieutenant, if you want to play it that way,” Rango retorted.

“Yes, Sir.” Maria saluted him, grabbed him in her arms, and gave him a big long passionate kiss. People started clapping. Their big kiss in public drew unwanted attention to the couple. Nearby men, women, and children stopped to take in the moment. It was as though they were being treated to free live Broadway performance.

“Stop that. This is the first time you’ve saluted me, called me Sir, and kissed me in public.” Rango was embarrassed. Was he being ambushed? On the bus she was standing up to him, now she had changed direction like the wind. What triggered this? Was it his generosity to the old man?

“You’re my commanding officer, remember?” Maria gave her sweetest peaches and cream smile. That was the type of smile that drew out the best in Rango. “There’s a first time for everything.”

A police officer came around the corner and assessed the situation. “There’s nothing here to see folks.” He waved his billy club to the watching audience. “Please move about your business folks. There’s nothing more to see around here.” He winked at Rango. “Sorry, sir. I hope these fine folks aren’t disturbing you. It’s just that it’s not every day they see two Star Corps officers kissing in public.” He smiled.

“Of course, Officer, please excuse us.” Rango was a little embarrassed at the unwanted public attention.

”I’m just glad to do my part. I really appreciate the great things you Star Corps folks do for us.” The police officer tipped his hat. “Keeping Earth free from those lizards is a big job indeed.”

“Where can I get a decent taxi cab around here, officer?” Rango inquired as he looked around.

“A cab? You and the pretty lady wait here a second.” The police officer nodded then walked off.

Minutes later, a weathered yellow cab with peeled off paint, windshield

cracks, and numerous dents and scrapes on its body pulled in front of the Star Corps couple. It looked like it had come out of a war zone and was ready for the scrap heap. “Did you folks call for a cab?” A husky and unshaven taxi driver yelled out.

“We did.” Rango replied as he opened the rear cab door to let Maria in. They seated themselves inside the rear of the cab. The cramped backseat provided the perfect opportunity for the two lovebirds to huddle closer together. They looked into each other’s eyes and were lost in a valley of wonder and rapture.

“Where to, Pal?” The taxi driver asked breaking their trance. He flipped a red handle which started a fare meter started ticking. Rango reached into his coat pocket and handed him a written address to his brother Ray’s house. “Aurora? Yeah, not a problem.” As cab sped off, the driver looked back at Rango. He stared, and did a double take. “Say, I recognize your face. You’re Ace Rango, the lizard killer. Sure, Ace, great job you’re doing up there. My wife won’t believe me when I tell her my cab was graced by the likes of Earth’s number one space ace. He glanced back at Rango. “I guess folks tell you this all the time? Am I right? I never had a celebrity ride in my cab. I guess I can change more for a ride now. Right?” He laughed adjusting his rearview mirror. “Ace Rango was here, yes, sir.”

The cab driver read Rango’s annoyed face as a signal to change the subject. “A lizard ship crashed in Aurora last week. I was there when it happened. I got my first good look at them lizards, really close up. He paused to reflect. “The Army came over and captured them on the spot and had them arrested. Yes, sir, they did.” He laughed. “Thanks to you Star Corps folks, they rarely attack us anymore. It’s not like the bad old days anymore. You help keep the skies safe for us.”

Rango and Maria stared out the windows, as their cab raced down the cold Denver streets. The diabolic work of the lizards was such a sorry sight to see. The side streets were still littered with smashed cars, twisted metal, broken chunks of concrete, and over turned power poles. During their initial invasion, the lizards had ravished much of the Earth with major cities taking on direct hits. It was only after Star Corps was created that the Earthmen were able to repel the invaders. Rebuilding and recovery was a long and slow process.

The taxicab drove past more signs of a post lizard invasion. Large rotating radar dishes could be observed, mounted high up on key buildings throughout the city. Sonic gun emplacements were also scattered strategically about the city along with giant searchlights. Maria saw signs posted along the route, pointing the direction to the nearest public air raid shelter location. Rango spotted some soldiers on lookout towers scanning the sky with their binoculars, looking for traces of potential lizard infiltrators. Lizard commandos were occasionally dropped behind enemy lines for intelligence gathering. Earth's defenses were far from perfect.

The taxicab pulled into a military checkpoint. A long yellow-striped pole in front of the cab blocked further access. They were warmly welcomed by five soldiers who immediately surrounded the taxicab with rifles pointed at the passengers. Rango thought the soldiers looked awfully young and nervous. They acted like new recruits spending their first day on the job. Maria was nervous, thinking that one of them might accidentally discharge a round. Finally, someone in charge stepped forward. "Papers please" the guard demanded, as he peered into the cab. "State your business please."

The taxi driver rolled his window down. "I got Ace Rango with me here.

He's all the papers I need." He boldly pointed to Rango and Maria behind him. "Ace wants to visit his brother. You guys have a problem with that?" Rango rolled the window down and smiled. All five faces broke into friendly smiles, as they recognized Rango.

"Ace Rango. It's really you in the flesh." The sergeant of the guard immediately rendered Captain Rango a snappy salute. "Allow them pass through. Sorry, Sir, for the inconvenience. Keep up the great job, Sir." "What did I tell you boys? You never know who's going to show up at our checkpoint. So, keep your eyes peeled and always look your best. Private Larson, check your uniform. You look like crap. Private Henderson, I saw how you looked at that female officer in the cab. I'll have none of that behavior here. I'll have no complaints about check point 17. Do you boys hear?" "Yes, Sergeant," came the response in unison as they quickly lifted the gate and allowed the cab to speed through.

The taxicab drove past the remains of an old lizard food processing plant. Now, it laid in decay and ruin. Years ago, these huge plants existed all over captured territory on Earth. The lizards once used these abandoned structures to herd in captured humans for massive food processing. Humans were efficiently slaughtered, processed, packaged, and shipped off to a faraway lizard world for interstellar consumption. These lizard food plants were like Nazi concentration camps but were far much worse. The lizards showed no compassion and mercy to their captives. There were unspeakable evils committed in these death plants. Finally, Earth rebel groups rose up to knock them out and burn them to the ground. Rango shuddered to think about it. Those were horrible times indeed.

"Can you drive by the lizard ship crash site?" Rango asked. The driver nodded and took a detour to the wreckage location. Rango had the cab driver wait while he surveyed the scene before him. The lizard ship had

crashed on top of an elementary school. Looking through the burnt out remains, Rango observed a lizard ship with a newer design that was sleeker, faster, and better built. He had not yet faced this new version in combat. This would mean a very long protracted war ahead. “I’ve seen enough, driver.” Rango climbed back into the cab. “Let’s go to my brother’s house.”

The night had chased away the day and painted stars in the sky. The taxicab plowed through the snow covered streets and eventually came to a screeching halt in front of Rango’s brother house. He hit a red lever which turned the meter off. “Thanks for the big tip, Ace. Happy hunting.” The driver flashed a big grin, then sped off into the night. His cab had left a long trail of gray smoke to linger for a moment in the cold Denver air.

“Here we are.” Rango winked at Maria, then gave a hardy knock on a door of a large, two story brick house. The dwelling badly needed major repair, but that was probably the least of his brother’s concerns. Everyday life on Earth was a struggle to exist. Like so many of the houses in the neighborhood, seeing a building in despair was considered the norm. The planet wide devastation inflicted by the lizard invasion created a shortage of building materials. The couple glanced at the worn out cars parked along the street. At a closer look, they were actually abandoned and sadly left to rust away.

A heavysset man in his forties appeared at the doorway. The weathered look on his face revealed many years of worry and concern that had taken its toll. He belted out a huge smile and hugged Rango. “It’s good to see you again, Brother. It’s been a long while.”

“Maria, this is my brother Ray Rango, and this is my niece, Aspyn.”

Rango happily made the introductions. “Ray, this is my fiancée, Maria.”

“So, you’re Maria. My brother considers you an angel.” Ray expressed as he hugged Maria. “Did he tell you that?” He laughed as he watched Maria blush. “You’re an angel alright. My brother’s always been the romantic type. Come on in, folks.”

“Maria, I would like you to meet my niece, Aspyn.” Ray said as a cute six-year-old little girl hung from the stairway banister casting a Cheshire cat smile.

“So, you’re Aspyn?” Maria expressed, as the child’s angelic face, shiny brown hair, and sparkling brown eyes caught her attention. She bent down to give the little munchkin a quick warm hug.

“Can you tell me a story tonight?” Aspyn asked shyly and innocent like. “Can you? Please?” She displayed her best sugar coated smile. “Pretty please?”

“Aspyn, where are your manners?” Ray butted in. “Allow these fine folks to get settled in first and grab some refreshments before we discuss bedtime stories. You go upstairs and get changed into your pajamas. Do you hear?” Aspyn worked her way upstairs, like a little monkey while the adults entered the large living room. Ray took their coats and treated the couple to some hot cups of coffee. They all sat around a cozy stone fireplace. Ray added another log to the fire. “Maria, you can use my spare bedroom, and your fiancé can sleep on the couch. Is that okay? He waited for Maria to nod. “Good. It’s settled then.”

They spent the next hour catching up on lives and reflecting on major events since Rango’s last visit. Ray stirred the fire with an iron poker as a

log fell out of place. “I know you Star Corps folks are doing everything you can to stop the lizards from reaching our planet. Unfortunately, some of them always manage to get throughout our defenses. Aspyn’s school got knocked out last week.”

“Sorry to hear about that. We saw the wrecked school on the way here. It’s a shame. Where does Aspyn go to school now?” Rango inquired, leaning closer to the fire place. Its comfortable warmth felt so good.

“Aspyn doesn’t go to public school anymore,” Ray said. “The government doesn’t have the money to rebuild many of our schools. She’s being home schooled at Mrs. Davis’ house. He pointed across the street. “That’s her new school now, thanks to those damn lizards.” He paused. “Sorry for the cussing, but I have a real grudge against those lizards.” For a second, the light of the fireplace flames revealed a sparkle of hate and sadness in his eyes.

“Sounds like times are tough,” Rango sympathized.

“You’re telling me, Brother?” Ray sighed and displayed a dejected look. “Ever since the lizards invaded the Earth, it has been difficult for life to get back to normal. You folks have been living so high and mighty in outer space that you have forgotten how tough it is here on Earth. Prices for everything are sky high. There are shortages of everything. Almost everything is rationed out, which includes gas, oil, and food. I was lucky to get some heating oil for the winter. I can’t even buy a pack of cigarettes. The government says that we need to support the war cause. The military gets first priority to the resources. Civilians get the scraps. Why a good carton of cigarettes around here is like a bar of gold.” He paused and lowered his eyes. “I had to sell Dad’s gold watch last week just to buy food.”

“I can lend you some money, until you can get back on your feet,” Rango offered. His brother was a bus driver for the city until he was recently laid off. He was hoping to be recalled. So far, it had been a long wait.

“Only if it’s a loan. I don’t take too kindly to charity,” Ray expressed. “Times really are tough.” He paused and looked down. “Ever since the lizards killed my wife, Renee, things have never been the same.” He paused to allow a little venting. “Damn lizards. I hope we kill them all.” “Sorry for that slip. It’s hard to raise a daughter all alone. I still miss her so much. Excuse me for a second.” He turned away for a moment to dry his tears.

Aspyn danced down the stairs to break up her dad’s sad moment. She had a blue ribbon around her hair and was dressed in pajamas with prints of rocket ships, stars, and planets. Aspyn made her way over to her uncle and jumped on his lap. “Can you tuck me in, Uncle?” she eagerly asked and gave Rango a hug. “Can you?” She gave her most irresistible sugar cream smile.

Ray laughed as his jolly spirit returned, chasing away his troubled past. “Would you kind folks like to do the honors of tucking in Aspyn?” Ray became animated. “When she heard that you were coming, she got very excited. It’s not every day we get Star Corps visitors.” He paused. “Aspyn dreams of following in your footsteps.”

“Does she now? Why not?” Rango replied. Aspyn took that as a clue as she waltzed back upstairs to her room to get ready.

“Charm and enchant her with your adventure stories,” Ray encouraged. “Besides, a little bonding with your niece couldn’t hurt. Right, Brother?”

He patted Rango on the back and departed for the kitchen leaving the two lovebirds on their own.

The couple went upstairs and stood at Aspyn's doorway, surveying her bedroom. The young child was sitting crossed legged on her bed with her worn out stuffed rabbit by her side, which was missing one ear. On one wall was a crookedly pinned newspaper reflecting some of Ace Rango's former glories. On the opposite wall was a child's hand drawn picture of a rocket ship flying through space. A stack of space travel books, crayons, paper, and small rocket ship model rested on her bed stand. On her yellow lampshade, there were cut out stars and planets decorated with sparkling glitter.

"Please come in, Uncle," Aspyn invited sounding all business-like. "Are you going to tell me a story?"

"Yes, we are," Rango replied, as he sat down on Aspyn's bed. Maria sat down in a comfortable rocking chair with a soft pillow at the corner of the room. He was amazed that his niece took a strong liking to him and outer space.

"What kind of story?" Aspyn eagerly asked.

"Would you like an adventure story?" Rango threw out. "Is that okay?" He reflected how fast his niece had grown up. If he was lucky, he visited his niece only once a year. Time flies.

"I love adventure stories, but it better be good," Aspyn insisted. "I hope it's not boring." She had been raised on many good stories and tonight she felt she deserved a special treat from her favorite uncle. She crafted up a challenge. "Both of you must tell the story. Okay? Please? Pretty

please?” She displayed a tender smile that would make Sugar Plum Fairies proud.

“You’ll like this story,” Rango insisted, “and it won’t be boring.” His little coercing niece was a rough customer. Tonight, he was up to the mighty challenge of a six year old. He would have to call upon the great gods of storytelling and craft up his finest tale. He felt like a magician about to enchant with a trip to a faraway world. He glanced back at Maria, like she was his partner in crime. She winked back as if daring him to conjure up his best story yet. She would join in to help him out.

What kind of story would be proper and fitting for a young child? He had so many great and hair raising adventures to tell. Rango stood up to remove his dress uniform coat and hung it on knob of the bed’s footboard. He thought for a few seconds, as he loosened up his necktie. His face lit up and a big grin manifested itself. The wind of imagination had blown into the room granting him the perfect tale to tell.

“Let’s see. Where do I begin? Oh, yes. Maria and I had just landed on the planet Zono,” Rango explained.

“Planet Zono? Is that far from here?” Aspyn wondered.

Rango stood up and walked over to the bedroom window. “Zono is way out there.” He pointed to the stars. The snow was gently falling in the night. The gentle wind blew the snowflakes, like tiny fairies dancing in the air. The white frosted window displayed the handiwork of Jack Frost.

Maria stood up and walked over to the window to join her fiancée. “It’s more like in that direction, Skipper.” She corrected and pointed to a group of stars to the right. The two paused to look at each other’s eyes and held

hands. To Maria, it seemed to be the perfect romantic moment. They were like a Mom and Dad telling stories to their child. Could this a sample of what married life would be like one day?

Rango loved the moonlight reflection and sparkle from Maria eyes. He could lose himself in those eyes forever. For the moment, the couple was lost in the magical embrace of a lover's charms.

It took the sweet and youthful voice of a child to burst their romantic bubble. "You mean way out there?" Aspyn imagined the great distance, as a smile lit up her angelic face. One day, she would travel to the stars like her uncle. The couple took that as clue to return to their seats.

"Where was I? Oh, yes. Maria and I were on the planet Zono conducting a rescue mission." Rango conjured up his best storytelling face as he sat down on Aspyn's bed. "Star Corps was sending us out to rescue an Earth ambassador. The nasty lizards had shot down his spaceship. Our job was to find him and bring him back to Earth. That's when the trouble began. We landed on a desert like planet that seemed so void of life. We desperately searched everywhere for the Ambassador's ship."

"Finally, our determination paid off," Maria joined in to continue the story. "We found his wrecked ship by a large dark mountain and went inside. His ship was totally deserted - not a soul in sight." She paused and winked back at Rango to continue the story.

"That's when we found the ripped and tattered clothes. They were all stained with blood," Rango emphasized with his hands. He pretended to be afraid, and then looked at story telling partner to continue the story.

"We're so lucky to be alive to tell what happened next." Maria

dramatized, as she got off her rocking chair and walked over to Rango. She stood behind him and placed her loving arms on his shoulders. “Should we really go on with this story, Skipper? After all, she is a little girl.” She winked at Rango. “Shouldn’t she be covering her ears?”

“I’m a big girl, Maria. I can handle it,” Aspyn crossed her arms and pouted.

“Can you now? If you promise to be a big brave girl, then I will continue.” Rango winked back at Maria.

“I promise, Uncle. I cross my heart and hope to die,” Aspyn pleaded.

“Very well. We will continue,” Rango replied. His niece would grow up into a smart and beautiful young lady one day. “Maria’s right. Had it not been for our quick thinking, we would be in the stomach of the flying spiders of Zono.” He emphasized with deep conviction in his voice.

“Flying spiders?” Aspyn questioned with amazement in her voice.

“Flying spiders that eat little girls for breakfast,” Rango relied as he pounced on Aspyn and tickled her tummy. The laughter of a small child echoed in the room. Rango cried out in laughter too. Maria watched the two have their fun, such a moment was priceless. What did she have to fear? Rango was a *good catch*.

“Please allow your uncle to finish his story.” Maria came over and whispered in Aspyn’s ear. “Or he will keep you up all night.” She gently rustled the child’s brown hair and radiated a motherly smile. “You’ll never get to sleep.”

“Sorry, Uncle. I won’t interrupt again.” Aspyn sheepishly apologized as she sat cross-legged and hugged her stuffed rabbit.

“Okay. There we were on the planet Zono.” Rango continued. “The pieces of bloody clothing were all part of a very long trail. We took a small squad armed with sonic rifles and sonic hand grenades. We were armed to the teeth. We followed the trail, which led us to a dark and mysterious cave.”

Aspyn’s eyes lit up. “I know where this story is going, Uncle.” Though her eyes, one could see the reflection of a bright little girl with storytelling skills. “You ran into a giant spider web?”

“Of course,” Rango conjured up an amazed voice. “Spiders always lead to spider webs.” He tapped Aspyn on her nose. “You should be telling this story not me.”

“No, Uncle. It’s your story.” Aspyn insisted, “You tell it.”

“Only if you insist,” Rango teased back. “And only if there are no more interruptions. As we entered the cave, we came across a spider web. It was huge.” He extended his arms to emphasize its large scale. “Naturally, we looked around for the Ambassador and his crew.”

“We found them wrapped inside thick silk cocoons lined up along dark and sticky cavern walls,” Maria interjected. “The cocoons were hanging upside down.”

“Were they still alive, Maria?” Aspyn wondered.

“Yes, they were,” Maria continued, “They were all barely breathing. Life

was draining out of them. I suspected they were being preserved to serve as future meals.”

“I ordered them cut down immediately.” Rango waved his arm like he was holding an imaginary sword.

“I applied immediate first aid in a desperate attempt to save them.” Maria dramatized the story.

“While Maria was trying to relieve them, a giant spider started to approach us,” Rango recalled. “I quickly drew out my sonic pistol and fired a sonic bolt at the monstrosity. I blew it to kingdom come.” He smiled. “That was close. Once the Ambassador was freed, he warned us that it was all a big trap.”

“A trap?” Aspyn played along with a surprised look.

“We looked all around us,” Rango explained. “A huge angry spider raced to the front entrance to block off our only means of escape. A furious spider appeared from behind a set of rocks and positioned itself ready to strike. At a nearby hole, an evil spider stuck his ugly head out with a very hungry look. He displayed a razor sharp set of teeth and he stared at us with eight sets of eyes.

“Sounds like you were totally surrounded, Uncle.” Aspyn tried to sound scared.

“We were, my dear child. We were almost ready to abandon all hope,” Rango exaggerated.

“What did you do, Uncle?” Aspyn played along with a worried look.

“What would you do under those circumstances?” Rango challenged. “You attack and start blasting away.” He tickled Aspyn. As she started giggling, Maria gave out a horrible scream.

“What is it, Maria?” Rango was both surprised and confused. “It’s only a story.”

“It’s not about your story. It’s about your coat pocket.” Maria corrected as she was visibly shaken.

“What about my coat pocket? What did you see?” Rango grew concerned. Aspyn stopped giggling.

“An ugly looking spider creature crawled out of your coat pocket. It jumped on the floor and raced out the door.” Maria explained.

“Seriously?” Rango couldn’t believe it.

“An alien spider creature?” Aspyn’s eyes grew wide in disbelief. “Here in my house?”

“Tell me it’s only my imagination.” Maria wanted reassurance.

“A spider creature you say?” Rango explained. “I did have a creature in a protective glass case in my coat pocket.”

“Why on Earth would you be carrying a creature in your pocket?” Maria was astonished.

“I was planning to drop it off at the space science lab after we left my

brother's house," Rango elaborated.

"I can't believe you would bring a creature into your niece's bedroom." Maria was upset.

"I was going to show it to Aspyn later to impress her. Kids love creatures," Rango explained.

"Oh, you impressed your niece, alright. You let a creature run loose in her house. Aren't you going to go track it down?" Maria pointed out the door. "I feel like belting you good. How could you?"

"Don't worry, Maria. We'll find it and take care of business. It's no big deal," Rango reassured.

Ray poked his head through the doorway. "I heard a scream. What's going on?" Rango explained the situation and the two brothers departed to track down the creature.

"Well, did you two gentlemen take care of the creature?" Maria inquired as she descended the stairs and entered the kitchen. Like a protective mother hen, she insisted that Aspyn remain in her room, until the house was declared safe. She anticipated that the two brothers had resolved the issue at hand.

"Negative. We searched everywhere." Rango was frustrated.

"Do you two gentlemen even know where to look?" Maria replied sarcastically. "Why does it always take a woman to find things?" She immediately bent down to look under the couch. What she saw made her eyes grow wide in terror. She let out a chilling scream, jumped to her feet,

and backed away shaking.

“What did you see, Maria?” Rango said anxiously.

“What do you think I saw?” Maria was both unnerved and upset. “It’s bigger from the one I saw come out your coat pocket.”

The creature darted out from underneath the couch and raced up the stairs. Aspyn watched in horror from her bedroom doorway as the creature raced up the steps towards her. She screamed as she slammed her door on the creature, causing it to bounce off its hard surface. It rolled on its back, flipped upright on its eight legs, and darted up a second flight of stairs.

“Did you see that? The spider creature is now the size of a small dog,” Ray expressed.

“What’s that?” Rango heard a horrifying cat cry echoing from the house’s upper level.

“That’s our cat, Little Guy,” Ray analyzed. “The cry sounds like its coming from my attic. Let’s go.”

“Aren’t you two going to take a weapon with you?” Maria insisted.

“I got a shotgun locked in the cabinet,” Ray said as he drew out a set of keys.

“I wish I had my sonic pistol handy,” Rango replied as he looked around for a substitute weapon. He grabbed a baseball bat that was resting against the kitchen wall.

The two, armed men raced upstairs to the attic. The attic door was opened, revealing a pitch back room beyond. Aspyn came up the stairs to see what was going on. “No.” Ray quickly waved her back down. ”You don’t want to see this.” Aspyn saw the horrified look on her Dad’s face and quickly returned to her room. The two brothers frantically looked about the disarrayed attic for any traces of the creature. They moved about a wooden floor that was stained with blood and littered with scattered bones and cat fur.

“Where did it go?” Rango questioned, as he looked under storage items and behind large boxes. Out of a dark corner, the creature leaped onto Ray’s back. Rango immediately swung his baseball bat, striking it off Ray. The creature sailed across the attic and landed upside down at the doorway. It quickly righted itself and scurried down the stairs.

“Are you okay?” Rango asked his brother.

“You knocked the creature off me just in time,” Ray replied checking himself over for possible wounds. Satisfied, he gave thumbs up. “I’m good. Thanks.”

“Anytime, brother,” Rango expressed. He heard loud barking coming from below. “What was that?”

“That’s my dog, Lobo. He found something.” Ray replied as he checked his shotgun. “It sounds like it’s coming from my basement. Let’s go.”

The two men quickly descended down the stairs, only to find the basement door wide open with darkness beyond. They switched on the light and carefully descended the stairs, anticipating a possible attack at any moment. They held on tightly to their weapons, as they searched about.

Only a small light bulb lit the entire basement leaving much of the room bathed in shadows and darkness. Ripped boxes, over turned furniture, broken lamps, and scattered newspapers, all suggested a vicious struggle. Ray spied a familiar object, laying on the basement's concrete floor -a chewed up dog collar soaked in blood.

Out of the corner of his eye, Ray saw a large, dark object move behind some large boxes. He pumped his shotgun and fired off a shot. The booming noise echoed. The creature leapt out of the way. The spread of the shotgun pellets ripped nearby storage boxes to shreds. He pumped another round and fired again. There was a loud roar as the shotgun pellets sprayed the room, hitting the basement wall. He heard the shattering of glass. The hairy, eight-legged creature scurried out the basement window and escaped into the cold and snowy night.

“Looks like Lobo chased the creature down here and got ambushed instead.” Ray analyzed, looking around.

“Unfortunately, your dog met his match.” Rango blamed himself. Now the creature was loose in the neighborhood. He felt personally responsible for stopping it and setting things right. Would the creature stop growing? What caused its explosive growth? They would need more help. Star Corps would have to be contacted.

“Aren't you going to call the police?” Maria inquired, as the two brothers came out of the basement and into the kitchen.

“The phone's in the living room. Help yourself.” Ray pulled out a box of shotgun shells and slammed it on the kitchen table. He started reloading his gun and stuffed a handful of shells into his coat pocket. “No spider makes a fool out of me,” his anger was growing. “Coming with me,

Brother?”

“I got your back covered,” Rango replied and grabbed a broom and a large sharp knife. “Got a roll of duct tape? I’m going to make me a makeshift spear.”

“After I call the police, I’m leaving. We’re not safe here. What about Aspyn?” Maria expressed concern.

“Please, take Aspyn with you. Go to Mrs. Davis’ house across the street.” Ray pointed out the window. “You’ll both be safe there.”

“Ray and I will search the neighborhood for the creature,” Rango replied. “We’ll rejoin you at Mrs. Davis’ house when we’re finished.” He smiled reassuringly. “Don’t worry. We’ll be okay.”

Maria placed the call to the police. At first, the police stubbornly considered it a prank call. It was only after her persistence, begging and pleading did the Police finally respond. They reluctantly agreed to dispatch a squad car to check it out her story.

After they put their coats on, Aspyn lead Maria by the hand across the snow covered street to Mrs. Davis’ house. They were welcomed in and offered some hot chocolate. With steaming, hot cups in hand, they sat down by the living room window to wait. Could the Rango brothers find the creature in time and kill it? What was taking the police so long? Would the creature stop growing in size? The snow continued to fall.

Officer Peter O’Reilly was on neighborhood patrol, completing his evening shift for the night. The police officer’s retirement was a mere ten days away. He parked his patrol car in a dark and secluded spot. “A good

cup of coffee would hit the spot,” he thought as he opened his thermos bottle. Ah, a hot cup would warm up his cold bones. Behind him, large hairy tentacles quietly approached. O’Reilly was too distracted by his thoughts as he replaced the lid on his thermos bottle. Tentacles wrapped tightly around him, drawing him closer to sharp moving teeth as though he was being drawn into a sawmill. A shocking scream shattered the silence of the night. Blood spattered on the patrol car windows, covering them in dark crimson.

Officer O’Reilly’s squad car radio sprung to life with a flash announcement. “Calling squad car number five come in please. I know you’re not going to believe this, but there’s a complaint about a giant spider running around in your neighborhood beat. Come in please.” He would not have to worry about answering his radio or drawing his retirement check.

Two tensed up ladies peered cautiously out their living room window into the night.

“Maria, do you think that we’re safe now?” Aspyn asked as she drew closer to Maria.

“As long as we remain indoors, we’ll be okay. That creature’s probably roaming the streets out there looking for its next victim. We’re safe in here.” Maria reassured the worried child.

“Good. This gives me the creeps.” Aspyn sighed as she put her arms around Maria to give her a hug.

Aspyn got personal. “Are you going to marry my uncle? I want you to be my auntie.” She gave her best pretty girl smile.

“Let’s see what going on outside, shall we?” Maria replied as she changed the subject. She pulled back the living room curtains. In the snow covered street before them, they could see the two brothers breaking into a run towards them. They appeared to be signaling with their hands and pointed towards them. The thickness of the glass was blocking the outside sounds.

“What are they doing, Maria?” Aspyn wondered.

“They’re signaling for us to do something,” Maria said.

“I think they are asking us to turn around,” Aspyn interpreted as the two men approached closer.

Maria and Aspyn turned around just in time to watch in horror as a giant hungry spider pounced upon them. Two horrifying screams disturbed the silence of a snowy night.

“That’s enough of the story. There no more time for giant spiders.” Rango stopped. “It’s time for bed little girl.” He rustled her hair. Did he do a good enough job as a storyteller or did her truly bore his niece?

“I loved it, Uncle. That was a great story!” Aspyn was excited. “That was so good.”

“Glad you liked it,” Rango replied. He had scored a homerun with his niece. There were no second chances. Their shore leave ended tomorrow and they would be on their way to their next adventure. He glanced at Maria. Having a fine woman like her by his side made his adventures more bearable.

“That’s only because you were in it?” Maria lovingly tapped Aspyn on the nose and smiled at Rango. That’s what she loved about Rango. He was very imaginative and bold. Such moments like these were priceless. She enjoyed this moment because tomorrow they would be racing across the stars. They would be facing untold predicaments and risking their lives for the people of Earth. She sighed. That was the life of a Star Corps woman. She glanced at Rango. With a guy like him sharing her journey, she was willing to go anywhere and risk anything.

“It seemed so real. I felt like I was actually experiencing the story as you told it.” Aspyn smiled as the wonder of her eyes lit the room. “So how does the story end, Uncle?” She hated cliffhangers.

“You finish the story, Aspyn.” Rango patted her head. “That’s why God created you with a brain.”

“Tell me another story, Uncle.” Aspyn insisted.

“That’s enough, Young Lady. You have school tomorrow. Now give your uncle a great big hug,” Rango playfully suggested.

The door busted open. “Brother, I need your help.” Ray’s voice had a sense of urgency.

“What’s up?” Rango turned around.

“I thought I saw something creeping and crawling down stairs. Let’s check it out. Hurry!” Ray requested.

“Seriously?” Rango challenged. Aspyn was stunned.

“Just kidding, Brother. Did you see that look on your face?” Ray grinned.
“I heard the whole story outside. Great story.”

“Did the three of you plan all this?” Aspyn asked in surprise.

There was abundant laughter and joy in the room as four souls shared a timeless happy moment together.

THE END

Joe Cepeda was born in San Jose, California but now calls Atlanta his home. He was raised on a steady diet of comic books, cartoons, B movies, super heroes, and sci-fi TV shows. He has a fondness for dinosaurs, monsters, aliens, armored warriors, and damsels in distress. He enjoys writing short stories and making his own films which he writes, directs, edits, and produces. Joe's a military veteran with three grown kids which allows him time to pursue his artistic passions. He's attending the Art Institute of Atlanta and helping other aspiring filmmakers realize their media dreams.

If you'll like to read more Ace Rango stories, then stay tuned for future adventures.

To see Joe's sci-fi videos, visit his You Tube channel.

www.youtube.com/user/Peanutman1954

DARKNESS

ETERNAL

OVER THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

by Russell Secord

Three thousand feet above the South China Sea, surrounded by the hum of Her Majesty's Australian airship *Inverness*, Lieutenant Commander Elizabeth Mayfair thought about the end of the world.

She looked at the headline again: *China Still A Threat!!* The *Sydney Morning Herald* sold papers with headlines like this one, even if the stories and the reality didn't support them. The *Inverness* and her sister ships patrolled the waters between southern China and Indonesia, but Mayfair had never seen a Chinese fighting ship or fired a live shell. In fact, she'd never had a more dangerous mission than to drop onto a fishing boat and help fix their engine. In the midst of the greatest conflict in human history, she had very little to do.

Not that she wanted to see combat. She had aspirations beyond becoming

a footnote in a casualty report: *Inverness Lost At Sea With All Hands!!* She'd done well in student government. She wanted her own headline: *PM Mayfair Signs Peace Treaty!!* Her mother couldn't get her a deferment, though, so into the draft she went.

Nobody called it “World War Two” any more, mostly just “the war.” Some called it “the Dark War.” Australia itself had avoided the worst of the fighting, but too many men had gone to their deaths in faraway places. Her own father had died in some trackless pasture in western Russia. What had the world already lost, in skills, in memories, in the simple humanity of talking and feeling and touching? How much more could the world stand to lose?

Women had taken over the fighting, and they'd have to handle the rebuilding as well. Around the world, cities and peoples lay in ruins, some beyond recovery. Plenty of opportunity awaited someone with a good nose for advancement and a little luck. Someone like Elizabeth Mayfair.

Until then she felt like a sailor in the doldrums, far from port and unable to move. One good breeze and she could get her life going again. The direction didn't matter.

She looked around the bridge, her “office.” Every sharp corner had a cushion, in case of turbulence. The aluminium girders looked like cobwebs. To save weight, every metal surface had gaps and holes built into it, leaving it structurally sound, but only barely.

She shook her head, tucked a stray blonde curl under her cap, and made her regular scan of the instruments. Radar: only a few clouds. Airspeed indicator: twenty-five knots. Compass: heading south-southwest. Fuel consumption: forty gallons per hour. Chronometer: 0945 hours. Danger on

an airship could come quickly, but it could also come slowly, so slowly that you might never notice it. Stray off your heading by a hair's breadth and you could end up in the midst of a storm... or in the midst of an enemy fleet. At best you had to take a crosswind leg to reach your destination.

A faint pressure on her eardrums told her the door to the bridge had opened. She turned, recognized her captain, and shot to her feet with a salute.

“At ease, Liza,” said Captain Stephanie Williams. She wore the same red lethyrene uniform as the rest of the crew, with slacks, jacket, and cap. Try as they might, the crew had never found anything that left a stain or a wrinkle in lethyrene.

“All readings normal,” Mayfair reported. “Turnaround made without incident at 0620 hours. We're on course--”

“Fine, fine, is the radio ready?”

Mayfair looked at the chronometer. “Ten minutes to go, ma'am.” She lifted the lid of the radio. All the tubes glowed orange. “Radio is ready.”

Before she could close the lid, the radio hummed with a carrier wave. Mayfair eased the lid back down. She picked up a pad and pencil.

The hum went on for much longer than normal, cut out, and came back. “Hanoi calling... Hanoi calling...” The voice seemed to come from an impossible distance. “Hanoi calling the Australian airship *Inverness*...” Static cut off the next few words. “Come in, Queen Elizabeth... come in, queen of Indochina... we need you...” The carrier wave faded.

Mayfair reached for the microphone. Williams caught her wrist and whispered, "We're under radio silence."

They heard a different voice, almost entirely swallowed by static. "... under... early... sun... meet... air.... "

"What in..." said Williams.

"Wait, here it comes again."

"... wind... blow... pilot... hail...." The voice and the hum stopped abruptly.

"Sounds like a weather report," said Williams.

The radio sputtered back to life. This new voice seemed to come from much closer. "Admiral Williams, please report... the fleet is waiting... admiral... Admiral Williams... your report is overdue... *tam biêt....*" The signal faded away.

Williams went to the front window and looked forward.

Mayfair said, "Did you--"

"I heard what they said."

A fourth voice, more distinct, said, "... calling *Inverness... calling Inverness... urgent message... please respond...* " This one faded out as well.

Williams turned, looked at Mayfair, and said, "No one will ever believe this."

“Agreed,” Mayfair said. “Still. Wouldn't you like to be admiral? They called you 'admiral.'”

“And they called you 'queen.' Ridiculous.”

A tentative knock came at the door. Williams opened it. A few of the crew had gathered in the forward corridor. The captain waved them inside. They arranged themselves around the radio and sat on the floor.

According to regulation, the crew couldn't use the ship's radio for personal reasons. At 1000 hours every Friday morning, the regulations went out the window. Mayfair turned the dials to pick up another frequency. Music and static floated from the speaker, faded away, and returned with one final flourish.

“From Hollywood USA, on the Red White and Blue Network, it's *Lucy Liberty*, with music by Glenn Miller and his orchestra.” For the next hour they listened to the latest adventure of America's greatest counterespionage agent. Lucy tracked down a ring of labor union thugs who planned to blow up the Boeing airplane factories in Everett.

“The Russkies flattened those factories a couple of months ago in an air raid,” said Donna Cross, one of the women sitting on the floor. “The Americans couldn't have rebuilt them so quickly.”

“True,” said Williams, “but they'd like you to think so.”

In the end, of course, Lucy caught the saboteurs. To finish the show, the star put on her huskiest voice. “Here's a special message for the men and women fighting in the Sierra Madres. The Southern Bloc has deserted you.

Put down your weapons. Surrender to the Americans. You will be well treated.

“This is Lucille Ball, signing off. Be here next week for another episode of *Lucy Liberty!*”

Mayfair gave Williams a significant look before she reset the frequency. The crew members filed out. Williams stayed behind. Mayfair said, “About those radio messages...”

“Someone playing a joke on us. Or some kind of trap. The Japanese love to set traps. That's all it was. Put it out of your mind. I already have,” said Williams. She went to the window.

Mayfair checked the instruments and made a note in the log.

Without turning around, Williams said, “Ever think about what you'll do when the fighting's over?”

She asked that question, or one like it, when she wanted to talk about going back to Brisbane to help run her mother's grocery. With her dull brown hair and round face, she even looked the part. She could go on for an hour about sausage.

Mayfair said, “Has it ever occurred to you that there might not be anything *to* do when it's over?”

That made Williams turn, but only halfway. “What are you on about?”

“I don't know how to work in a grocer's or a chemist's or a bank or a shop. I know how to tie off a tourniquet, but I can't tie a bow in my hair. I know

how to make a bomb but not how to bake a cake. If we ever do go back to peacetime, there'll be a whole generation--*my* generation--that won't know how to live.”

“There'll be a period of transition, of course....”

The radio hummed. Almost immediately, a crisp voice said, “HMAS *Kent* calling HMAS *Inverness*... urgent message... permission to break radio silence... code word *spongecake*... HMAS *Kent* calling HMAS *Inverness*...”

Williams nodded. Mayfair picked up the microphone and pressed the Send button. “*Inverness* here. We read you, *Kent*.”

“We've been trying to raise you for some time,” the voice lied. Everyone in the Air Force listened to *Lucy Liberty*, and every Friday they tried to outdo each other with their excuses.

“We've had some strange interference,” said Mayfair. It sounded flat, despite being the absolute truth. “And we've been speaking with the queen of Indochina,” she added.

After a brief pause, presumably for laughter, the voice said, “And how is the queen?”

“As well as can be expected.” Mayfair reached for the pad and pencil.

Another pause. “The Cheshire Cat will be paying you a visit. Her plane will dock with you at 1520 hours. I repeat, 1520 hours. Rendezvous point is--” The voice gave a series of letters. Mayfair wrote them down and read them back for verification. “She'll be flying a Zephyr. Make the necessary

adjustments.”

“Thank you, *Kent*. Over and out.”

Cheshire Cat meant Admiral Garrett, head of the fleet. “Wonder what the old battle-axe wants?” said Williams. “Well, see you at lunch.” Mayfair rose and saluted. Williams left the bridge.

Mayfair decoded the latitude and longitude of the rendezvous point, consulted the map, and made a minor course correction. In about four hours they would find out what the old battle-axe wanted.

After lunch Mayfair helped Dennis Potts, the cook, clear the tables in the mess hall. The only man on the ship, Potts had certain responsibilities beyond feeding the crew. Australia needed more soldiers to replace the fallen. He had a patriotic duty to help refill the ranks of the military.

“It's my night tonight,” Mayfair said. “I get you all to myself.” She pushed him playfully against the wall of the kitchen. It didn't hurt that he had curly blond hair and blue eyes.

“I haven't forgotten,” he said and ran a hand down her arm.

“I've got something to tell you. There was a message for me on the radio this morning.” She rubbed his chin between her thumb and index finger.

“Really? What kind of message?” He caught her earlobe between his lips.

“I'll tell you ... tonight” She took a deep breath to prepare for his first

kiss.

A voice came from the mess hall outside. "Hello?"

Potts turned towards the door. Mayfair stopped him. She straightened the sleeves of her jacket and went out.

Lieutenant Sandra Morris, the flight officer, waited among the tables. She saluted. "I checked your cabin. Then I remembered it was your day with Dennis, so I came here. Hi, Dennis." Morris waved.

"What can I do for you, lieutenant?"

"Ah, with the admiral coming this afternoon, I was hoping you could help me check the landing platform. You're the only one who's had training on all the equipment."

Mayfair couldn't argue with that. She told Potts, "I've got to go. See you later, midshipman." They took the aft corridor to the rear of the ship.

For the next two hours they tested every part of the platform, the hangar, the controls, and the emergency systems. They had already adjusted the platform for the admiral's plane, a type larger than they normally saw.

A buzzer sounded in the landing control room. The plane had come into transponder range and would follow their beam straight into the stern of the ship.

"Any idea why she's here?" Morris asked.

"Your guess is as good as mine," Mayfair said.

The admiral's Zephyr appeared, a small dot against the water. Morris pressed a button. The landing platform swung out from the hanger above them and locked into position. With the platform deployed, the ship slowed from the extra drag.

Morris pressed a button to unlock the nacelles, two large nylon scoops on the sides of the ship. She pressed another button. Small motors would turn the nacelles outward and let the wind fill them. The small end of each nacelle narrowed down to a vent, now blocked by a louver. When the louvers opened, they directed the backwash across the landing platform.

Morris raised a long lever on the wall, which opened the louvers. The gentle whisper of wind turned into a scream on its way through the narrow slots, then into a whistle, then back into a whisper. She locked the lever in the open position by releasing the handle and spoke into a microphone. "Cheshire Cat, you are clear for landing."

"Roger," said the pilot.

The plane made the final approach with an upward lunge. It shuddered slightly when it made the transition from the outer air to the ship's backwash.

Morris grasped the louver lever again. She slowly lowered it to throttle down the backwash. The pilot had to keep her speed matched to the backwash--too slow and it would stall out before it reached the platform, too fast and it would crash into the ship.

The Zephyr floated gracefully across the edge of the platform. While Morris watched the plane, Mayfair watched the pilot, who wore a leather

helmet and goggles. Mayfair couldn't read her expression but saw tension in the thinness of her mouth and the set of her jaw.

Once the plane got entirely above the platform, Morris locked the lever. The plane lined itself up between the bright yellow wheel clamps. With tiny adjustments, the pilot brought it forward and downward until it almost touched the platform.

Morris unlocked the lever and closed the louver. The plane bounced slightly and came to rest. The airship rocked slightly under the extra weight.

Morris pressed another button to close the wheel clamps. The Zephyr had landed.

Morris closed the nacelles. She said, “Didja see that? I wanna meet that pilot.” She latched the nacelles and spoke into the microphone. “You may now deplane. Welcome to the HMAS *Inverness*. Nice landing.”

“Thank you, *Inverness*. We could show those aircraft carriers a thing or two, couldn't we?”

It took a few moments for the passengers to shut down their engines, unstrap themselves, gather their belongings, and open the hatch. Morris raised the rear half of the platform to shield them from the wind. Two people climbed down from the hatch and walked stiffly to the control room.

Morris opened the door. The pilot came in, peeled off her helmet, and shook out her hair. Morris grabbed her hand and shook it. Williams came into the control room from the corridor and saluted. “Permission to come

aboard,” said the pilot.

“Permission granted, admiral,” said Williams.

Admiral Violet Garrett removed her flight jacket and handed it to Williams. The ensign behind her handed her a red dossier and went back outside to see to the stowing of their plane. The captain and the admiral went out into the corridor.

Morris said, “Wow! Marching orders! Secret papers! We're going to see some action! We're going to rain some death on those dirty Japanese!”

Mayfair said, “You've been watching too many movies.”

Nobody saw the admiral or the captain until dinner. The crew, abuzz with rumors, assembled in the mess hall. The admiral and the captain entered last. They sat, which gave the signal for everyone else to follow suit.

Morris fidgeted on the bench next to Mayfair. “Where do you think we'll hit 'em? Shanghai? Hong Kong?” Mayfair shrugged. The admiral didn't look like someone excited about a major offensive.

The meal went by quietly. The admiral stood up. Everyone stopped what they were doing and fell silent.

“The Royal Australian Air Force,” said Admiral Garrett, “believes in keeping our airwomen informed. The men too.” She looked at Potts, who lounged in the kitchen doorway. The crew laughed politely. “Keep in mind there are certain things I can't divulge, for reasons of security. But I

will try to answer any questions you have.”

Several hands shot up. Garrett pointed at one, who said, “When will we go into battle?”

“The War Council makes that sort of decision, I'm afraid. Even if I knew about an upcoming operation, I wouldn't be able to tell you about it until the orders came down.” Several hands went back down. “Yes, you.” Garrett pointed at Morris.

“If we did go into battle, where would we hit them?”

“Again, that's a question I can't answer. Even speculation could make its way to the enemy. I would advise you to keep quiet about possible targets and strategies. 'Loose lips down ships,' you know.” More hands went down. Garrett pointed to a third person.

“What *can* you tell us about China?”

“Japan hasn't been able to establish enough control to use the Chinese people effectively. Threats didn't work. Carrying out threats didn't work. Kill enough people, and you lose the very thing you were trying to get.

“Now, different parts of China are pulling in different directions. In the north, they've exhausted themselves against the Russians. In the south, they won't obey the Japanese, but they can't throw off the yoke either. In the center they have millions of people they could use as soldiers, but those people are busy growing food for all the others. China doesn't have the materièl to attack us, and we don't have the numbers to attack China.” She fell silent.

“What do we do, then?” someone said.

“I don't know,” said Garrett. “I honestly don't know.”

Mayfair raised her hand. “What can you tell us about Indochina?” She ignored Williams's hard stare.

Garrett seemed glad to have another topic. “Indochina? It's a sweaty pimple on the backside of China. Nobody will ever care about it.... Any more questions? No? I'm off to bed then. Three more ships to visit tomorrow.” The admiral left the room, which began to buzz with more rumors.

After the others had left, Mayfair went into the kitchen. Potts had put the pots and pans into a sink. She sat on a stool, laid her chin on her fist, and watched him. “Hello, lover,” she said.

“Hullo yourself. How've you been?”

“Dreaming of you.”

“Let me just clean up this mess.”

“I'll gather the dishes.” Within one hour they had cleaned everything. Within another hour they had made love in his cabin, and she lay in his arms.

“Say it,” she prompted.

“You're the best. You're my one true love.”

“Yes, I am.” She kissed him and nestled closer.

“You had a message?”

“That's right.” She told him about the voices on the radio.

“You caught bits and pieces of a radio show,” he said. “Signals can bounce off the ionosphere from anywhere.”

“Even from the future? They called us by name. 'Queen Elizabeth of Indochina.' And 'Admiral Williams.' That can't be pure coincidence.”

“You've been thinking about this a good bit, haven't you?”

“The admiral's on board tonight. Another coincidence? Everything is lining up, like points on a chart, and they lead to Hanoi. I can't just jump ship and become queen overnight,” she said. “I'd have to give them something. An airship, say.”

“You think big. I like that.”

“If something happened to the admiral, Williams could take her place. And I'd be captain of the *Inverness*.”

“Aye, then what?”

“Then what'? That's not enough?” She poked him in the ribs.

“As long as you're moving along this course, add another leg. Once

Williams is admiral, you could take *her* place.”

“Why--then I'd have a whole *fleet* to take to Indochina. They'd *have* to make me queen.” The impossible suddenly looked possible. Rather than become breathless with the audacity of the plan, she became delighted with its simplicity. Only two women stood between her and a crown. “Can you do it, Dennis? Would you? For me? For us?”

His muscles stiffened. “You mean ... do it? For real?”

“Did you think I was joking?”

“I--no, of course not. It's--well, rather sudden, is all.”

“Good.” She kissed him on the cheek, turned over, and fell asleep.

A soft knock woke her. Potts turned on the light, called, “Half a moment,” and reached for his robe.

He opened the door. “Evening, ensign. What can I do for you?”

The admiral's assistant said, “The admiral would like to avail herself of your services.”

Potts didn't ask about the sort of *services* she wanted. “Give me a moment to wash up.”

“Of course.”

Potts shut the door and dropped across the bed. “What do I do?”

She rolled over and searched his face. “You'll think of something. Just ... try to make it look like an accident. Do this one thing for me. I'll take care of the rest.” She patted his cheek, turned over, and pretended to sleep.

He got up, ran the tap for a moment, and turned out the light.

The door opened and closed.

Williams shook her awake. “Lieutenant commander. You've got to leave. Potts is confined to quarters. Come along.”

Mayfair got up. The captain helped her put her hand into the sleeve of her robe and draw it around herself.

Dennis stood near the door. He might have winked, but the light behind him made it hard to tell.

Out in the mess hall, Williams shut the cabin door and walked briskly towards the bridge. Mayfair hurried to catch up. “What's going on?”

“The admiral's dead, that's what's going on. The admiral has died. On my ship.”

“That's terrible! What happened?”

Williams stopped. “Figure it out. You must have been in Dennis's cabin when Her Ladyship sent for him. Apparently she likes it rough, and he doesn't know his own strength. For now I'm treating it as an accident.” She shrugged. “When we get home, there'll be no end of paperwork. Get

dressed, find a couple of midshippers, and stow the body in the mess freezer.”

Mayfair saluted. “Aye, aye, captain.” She'd wanted responsibility. Now she had it. At the least she could tidy up after a murder or two. “Ma'am?”

“Yes?”

“You're senior captain of the fleet. Doesn't that make you acting admiral now?”

“I suppose it does. The brass will have to make it official. No time to worry about that now.” Williams harrumphed and stalked up the forward corridor.

Mayfair went to her cabin. The clock said 0341, almost time for her watch to begin. She dressed, brushed her hair, and went to the crew quarters to recruit a couple of accomplices.

Garrett looked peaceful, even happy. They wrapped her in the sheet on which she lay and secured it with curtain ties. With as much dignity as the narrow passages allowed, they carried the body to the mess hall and laid it in the freezer.

Mayfair used the intercom to call the bridge. “Captain? Mayfair.”

“Yes?”

“Have you detailed anyone to replace Potts?”

“No. Good thinking. Find someone to make breakfast. Then get up here

for your watch.”

Mayfair pointed at the two airwomen. “You're doing the cooking this morning. I'll find someone else to do lunch.” They saluted. Mayfair made her way to the bridge.

“Mayfair taking the watch,” she said with a salute.

“Very well, you have the bridge,” said Williams. “Now perhaps you'll tell me what the hell is going on.” Her expression left no doubt about her topic.

“You heard that message. 'Admiral Williams,' they called you. What did you think it meant?”

“A trick. A trap. You couldn't take it seriously... unless you already had something like that in mind.” Williams's eyes widened.

“We discussed it. You didn't say anything then about having qualms.”

“I wouldn't call it a 'discussion,' and you certainly didn't say anything about murder. There are other ways to get ahead in the service, you know.”

“Silence implies consent. You're admiral now. Start talking, and you're as much in the soup as anyone. Keep quiet, and everything will be fine.”

“I didn't consent to anything, especially murder.”

“It's too late to split hairs. The wind has shifted. We can't go back and unshift it. We've got to ride it out.”

See here, all I ever wanted was to be a greengrocer. You want to be queen? movie star? head of Rolls-Royce? I don't care. Leave me out of it.“ Williams left the bridge.

Mayfair sat down. She needed Williams's cooperation, or at least her acquiescence. Or did she? That talk about murder didn't bode well. Better to take the initiative.

Breakfast would have started. She thumbed the intercom to the mess hall. “Midshipwoman Cross, please report to the bridge.”

The young Cross appeared and saluted smartly. “Aye, aye, lieutenant commander.”

“You're aware of the loss of Admiral Garrett. Until we learn otherwise, we must assume that Captain Williams will become admiral of the Sixth Air Fleet.” Cross waited.

“We must also assume that, as senior officer, I am now captain of the *Inverness*.” Cross still waited. The crew would have realized as much already. Cross's silence gave Mayfair credit for recognizing that Cross would know those things.

“I'm going to name Morris as my replacement. That leaves the matter of naming her replacement.” Cross kept her face straight, although she must know what Mayfair would say next. A smart one. “I'm promoting you to acting lieutenant. You're the new flight officer of the *Inverness*.”

“Thank you, ma'am.”

“I'm going to address the crew in the mess hall. I'd like for you to take the bridge.”

“Of course, captain.” Cross saluted. Mayfair went down the corridor and into the mess hall.

She rang the ship's bell and said, “Your attention, please. I'm sure you're all grieving the loss of Admiral Garrett as much as I am. We are at war, however, and although we expect casualties from combat, we also suffer them from illness, accident, and other misadventures. We should honor her memory just the same.” The crew bowed their heads.

Mayfair gave them a moment. “We'll have to wait for official word, of course, but Captain Williams is almost certainly the new admiral of the fleet.” Mayfair moved to a spot beside the head table and extended her hand in Williams's direction. The crew applauded politely.

“With Williams moving into an administrative capacity, the captaincy falls to me.” More applause. “My lieutenants will be Morris and ... Cross. She is on the bridge at the moment.” More applause. “You can give her your best wishes later.

“I've had a look at the orders the admiral brought. I can't give you all the details, of course, but we will be seeing action soon.” The crew cheered. They would follow her anywhere.

Williams got up and put her hand on Mayfair's shoulder. Putting on a smile, she hissed, “What are you doing?”

“Doing? I'm boosting morale. They want to fight.”

Still smiling ferociously, Williams pulled Mayfair into the corridor. After a long stare she said, “You don't know what those orders said. You don't even know if there *were* orders.”

“I'm the captain now. This is my ship. We're going to attack Tokyo and end this war!”

Williams stared again, longer this time. “You've gone mad. Completely mad. Well, I can't say I'm surprised. We'll get you sorted out in short order.” She went back into the mess hall.

Before she could speak, though, Mayfair took her arm and announced, “Stephanie Williams has just confessed to the murder of Violet Garrett. You and you”--she pointed to two airwomen--“escort her to her cabin. Confiscate any weapons you find there. Set a guard.”

Williams raised her voice. “You can't let her do this! She's going to attack Tokyo!”

“That would be suicide, 'admiral.’” Standing behind Williams, Mayfair twirled a finger next to her ear. Williams looked around at the sympathetic faces and realized how neatly the trap had sprung. She gave Mayfair a dirty look but didn't protest. If she expected her precious “brass” to save her, she would have a long wait.

Mayfair went back to the bridge. Cross rose and saluted. Mayfair asked, “Did you listen in on the intercom?” Cross nodded. “I'm relieving you.”

Another salute. “Aye, aye, captain.” She left.

Mayfair sank onto the seat but immediately got up again. “Come, radio.

You've brought me this far. Bring me the rest of the way.” The tan fabric covering the speaker remained impassive.

Mayfair looked at the map. She needed a rendezvous point for the fleet, a place close to Hanoi but not so close that it raised suspicion.

She selected a position, wrote down the latitude and longitude, got the code book out of the safe, and translated the numbers into letters. The paper went into her shirt pocket.

She fell into the routine of checking the instruments, the sky, the radio, the compass. A few clouds appeared on the horizon, broke up, and faded into thin air.

The radio sputtered and hummed. At last, a message!

“*Inverness... HMAS Liverpool calling HMAS Inverness... code word alfredo... permission to break radio silence... HMAS Liverpool calling HMAS Inverness....*”

“Come in, *Liverpool*, this is *Inverness*. We read you.”

“Do you have a departure time for Admiral Garrett?”

“Stand by.” Mayfair cursed herself. She couldn't tell them the truth, that the admiral had died. She concocted a series of lies, each more unsupportable than the last. How had things gotten so complicated so quickly?

Follow the plan, the simple, simple plan. With Garrett dead and Williams in custody, *she* became admiral. *She* gave the orders.

“Inverness to Liverpool. The admiral has made Inverness her flagship. There are new orders. Tell the fleet to rendezvous at these coordinates.” She pulled the paper from her pocket and read the letters. The voice on the radio repeated the letters back for verification. *“Roger. The fleet will receive further orders at the rendezvous point. Over and out.”*

The radio hummed again. *“Calling the queen... the queen of Indochina....”*

Mayfair grabbed the microphone.

She froze. The other ships, heading in her direction, would pick up everything she said. She put the microphone down.

“We are ready... come to us....” The hum faded away.

The door opened. Cross saluted and said, *“We have a problem. Potts has left his cabin. Would you like for me to take the bridge?”*

“Where is he?”

Cross pointed down the corridor.

Mayfair pushed her aside and dashed to the mess hall. From there she could see a crowd at the other end of the aft corridor. She burst through the door to the landing control room and stopped short. Morris faced Mayfair, gave a half-hearted salute, and went back to looking out the window.

Outside, Potts floated above the platform, gently rising and falling. The bright morning sky silhouetted him.

Once her eyes got used to the glare, Mayfair could see the rope that he clutched in both hands. He'd tied the ends through gaps in the girders. Morris had opened the louvers slightly to give him some lift. A look at the handle told Mayfair as much.

Mayfair managed to keep her voice below a yell. "Do you have any idea how dangerous that is?"

"He's flying! Isn't that neat?"

"This isn't a movie! Get him down! Now!"

"Relax, this was his idea." Morris turned back to the window.

"How did he get out of his cabin?"

"You said yourself Williams killed the admiral. That let him off the hook, right? So I went and told him. And here we are."

"It's too dangerous. We can't afford to lose any men."

"Aw, let us have our fun. I wouldn't hurt him. We're gonna get married, y'know."

"What?"

"Sure. I'm his one true love. He said so."

Mayfair meant to signal Potts to come inside. She grabbed the louver handle and gave it a quick yank downward, intending to push it back up just as quickly.

Maybe the wind gusted and forced the louver wider. Maybe she'd forgotten how much effort it took to move the handle. Whatever the reason, the handle jumped to the halfway position. The whistle from the louver turned into a scream. Mayfair slammed the handle closed, and the scream stopped.

Another scream began. Morris dropped to her knees.

Mayfair looked outside. Potts had disappeared.

“What happened?”

Morris kept screaming. Mayfair pulled her to her feet. “What happened?”

“He... he blew away....”

“This is your fault. You put him out there, you opened the louver, and you disobeyed a direct order. I'll see you brought up on charges.” Mayfair pointed out the window. “Although what I should do is send you after him.”

Mayfair pushed Morris through the corridor door. The crowd had disappeared. Well, the ship already had a *de facto* brig. Mayfair took her to the captain's cabin and told the guards, “Another prisoner. Potts is dead, and Morris is responsible.”

She returned to the bridge. “You're relieved, Cross.”

“Aye, aye, captain. Is Potts okay?”

“Potts is missing and presumed dead.”

“I'm sorry, ma'am,” said Cross and left the bridge.

How dare he.

The sky remained stubbornly serene, a clear cerulean blue over the darker turquoise of the sea.

How dare he promise true love to another woman.

The jealousy and the grief struggled with each other. She wanted a storm outside to match the one inside, so she could concentrate. The plan would fall apart if she let herself fall apart.

The plan again. *Follow the plan. Nothing else matters.*

The door burst open. Mayfair turned. Williams stood there, flanked by the two guards.

“What is the meaning of this? You're confined to quarters,” Mayfair told Williams. “Take her back to her cabin,” Mayfair told the guards.

“I have some concerns about your fitness to command this ship. These two share my concerns.”

“What sort of 'concerns' are those?”

“Morris told me how Potts died. She's too grief-stricken to see the truth, but I saw it right off.” Williams pointed at Mayfair. “You opened the louver. Nobody but you could have done it. Nothing else would account

for what happened. Furthermore, you had a motive. With Potts gone, no one can connect you to the admiral's murder.”

“Ridiculous. You can't prove a word of it.”

“And you can't prove anything either. The only 'evidence' is your word that I confessed.”

“It's a stalemate, then.” Mayfair crossed her arms.

“I have a suggestion. Let Morris take command as the next officer in succession. She can sort out all of this.”

“Morris is unfit to make command decisions at present, don't you think? Let Cross decide.”

“Done.”

One of the guards went and fetched Cross. Once apprised of the situation, she told the guards, “This could take some time. May we have some privacy?” They looked at each other, nodded, and left.

“Let's have your side first, Mayfair,” said Cross.

Mayfair had had time to review her case. She knew where she had to start. “Look at the world out there,” she said and pointed in the general direction of Asia. “This war has gone on for almost two decades.”

Williams interrupted. “How is this in any way relevant?”

“You'll have the same leeway,” said Cross. “Let her speak.”

“The generals won't be happy until every city and every farm lie in ruins. Even if we win, we'll have nothing left to go forward with.

“All I want to do is stake out one corner of the rubble and keep it safe. One place that won't go completely dark after the bullets stop flying.”

Cross said, “You have a specific place in mind?”

“Yes. Indochina. The Japanese have already given up on taking it. India is too far away to consider it a threat. We see it as nothing more than a stumbling block along the way from China to our country. Someone could set up a new regime there, and the rest of the world wouldn't even notice.”

“And what,” said Williams, “would stop them shooting you out of hand?”

“I'd have a fleet of airships under my command. An armada that would stop any invasion before it started.”

“You're mad.”

“To the contrary. The Sixth Fleet is already converging on Hanoi. I am the acting admiral. I have the orders that Garrett carried. No one can gainsay me.”

“You fool! You utter fool! I saw those orders yesterday. She was visiting the ships to introduce a new merit system for personnel decisions.”

“That's... that's not possible.”

“You were in line to become a captain. Instead you resorted to

assassination. But there's still time to do the honorable thing.” She went to a window and opened it.

“You want me to *jump*?”

“It's that or a court-martial.” Williams peered into the distance. “Good lord! There's land ahead!”

Cross put a hand to the back of her neck. She drew out a shining sliver, took a long step forward, and pushed the sliver into Williams's back. Williams exhaled with a long sad sigh and fell to the deck.

“We've got a few minutes before the crew notices the coast. Help me drop her through the front hatch.” Cross wiped her dagger on the captain's shirt.

“But why...?”

“Some of us believe as you do,” said Cross. “There's a dark time coming. As long as we can set out a lamp here and there, the darkness won't be eternal.”

Mayfair opened the hatch and helped Cross drop the body through it.

The plan had worked. Plumes of chimney smoke showed them the way to Hanoi. Mayfair thumbed the microphone. “HMAS *Inverness* calling Hanoi, do you read? Requesting permission to land.”

A car with flags on the fenders waited for Mayfair and Cross at the airfield. An old but sprightly chauffeur ushered them into the back of the

car. He slid into the front seat and started the motor. The car rolled smoothly and silently over the grass and onto a macadam road. They passed the airfield, turned onto a main road, and crossed a wide river.

Once in the city proper, they maintained the same stately pace. Mayfair marveled at the number of children allowed to run free. Everywhere else in the world, parents treated them like precious heirlooms and kept them close.

Bicycles and lorries gave the car a wide berth but never slowed down. Mayfair felt like a character in a fairy tale. She'd come from a lowly station in a land of perpetual mourning and empty rooms. Now she would rule a country full of life and promise.

The car stopped outside a palace. Young women handed them flowers and ushered them into a long high hall. Soldiers along the walls snapped to attention.

Mayfair tried not to let the pomp dizzy her. It would not do for a queen to lose her composure.

They entered a large room where three old men stood in a line. They bowed in unison. The first stepped forward and said, "Welcome to Hanoi, Queen Elizabeth. I am Nguyen, minister of war. This is Trinh, minister of agriculture, and that is Tho, minister of education. Regrettably, we are the only government officials who speak English."

"We are pleased with your reception," she answered. Should she curtsy or not? She decided no. "But tell us, how did you know we were coming?"

Tranh said, "There is an old Vietnamese saying. ' When our people are

facing their greatest need, a queen will come through the air over the sea to save us.' We called, and you answered.”

Mayfair nodded as if she understood.

Tho brought a tray and poured a clear liquid into small glasses. “This is rice wine, your majesty. One thing we have in abundance is rice, and we offer it to you.”

She took a glass. Should she drink first or not? She decided yes and drained the glass.

“Your majesty,” said Nguyen and raised his glass.

“Your majesty,” said Trinh and raised his glass.

“Your majesty,” said Tho and raised his glass.

Mayfair's eyes rolled up. She fell loosely. Her head made a muffled *thump* against the carpet.

Cross glanced down at the body and said, “Did she have to die?”

“Yes, but we allowed her to die happy. And quickly,” said Nguyen. “That is a gift traitors do not often receive.”

“Lieutenant Commander Mayfair worked to benefit only one person-- herself,” said Tho. “She was willing to betray her country for a selfish reason. You've betrayed your country because it no longer works for the benefit of its people.”

“And the saying?” said Cross.

“We have many sayings,” said Tranh.

Tho gathered up the glasses, careful not to touch the inner surfaces. “We will honor our agreement. You are now commander of the Vietnamese Air Force. The car will take you back to the airfield to begin your duties.”

Nguyen went to a corner and pulled back a curtain to reveal a radio. Without looking back, he said, “I would give you one piece of advice.”

“Yes?”

“We have another saying--*Không gì tuyệt đối.*”

“I'm sorry, I don't know much Vietnamese yet.”

“ ' What goes up must come down.' *Tam biết.*”

“That I know. *Tam biết*--goodbye.”

THE END

Russell Secord is a man of many talents. He has had careers (not jobs, careers) in seven different fields. Coincidentally, he has started seven novels but finished none of them. However, his eighth novel, “Under World,” a hard-boiled kung fu fantasy western, is scheduled to appear in 2015. In addition to writing, he is currently utilizing his talents in audiobook production, graphic design, music composition, programming, and animation. He has a web site at secord-sound.com.

His affinity for the dieselpunk genre dates back to 1970, when he stumbled across a paperback reprint of a Doc Savage story. It hooked him with its blend of action, mystery, science fiction, 1930s New York, and larger-than-life characters. Those elements keep creeping into his stories, but he's never had the confidence to try to reproduce that thrilling sense of wonder--until now. His latest series, “Darkness Eternal,” is set in a World War II that has raged on for two decades and threatens to destroy what's left of modern civilization.

Look for other stories in the *Darkness Eternal* series (text and audio versions) at finer bookstores online.

the

ROCKET MOLLY

SYNDICATE

By John Taylor

Chicago May 19th 1931

High heels clicking on fine marble announced the entrance of five gorgeous dames marching in lockstep. Each dame had an oversized handbag on her right elbow and a violin case in her left hand, and sported a poker face that cut the air like a switchblade. The dames brushed past the coatroom like an ex-lover, and the sultry air in the grand ballroom turned icy, getting colder with each step. Revelers suddenly became self-conscious of the constellation of jewelry that glistened from their wrists and necks, outshining the night sky. The band ground to a halt, and Christian Axeworth's eyes narrowed on the showstoppers. He knew trouble when he saw it, but this was his hotel, and all the trouble in Chicago was supposed to be on his payroll, especially tonight for the exhibit's unveiling. Yet there they were, dressed to the nines, all in black

like a funeral procession. Christian bit down on his cigarette holder furiously and continued to eye them with contempt.

Sharp heels and dark nylons greeted his stare, with custom tailored black skirts to the knee and business jackets. Each wore chrome-tinted aviator's goggles under the mesh veils of their broad, dark hats, and lipstick so blood red it made Christian's pulse race. But his attention was fixed on the devices they wore on their backs. Thick leather straps and belts supported what looked like a cross between an engine and an artillery shell. Multiple exhaust vents and rudders lined the sides, and the devices seemed to be wired to wristwatches the dames wore over their leather gloves. The party-goers noticed them, too, and shuddered under their furs and tuxedos. The dames moved with a purpose toward the bar, silent as death, and Christian flicked an alarm switch under his table. These gatecrashers may have been dressed for a funeral, but it damn well wasn't going to be his.

The five dames eyed the bartender, and he began to sweat like a bootlegger on death row. Without a word, all five released the catch on their violin cases, flipped out Tommy guns and opened fire. A deafening volley of shots echoed in the vaulted stained glass ceiling of the ballroom, followed by the screams of the crowd as the bartender went down in a spray of cheap blood and expensive crystal. The lead dame, a white haired woman with a pale complexion, fired to her left and shattered the ice sculpture that had been the centerpiece of the room and sent the band ducking for cover. The dames turned to the rest of the ballroom, but kept their silence. They didn't need words. A Tommy gun can say 'your money or your life' in any language. They began to work the room and garlands of diamonds and pearls fell at their feet like roses for a triumphant matador. Christian ground his teeth and furrowed his brow, fighting to keep silent. Jewel by jewel, their handbags swelled with a fortune in the world's choicest gems until only the grand prize, the reason for the

evening's festivities, remained.

The Rosenkruentz Diamond, set with gold and sapphires, gleamed like the sun in its display case in front of Christian, its new owner. The leader of the gang shattered the glass with the butt of her gun and lifted the massive gem off its velvet cushion. Christian snarled at her when she casually dropped the world's most precious gem in her handbag and triggered an alarm that left most of the guests screaming. Still the dame's sphinx-like silence held, their faces showing no trace of emotion. That maddened Christian even more. They'd stolen his wealth, his thunder, his pride, yet showed no satisfaction, like his priceless gem was just another trinket to pawn. He was just another job to them. Christian Axeworth could deal with being hated or rejected, but he refused to be ordinary. He bit into his cigarette holder until it snapped, waiting for the alarm to be answered. The gang kept their cool despite the racket. Their silent revel seemed unbreakable until another clatter of footsteps filled the ballroom with fleeting hope. Ten police officers burst in the door with guns drawn and badges gleaming. The five dames ignored their cries of "freeze" and "drop it" like bad advice. A Cheshire Cat grin spread across their faces, the first trace of emotion from any of them, and they pointed their guns up at the stained glass skylight.

"Hit it, girls!" the dame in charge yelled, and they hit a button on their watches. There was a deafening roar as their backpacks rocketed to life and sent the dames rushing skyward like fireworks. They fired in unison at the stained glass dome of the ceiling, unleashing a storm of hot lead and covering the ballroom with a rain of shattered Tiffany glass. Camera flashbulbs and screaming guests drown out gunshots as the ground bound police watched them rush through the shattered skylight toward a zeppelin flying overhead. Before vanishing out of sight, the lead dame tossed her hat down and blew Christian Axeworth a kiss as it landed. Sullenly,

Christian cast a glance at the hat. On the inside of the brim, a calling card was written.

“Courtesy of Rocket Molly,” it read in elegant, silver cursive letters.

New York City, June 18th 1931

“So, Miss Maxwell, may I call you Millicent?” Miles Donovan yelled to the woman in the pilot’s seat of the K-5 Fleet biplane, struggling to keep his press pass in place while he scribbled on his notepad. “It’s a very refined sounding name for an...independent contractor.”

“I’ve told you twice to call me Millie,” she replied without taking her eyes off the horizon. “And we’re mercenaries. Just come out and say it. The only refined thing about me is the oil in my plane’s engine.”

“Millie, then,” Miles began again, “what contract brings you and your siblings here today?” he asked, eyeing the second plane, another K-5, that had three occupants, with one daredevil standing on the upper wing in a harness. The lettering on their sides read “Maxwell and Sundberg’s Flying Circus,” in gaudy, but badly faded colors. They were armed with front mounted machine guns and rear facing harpoons cannons that made them look as formidable as any warplane.

“Doyle and O’Brien’s dinosaur carnival had four of their laboratory-grown Pterodactyls escape,” Millie said over her shoulder, “including Gusto the Magnificent, their alpha male. He carried off their tightrope walker during a show in the Bronx, and is roosting with the three others atop the Empire State Building. The New York Fire Department hired me to get her back.”

‘Is this an unusual errand for you, Millie?’

“I’ve flown stranger assignments,” she replied, “but this one will probably be one I tell the grand-kids about someday.” She hated having the reporter along, but his riding along was part of the deal. And a mercenary pilot couldn’t be too choosy on contracts, not with the depression going full steam and the F.E.A.R Act closing every flying circus in sight. Millie felt the patched knee of her flight suit break a stitch. She sighed and shot a quick glance at her employer’s promissory note, which was taped to her instrument panel, her leather pilot’s jacket creaking softly as she did.

“Millie to Cecilia,” she said into her radio handset, “our target is in range. Aim for Gusto first and prepare to attack.”

The early evening skies of New York City were filled with police and fire department airships flashing their warning colors to air traffic over the Empire State Building, diverting taxi zeppelins and autogyros wildly away from the aerial blockade. The symphony of air raid sirens was answered by cries of primal defiance from the four pterodactyls that perched on the zeppelin mast. Painted in heavy, caked grease makeup and wearing the tattered, soiled remains of clown costumes. The largest of them perched at the pinnacle, wrapped in a shredded banner that read “Gusto the Magnificent, Miracle of Science.” In his once majestic talons, Gusto clutched a shapely blonde woman spilling out of a torn acrobat’s costume. She struggled for her freedom, her cheap eyeliner ruined by hours of tears and her voice hoarse from screaming. Gusto was indifferent to her cries, cawing and snapping at the circus trainers and reporters at the base of the mast. He screeched at their flashbulbs, challenging the 20th century to cage him.

“Roger that, Millie,” came the radioed reply. Miles Donovan jumped at the clanking sound of something locking into place under his seat, and saw a cannon built like a six shot revolver drop out of the bottom of the other plane, matching Millie’s. “What are those?” he asked nervously.

“Net launchers,” Millie replied. “You’d be surprised how often they get used.”

“I take it you’ve done this before, Millie?”

“Our family gets a lot of trap and transport jobs. Now, just pipe down and take notes, Mr. Donovan,” Millie replied, her frustration mounting.

Cecilia’s plane rushed into its pass at the Empire State Building and fired the net launcher. The net flew fast and curved low, wrapping the lowest Pterodactyl in a squawking bundle. It screeched madly, sending the others flying in a frenzy toward midtown with the acrobat still in Gusto’s talons.

“Stay on him, Cecilia!” Millie yelled into her radio. Her heart sank. Of all the times for a botched job, it would have to be the time there was a reporter flying with her. She was not pleased at this turn of events, and having Miles instead of her brother Frank in the gunner’s seat wasn’t helping. But Millie didn’t have time to dwell on it, not when a woman’s life and her paycheck were on the line. The other plane followed in pursuit, and Millie turned to Miles Donovan. “Are you buckled in?” she asked. Miles nodded yes. “Then put away your notepad, this is gonna’ be a little rough.”

Millie banked into a barrel roll and fired at Gusto with her machine gun while upside down, sending him into a sharp left toward the aerial barricade and Miles into a near panic at the sight of the Chrysler Building

looming ahead. There, zeppelins re-directed from the barricade were moored in a circle. Gusto swooped below one, a dingy yellow air taxi, and Millie followed. Gusto released his grip on the acrobat with one talon and slashed the zeppelin's envelope. He screeched with malice as Millie fired on him again. There was a spark, and Millie saw, to her chagrin, the taxi pilot bailing out. His zeppelin's hydrogen filled envelope burst into flame and fell to the street as Gusto flew around it. Miles screamed in terror and Millie pulled up sharply from below the flaming wreck, barely clearing it as the three pterodactyls rushed toward midtown.

"N.Y.P.D. to Maxwell one," Millie's radio crackled, "cease fire, I repeat cease fire. Further use of unauthorized live fire will not be permitted in city airspace."

"Are they serious?" Millie yelled at Miles. "Have you ever tried to steer a 'dactyl into a trap without live fire?"

"Can't say I have," he croaked in a seasick tone.

Millie banked hard and slowed down to the other two dactyls as her siblings pulled ahead. She dropped altitude and nudged the closest one with her wingtip. With a squawk, it dived between buildings and skimmed the side of the Flatiron building. Millie followed tight on its tail, her wheels grazing the building's side. She winced and tried to remain airborne. The pterodactyl and her plane had comparable wingspans, but the 'dactyl was far more agile than her rigid bi-plane. As the 'dactyl reached the edge of the building, Millie fired her net launcher and ensnared it. It fell for a moment, then was caught by the harpoon from the other plane and flung gently to the street in a thrashing bundle.

A satisfied grin came to Millie's face. "Did you see that?" she yelled over

her shoulder to Miles Donovan.

“I could see my office from there,” he replied weakly.

Millie was getting her confidence back and she let out the throttle, speeding up and banking wide opposite Cecilia’s plane. Their paths crossed around the next ‘dactyl, then each looped upside down and Millie fired her net launcher. She snared her target, which was instantly harpooned by Cecilia’s gunner and towed to street level where a fearful mob ducked, then cheered, as the captive ‘dactyl landed with a soft thud.

“Second one down at Broadway and fifth,” Millie said triumphantly. “On to the main event.” Millie opened up the throttle and charged after Gusto, who weaved maddeningly in her sights, still screeching in defiance at her. “Millie to Cecilia,” she barked into the radio in an exasperated tone. “Cecilia, the cops said we can’t shoot them down. New plan, I want you to get wingtip to wingtip with me and trade places with Frank up on top.”

“But I’m the better pilot,” Cecilia protested.

“I know you are,” Millie radioed to her, rolling her eyes. “I need you to fly my plane while I go after the acrobat.”

“You’re wing walking after her, Millie?” Cecilia asked.

“There’s no way around it. I can’t risk dropping her in the net,” Millie replied as the other plane pulled parallel with hers. Millie’s brother dropped into the cockpit of the other plane and Millie released her seat restraint, then stood up and pulled a .45 Mauser ACP pistol from her belt.

“What are you doing?” Miles cried.

“Changing pilots,” Millie replied over her shoulder, “Meet my sister, Cecilia.” A teenage girl in oil stained mechanic’s overalls and a pilot’s cap with goggles that seemed much too large dropped into the pilot’s seat and took the throttle.

“Y-You’re flying the plane! But you’re just a kid!” Miles stammered in alarm.

“I’m not a child anymore!” Cecilia spat defensively. “I’m seventeen and I’m already a better pilot than Mom was.”

“You watch what you say about Mom, you hear?” Millie snapped back. “And catch up to that ‘dactyl!’”

Cecilia sped up and Millie hooked her belt onto the cable that spanned her upper wing. Her eyes narrowed behind her goggles and she took the safety off her pistol.

“Come on,” she thought, “just one clean shot.”

Millie braced herself as Cecilia swooped so near the 'dactyl that she could hear the acrobat scream. Millie saw her shot and took it, hitting Gusto in the wing and tearing the fragile web of skin that kept him aloft. Gusto screeched in pain and attempted to climb again, but the wounded wing stopped him. As if sensing the challenge, Gusto turned to face the bi-plane and snapped at Millie, bringing the terrified acrobat within reach. Without hesitation, Millie grabbed the acrobat by her dress and Cecilia sent the plane on a seven hundred and twenty degree twist into a power dive. Gusto’s wings buckled and Millie fired four shots into his chest. With a final squawk, Gusto released the acrobat and fell away dead, sending her

and Millie sliding down the wing as the plane banked away. The acrobat's dress tore at the shoulder strap, and she tumbled off the edge of the wing, screaming. At the last second, Millie caught her by the wrist.

“Cecilia!” she cried to her sister. “Get me a place to drop her, fast!”

“Maxwell one to N.Y.F.D. air rescue,” Cecilia radioed, “Mission accomplished. Are you ready to receive the rescued woman?”

“Affirmative, Maxwell one,” it crackled in reply. “Proceed to the rescue zeppelins at the edge of the barricade.” Millie saw the receiving team ahead, a pair of N.Y.F.D. zeppelins with a safety net spread between them. Cecilia slowed and cut between them and Millie gently dropped the acrobat into the net. A smile crossed her face. Millie looked back to see Miles Donovan, wide eyed and quietly saying a Hail Mary, his knuckles white as a ghost gripping the sides of his seat, and her smile became a heartfelt laugh.

At the airfield, Millie's plane was surrounded by story seekers and reporters as she taxied into the hangar. That wasn't good. She'd promised Miles Donovan an exclusive for a fee. When she jumped down from the plane, a flash bulb went off to her left, held by some young, hotshot photographer for another paper. Before Millie could address him, the crowd parted and a tall, gaunt, man with sharp, unforgiving features and gray hair that matched his high collared uniform well approached her.

“Miss Maxwell,” the man in gray said, flashing a badge. I'm Commissioner Stephenson I'm here on behalf of the F.E.A.R. Act compliance office in Brooklyn. We have a matter to discuss with you.”

“Am I under arrest?” Millie asked, leaning on the plane with her arms crossed.

“Let’s just say your participation is mandatory if you want to keep your pilot’s license,” he replied. “I have an urgent matter to discuss with you.” The Commissioner motioned toward a ’29 Lincoln touring car parked near the end of the runway. Millie sighed and quietly walked to the car at the end of the runway, and winced as the door slammed with deafening finality and sped off toward the city. At least in the mind of the driver. To Millie, who was used to four G turns and ninety-three mile an hour power dives, the thirty minute drive seemed to take years and it only gave her time to seethe in her frustration. The F.E.A.R. Enforcement Commissioner was the bane of every freelance pilot and crop duster. Millie would just as soon spit in his eye as look at him, yet she rode quietly to his office when she should be picking up a fat paycheck for a hard day’s work. She looked at her watch. Seven thirty-four. Millie cracked her knuckles.

“Something the matter?” Commissioner Stephenson asked her.

“Just wanted to be back to the hangar in time for dinner,” she replied distantly, watching people shuffling away from the closing breadlines under the shadow of great factory smokestacks that blotted out the sunset.

“The American dream, eh?” he replied as shiny glass and steel gave way to gritty ironworks and the car pulled into a dark, dirty industrial park. “A hard day’s work nets you a chicken dinner, maybe some apple pie, is that it? This is not that America, Miss Maxwell,” he continued, “not for you, not for anybody. You may not see it from the clouds, but down here we’re in love with this thing called progress, and she’s a bitch of a mistress.”

“Spare me the monologue,” Millie snapped as the car came to a halt in front of a tarnished, brick and iron office building. It was emblazoned with the winged hand in a stop gesture that was the emblem of the F.E.A.R. Enforcement Corps in faded, green copper. Like the rest of the world, the art deco exterior had seen better days and stood in sharp contrast to the elegant touring car. The Commissioner escorted Millie through the cavernous lobby, toward an elevator and past a receptionist who gave her a condescending “nice knowing you,” smile. Millie expected it. She knew what this place was; a graveyard for pilot’s careers. This was where men walked in aviators and walked out janitors, blacklisted from flight. Here, pilots were at the mercy of rulebooks written by men who’d never looked up from their desks, much less actually flown, and yet fancied themselves the gods of the skies. Yet as the aging elevator’s gears droned on, Commissioner Stephenson kept his silence. No gloating, no lecturing, no triumphant smirk of victory that usually graced the face of a G-man about to bust another rogue pilot. And somehow, that bothered Millie even more as he lead her through the door of his office. It was an office well suited to the man; a dark, cold box lit only by a desk lamp, with a north facing window that overlooked the industrial cesspool below.

Christian Axeworth sat near him, lighting a cigarette. He glanced at Millie's with a contempt usually reserved for hookers and deadbeats, then motioned to the Commissioner, who strong armed Millie into a seat in front of the desk.

“That was quite a performance today, Miss Maxwell,” Stephenson said, pacing around her with steely determination. “And you only broke forty-four regulations doing it, impressive. A lesser pilot might have stopped at the five year suspension threshold, but you, Miss Maxwell, have raised the bar for flagrant violation of the F. E. A. R. Act. Do you remember what the F.E.A.R. Act stands for?”

“Feds Ending Aerial Recreation?” she quipped mockingly.

“You know damn well what it stands for,” the Commissioner barked, striking his desk. “The Federally Enforced Aerial Roadways Act of 1925. The law that created ordered skyways above our country, complete with the speed and altitude limits you delight in breaking for a career, and gave us absolute authority over them. No agency or office of government short of Congress has the power we do, so I suggest you modify your attitude, Miss Maxwell. As I said, I have you dead to rights on forty-four violations from today’s escapade alone. I’d very much like to tear up your license in front of you. However, I cannot. We...” he paused, looking for the words, “... have need of a pilot of your skill.”

Millie sat silent and confused.

“We want to hire you as a contractor for an undercover operation, Miss Maxwell,” Christian Axeworth chimed in.

“What do the feds want a stunt pilot for?” Millie asked guardedly.

The Commissioner emptied a manila envelope marked classified onto his desk, pouring out several grainy photos. “It all started about three months ago,” he began, “with the theft of a half-ton of asbestos from a warehouse in Tennessee. The thieves made their getaway in a zeppelin. The FBI put a low priority on it then. I mean, what were they going to do, fireproof half of Nashville? But then there was a major break-in at the Knoxville Aerospace Laboratory. The thieves took this.” He changed photos to show a small, steel rocket mounted on what looked like a parachute harness. “The Phaeton mark III personal transport engine,” Commissioner Stephenson said. “It’s a covert project, developed for use on F.E.A.R.

Enforcement Corps interceptor airships, to perform pilot arrests midair.”

“How are the two connected?” Millie asked.

“The asbestos was for fireproof clothing. A lot of it,” he replied, spreading out several grainy photos of a white haired woman in an expensive evening dress and wearing pilot’s goggles. She was firing a Tommy gun in midair, with a Phaeton Mark III on her back. Other photos were of the large, gray zeppelin from the previous heist with what appeared to be several other women flying toward it on rocket packs. At the sight of these, Christian Axeworth’s pulse seemed to quicken. “These were taken by a society pages reporter last month,” the Commissioner told Millie. “She calls herself Rocket Molly, head of an all-female organized crime outfit. Since this photo was taken, she and her gang have pulled fourteen bank jobs and jewel heists, including robbing Mr. Axeworth of the Rosenkruentz Diamond, and muscled in on bootlegging rackets all over the Midwest. She hits hard and fast, too fast for cops on the street. And while interstate aerial crime falls into F.E.A.R. Enforcement Corps jurisdiction, my men can’t open fire until they’re one hundred feet above the skyline, regulations and all.”

“That’s where you come in, Miss Maxwell,” Christian told her. “We need a pilot who can play by their rules, fly circles around the cops and fight dirty. We want to hire you to infiltrate her gang, recover the Phaeton mark III and my diamond, and bust their syndicate. The job pays fifty thousand, Miss Maxwell. Plus, if you co-operate Commissioner Stephenson has agreed clear your record with the F.E.A.R. Enforcement Corps.”

“And If I don’t?” Millie said, her arms crossed defensively.

Christian Axeworth grabbed Millie by the wrist and dragged her to the

window, then raised the blinds and forced her cheek to the glass. “Take a good long look down there,” he whispered. “What do you see? Hungry smokestacks fed by starving workers whose lives are worth less than their work tools. This world is a machine, Miss Maxwell, one with too many small gears. Right now, I could toss you out this window and no one who matters would lose sleep over it. Poverty buys silence. But fifty grand, that screams. There are people out there, even movie stars, who will never see fifty grand in a lifetime. The feds are offering this because Rocket Molly hit the right man in the pocketbook. I want my diamond back, and I'm a man who gets results fast. You don't get this chance twice.”

Millie wasn't going for it. This wasn't her idea of a contract. The F.E.A.R. Enforcement Corps were the enemy of everyone who flew freelance, including her, and she was in no mood to ink a deal with the devil. She twisted loose and faced Commissioner Stephenson.

“How long have I got to think this over?” Millie asked.

“You think you're walking out of here without a contract?” Christian sneered.

“Cool it, Axeworth,” the Commissioner snapped back. “This isn't your nightclub. Up here, we've got procedure to follow. Look, Miss Maxwell,” he continued. “This is a time sensitive deal. You have until sunrise to sign the contract. If I haven't heard from you by then, the F.E.A.R. Corps officers are coming to get your answer personally. Am I making myself clear?”

“Crystal,” Millie replied. “Are you gonna' show me the door or are we taking the window?”

Stepping off the elevator, Millie flashed the receptionist a big, satisfied grin. Millie knew she may not be a pilot past tomorrow, but tonight she'd beat the reaper and was going to tell the world in no uncertain terms that she wasn't your average stunt pilot. Silently, she took The Commissioner's calling card, then hailed a cab for the long slow crawl back to the airfield. As the cab plugged onward, Millie pulled a faded photo from her pocket and examined it by the fleeting streetlights. It was her sixteenth birthday, and the entire family leaned against her plane with a candlelit cake in her father's hands. She flipped it over to where her parents' obituary was taped and read for the millionth time;

“Mr. and Mrs. James Maxwell of Jefferson City, Missouri, were killed on Saturday afternoon when a stunt in their airshow failed, resulting in a fiery crash near Abilene, Kansas. They are survived by their four children, Millicent, Cecilia, Frank, and Henry...”

Millie knew that the Pterodactyl chase that afternoon was twice as dangerous as the stunt that killed her parents. And it wasn't the first time she'd flown her siblings through hell and back for a paycheck. For five years, Millie had raised them airfield to airfield, check to check. Whether as a crop duster, a mercenary, even a bootlegger, they had followed her across America's skyways without knowing where their next meal was coming from. They couldn't keep this up. Millie despised the thought of taking this contract. But fifty thousand, that was a game changer. This was a shot at a life for them, for a home. That word sounded so strange, home. Like something out of a fairytale. The cab stopped suddenly and snapped Millie back to reality. She put the photo away and walked to the hangar without tipping the driver. Inside, she found Cecilia and her brothers asleep around a camp stove with empty soup cans in their hands, and a place set for her. An envelope marked 'Urgent' was tucked under her can. Millie opened it to find a bill for taxi zeppelin she'd shot down. The

amount was slightly greater than the job paid. Millie stared at it for a moment, then walked to the hangar's payphone and called The Commissioner, drumming her fingers on the glass until he answered.

"I'm in," she said in exhaustion.

Chicago, June 23th, 1931

Millie fidgeted in the slinky, black evening dress and mink coat that Commissioner Stephenson had had fitted her with. The whole look was so delicate and ritzy, so totally unlike her. She hated the itchy coat, and the holster that held her .45 to her garter chafed. Millie set her jaw and bore it. This was a contract, and she'd fulfill it. Millie focused her attention on the photo of Rocket Molly she'd been given. She took a moment to memorize her features, then torched it with the cigarette lighter in her purse. Millie threw it out the window of her cab as it arrived at her destination. The Hotel Elysium rose like a neon castle above the riff-raff of the city, an icon of decadence wrapped in Grecian columns and faux ivory. Millie breezed past the velvet ropes like she owned the joint. She left doorman a hefty tip that thankfully was on the Commissioner's dime, then headed straight for the VIP elevator.

"What floor, miss?" the bellhop asked, his hand on the control lever and his eyes on Millie.

"Tartarus," she replied and flipped him twenty dollars.

"That ain't no place for a fine lady like you," the old man said with a sly smile and set the lever to sub-basement.

“I ain’t no lady,” Millie said with a wink, and the elevator dropped like a rock two floors into a short, dark hallway. The faint scent of tobacco permeated the hall and muffled jazz music played beyond a thick metal door. Millie rapped hard on the door and a view slot opened revealing a pair of narrow eyes with a piercing, steely gaze.

“What’s the password?” the doorman growled.

“Grand Architect,” Millie answered. The door opened to reveal a cool, smoky speakeasy where liquor flowed like water, pooling into an ocean of vice. Millie tossed the mink coat at the checkroom with abandon and began scanning the room for Rocket Molly. She found her quickly enough, sitting at a booth to the right, sipping a martini with her trademark poker face and tinted flight goggles, and wearing the Rosenkruentz diamond. She stared disinterestedly over her drink, seemingly waiting for trouble.

“Now to get her attention,” Millie thought. She searched for a moment, then elbowed in at a table where a hot poker game was going on between some of the toughest mugs in the joint.

“Someone get me a whiskey sour,” Millie shouted with a snap of her fingers.” Drinks are on me if you deal me in.”

“The buy in is two hundred bucks, doll face,” the dealer snapped. “You ever play before?” Millie thought back to the dozens of nights at airfields where she’d taken drunken pilots for a week’s pay a hand, just like daddy taught her.

“I might have,” Millie said coyly, and slammed two hundred and fifty on

the table.

“Jokers and Twos are wild,” the dealer continued, “And make that a round of whiskey sours, on her.”

Half an hour later, dozens of shot glasses lay over turned on the table and six grand lay in front of Millie as her next to last opponent folded. The dealer eyed her suspiciously over the table. So did Rocket Molly from her booth. The dealer sat for a moment, drumming his fingers on his remaining cash and grinding his teeth. Millie stared him down, waiting for his response.

“I’m callin’ it,” he slurred drunkenly. “Two pair of Kings and a Queen. You got a miracle, woman?”

“You could say that,” Millie said calmly. She dropped her hand, revealing a royal flush with a Joker in the kings’ place. The dealer roared in rage and flipped the table, seizing Millie by her dress and holding a knife to her throat, only to find a hypodermic needle in his own. It was held by Rocket Molly.

“Tetrodotoxin,” Molly said coolly, “Puffer fish extract. Don’t even drop the knife; you’ll be dead before it hits the floor. Just back away slowly and let her take her money. And you,” she said to Millie, “grab your dough and join me at my booth.”

“Jackpot,” Millie thought, struggling to hide her satisfaction as she followed Molly.

“Listen, Honey,” Molly told her as they sat down, “Tartarus means Hell. That’s what you should be ready for in here. And by ready I mean armed.

Some of these guys have seen the inside of Alcatraz. They'd kill the devil himself for a dollar, and I'm no angel either.

I didn't save your skin for free. You owe me fifteen percent of your take from that table, or this needle gives you a kiss goodnight, you get me?"

"Yes," Millie said and started counting her winnings. "Decent take for thirty minutes work, wouldn't you say?"

"Hardly," Molly replied coldly. "It could have been twice that if you didn't wear your heart on your sleeve. Your face was practically a billboard of what was in your hand. Look at me. This is a poker face. You know what this look tells you? Almost nothing, except that you're in control. Master yourself and you master your enemies. There's a writer you should look into, a Greek philosopher named Epictetus. He wrote a helpful little book called the Enchiridion."

"Enchi-whatsis?" Millie asked, trying not to lose count. "Isn't that some kind of Mexican dish?"

"Enchiridion," Molly repeated slowly. "It means the handbook, and it's the bible for Stoic philosophy. Never act on emotion, it's just another tool in your enemy's toolbox, That's the first thing I teach my girls. The thugs on the street, the loan sharks, the wise guys, even the cops, they all count on us ladies panicking like good little girls whenever they pull a gun and bark orders. That's how they keep women out of the big money rackets, convincing them they're not tough enough to take it."

Molly held up the Rosenkruentz diamond. "You want to know how I got this?" she asked Millie. "By not panicking when a tough mug yelled freeze. You know how I keep it in a joint like this? By not being afraid of anything these clowns can do to me. I know they can't break me. I know they know it, too. And knowing that is more satisfying than anything I'd

ever feel.”

“Whatever brings you joy,” Millie said and counted off nine hundred dollars to her. “Are we square now?”

“Not yet,” Molly continued. “I'm not the hooker with a heart of gold type. I run with the big boys and I don't rescue lost kittens. But you've got some claws, kitty cat. I saw you in the paper; you saved that broad from the dinosaur carnival. Millie Maxwell, isn't it?”

“Yes,” she replied. “I'm in town looking for a job that pays.”

“You like risking your neck for a couple of bucks?” Molly asked over her cocktail glass, showing no emotion.

“Safety is overrated,” Millie replied. “ And if I'm gonna' get my skirt ruffled for a job, I'd rather it be the wind that did it than the boys at the airfield.”

“Then let's talk business,” Molly said, pocketing her cut of the poker money. “If you're in here, then you know who I am and you're obviously willing to break the law for a buck. I need a tough girl with flight experience for a job tomorrow night. But not just any broad will do. Can you fly a zeppelin?”

“In my sleep,” Millie replied.

“How are you with motion sickness?” Molly continued, finally letting her interest show.

“Average,” Millie answered.

“How’s your aim?”

Without a word, a shot rang out in Rocket Molly’s direction. She moved to stab Millie with her needle until a familiar looking knife fell to the table between them. Molly turned to see the poker dealer slumped to the floor behind her, clutching his inner thigh in agony. Millie stood up and closed her purse, revealing a singed hole in her dress where the muzzle of her .45 smoked through the remains of her holster.

“Better than average,” Millie replied.

Molly quickly wrote some directions on a napkin and slid it to Millie, then motioned for the door as the whole speakeasy gathered to catch a peep at her handiwork.

“Follow these and meet me tomorrow evening,” Molly told her. “Come alone, Kitty Cat, or I use you for target practice. Now scam before your poker buddies sign up for a rematch. Your tab’s on me.” Millie didn’t stop to ask questions, just made for the door and skipped the coat check. She knew the Commissioner would be furious at writing off the mink coat.

“Too bad,” she thought. “I’m just starting to enjoy this contract.”

Chicago, June 24th 1931

Millie arrived on time at Molly's meeting place, a small, abandoned airfield near the Lake Michigan waterfront. She felt nervous going in unarmed, but the Commissioner had ordered it. Millie hoped he was right about it building trust with Rocket Molly. Cautiously, she open the hangar doors. Millie entered and found the massive hangar dark, lit only by

moonlight coming from the open skylight above. Below it was two simple wooden chairs, one of which held a Phaeton mark III and the gang's typical black evening dress and gear. Rocket Molly sat on the other, wearing another rocket pack and lighting a cigarette.

“Right on time, Kitty Cat,” Molly greeted Millie in a puff of smoke. “You start tonight, get changed,” she added, motioning to the dress on the chair.

“What, right here?” Millie balked.

“I need to know you're unarmed, and you need the dress to protect you from the vents on that thing,” Molly told her, tapping her fingers on the Phaeton mark III. Molly fell silent and exhaled a puff of smoke. This was not up for discussion. Reluctantly, Millie ditched her pilot's overalls and started putting the dress on. Thought Millie couldn't tell through Molly's chromed goggles, she seemed to be paying closer attention to her than a mere weapons check. It left Millie with an uneasy feeling, but she knew the rocket pack would burn her in half without it. Millie knew better than to let on she knew that, and dressed quickly. She was astonished at how disturbingly similar she and Molly now looked, her pilot's cap and goggles now the last shred of her identity.

“Now what?” Millie asked.

“Put the rocket on,” Molly told her. “We're going on a practice flight.” Millie strapped the Phaeton mark III on just like Molly showed her, then Molly stood next to her and held her control watch next to Millie's. Molly tossed her cigarette and pulled Millie's goggles down over her eyes, then rested her hand on Millie's shoulder.

“Your right wrist is your rudder, aim for the skylight on the count of three,” Molly said. Millie was about to ask a question when Molly hit a button on both of their watches and the two dames rushed skyward at a

dizzying pace, zipping out the skylight and into the night sky toward downtown Chicago. Millie cried out in a panic, the heat of the rocket's vents didn't burn through her clothing, but was still quite painful, like grabbing a white hot kettle with thin oven mitts.

“It hurts,” Molly yelled over the roar of their engines, “but it won't burn you. If you have any hope of controlling this device, you must lose your fear of injury. Concentrate on the throttle and rudder, not the pain. Don't feel, Millie, think. You have control, not the rocket. It can't hurt you if you don't feel the heat.”

Millie held back her tears and fought to concentrate on the sky ahead. She leaned and turned with Molly, focusing on the rudder, giving it all her attention. Gradually, the burning in her legs dulled to an electric blanket warm, and the wind rushing past her cooled her. Millie regained her calm and control of the device, only to feel Molly let go of her shoulder, then her fingertips.

“Follow me, Kitty Cat,” Molly yelled again.

Millie spiraled out of control for a moment, then regained her equilibrium. She caught up to Molly, then followed her across the night sky in a dazzling display of loops, twists, and dives, darting between skyscrapers. Millie's heart soared. She hadn't felt so free since she was a teenager. Millie raced Molly in a spiral around a hotel on Michigan Avenue, and for a brief moment, she thought she saw Molly smile as lights came on all over the building. Finally, Molly pulled along side Millie and showed her how to land, setting them down on the observation deck of a building overlooking the canal. Millie leaned on the railing to catch her breath and cracked a smile as Molly joined her, looking down the city.

“Your still wearing your heart on your sleeve, Kitty Cat,” Molly said to

her. "I'm no mind reader, but I'd say that ride brought back memories."

"Like being a kid in the flying circus again," Millie exhaled. She thought for a moment.

"Why do you do it?" Millie asked Molly. "Refuse to feel, I mean." Molly leaned on the railing, the lights of the city glinting off her goggles.

"My name is Molly MacCullough," she began. "I was born to poor Irish parents in a neighborhood where Irish was the last thing you'd ever want to be. I was the first member of my family to learn to read, even got straight A's in chemistry. Fat lot of good it did me. The Irish label was all people needed to know about me. My job prospects were being a gun moll for some hotshot gangster, or being a prostitute. I tried my hand at both and got nothing but grief for my efforts. For years, I didn't feel anything worth feeling. After a while, I just stopped altogether. One day, I realized I never really missed it, either. That's when I found my real strength."

Millie looked at Molly, hoping to see some glimpse of emotion, yet Molly showed none.

"Look at it, Millie," Molly continued. "The whole magnificent city, laid out like a buffet table. Nothing they've got down there can catch us. Anything you want, anything, is just a joyride away. And not just Chicago. All the cities, all the kingdoms in the world, I give to you. Just follow me."

"I don't understand," Millie replied. Molly rested her hand on Millie's with an unexpected tenderness that didn't match her cold demeanor."

"I know you judge me for my ways, for my refusal to feel," Molly said, "But there are things I choose not to feel that this world would judge me more harshly for. Things I hoped you, of all people might understand."

We're not so different are we, Kitty Cat?"

"I don't know what you're looking for," Millie said, drawing her hand back slowly, "but what you found is a pilot, and nothing more."

"Then follow me back to base and come back tomorrow night," Molly said with a sigh. "The job pays six grand, two thousand tonight, four more on completion." Millie smiled when she heard that.

"Some thing up, Kitty Cat," Molly asked.

"Nothing much," Millie replied. "Just that now I can afford a taxi in New York.

Chicago, June 25th 1931

"This is bull, Millie!" Cecilia yelled at the top of her lungs, pacing the hangar with her arms crossed. "You never take a job without us!"

"This isn't like a usual contract," Millie replied and finished loading her .45 Mauser. "These people are hardened killers, and I have orders to come alone. I won't risk your lives, not anymore. Besides, we're supposed to be crop dusting in Springfield tomorrow. A contract's a contract, Cecilia. We always keep our contracts, like Daddy taught us."

"But it's boring as sin! Millie, please. Daddy always told us..."

"This is not up for discussion, Cecilia! You've had more than enough excitement for one week. Now go get your plane gassed up and get ready to go tomorrow morning. Go and let me work, just this once."

“You ain't the boss of me. I'm not a child anymore, Millie!”

“Then stop acting like one, Cecilia! Now get to work and don't follow me!”

Millie listened to the hangar door slam and breathed out slowly.

“I know, Cecilia,” she said to the door, “I know why you're mad. I remember what Daddy told us. I really do. He told us never to fly alone.”

“Bicycles,” Millie thought. She would get them all bicycles when she got paid. That image, the whole family riding bikes together, stuck in Millie's mind as she steered the zeppelin silently over Lake Michigan toward their target. Millie hadn't flown one in years and compared to her nimble K-5 Fleet, it handled like a battleship. Even its small cabin seemed like an airplane hangar, with the assortment of tools, instruments, and weapons hanging everywhere. Yet she piloted it with finesse, each turn of the wheel like an artists'

brushstroke. Millie stared at her reflection in the instrument panel for a moment, her identity lost the black, fireproof dress that marked her part of Molly's gang. Only her familiar pilot's cap reminded her of who she really was. Nervously, she fingered the transmitter ring Commissioner Stephenson had given her. Millie tapped out a ready message in Morse code on it, hoping he was on top of his game. Behind her, six women retrieved Tommy guns from a row of lockers on the back wall and strapped on their rocket packs. Molly buckled a utility belt as she gave them the plan like a general preparing for combat.

“Listen up, girls,” Molly barked, “I'm only saying this once. This is a simple job. Mr. Axeworth is hosting a rooftop jewelry auction. This is like a state fair for precious stones, so focus on blue ribbon winners. Don't mug every broad in sight for pearls or cheap rocks. We're going for unset diamonds and shaking down the old money for their cufflinks. You get me, girls?”

“We get you,” they replied in unison.

“Good,” Molly continued, “We drop into the alley, then enter through the service elevator off the kitchen. Save your ammo for our entrance and covering our exit. Any problems on the elevator and I bust out this,” Molly said, pulling her poison syringe from her utility belt. “Come out blasting and clear the place in five minutes, tops. Everyone know their roles?” Six stone cold knockouts nodded yes and stepped to the ready line by the door “And you, Maxwell?” she asked.

“Keep it below one hundred feet above the skyline. Got it, Molly,” Millie answered.

“Good,” Molly said, snapping a pair of handcuffs around Millie's left wrist, and cuffing her to the steering wheel of the zeppelin. “Just a precaution. Consider this your initiation into our sisterhood, Kitty Cat. Now, bottoms up, girls,” she concluded, opening the cabin door and dropping into the night air. Molly fired her pack and the other dames followed, slowing their descent into the alley and searing the pavement as they landed. Millie waited until they had disappeared into the building, then climbed to an altitude of nine hundred feet above the skyline as the Commissioner had instructed her. She checked the zeppelin's radar. The F.E.A.R. Interceptor was already approaching from the starboard. Millie set to work on the cuffs. Nothing within arms reach seemed to be useful,

but then she saw the spare Phaeton mark III on the back bench...

Molly and her gang kept their poker faces as they stepped off the elevator and wasted the auctioneer in a hail of hot lead, and jewelry fell at their feet like candy at a parade. Once again, Christian Axeworth bit his cigarette holder. This time, a devilish grin spread across his face, widening as he saw Rocket Molly wearing the Rosenkruentz Diamond, his diamond, for this heist. He snapped his fingers when the dames knelt to collect their loot, and the sound of guns cocking filled the air.

“Freeze! Federal Agents!” Commissioner Stephenson yelled, pulling a Browning sub-machine gun from under the serving cart where he was disguised as a waiter. A dozen other undercover agents followed his lead, training their guns on Molly and her gang. They were now caught in the spotlight of a circling autogyro bearing the emblem of the F.E.A.R. Enforcement Corps. Molly cursed and rushed at Christian Axeworth. She caught him by the arm, leveling her Tommy gun at his jaw.

“Nobody move or I paint the place red!” Molly shouted, losing her composure and inching toward the railing with him. Christian smiled. He almost had his diamond. He was so close he could taste it. Greed overcame Christian and he grabbed Molly's wrist and threw her over his shoulder. He reached for the diamond and missed. Molly kicked free as he lunged forward, and her gang opened fire on the feds. Two dames took bullets in their packs, which exploded when they tried to take off and lit the roof up like a Christmas tree in Hell. In the confusion, Molly led her remaining gang skyward, only to have them riddled with bullets by the autogyro. They went down swinging, the whole gang shooting the autogyro to Swiss cheese until their guns clicked, dropping it after them in

a ballet of blazing death and ice cold beauty

“Then no one gets it,” Christian hissed under his breath, tapping out a Morse code message on a ring of his own while Molly sped off toward a zeppelin that tilted downward at a forty-five degree angle...

“Success!” Millie thought as the Phaeton mark III slid across the floor to her feet. She caught the shoulder strap with her foot and kicked it into place below the wheel. Millie aimed the vents up at the helm and switched on the control watch that was wired to it. The rocket blast quickly tore the steering wheel off the helm and knocked Millie over backward with it still cuffed to her wrist. Quickly, she adjusted the shoulder straps on the rocket pack and put it on. Millie barely had it re-buckled around the cuffed arm when Molly rocketed through the cabin door and cuffed Millie in the jaw with the butt of her gun. Molly slammed Millie against the cabin window, pinning her with the gun across her throat.

“How much did they pay you to send me up the river, Kitty Cat?” Molly hissed, fighting for balance on the tilted floor, her emotionless front replaced by pure, unreasoning hate.

“Enough to buy me a life boat,” Millie croaked. Molly wound up to strike her but froze, her attention fixed on the starboard. Millie followed her spiteful gaze and saw the F.E.A.R. Enforcement interceptor, a sleek, streamlined bomber, bearing down on them. Its twin gunwales opened to reveal two bazooka-like cannons.

“Attention zeppelin,” the helm radio crackled to life. “You are in violation of the F.E.A.R. Act and state law. Lethal force has been authorized.”

Before the radio had gone silent, the interceptor fired on them. Millie was airborne a heartbeat after Molly, barely clearing the fireball that consumed the massive zeppelin. Millie gave her rocket full throttle, racing after Molly across the night sky. Millie pulled along side her and lashed out with the steering wheel, knocking Molly into a sideways spiral. Molly twisted out of control for blocks, then recovered and charged at Millie full throttle. Millie braced for impact, holding the steering wheel like a shield. Molly hit like a freight train and Millie screamed as three of her ribs cracked from the blow. If Molly was injured likewise, Millie couldn't tell. Even in anger, she remained as Sphinx-like as ever, not flinching while she and Millie rushed straight at the ground. Molly rammed the steering wheel hard into Millie's chin, making it hard to fight and impossible to steer.

“Got nine lives, Kitty Cat?” Molly yelled over the roar of the wind, her voice betraying the slightest hint of satisfaction.

“No,” Millie winced as she grabbed Molly's utility belt with her free hand and pulled her hypodermic needle of Tetrodotoxin. “But I still have claws,” she cried, ramming the syringe deep into Molly's side. Without a word, Molly went limp, and her pulse stopped. Quickly, Millie snapped the Rosenkruentz diamond off her neck and flipped upward. Millie looked down to see Molly's body strike a 1929 Rolls Royce, engulfing her in a viking funeral pyre of burning chrome. Millie continued to rush upward for hundreds of feet before her rocket slowed and she regained control. For a moment, Millie saw through her pain that it was a beautiful, starry night, that sparkled like tinsel. But her attention was grabbed by a blinking, red alarm on her wristwatch control.

Her rocket was out of fuel.

Millie's engine sputtered and she froze. For a moment she fell screaming, only to land on the inclined wing of a bi-plane. With her free hand, she instinctively caught the wing-walker's cable, almost before she realized what had happened. The plane leveled out and Millie peered over the edge of the wing and into the eyes of her sister at the throttle, and her brother Frank in the gunner's seat of her own plane.

“Damn it, Cecilia,” she gasped for breath. “I told you to stay out of this.”

“You're always going on about how we're a family and all that crap, Millie,” Cecilia said. “Mom told us to always stay together. What did you expect us to do?”

“What about the Springfield job, Cecilia?” Millie asked her sister.

“We sent Henry. Besides, I'm the better pilot,” Cecilia replied.

A weak smile crossed Millie's face, followed by a wince of pain. She tapped out a message to the Commissioner on her ring.

“Mission accomplished.” she wrote, “Meet me at the airfield with my check and a skeleton key.”

Cecilia taxied to a stop by the hangar and Millie saw Commissioner Stephenson and Christian Axeworth waiting by a rented limousine surrounded by an ambulance and several F.E.A.R. Corps officers. Millie's siblings helped her down from the plane as they advanced.

“Splendid, you've recovered the Phaeton mark III,” The Commissioner said as three F.E.A.R. officers pulled their guns on her. “Surrender it immediately.”

“Who ordered the interceptor to fire?” Millie asked, handing over the rocket pack as he approached.

“I'm afraid Mr. Axeworth was a bit...overzealous... about keeping his diamond out of the wrong hands. You did recover it without damage, right miss Maxwell?”

“Overzealous?” Millie said and held out the Rosenkruentz Diamond. “I almost died up there. Take your damn rock!” Before she was done speaking, Christian swiped the Rosenkruentz Diamond out of her hand and began to stroke it like a kitten.

“You snapped the chain, you clumsy bitch,” he muttered as he walked off.

“I'll take my fifty grand now, please,” Millie said eying the Commissioner in disgust.

“About that,” he said pulling Millie's contract out of his jacket and holding up his cigarette lighter. “You didn't read the fine print, Miss Maxwell. You're a civilian contractor. Any collateral damage incurred by your involvement in this operation comes out of your payment, and you left me one hell of a clean up job. A zeppelin and an autogyro down in the middle of the city, plus the damage to Mr. Axeworth's diamond, and that's the short list. Fifty grand will barely cover it.” He lit the contract on fire and dropped it at her feet. “Forget getting paid, you're lucky I'm not billing you.” Millie's teeth ground and her heart broke.

“If you get an attorney and file an appeal,” he added, “you might get a settlement in six to eight years, though I doubt you'll still be a pilot the day after you file it. The ambulance here will take you to St. Mary's. Mr. Axeworth has graciously offered to pay ten percent of your treatment expenses. Now if you'll excuse us, we have a plane to catch. Lucky for you, it isn't yours. Good night, civilian,” Commissioner Stephenson said and lead the men out of the hangar. Millie looked at the ambulance crew, then dismissed them and turned to her siblings.

“Now what?” Cecilia asked.

“Grab the tool box and get this wheel off my wrist,” Millie sighed. “We join Henry and do what we always do. Carry on.”

THE END

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the WORLD *of* MAÑANA

STORMING SHANGRI-LA

Created by Jack Philpott

INTRODUCTION

Tropical islands, palm trees, flying boats...and the soft *thump* of a silenced pistol in the night. This is the *World of Mañana*, a place of lazy relaxation coupled with deadly intrigue. Of patient, persistent progress into A Glorious Future. Of sociopolitical and ethnic diversity emerging from the dying remains of the grand empires of old. Imagine, if you will, Bogart's *Casablanca* on a global scale, and with the naïve self-assuredness of the summer of 1914. Imagine the *laissez-faire* attitude of a cafe in Nice contrasted with the frightful panic of a deadly chase through the crowded city streets of Cairo, or a gorgeous sunny seascape with a looming shadow just at the edge of your vision. Set in the present day in a world not our own, *Mañana* is a world of contrasts and amalgamations. Retrofuturistic super trains share the stage with “old fashioned” flying boats and airships.

Baroque-tinged Great Power politics clash with radical, futurist ideologies, emerging global corporations, and the burgeoning nationalism of a thousand composite cultures our world never saw. The old, decaying empires fight for continued hegemony and try their best to patch the growing cracks in their imperial façade, but the center cannot hold. It all gives a guy or dame a lot to think about while sipping that rum as the sun slips quietly beneath the tropical waters in a pool of warm crimson. Combining the Noir-tinged optimism of the Jazz Age with the laid back world of the islands, *The World of Mañana* is a new, deceptively relaxed, but sinister addition to the Retrofuturist culture. This is where Dieselpunks go on vacation to leave their troubles behind...only to find that their troubles have followed. It's Noir, on Island Time.

Warmth. Embracing, consuming, warmth soaks into my muscles like a gentle massage. The penetrating rays of sun from above and the bracing heat from the sand beneath make a soft bed and blanket, lulling me into an easy afternoon's siesta. Background noises of squabbling chickens and metal clanging in the gentle wind blur into the background. Ill thoughts and distant troubles fade away with my consciousness. I pass comfortably into the infinity of gentle sleep.

A light kick to the soles of my sandals jerks me back into the realm of consciousness.

“We are soon the airplane to be fixing, yes?” says an impatient, familiar, and utterly unwelcome Scandinavian voice. His Portuguese is harsh and accented, his grammar Germanic.

I scowl under my hat. “Mañana,” I say, hoping he'll let me return to the

embrace of my siesta.

“What the hell do you mean ‘mañana’? You said ‘mañana’ yesterday!”

I sigh and push the hat back from my eyes. The afternoon sun, which has been so wonderfully warm on my chest, blinds me momentarily. I can barely make out the shape of my passenger’s head through the glare. His close-cut crop of blonde hair glows like a scary halo. He’s a Vinlander of pure Euro stock and white as a lily, but slowly burning to red as a rose in the California sun. His name is Svensen, a businessman from Nye Copenhagen, a land of towering spires and angry swarms of autocars. He’s still in a hurry even after several days in the tropics. “The plane will be ready when it’s ready,” I say. “The mechanic is working on it!”

“Damn it, Herr Lagarto!” I don’t have time for ‘when it’s ready’. I important and urgent business in San Cristóbal have and no time for some grease ball mechanic from nowhere California to poke at your rattrap plane until it is fixed!”

Now Svensen is just irritating me. No need to insult my plane, *Estrella*. I pull my hat back over my eyes and lay back again. “If you’re in that big of a hurry, then I’m sure there’s a coach to San Pedro. From there, you can *maybe* catch a train to San Cristóbal.”

He kicks the soles of my sandals again, harder. “I don’t have time for a coach, and I doubt the trains run regularly in this sand pit! I am paying you to fly me to San Cristóbal, not catch up on your suntan!”

I sit up, slowly burning from the inside now. Svensen was brusque, but polite when he chartered the flight three days earlier in Nye Malmö. He kept quietly to his notes and bank books the whole flight, ignoring every

bounce and jolt, not even leaving his seat during the fuel stops in Cozumel and La Paz. It was like having an automaton for a passenger. My iguana Don was more interactive.

However, a thrown rod in the portside engine en route to San Cristóbal diverted us to San Miguel harbor and, ultimately, to Pedro's shop near downtown. It was nothing I could fix with hand tools. Pedro would have to machine us a new piston.

Figuring there were worse places to be stranded than San Miguel, which manages a dry, breezy seventy-two pretty much year 'round, I bought a bottle of local tequila and kicked back on the beach. Svensen started out annoyed and has gotten progressively more irate as the days slide by. Now, he is getting confrontational and my own patience is running low.

"Mr. Svensen," I say, "Pedro's the best machinist in San Miguel. He's also the busiest. He'll be done when he's done. You try and rush a piston and you get a seized engine. While you paid me well you didn't pay me enough to risk my plane or my life."

"Busy?" Svensen snaps. "I went by yesterday afternoon and he was asleep!"

"You probably went by during siesta. And if you are unhappy with my services, I'll be happy to refund you half the amount, and you can fly with one of the other planes in San Miguel." I motion to the harbor. Besides *Estrella*, the only other aircraft is an old floatplane missing half of its wing fabric.

He scowls and his lips move silently, as if counting to calm himself or plotting my murder. "Look, can't you just a word have with this Pedro or

something? Light a fire under him? Bump us up in priority? I can his palm fatten if needed.”

Cursing silently, I get up and stretch. I look off into the distance at the sandy peninsula of Playa del Sol and the scrub-covered hills of the Punta Loma. I lean against a thin palmetto trunk and brush sand from my clothes. “I’ll see what I can do,” I say.

Still cursing, I walk back to *Estrella*, her port engine cowling open like a patient in surgery. She bobs slightly in the greenish waters of the bay. It’s a deep bay, well sheltered. San Miguel could have been quite the port city had a proper investment in infrastructure been made. Instead, with few workable docks, it remains a small, isolated outpost in central California, eclipsed by San Cristóbal to the north. Though to be honest, the former, located on the Bahía Grande near the breadbasket of the valley and the gold-laden foothills of the Sierra Nevada, has more worth shipping. Nothing much comes out of San Miguel but a trickle of silver and turquoise out of Colorado or Apacheria.

I hop up on *Estrella*’s nose and slip in through the hatch. Don slides up a lazy eyelid from his perch in the copilot’s seat, but otherwise ignores me as I climb the stairs into the cockpit and slip into the passenger/cargo area.

I continue back to the tail section. Rummaging through the haphazard stack of old boxes, I finally find what I’m looking for. It’s a long, flat box with Caddoan engravings, 16 by 6 inches by 2 ½ inches tall. I sigh. Svensen offered a bribe. It shows how little he understands professional pride. There’s only one way to settle this, and it lies in the box I hold.

My final negotiator. My Peacemaker.

I open the case. It sits there, nested in its L-shaped velvet cutout. Its grip is of intricately carved maple, adorned with bone beads and a single crow's feather; form and function, wedded through the able hands of a master.

I haven't had to resort to using it in years, and only take it out in the most desperate of times. I debate returning it, ashamed to even consider resorting to such measures, but, damn it, the customer is always right.

I remove my Peacemaker and its cleaning brushes. Carefully, I brush out the interior of any dust or old cinders, oil the wood, and wipe off the feather. I hold it to the light, sighting down it, and once certain it's ready, I load it and prime it for use before sliding it into my belt.

It's time.

I take a last swig of tequila to fortify myself for hard negotiations and march to Pedro's. His small shop is noisy with the grinding of a band saw on metal and the clanging of a hammer on steel. Inside, it is dark as a sinner's soul, save for the hellfire sparks from the band saw. The clang of the hammer stops and a large, muscular, young apprentice stares at me, hammer at his side. He taps the shoulder of Pedro at the band saw. Pedro turns his considerable bulk around. His eyes are dull, cloudy after years of using a welding torch. His beard is scraggly from being singed repeatedly over the forge. He nods.

"We need to talk," I say.

"We are almost done with the mayor's boat," he says. "We get to your piston maybe tomorrow."

"I need you to start the piston now," I say.

“Tony,” he says, “I have other things. I get to it. You know I will.”

I remove my Peacemaker, holding it out before me. “It’s loaded and ready, Pedro. My customer insists. We have to do this.”

Pedro sighs. “How long have you known me, Tony? When have I ever cheated you? When have I ever lied to you?”

“Never, Pedro, my friend, but my client leaves us little choice. I am sorry that we must resort to this, but we have a grievance, you and I, and this is the only way to resolve it.”

Pedro’s eyes drop. “I understand, my friend. Come, we talk in the back room.”

I follow him under a hanging sheet and into a dingy back room. It houses a small bed, an ancient dresser, and a wash basin. A single paneless window gives the only light. He sits on the bed, I on a small stool. “My friend,” I begin, “my client has left little choice but to use the Peacemaker.” I hold it aloft and remove a match. I light the match and then the bowl of the Peacemaker, puffing to get it lit. Thick, oily smoke from tobacco, sage, and a few traditional herbs fills my mouth, singeing it slightly. The Peacemaker finally lit, I take three ceremonial puffs and pass it to Pedro. In Vinland and the Great Lakes, they call it a *calumet*, in the khanates of the plains, a *chanunpa*. Whatever the name, the peacemaking pipe is almost universal in North America as a symbol of settling grievances and coming to terms—but typically only the most contentious of terms. To break out the calumet is to declare that a near-war is in existence between you and your adversary. By resorting to it, I have all but declared a state of war with my old friend Pedro, and am now making peace demands.

We sit there in silence for several passes of the pipe, relaxing, contemplating the strange winds of fate that brought us to this moment. I think about Svensen's impatience. How mad would he get seeing us now? "I don't pay you two to take smoke breaks!" I regret taking him on as a passenger. Yet, to be honest, I had plenty of reasons to leave the islands for a while myself, namely a not-Mayan princess, whose amateur intrigues have put me on the Inquisition's naughty list. Truth be told, those two stoic Neapolitans in suits, whom I saw in Nye Malmö, were probably just tourists, but why take chances when I may or may not be hunted by Christendom's most far reaching shadow force? When a fidgety blonde Vinlander businessman solicited a flight to California, I figured better to be safe than sorry, and took the opportunity to skip town for a while. Maybe I could fly on from there to Chinooktla or Alyeska, fly some delivery routes in the bush for gold dust.

Shaking off the reminiscence, I get to the business at hand. "Pedro, many times we've worked amicably together, you and I, and always you have done me honor. I know you have important work, and I hate to ask for special treatment, but today, I need you to do my piston first, preferably this afternoon."

He puffs for a while, thinking. He hands back the pipe and gets up, grabbing two cloudy, old glasses and a bottle of bad mescal. He pours us each three fingers worth. It burns like kerosene going down my throat. "My friend," he says, "I understand your predicament. Your Gringo, he is in too big a hurry, even for a Gringo. God grants us so short a time on this world, yet some, they seem in such a hurry to get through it. I would ask that he wait. He needs to learn patience, yes?"

I puff and think. "Yes, yes he does," I say. "But today, maybe not. He has

a meeting, he says.”

“And I have to do the mayor’s boat. He has an important visitor, so I hear. The Governor, perhaps. Maybe even a Spaniard.”

I take another swig of the drink and pass the pipe. “I understand, but I must insist. He is crazy, even for a Vinlander. If you wish to charge us more for the inconvenience, Pedro, I will see to it that you receive all you ask.”

He thinks this over and quotes me a price three times his normal rate.

I scowl. “Pedro, please, such an amount is beneath you. You could get twice that from this Gringo. He has far more money than patience.”

“I would not feel right, taking more,” he says.

“That is why you are a true man of God, Pedro. Hmm, God...”

“Yes, my friend?”

“I hate to see money go to waste where it is needed. Surely the cathedral here needs a new roof or bell...”

Pedro smiles. I smile. We have our compromise.

The California sun soaks warmly into my back as I kneel atop *Estrella*. It still amazes me how much difference a slight change in latitude makes on the intensity of its light...were this tropical Dominica where I hale from,

I'd be cooked alive by now. I take a second's break from my work to gaze out over the small city of adobe, brick, and stone that rises up into the scrub-covered hills to the east. To the west, the flat, sandy expanse of the peninsula holds back the cool Pacific waves. The setting is peaceful, secluded, and relaxed. I could almost live here were it not for the arid brown of the landscape.

I smile and return to work, carefully installing Pedro's new piston. As always, he's machined it perfectly...a master craftsman even under duress. He'd worked through the night to finish both it and the mayor's job and was rewarded handsomely by Svensen. That over-hurried Vinlander barely scowled when Pedro quoted that exorbitant amount, making me think we should have held out for more. Oh well... either way the cathedral of Santa Maria de San Miguel de las Ipais is receiving much needed restoration work.

My thoughts drift with the recollection of the cathedral. This morning I lit a candle there to Santa Maria de los Negros de Erzules, hoping that Her blessing will carry me through the trying ride ahead with Svensen. Had anyone asked, I would have said the candle was for Santa Maria the Virgin. California is staunchly Roman Catholic. Those of us who follow the "heretical" Congolese Mass can find ourselves harassed here, or worse. I wonder, not for the first time, whether I am wasting my time, not just with the deception, but with the whole religion thing. No Saint has possessed me in months. No prayers seem to be answered. Guilt and fear wash over me for entertaining such doubts. I shake them off and return to the piston.

I'm just finishing the piston installation and preparing to replace the cylinder case when Svensen reappears. He's guiding a pair of locals, who are pushing a large steel drum on a pushcart. Svensen yells up to me,

“Herr Lagarto! Good news! I have more fuel bought you! This should be more than enough to refuel your plane when we in San Cristóbal arrive. Consider it a tip for getting that lazy local in gear!”

I curse as the two local men proceed to carry the drum through the open back passenger door. Just what I need, added weight...and weight sure to stink up the whole cabin with the scent of petrol. “Couldn’t you have just bought me the fuel in San Cristóbal?”

He looks pensive for a moment. “I guess I could have, but perhaps the fuel is less here!”

It’s probably more expensive here, what with the extra shipping costs. But Saints, it’s his money, so smell-be-damned I’ll take what gratuities I can get. “Thank you then, Herr Svensen,” I say, feigning sincerity. Ignorant North Americans. For all the hassle this trip is becoming, I at least know I’ll make a nice profit.

The rest of the repairs and subsequent checkouts and test runs go like clockwork, and by evening I’m kicked back in the sand with that bottle of tequila, just in time for the sunset. Svensen is annoyed that we didn’t make it out today, but at least he wasn’t stupid enough to insist we fly at night. This close to the Sierra Nevada and in unfamiliar territory, we’d run the extreme risk of flying straight into a mountain. I light up one last cigar for the evening. By the time it’s finished, I’ll likely be almost asleep.

I wake up with a hole burnt in my shirt from the cigar. The tequila bottle is empty. I wonder how much I drank, before I notice the pungent stain on my shirt and the moisture-clumped sand below me. I’d fallen asleep and

likely lost half the bottle and most of the cigar in the process.

Damn it.

I'm rummaging through my goods for a change of clothing, figuring a dip in the harbor will do me well, when I see Svensen staring alternately at me and at his watch. "It is almost eight o'clock. Soon flying out we should be, yes?"

I curse again. "Give me thirty minutes."

It takes closer to an hour by the time I've preflighted *Estrella* and woken up the local harbor master to give us flight clearance. I crank up *Estrella*, happy to hear both her engines purring again, and once the check-flight is done, nudge her gently forward until, roaring gleefully, she screams down the near-empty harbor channel, leaving white foamy wake behind. Soon, she has once again broken free from the green waters and risen up into the air. As the Punta Loma passes astern, I smile to the rising sun over the mountains, happy that soon I'll be in San Cristóbal and rid of this troublesome Vinlander.

A couple small nudges of turbulence are the sky's greeting as *Estrella* settles into cruising altitude. The peace of the air wafts over me, and I smile, first at the clear blue sky, next at the craggy shapes of the Sierra Nevada to the north and east, her peaks still frosted with snow even into the late spring. The Pacific is a deep blue to the west. The sun is a warm yellow to the east. The Saints may have forgotten me, but up here the Divine is always near to me. I set a path between the Sierra and the Pacific and make some navigational notes and then let myself settle into that sense of freedom and oneness that always overtakes me in the air.

The minutes burn by and soon we are over the flat scrub plains around San Pedro. A winding band of green trees embraced on both sides by a patchwork of geometric green fields marks the path of the San Pedro River. I hear she is a beautiful river, but deadly in the spring thaws. Every few years she spills her banks and floods the valley. Were this over-practical, soulless Vinland, some Vinlander engineer would have probably sluiced and levied her into submission, perhaps even paved her over entirely. Some wealthy businessman, like my passenger, might have funded such an effort. Smiling to myself, I sneak a peek back at him. He's pulled the curtain shut, but left a slight gap. I see him fiddling with something silver and shiny and immediately recognize it. I curse and pray, and sigh all at once. It's a revolver.

Something has bugged me about this guy from the start. If he was so desperate to get to a scheduled meeting in San Cristóbal, why hadn't he taken one of the regular airships that ply the air lanes between Nye Copenhagen, Fort Chinooktla, and San Cristóbal? He could certainly afford the tickets. Why even bother taking the long route down through the Bahamas and Mexico when a pilot could probably be chartered for a more northern route through the Lake Countries? The answer became obvious when I saw the pistol. His plans in San Cristóbal are less than honest, and he needs to enter the city quietly and unnoticed. Small cargo planes out of the somewhat friendly Latin south attract less interest than flights out of the semi-hostile Russo-Indian north.

I take a few breaths and calm myself. Hell, not my problem what this guy wants. That's between him and the Saints. Had I found out earlier, I could have conceivably kicked him off the plane, but it's too late now. I only have enough fuel to reach calm waters near San Cristóbal or backtrack to San Miguel now. Might as well finish my duty and leave him to his own business. Besides, if word got around I'd ditched a passenger, it might hurt

my own business. I settle back into the freedom of the air and forget about my anxious Vinlander and his pistol.

I hear the sheet pulled back behind me and the tell-tale cocking of the revolver.

Shit.

“It is now time this plane north by northeast to turn,” Svensen says. I can feel the menace of the pistol behind my head, though it is not touching me. “We will proceed to coordinates thirty-nine, five, and thirty North by one-hundred-twenty, two, and thirty West. There we will in the lake land.”

I double-curse: once at my naiveté and once at his. The coordinates are for a spot somewhere in the craggy peaks of the Sierra Nevada. What, does he think *Estrella* is a helicopter? “It takes this plane hundreds of feet to take off, even assuming glass-calm waters and good headwinds. No mountain lake is large enough to accommodate.”

“This one is,” he says, matter-of-factly.

There’s an uncomfortable silence. “Lake Da’oe,” he says after a moment.

I laugh out loud. “Sure, Da’oe! I’ll take you right there, sir, just after a brief stop in Eldorado and a layover in Shambala! Shall we visit Elysium Fields afterwards?”

“There is no reason to be rude,” he barks. “Da’oe is very much real.” Now I know he is a loon but keep quiet, not wishing to antagonize the guy with the gun. He takes my silence as an invitation to speak. “There are several eyewitness accounts of Da’oe: Pedro Lopez de San Juan’s ill-fated

expedition, reports from Californio gold prospectors, and Gulbrand Gøttfriesen's aerial mapping of the Sierra Nevada. Gøttfriesen identified several large mountain lakes. Of them, only the one I have identified has any claim to match the descriptions from de San Juan's few surviving compatriots; 'waters as clear as a diamond and as deep as the abyss,'" he starts to recite from memory, "'hills green as emeralds capped with snow as pure as innocence...seven leagues from end-to-end and ringed with trees tall as a score of men'. Only this one,'" he adds, tapping a map with the pistol, "the most southerly and easterly, perched just west of the great Utan Desert, matches."

I roll my eyes. Da'oe was a child's story, the delusions of battle-shocked would-be Conquistadores and wilderness-maddened prospectors. A place of earthly paradise with lovely naked Indio maidens that beckon like sirens, where the fish are so numerous one can walk like Jesus across the lake upon their backs. Surrounded, of course, by trackless mountains filled with hostile cannibal Indios, more beast than man, who kill all who gaze upon Da'oe's beauty. "Da'oe is a myth, and this is a suicide mission," I say. "If you're so desperate to die, then I'll take you to San Cristóbal as agreed and you can hire a different fool."

He pokes the gun barrel rudely into the back of my head. "Fly to the coordinates and land in the lake, or I shoot you dead right here!" he screams, loud enough to wake Don and make him hiss and rear in his seat.

I steady my nerves. "You are an experienced pilot, then? You can land a flying boat on an unfamiliar lake, I take it? Be advised, the yoke will be a bit slippery with my blood and brains, which you'll have to clean off the gauges and windscreen as well if you want to make the landing."

"I'll kill you!"

I shrug. “I die either way, and so do you. If you could fly a vessel such as mine, you’d probably have just bought a plane and done it yourself. A bullet in my brain kills us both. So sit down, shut up, and enjoy the flight the rest of the way to beautiful San Cristóbal.” *Jackass*, I add silently.

“Money,” he says. “I’ll give you five...no, ten times what I originally paid you for this flight.”

“I don’t think the Devil takes Vinlander coin.”

“For the love of God, you have to take this plane to Da’oe!! I beg of you!”

I turn to face him now. He’s visibly furious and somewhat pleading, but his eyes are not wild and manic. He’s severely angry and desperate but controlled. There’s none of the look of wild power and control I’ve seen in the eyes of psychopaths and killers, nor the confusion I’ve seen in madmen. He casually walks over and unflinchingly grabs Don behind the neck and, before I can raise my voice, steps through to the cabin and drops Don, hissing and biting but unharmed, onto the passenger bench. He claims the co-pilot’s seat for himself. “I do not time have for negotiations, Mr. Lagarto,” he says, visibly fighting to restrain his seething emotions. His eyes never leave mine. The pistol never wavers or shakes. “My time to act in Da’oe is running out. I will this aircraft see on the lake this morning or the fires of hell see instead. If that means trying your plane to land myself, this I will attempt. The lake is real. I have copies of Göttfriedsen’s aerial photos and navigational charts. If indeed there are cannibal savages there, I will personally fight them if I must.”

“Why?” I ask, unable to think of anything else to say.

“Because the savages my firstborn son have, and if I don’t rescue him, they will to their heathen gods sacrifice him before the full moon wanes.”

They say Santa Maria protects fools and crusaders. Flying into the trackless Sierra Nevada looking for a mythical lake in order to rescue a child from savage cultists certainly qualifies me on both counts. Svensen calmed and settled into the co-pilot’s seat once I reluctantly agreed to fly him to Da’oe. I don’t doubt for a second he’ll kill me and try to land *Estrella* himself with his son’s life on the line. I know all too well the lengths a desperate father will go to. Any doubts I had on the merits of the trip vanished when he showed me a Vivachrome photo of his young son Erland, smiling, blonde, and bright-eyed holding a new Christmas train toy. A few of my doubts to Svensen’s sanity fade when he shows me Göttfriedsen’s photos and navigational charts of the lake Svensen is convinced is the mythic Da’oe.

Possibly-Da’oe is a *very* large lake, estimated by Göttfriedsen to be roughly twenty miles north-south by ten east-west and roughly ovular in shape. The monochrome photos show rich strands of conifers and small cone-shaped Indio houses, dugout canoes, and placid, noticeably clear waters. It very well might be the lake described by de San Juan’s men, given a little imagination. There is more than enough room both to land and to take back off. The hard part will be first actually finding Erland and next getting him back to *Estrella* alive.

Svensen and I run through a few possible scenarios while en route to the lake. A daring, guns-blazing rescue like in the adventure autopictures would be suicidal, even if facing clubs and stone spears. Remembering my Peacemaker, I steer him to a more sane approach of making contact under

the protection of the calumet and offering to pay a ransom in return for his son. Assuming they are anything less than the blood-cultists Svensen fears, it holds the best and possibly only real hope of getting Erland and ourselves out alive.

As Svensen retires to use the evac tube I sneak a peek back to check on Don and am satisfied to find him not only safe and unharmed but contentedly chewing the leather handle off Svensen's designer briefcase. I set the autopilot and get Don a mango. Back at the helm, I double-check my navigation against Göttfriedsen's maps, happily identifying Peak 038 as the mountain to our starboard side. Svensen rejoins me, pistol now thankfully in his belt rather than in his hand.

A few minutes pass in silence before Svensen begins speaking as much to himself as to me. "I was in Nye Malmö checking in on one of my investment ventures when word to me came that my son had been by savages taken while on missionary work in Dinetah with his uncle. Always adventurous, that boy. I could not keep him from following my foolhardy little brother into those dangerous deserts. There is a new cult sweeping the continent. The 'Dance of the Rainbringer', they call it. The savages dress in the near-nude ways of old, their Bibles and crosses cast away. They run away from the missions, the growing cult to join in the deserts. The missionaries tales of human sacrifice tell, spiriting away women and children to their great center in the mountains. Interviews with cultists indicate it is to Da'oe they go. It is where they have my son taken, I am certain."

Another hour passes in near silence, though I am unable to regain that sense of peace and freedom with my nerves so jangled. Finally, I identify Peaks 045 and 046, marking what should be the southwestern corner of the lake above a small ovular-shaped bay. Peak 045 is tall and fully clad in

thick white snow. I suppress a cold shiver upon seeing the white stuff, and throttle up, aiming to pass just east of its crest, descend over the small bay, and fly over the surface of the open lake to check for a clear landing path.

I am utterly unprepared for what I see as we crest over the peak, and the lake opens up before us. The lake sits dreamlike, sapphire blue in a bowl of emerald woodlands and white-capped mountains. The small bay has water as clear as any in the Caribbean, possibly more so. The waters glow emerald on the edges. It is breathtaking.

There can be no doubt: before us lies legendary Da'oe.

Da'oe is not empty of men. Below in the small emerald bay I can see a small fleet of canoes, surrounding a small rocky island. Bright colors blanket the island as if it were dressed for Carnival. A large tree trunk stands upright on it like some primitive shrine. Shaking myself from the vision, I remember I still have to actually land, and soon. A glance at the fuel gauge shows near empty. I have perhaps enough fuel remaining for a couple passes before I absolutely have to land. Swooping low over the lake's surface, I find it smooth and empty. I pull *Estrella* up into a shallow wingover and cut power, gently lowering her down onto the glasslike surface of the lake. She settles onto the step as easily as a land plane onto a paved runway and then smoothly settles into the cool embrace of the crystalline waters with hardly a plume of spray as I throttle back to idle.

I feel a sense of relief and accomplishment at being the first man to land a plane in legendary Da'oe. Then, suddenly, I feel awash with guilt. I feel like I've defaced a masterpiece or defiled a virgin. I feel like I've heckled a choir or farted loudly during Mass. There is something so quiet, remote, and untouched about Da'oe...or there was before I brought loud, roaring *Estrella* screaming over the mountains and cut a foamy scar across the still

waters of the lake. Already, the wake must be pounding the quiet shores. I turn off the portside engine in slight consolation.

I taxi slowly south, towards the small bay. Certainly, the small island must be a ceremonial center and the likely place to hold a sacrifice. I slide open the window to my side and am blasted by a rush of icy air. It is fresh and exhilarating, but frigid. It must be fifty five degrees out there! Inhumanly cold! After three hours of fumes from the large gas can, though, I can tolerate the frigid air for the sake of its purity.

We approach the small bay. A flotilla of canoes is coming towards us in a manner both picturesque and ominous. I glance out the window and am amazed to be able to see the bottom of the lake this far from shore. So much for “deep as the abyss”. I kill the starboard engine and let *Estrella* drift then walk down the stairs into the nose, put on my flyer’s jacket against the bitter cold, and open the hatch, dropping the anchor. The anchor rope goes taut, but we still drift, the anchor not reaching the bottom. Impossible! How clear can this water be? We drift closer to the bay and the flotilla. I get ready to run back up to crank an engine when the anchor finally finds purchase on the rocky, weed-covered bottom, and *Estrella* pulls sharply to a stop. The flotilla is already in rifle range and nearing arrow range. I scramble back to the tail to get my Peacemaker.

As I walk back through the cockpit I see Svensen with gun in hand. “Put that away, damn it!” I yell, scampering back down into the nose. Back up through the hatch, this time with the Peacemaker in hand. I hold it aloft in both hands by index finger and thumb and arch skyward in what I have been assured is the Plains Khanates’ symbol for seeking parley. I hope the Da’oños understand it. Otherwise, I’m a sitting duck. After a moment I see one of the Indios stand and mirror the gesture. Breathing a sigh of relief, I signal to go around to the port side. I run back past Svensen, who

is looking confused, and open the portside door. The canoes slowly paddle around into a semicircle by the hatch where I stand, Peacemaker held out before me in both hands.

One canoe, a large ornately carved and painted dugout draped in garlands of flowers, paddles up to me. An ornately dressed man covered with flowers and feathers (a chief? A priest?) stands and holds both hands aloft, chanting ceremoniously. The language is harmonic, choppy, and unlike any I've yet heard. He's just finished chanting, and I'm just ready to call out when Svensen stands alongside me, pistol in his hand. A cry of shock goes through the men on the canoes and all are soon onto their knees chanting and swaying. The ornately dressed man looks shocked and then raises both hands and eyes to the heavens and starts saying a loud, harmonic chant.

"I think they think we're gods!" says Svensen, cockily.

"Or demons," I add. "Put that damned gun away, you fool!" I try desperately to motion with the calumet pipe, hoping to salvage the situation before it gets truly savage.

Another boat paddles up from the left. One of the rowers yells to us in Spanish, "Actually, they just think you're foolish, rude men who have desecrated a holy place with your weapon and your airplane!"

"You speak Spanish?" I ask, relieved.

"You know what an airplane is?" Svensen asks, incredulous.

"I speak Spanish better than I speak the local Washeshu gibberish," he says, "but I slowly learn. I am better with the Ute dialects. We know what

airplanes are because many of us come from elsewhere, and we all saw the airplane flying by last year. It was a bad omen. I was born Federico Alvarez near Havasupai Mission, Colorado, son of a Coloradeño bronze smith and a Havasupai weaver. But today I am Mup'ilp'ili'digumséwe?i, or 'he who makes metal from fire'. I am but a simple child of the Rainmaker, He Who Brings Life and Peace, Forgiver of Sins and Banisher of War and Hate. My fellow children pray to try and cleanse the lake and air of the curse you bring here with your airplane and, worse yet, your pistol. No weapons can be brought even to the shore of the lake, for it is an affront to the Rainmaker. That you break the peace of the lake with the airplane and then pollute the Source of All Waters with your vile weapon is unforgivable!"

I bow my head. "Please forgive us our trespass and our extreme ignorance, but we had to come here. My...passenger here must see his child. He fears for his boy and fears what harm might come to him here."

Metalmaker/Federico crossed his arms angrily. "What savages do you take us for, that we would hurt a child or allow harm to come to a child, particularly here at the Source of All Waters?" He shares some quick, halting words with the ornately-dressed man then says to us, "But there is no white child here, so your passenger has wasted his time, yours, and ours in the commission of this sin against harmony. The Rain Talker has asked that you turn your airplane around and fly forever away from here."

"As you wish. I will need a few minutes to get my airplane ready to fly. Again, my humblest apologies," I say, bowing low and humbly. "Back in your seat, Svensen. You were wrong. Your son is not here."

"They lie," he says.

“You care to prove them wrong? Feel free to jump off here.”

“They...there’s more...to hell with it!” He stands in the doorway. “My son is not a child,” he yells. “His name is Erland Svensen, a young man of nineteen years, hair blond like mine! I will pay handsomely for his safe return!”

Upon mentioning Erland’s name there is a murmur through the flotilla. After a moment, Metalmaker/Federico speaks. “In that case yes, your son is here, and he is safe. He half expected you to try to come here and feared for your safety. He will be glad you are alive, but I doubt he will care to return to you. He is now called ‘Dí:be welegáŋaʔi degápšaba,’ or ‘The sun shines on his thick beard’, and he too is here of his own will as a child of the Rainmaker. You know this, Father of the Man Once Called Erland, for he told you as much in the letter he sent you.”

I scowl at Svensen. “A ‘small boy’,” I say, “‘kidnapped by evil cultists and about to be sacrificed’, you say? I should leave you here with him and fly off myself!”

“They lie! They...”

“Don’t piss on my leg and tell me there’s a hull leak,” I say. “One more lie and I’ll throw you off my airplane myself!”

“I...” He sighs, and guides me back inside out of earshot to the Indios. “I received the letter while I was in Nye Malmö. My boy has always been a fool, but this was the most foolish thing yet! They talk peace, but any missionary will the truth tell you, about how they young men and women lure in and brainwash until they will gladly themselves to their heathen gods make sacrifice.”

“And I’m sure the missionaries have no ulterior motive in defaming a competing religion,” I say, voice dripping with snide. Although I am a practicing Christian, my particular Congolese branch of Catholicism, with our African Saints and rituals of possession and rhythmic dance, have been labeled cultism, Satanism, and heresy for centuries. This has made me more than a little suspicious of the accusations and edicts of the Eurocentric faiths.

“I must see him! I must talk him out of this foolishness!”

“Foolishness must run in the family,” I say, no longer giving a shit about decorum or manners. I walk back to the door. “Mister Svensen wishes to see his son, to speak to him!” I say.

The Rain Talker rattles on in the Utan language. Metalmaker speaks. “We will arrange a visit, ashore. You may enter as guests and stay in one of our shelters. You may bring the peace pipe, but nothing more. Not a single weapon is allowed. You may not bring any of your poisons either: no wine, beer, or spirits, no coffee or tea, no medicines. No curses or angry words. This is a place of physical and spiritual purity.”

Before Svensen can object, I say, “We agree to all terms.”

“In that case, you may board one of our boats. We swear by the Rainmaker that your airplane and possessions will be left undisturbed, for none of us would pollute ourselves by touching it.”

“Fair enough,” I say. “One more request, however. May I bring my lizard?”

The canoes glide slowly towards the shore, silent save for the gentle, rhythmic splashing of the paddles. I shiver slightly. The air is freezing, probably no warmer than fifty. I can see my breath! The Indios take it in stride, as does Svensen, who still wears short sleeves while I'm bundled up in flying leathers. Don lies tucked into my shirt, scales scratchy against my skin. He's too cool to do more than hiss complaint. I feed him another piece of mango, and he seems content to gnaw on it. Low gray clouds are moving in, bringing a slight mist. I shiver again, harder, and rethink my Aleyska plans.

Eventually, we reach the shore, landing on a (for lack of a better term) beach of smooth round rocks. There's a scraping sound as the canoes land, and we step ashore through the surf. The water instantly soaks through my pants and hits my legs, ice-cold. Water should not be such a temperature! We walk up into a small village of conical bark houses. The Indios have gathered around to see the strangers who came from the sky. I practically rush to the large fire in the center—by now I'm shivering violently, teeth clattering. I sigh in relief when the wave of heat hits me. The Indios look upon me with amusement, like I'm insane or at least terminally weak. After a moment to break the shiver, I find a large flat rock and use a stick to push it near the fire. After a few minutes to warm it up, I blow and fan it until it is cool enough to hold to my palm but still warm. The Indios watch this ritual with unconcealed amusement. I retrieve Don from my shirt and set him alongside it. The Indios talk excitedly in their strange choppy language, pointing at Don, curious smiles on their face. Lizards probably don't reach iguana size around here. Don ignores them and slowly makes his way up on to the warm rock, where he curls up atop it and seems to smile contentedly.

Children rush excitedly up to us. I smile paternally, but to my disappointment they pay only cursory attention to me, all wanting instead to touch Don. I allow a few soft, quick touches, trying to communicate my meanings without words. I mime 'eat', 'plants', and 'leaves' as best as I can and the children go running off into the woods, returning swiftly with various leaves and shoots of plants. I pick out some likely candidates and they run to fetch more. Soon Don is having a smorgasbord of young plant shoots, grasses, and greens. Content, he curls up and falls asleep.

With Don asleep and me not performing any more oddities, the children grow bored and run off to play games in the woods. I look around, taking in the panorama: conifers as tall as anything in the jungles of Brazil, still waters that glow a deep ocean blue in the fading afternoon light, and soft gray clouds rolling fog-like among the verdant hills. The air, though cold and thin, is crisp and clean, carrying only a few smells of human habitation: smoke, foods, and wet leather. Despite the bitter cold I settle back and find relaxation and contentment.

Meanwhile, Svensen is still animatedly arguing with the Rain Talker and Metalmaker. The latter two maintain a Jesus-like gentility and composure despite Svensen's irate gesturing and whatever accusations he's making. Rain Talker holds up a calumet, and Svensen pushes it away, complaining.

I turn away, shaking my head, and watch the Indios. They're calm, laughing on occasion, bickering on occasion. Young would-be lovers flirt, married couples squabble, parents and grandparents hug or yell at their children...in all a very normal human society. There's none of the wild-eyed hypnotism I've seen in religious fanatics, nor the downcast eyes of a society beaten into submission. All seems to contradict the accusations of cultism.

An old squaw comes up to me and rattles off questions in that strange tongue that seems to be the second language here. Ute? Trying to recall the bits and drabs of Paiute I picked up from a former trade partner from Colorado, I catch a few passing words: “you want [have? Need?] - food eat?” She mimes “eat”. I nod, saying what I think means “yes, please,” though her odd smirk makes me wonder what I really said. Either way she brings me a woven plate with small baked patties of some ground grain-like substance. I taste them; they have a pleasant, light piney taste. Some sort of pine tree seeds? I smile and make “yum” noises. She smiles contently.

A middle-age man with scar-crossed hands and sun-wrinkled skin brings me some strips of smoked fish. They’re absolutely mouth-watering, exploding salty and smoky on my taste buds, with a cedar-like finish, probably smoked over the wood of one of those ridiculously tall cedars I’ve seen growing here. I’m honored, for the salt alone must be impossibly valuable here in the mountains far from the sea. He sits beside me, carrying himself in the graceful, ready, but gentile way of an old warrior who has long since laid aside the spear in favor of a softer life.

He speaks a smattering of Coloradeño Spanish. With my smattering of Paiute we manage to eke out a semblance of conversation. He is called something like “Wolf of the Dell” or “Wolf of the Small Valley”. He’s a “Shoshone”, which is apparently a tribe from north of here that speaks similarly to the Ute and Paiute, in the same way Portuguese and Italian are similar. I gather from him a long story of violence and disease and sorrow until he met a holy man of the Rainmaker and abandoned his violent, drinking ways for the peaceful life of a fisherman. I tell him a somewhat similar story, one of a young adventurer who fled a life of harvesting sugarcane for a life of violence and intrigue, but instead of finding

God...whom I'd grown up with and knew already, thank you...I'd found the Air. He seems somewhat fascinated and horrified by the idea of a machine of fire and steel that could fly as the birds, and somewhat offended in a mild way that a mere human would break the limit of the trees and mountains and dare trespass on the Rainmaker's property.

He asks why a man used to flying among the clouds is so afraid of the cold. I waste valuable breath trying to explain the concept of a heater, which I guess he takes to mean the fire that brings life to the bird machine. He tries with limited success to teach me some of his new style of fighting in a passive way, a system of throws and locks that cause no harm to aggressor or would-be victim. In his hands it seems quite powerful, but it is rather complicated, and the whole idea of peaceful fighting seems mostly contradictory to me. In the end, we concentrate on our similarities and part as friends.

By this time Svensen has given up arguing and is sitting on a rock, dejected, cursing, ignoring the paradise around us. I leave him to his sulking.

The sun is setting and the entire village drops their mealtime chores to perform some kind of sunset dance. It's rhythmic with chanting, drums, flutes, and circle-dances. I'm struck by the similarities to aspects of Congo Mass when the Saints come to possess the devout. Swayed by the music and chant, I'm lulled into the ritual. I can feel the Saints, present even here. The small, retreating rational part of my mind wonders briefly if the Rainmaker is an aspect of Saint Danbhalla, when suddenly Saintly possession takes me and all fades to white.

I awake, lying on the ground. It's now twilight and the Indios stand around, looking amazed. I feel hot and notice the wool of my flying

leathers is singed, as are my eyebrows. My mouth is black from where I'd been chewing a coal. I notice the fire has been disturbed. As I sit up they step back. Rain Talker approaches, looks at me, and chants, waving a pine bough over me. He smiles and grunts, then turns to the crowd, chanting some more. They cheer and move in around me, lifting me up on their shoulders, walking me around the fire, chanting. Don looks on from his warm rock. I swear he seems amused.

I am named "Serpent of the Sky and Fire". Under the possession, I'd taken on snakelike attributes and slithered through the fire unharmed, crunching hot coals in my mouth. In all, a typical Spirit possession, probably Saint Danbhalla or one of his many serpentine aspects. Without a priest to properly identify the Spirit, I'll just have to guess. I'm greeted as family here, now. They're sure the Rainmaker's Hand has touched me, and, if my theory that the Rainmaker is an aspect of Danbhalla is correct (I need to consult a priest or mambo), then perhaps He did. The Lord works in mysterious ways and touches all men and women across the globe. Who am I to say who's been shown the truer light? Perhaps we are all correct in some way or all wrong. Lord only knows.

The setting sun glows pinkish-orange through a low cloud hovering above us, casting a red-shifted light upon us. It gives a strange Vivachrome glow to the already ethereal land. It's easy to see why the Indios find their God here. Certainly this place has a touch of the divine to it. Perhaps He brought me here for a reason, perhaps to restore my flagging faith even as the shadows of the Inquisition behind me grow longer. He moves in mysterious ways, and what could be more mysterious than choosing an overstressed Vinlander businessman as His vessel?

And I am not the only one who has found something lost this night. Father and son are finally reunited here in the glowing, ethereal light, meeting face to face on a crossroads atop a slight hill. They are too far away for me to hear what they say to one another, but their body language speaks volumes. Svensen stands rigid and confused, as if not sure to run to his son or berate him for his idiocy. Erland stands still and silent, hesitant as well, as if torn between fear, relief, and anger.

The father wears a gunmetal grey Vinlander-style suit of sharp cut. The son is dressed as an Indio in loose leathers, beads, and feathers, a garland of flowers around his head like a crown. The father's close-cropped hair glows dimly in light of the setting sun, a sharp, cold line like a ring of gold. The son's long, scraggly blonde hair and beard glow brightly, like a soft halo or aura. Finally, filial love wins out over mutual anger and resentment, and the two run to embrace. I'm partly amazed to see Svensen actually cry.

A hard kick to my feet rips me violently from dreams of rainbow serpents and warm sunlight and back into the harsh, cold world of consciousness. I roll over, groggy, and look up to see the less-than-angelic halo of Svensen's blond hair, illuminated by the dying embers of the bonfire. I start to curse.

“Shhh! Quiet, Herr Lagarto, it is me!” calls Svensen from the dark. “Get up; it is time for us to leave.”

“Mañana,” I say and try to roll back over.

“No!” he hisses, “get up, now!” He kicks me harder. I look up again and see the silver gleam of his revolver pointed through the shelter flap.

“What are you talking about?” I say, fighting to clear my head of night shadows. “Why now?”

There’s a brief struggling between Svensen and an unseen someone outside of my borrowed bark shelter. Svensen hisses something in Danish to the other and jerks the man to his knees. I notice for the first time that it is his son Erland, gagged by a handkerchief, hands bound behind him. Erland’s eyes burn with fear, anger, and a touch of indignation. “Get up, damn you!” Svensen whispers sharply at me. “We’re going to the boats and then to the plane, all three of us! Don’t forget your damned reptile.”

A cold anger seeps through me. “Mañana, Svensen,” I say and start to lie back down. He kicks me again and cocks the hammer on the pistol.

“We go. Now.”

“Shit.”

I march, Don in my shirt, backpack over a shoulder. Svensen is several paces behind me, pistol in hand, dragging his son. We reach the stony shore, and Svensen motions to one of the ornate canoes, sitting silently in the still waters. Only the sounds of the night’s creatures break the stillness. “You row,” Svensen says to me, pushing his son violently towards the canoe. “Don’t try anything.”

“Or what?” I ask, my voice no longer a whisper. “You’ll shoot the only person in this valley capable of flying you out of here? You haven’t learned much, have you? Good luck on the preflight, and remember:

you'll need to get her up to speed very quickly and don't forget to set the flaps just right to get..."

"In the god damned boat, now!" he hisses.

I stand there a moment in the silent stillness, pushing aside my fear with a steel resolve. If I am to die, I die here, in this house of God. I chant the *Lord's Bilongo* and prepare to enter the waters of the next world where Saint Peter of the Crossroads will guide me to the next world.

Svensen is practically yelling now: *"I said get in the fucking boat!"*

My vision catches the slightest hint of a shadow sliding out of the shore-side bushes and on to the stones of the shore. I see a human form stalking towards us, impossibly silent with not even the slightest scraping sound despite the loose rock. I deliberately keep my gaze away from him, lest I give his presence away.

"In the boat now, goddamn it!"

"Or what?" whispers the voice of the stalker. I recognize the voice as Wolf of the Dell's. The normal gentleness his voice is gone, replaced now with a feral growl. He yelps three times, loudly, towards the encampment.

"This concerns you not," Svensen says. "I am my son taking home, away from your cult! A few weeks of psychiatric help will him soon reeducate." Already the rest of the people of Da'oe are sprinting up, taking position around us. Erland takes that moment to run for the villagers. Svensen turns his head to yell at his son. In that instant Wolf springs, halting only at the last second as the pistol turns to face him. "I said step back!" Svensen screams. I am my son taking from here! You heathens cannot stop me! I

will shoot every one of you if I must!”

“You will shoot the hundred of us with the six bullets of your gun?” asks Erland, gag now removed by his fellow villagers. “Will you shoot me as well? I will die to defend my family here if I must.”

Svensen, amazingly, is left speechless. He looks desperately from his son to me to Wolf, unsure of what to do. It is a dangerous mix of fear, anger, and uncertainty. It has to be ended and soon.

I can't say with full certainty whether it is me or the Saints that move. In a blur of adrenal haze, I bolt forward and grasp Svensen's gun-hand. Recalling by muscle memory a move Wolf had showed me the day before, I twist his wrist over and fling him quickly to the ground. Wolf reacts a second later and leaps upon him. An instant after that four other young men jump into the pile, grasping arms and legs. Within seconds Svensen is pinned on the shore, face down, and disarmed.

Wolf in the Dell holds the pistol out to me with two fingers, as if revolted by its touch. “Thank you,” I say to Wolf, “for all you have done.”

“Just take cursed thing away here.” I grab the pistol, pop open the cylinder, and eject the bullets into my pocket. I then begin to break it down into its component parts. I'll hide the parts in various nooks of my plane to make sure Svensen can't reassemble them any time soon, keeping the firing pin on my person at all times.

Erland – Sun Beard – walks up to us, leading the rest of the clan. He says something in the strange Da'oe tongue, and the four young men let Svensen up. “Father,” he says in Portuguese, obviously wanting me to hear and to understand. “Tomorrow you leave – without me. I had hoped

for a few days to show you my new life, my new people, and let you know what I have found here. But before you go, I wish to show you something. Also, someone.” He motions to a young woman, who walks up. “This is my wife, whose name translates to Evening Flower. In her is your grandchild, whom you may never get to meet unless you can prove to us that you have that honor earned. I planned to introduce you to her tomorrow, but I want you to see her now, and only now, and for her to see you like this. I pray one day we will all sit around the same table. In the morning I will take you some place special, sacred, before you leave. I pray its divinity will cut through the wall of steel and ice you have built around your heart.” With that, he turns his back on his father and walks, hand in hand with his young wife, back to the village.

The strokes of the paddles in the water are the only sound. Ornatly carved canoes carry us south through the mouth of the emerald bay we had overflowed the day before. We pass through a small chokepoint of stones that guard the inlet. Men stand on each rocky outcropping wearing bison-skull headdresses, chests bare and painted. They raise their hands and chant greeting. As we pass beyond the inlet, the hills and mountains around the bay encircle us. We see the small island, a large flower-festooned cedar pole rising like an obelisk from its center. Blankets of flowers surround it. Men and women swim nude from the shores to reach the island and kneel, arms raised, before the sacred pole. The large, snow-capped mountain stands sublime above. A waterfall cascades like white lace from the nearby hills. Even somber Svensen is left speechless. “It is beautiful!” he says. “Like a Norwegian fjord.” While I’ve never seen a live fjord myself, I can easily see this place as some Viking’s home.

“This is the Fount of All Waters,” Sun Beard, formerly Erland, tells us. He

speaks in Portuguese so that I too can understand. “Here Rainmaker touched the earth and a fountain to the waters below sprung up to fill the world. This is our most sacred place, holiest of holy. To enter this bay with pollutants, chemical or spiritual, in you is the greatest of defilements. The Rain Talker has forgiven your unwitting defilement. You,” he says to me, “have already the Divine Hand felt. You may to the Holy Island swim, if you wish.”

I thought of the cold, cold waters and declined. “It is not my place,” I say, “but I thank your people for this greatest of honors, for which I am undeserving.” I figure if Saint Danbhallá really wants me there, he’ll possess me and ride me over there at his leisure.

Svensen speaks up, his simmering anger muted with resignation, “You have a mind strong enough to forge a new destiny for the company and the family, but instead you settle for a bark hut.”

“Your ways were never mine, father. The path you for me built was not mine to take.”

“I can at some level understand why you came here, Erland, even if I still cannot accept that you will abandon your family, your city, your life, and your future for this gentle heresy.”

“This is my family, my city, my life, and my future now, father.”

Svensen sighs. “Last night convinced me, however much it hurts me, that you’ve your decision made. I, for your immortal soul, pray and for your safe return hope, when and if you grow out of this.”

“I will accept that as the greatest gift you may offer me, father,” Sun

Beard replies.

“You always a dreamer were, Erland. To your detriment. But so be it, it is ultimately your decision as you are a man and no longer a child. I was a fool not to understand that. Ivar will be happy your seat in the board room to take, though he has but half your wits.”

They sit in silence. They had the whole conversation in Portuguese, for some inexplicable reason letting me in on their special moment. Perhaps, I am meant to bear witness to this exchange. I hope Svensen doesn't expect me to sign an affidavit on it as part of some strange legal justification for disinheriting his oldest son, or something.

We sit in silence for an hour or more, in the still waters of the bay. I begin to wish for a fishing pole. I can see some of those huge lake trout, swimming below the boat. I know better than to ask for one. Finally, Svensen nods and we turn the boat around and paddle back out of the sacred bay. He never turns back. I look back towards it the whole time, watching this earthly paradise recede like the fading vision of a path not taken. Part of me is tempted to stay here: live simply in this realm of peace and solitude like some new world monk, perhaps marry an Indian maiden and become a fisherman like Wolf of the Dell.

Yet for all its eternal beauty, there is a short-lived, almost doomed quality to this place. Göttfriedsen found this place for the civilized world, and now so have Svensen and I. More will come. Scientists, explorers, and God forbid missionaries. The warlike Ute tribes and xenophobic California tribe refugees that surround this slice of the divine will fight to the death to defend it. They may not be enough. Perhaps, just perhaps, this will prove too hard a nut to crack given the lack of obvious material wealth. Maybe Wolf in the Dell's passive fighting style will help. I can

only hope.

Besides, as I said to Sun Beard, this is not my place. Rainmaker, even if truly a guise of Saint Danbhalla, is not my God. My place is in the air, ever the flying nomad. My place is warm and sunny, properly hot and humid like the original Eden. My wife is *Estrella*. My child is Don, and I'll never have the audacity to assume he must follow in my footsteps. A simple life of a warm rock and a cool mango is good enough for him.

I turn away from the bay and see *Estrella* growing larger. More canoes approach from the village. We all converge at *Estrella*. A child in the lead canoe from the village holds Don. The villagers help me prep for flight. Under my guidance a pair of Indios pump fuel from Svensen's drum into *Estrella's* tanks. It is obvious to me now why Svensen bought the fuel, knowing, as he did, that there'd be none in Da'oe. I gain a new respect for his planning and attention to detail and start to understand how he managed to build up an empire amid the cut-throat business world of Nye Copenhagen. I leave the empty drum open to air out for an hour for the sake of safety while I perform the full preflight ritual. The child that brought Don seems fascinated with every aspect of the ritual and *Estrella* herself. Perhaps one day he'll break his father's heart and run off to California to fly airplanes.

As the Indios gather in the canoes to depart, I give them two gifts: a crate of mangoes and a twenty pound bag of sea salt. They greet the latter as a treasure greater than gold, and here, in the mountains, perhaps it is.

Preflight done, Svensen and his son embrace one last time, both crying. Svensen takes his seat on the passenger bench and stares straight ahead, lost in his thoughts. Don rests comfortably in the copilot's seat.

The inside of the plane is cold, cramped, and reeks of fuel, oil, and hydraulic fluid. Home, sweet home. I retrieve the anchor and make sure the props are clear before cranking the starboard-side engine. It sputters to life with a loud, coughing scream that breaks the eternal silence of the lake valley. The Indios, watching from their canoes and the far shores, cover their ears. The portside engine coughs effortlessly to life. I check all the gauges, flight control movements, and other mechanical aspects as the engines warm, making sure *Estrella* is ready to fly. I sneak one last look around at this mythic mountain lake, waving one last time to the Indios of Da'oe.

“Are you ready to leave, Herr Svensen?” I ask.

He remains silent, staring ahead. Finally: “Today, I fear I have lost my son. There is no feeling worse.”

“Believe me,” I say, an ache of painful memory stabbing at my heart, “I know. All too well.” *Estrella* responds with impatience as I throttle up her engines, as if eager to get airborne. “Me too, my love,” I tell her, “me too.”

Turning away from the canoes, careful not to blast them with prop wash or splash them with wake, I slowly nudge *Estrella* forward. We gain speed, slowly rising up onto the step, etching our own horizontal white lace cascade behind us, and then break clear of the surface of the lake. Climbing well, despite the thin air, we bank around and waggle our wings to our hosts before banking off over the mountains in a circuitous route to avoid defiling the emerald bay again.

We climb high and free into the cool embrace of the sky, setting course for San Cristóbal. Behind us, ancient, sacred Da'oe returns to its eternal

stillness.

THE END

Jack Philpott is a born writer and artist who somehow ended up as an Electrical Engineer. Whether he's enjoying a chilled Vermouth on the streets of Geneva, being catapult-launched off of a perfectly good aircraft carrier, or painstakingly reconstructing the Pyramid of Giza in the sand box with his son, Jack tries to appreciate the sublime nature of the moment.

Jack's previous works include several articles for Palladium Books' ® Rifter™ periodical plus the perpetually-upcoming Rifts® Delta Blues trilogy (with Josh Sinsapaugh), several fan award winning “timelines” for Alternatehistory.com (as [Geekhis Khan](#)), and regular contributions to Dieselpunks.org (as [Cap'n Tony](#)). Jack co-created the World of Mañana with Norman James in 2010.

See the tropical prequel to this tale, “Cocktails on the Street of Bones”, in the Twit Publishing Dieselpunk Anthology (scheduled for release in Feb 2014) with even more stories to come...mañana.

To find out more about Jack visit him on Facebook www.facebook.com/Jack.Philpott.author.

GOODBYE

There you have it, folks. You've survived the bullet-strewn alleys of our ePulp adventures.

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-Tome

PULP ALLIES

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<http://www.dieselpunks.org/group/authors/forum/topics/welcome-to-john-s-epub-primer-a-dieselpunks-org-exclusive>

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