



PROLOGUE

A CHANCE MEETING

1887, in the city of Amiens, France

At a small café in Quartier Saint-Leu, Jules Verne sipped quietly on his coffee as he sifted through the Paris newspaper. Verne enjoyed quiet moments like this. They helped clear his mind and organize his thoughts for the next adventure he would bring to life. The writer appreciated the quiet, little community on the Somme River. The sound of seagulls, steamship whistles, and church bells was as much noise as he could manage.

By looking at this ordinary man, you wouldn't know that he was such a renowned author. His white hair and beard matched the wrinkles on his face. He rubbed his left leg regularly, hoping to relieve the pain. It still ached where his

nephew, Gaston, had once shot him. The poor boy was locked away in an asylum with little to no explanation of why he'd done it. All that remained was the ache in his leg.

The pain was a constant reminder to Verne, a reminder of his mortality, and it scared him. He would leave behind a legacy in his science, fantasy, and adventure stories, but was it enough, he wondered? Did these "flights of fancy" mean anything beyond the pages he wrote?

"*Pardon moi, monsieur,*" said a voice, startling the author. "Are you Jules Verne?"

He looked up from his newspaper to see a tall, skinny young man standing by the table. He bowed slightly at the waist with a bowler hat resting in his hand over his heart. Verne knew the young man had to be from Eastern Europe by his burly mustache and thick accent. His dark clothes reminded Verne of an undertaker. He hoped that was not the case.

"*Oui,* may I help you?" Verne asked.

"I am Nikola Tesla," the stranger said. "I am a great admirer of your work, *Monsieur Verne*. I apologize for interrupting you, but your housekeeper told me I might find you here. I was hoping I could have a moment of your time."

Verne thought for a second before nodding and motioning for him to sit down. Although he hated engaging with admirers, Verne knew it was part of the fame of being an author. Tesla seemed giddy as a schoolboy as he sat in the chair across from Verne. Before he could say anything, the waiter approached the two men.

"*Voulez-vous un café, monsieur?*" he asked, inquiring if Tesla would like a cup of coffee.

“*Oui, merci, et un verre d'eau s'il vous plait,*” he replied, asking for a glass of water as well. Tesla waited patiently for the waiter to depart before saying anything, but Verne spoke first.

“From your accent, I assume you are from Eastern Europe, *Monsieur Tesla*. Austria or Hungary, am I correct?” Verne inquired.

“Serbia, *Monsieur Verne*, but it is part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, so you are quite correct.”

“And what brings you to Amiens? Surely you did not come here to get an autograph?” Verne quipped.

“*Non, monsieur,*” Tesla answered. “I work for the Continental Edison Company. I came to Amiens to work on the electrical system. I thought I might get the chance to speak with you before I return to Paris.”

“Edison . . . Well, well, I must thank you for the electric lights,” Verne commented. “It is better to light the night with your electric light bulb than to try to write by fading candlelight at three o'clock in the morning.”

Tesla smiled in appreciation of the compliment. “Thank you, *Monsieur Verne*, but perhaps I can inspire you another way,” Tesla remarked as he pulled out a folded piece of paper from his coat and handed it to Verne.

“*Qu'est-ce que c'est?*” he curiously asked. “I thought you weren't looking for my autograph.”

“No, *non*. It is something that your writings inspired me to create.”

He piqued Verne's curiosity as he carefully unfolded the paper. When Verne saw what was inside, his eyes grew as large as hen's eggs. It was an engine so complicated in design that Verne could not understand the intricacies of what he was

seeing. Around the machine was a crude drawing of a ship, a submersible ship that resembled his *Nautilus* description.

“*Incroyable*,” Verne whispered, amazed at what he saw. “What is it?”

“A steam-powered oscillating electrical generator,” Tesla explained. “It can generate twenty times the electrical power of anything produced today, maybe more. My machine could power a ship like your *Nautilus*, don’t you think?”

“*En effet*. Indeed it could, but it would take a ton of coal to generate the amount of steam you would need to power such an engine, would you not agree?”

“Under normal circumstances, yes, but not with this,” Tesla said as he looked around first to see if anyone was watching him before he reached into his pocket and pulled out a small, corked vial. A few small blue stones glowed dimly in the morning light and were nestled inside the glass. He handed it to Verne, who stared at them in awe.

“What on earth are they?” Verne asked.

“They’re from a meteor that fell near my home in Serbia, near the Balkans,” Tesla began to explain, but he abruptly stopped when the waiter returned with his coffee and a glass of water, as he had requested. He waited until the waiter departed to continue his explanation. “It generates a constant heat that never seems to die out. Here, please observe!”

Tesla took the cork off the vial and poured out one of the small meteorite fragments into the glass of water. The blue rock began to bubble and burn, rapidly raising the water’s temperature. Soon, the water was boiling as steam arose from the glass. Tesla took a spoon and pulled out the tiny rock before dropping it carefully on the tabletop.

“You can pick it up, *Monsieur*. It won’t burn you.”

Verne reached down and tentatively touched it with his fingertips until he realized how relatively cool the rock was, then he picked it up and held it in his hand. “*Monsieur* Tesla, this is quite, well, *remarquable!*”

“It expends energy without reducing its size or mass,” Tesla boasted. “It could change the world as we know it.”

“Is there any more of this meteor?” Verne asked. “Where does it come from?”

“I have a colleague at the Royal Astronomical Society in England who discovered a comet he named Uriel, after the archangel,” Tesla said. “As the comet passed by our planet, Uriel’s fragments impacted Earth from the Urals to the Alps and even into North America. I am working on a precise method to detect the meteorite fragments because others are beginning to search for them. So far, I’ve collected nearly five hundred kilograms.”

“You are an incredibly talented young man, *Monsieur* Tesla,” Verne said as he handed him the meteor before Tesla dropped it in the tube. Verne then folded the paper and gave it back. “But what does this have to do with an old man like me? I am a writer of flights of fancy, not a scientist.”

“Your stories have inspired me to pursue new avenues of science. You have dared to dream the impossible, but this,” Tesla said as he held up the test tube, “makes it possible. I would like to collaborate with you on some ideas that I have. I have the scientific knowledge, and you have an incredible imagination. Perhaps, together, we can bring about a new age of science and technology, which benefits all of humanity.”

“Will that not interfere with your work at the Edison Company?” Verne asked.

“I have already put in my notice to leave my position with Edison. I plan to go to the United States and pursue my dreams there, but I want to work with you on my designs before I go.

“Besides,” Tesla continued, “I don’t want my ideas to come under an Edison patent instead of my own. He is a brilliant man, but his ambitions are to pursue science for wealth. I cannot be a part of that.

“Something like this”—he shook his design at Verne as he picked it up—“could change the course of human history. It needs a little imagination to make it come true. You, *Monsieur Verne*, are a master of imagination. Think of what we could accomplish together!”

Verne sat quietly, intrigued by the young man’s offer. He saw how his novels could influence humanity’s future for the first time. “Very well, *Monsieur Tesla*. Where do we begin?”



CHAPTER ONE

HEIST ON THE VALIANT

1907, somewhere over the English Channel

A storm raged over the rolling sea, fierce winds creating a pounding surf as thunder and lightning roared in the overcast sky. It took a skilled pilot to navigate a storm like this.

Murky fog usually shrouded any visibility, a potential hazard for any ship daring to sail these waters, but not this ship. Above the waves and crashing seas, floating effortlessly above it all, the zeppelin Valiant sailed toward Great Britain.

The Valiant was the pinnacle of first-class accommodations for passengers traveling throughout the British Empire. With an Edison Counter-Oscillation Engine, the majestic zeppelin could stay airborne indefinitely, providing its guests with every luxury. At nearly twelve hundred feet in length, the Valiant was the pride of the White Star fleet of airships. It

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could carry more than twenty passengers with a complement of thirty officers, crew, and staff to tend to their every need.

Thanks to the genius and unparalleled visions of people like Tesla, Edison, Bell, McCoy, and others, steam-powered machines utilized the fragments of Uriel as a power source. The discovery of the comet and its power brought about a new Industrial Revolution, an age where these devices made life easier and more reliable for everyday people. Machines no longer operated only on the ground or on the seas. They moved into the sky. The *Valiant* was an example of this unprecedented new age.

“Tonight, the sky is quite clear,” one crew member said to his companion while taking off his hat. They were climbing down the ladder from their watch station now that their shift was over.

“Maybe for once, the pirates are getting airsick.” His companion chuckled.

A prize like the *Valiant* was also a tempting target. The rigid frame was adorned with gold and brass fittings, emulating its rich beginnings. It tended to attract unwelcomed guests.

“You know my father was a sailor, right?” the first crew member continued. “He always joked about how these new engines brought everything about the sea into the air as if nothing had changed.”

The second crew member snickered. “Pirates fight for the ‘booty,’ and the treasure doesn’t have to be on an island.”

While the two sailors laughed, they failed to notice another airship above the cloud line, moving in over the *Valiant*. This one was smaller but relatively well armed. Dual-

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barrel cannons adorned the top, sides, and underneath, rotating around the dirigible frame on a track. The airship's rigid structure was covered in sectioned armor plating to protect it from harm. The blimp was painted to resemble a rainbow-striped serpent, with sharp teeth and an intimidating grin, flowing aft as its body wrapped around it. On the tail fin was the traditional skull and crossbones, denoting its pirate allegiance.

The blimp was the *Galeru*, and it belonged to one of the most infamous pirates of the age, Corsair. The daring deeds of this sky pirate made him a villain to the authorities and a celebrity to the people. In an age of modern marvels, the wealthy grew richer off the workers who toiled in the factories worldwide to produce these wondrous inventions for people, but at the cost of human lives. Corsair was a new age Robin Hood, robbing from the wealthy and affluent and giving to the poor and those in need, but there was more to him than being a thief and pirate. He kept his secrets close, and only those he trusted most knew what they were.

On the bridge of the *Galeru*, first officer Francesca "Kiki" Mori peered out at the *Valiant* through her spyglass. Her long, black hair was pulled back in a traditional Japanese bun called a *shimada*, held up with ornate oriental combs and hairpins. Her appearance and style showed off her adoptive homeland's Japanese heritage with a modern take on samurai armor layered over Victorian sensibilities. She considered herself a *ronin* or a samurai without a master. With a katana around her waist and a Colt M1895 strapped to her hip, Kiki was an intimidating figure. Her skill as a swordswoman was one of many hidden talents that made her an asset to Corsair.

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“Keep her steady, Eager! We want to stay right in her blind spot!” she ordered.

Behind her, at the helm, Gelar “Eager” Kingsman kept a tight grip on the ship’s wheel. The old Australian Aboriginal didn’t look anything like a modern navigator. His baggy clothes, consisting of a short-sleeved shirt and shorts, covered his thin, bony frame. He said he needed his skin exposed like that to feel the slightest shift in the air around him and the ship’s movement under his feet. His white hair and beard were quite long, stringy, and somewhat unkempt. The goggles he wore over his eyes had white lenses to hide that he was blind. Although he couldn’t see the world around him, Eager had an unnatural ability to pilot the *Galeru*, so Corsair kept him on board. His other senses were so sensitive that he could “see” the world better than the rest of them.

“Don’t you worry none, Lady Kiki, we’re right where we want to be,” he replied in a thick accent, exuding confidence. “Their radio wave detector is focused forward, keeping an eye on the storm. Back aft, they’re as blind as I am.”

She looked at the *Valiant* again with her spyglass, peering along the top for any lookout or guards keeping watch. These first-class zeppelins had lookout towers and guard posts along the top centerline. The domed viewing posts were visible along the dirigible spine, raised and lowered in inclement weather. Kiki could see that they were all closed and locked down.

“It looks like their top deck lookout posts are down, but why would they do that?” Kiki asked. “Even in this weather, they always keep one operational; it’s standard procedure. Why on earth would they risk it?”

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“They wouldn’t,” said a voice behind her. He stepped on the bridge of the *Galeru* with the confidence of a commander. His long, leather waistcoat covered a bronze-metal-inlaid vest that hugged his body tight. He had twin modified Colt M1895s strapped around his waist and a cutlass at his side. The sword’s guard wrapped around the hilt in moving gears, leaving one to imagine what power it held within. A flowing red scarf wrapped around his neck, fluttering as he walked. His shoulder-length black hair was pushed back off his face by a large pair of optics. His handsome face gleamed with a devilish grin that made most women swoon. No one knew his real name, only the name he went by: Corsair!

“No guards or lookouts means only one thing, Kiki,” he said as he stepped up next to her. “They’re guarding something so valuable they can’t afford to spare anyone for lookout duty.”

“Private security? Pinkertons, maybe?” she asked. “Do you think they’re transporting some pieces of the comet?”

“According to my sources, yes, absolutely,” Corsair responded as he lowered his optics down over his eyes. He turned some dials to extend the lenses outward, giving him a better view of the *Valiant*. “And it’s not that, Kiki. Our spies saw John Kreusi getting on board in Paris.”

“Edison’s right hand? What’s he doing on this side of the Atlantic?”

“That’s what we’re here to find out,” Corsair said as he continued to look out over the *Valiant*.

“More security means we’ll need bigger guns,” Kiki replied. “This one could get messy, Captain.”

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“No doubt, but every world government is trying to find as much of that meteorite as they can for ERP, and they’ll stop at nothing to get their hands on it.”

ERP, the Edison/Röntgen/Parsons Corporation, was the leading designer for many of the most fantastic machines and engines the world had ever seen. From motion pictures to phonographs, electrical power generators, and weapons of war, ERP supplied them all. Their hands reached deep into the pockets of all the major world powers, from America and Great Britain to Germany and Russia.

“Just so they can keep their factories running without interruption, running the poor and destitute into the ground while they relax in luxury,” Kiki said. “Bastards!”

“Go get the crew ready; we drop in twenty!” Corsair ordered. Kiki ran off the bridge to get the rest of the crew ready to board the *Valiant*. “Eager, bring us down to fifteen feet above the *Valiant*, past the tail fin, when I give the signal.”

“Roger, oy, *gubba!*” Eager cajoled, calling Corsair his “little boy,” as he always did.

Even though more than two-thirds of the *Galeru* was open space for helium bladders, the lower two decks were crew areas. The largest of them was the hangar bay. It held two small aircraft called *aero-wings* designed by two bicycle shop owners in Ohio using a Tesla engine, retractable gun mounts, and a bomb rack. It also contained several drop tubes—hydraulic cylinders that forced their way into the superstructure of another airship—allowing for quick boarding and an equally fast escape.

Corsair’s crew gathered around the hangar, checking their weapons for the upcoming raid. According to their criminal

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records, these men and women were assorted lowlifes, scoundrels, and thieves from the four corners of the globe. Those records didn't reflect the deep commitment to the people who needed their help and fully supported Corsair's cause. Many of them lived for the thrill of the hunt, the adventure, and the payoff after a good heist. The saying might be "no honor among thieves," but this group was the exception.

"Knox, why the Hell are you taking that cannon? They are a bunch of snotty, fancy-pants *stronzo* down there, not the Kaiser's *Eisenwand*, no?" said Eddie "Dash" Castello, trimming his wispy, thin mustache as he gazed into a small hand mirror. The little Italian didn't look it, but he was the weapons and demolitions expert aboard the *Galeru*. He was a regular deadeye for his accuracy with anything from a long gun to a pea shooter. Aboard the airship, they called him Dash because he picked up on things fast. He started using explosives in the Carbusulcis Coal Mine at age ten. Dash's experiences and hardships made him eager to take to the skies when he met Corsair.

He always looked overburdened with various weapons and explosives strapped to his belt, thighs, and back, with bandoliers across his chest. To him, it was like wearing his favorite sweater. Next to Corsair, Dash was the best shot in the crew.

"The captain said to expect the worst, and I always come prepared," replied Heinrich "Knox" Romig as the armored soldier carefully loaded the ammunition feeder into his .58-caliber Gatling gun. He kept the massive weapon slung over his shoulder with the ammunition fed from a huge backpack.

Knox was a former member of the Kaiser's elite *Eisenwand*, or Iron Wall, German special forces that wore steam-powered armor under long coats, making them practically invincible. His head was cleanly shaven, but a thick, burly beard covered his jawline. He towered over Dash and most of the crew and looked like he could easily toss a bear. They called him Knox after Fort Knox because he was impregnable in body and spirit.

Knox was one of the most decorated soldiers in the *Eisenwand* until his superiors ordered him to lead an attack against insurgents in an abandoned factory in Poland. However, that factory turned out to be an orphanage full of children. After that slaughter, he left his chest full of medals behind and joined Corsair.

"I have to protect everyone, even you, Dash," Knox said as he hoisted his gun across his shoulder.

"That is always refreshing to hear, my dear Heinrich," Felicia Scarlett "Fox" Bertrand cooed in her quaint British accent as she carefully filed her fingernails. Fox sat comfortably, her legs crossed while she continued with her manicure. Her form-fitting dress underneath a button-down coat didn't seem appropriate for a raid. Her red hair was pulled up tight into a bun under a fascinator, and her makeup immaculately done.

In most circles, Fox—better known as the "Scarlett Fox"—was a shade, an expert on infiltration and information collection. Her beauty and charm, combined with her innate ability to blend into any environment, made her an asset in more ways than one. Her skills were once the pride of the British Secret Intelligence Service, but she left shortly after

discovering how deep ERP was into the British government. After British Intelligence framed her for murder, Fox met Corsair and found a new purpose in life.

“You know I will always have your back, *mia adorabile signora!*” Dash swooned as he leaned into her and twirled his mustache. “And what a lovely backside it is!”

In a blur, Fox pulled out a dagger hidden in her belt and spun it around her fingertips until she placed the blade’s tip under his chin. “Comment about my backside again, Dash, and your front side will get my full attention.” Dash ignored her threats until a strong hand grabbed him by the scruff of his neck and pulled him back.

“Dash, you’re one second away from Fox giving you a butcher’s Sunday special,” said Henry “Bronx” Jones. “When are you gonna learn to leave that woman alone?” Bronx, a Black garage mechanic from New York City, was the chief engineer on the *Galeru*. Bronx was a natural for engines, especially the complex Tesla Oscillating Electric Engines. He was known by many as a Vernian. He studied mechanical engineering, but he also read Jules Verne’s novels and—like Tesla—put his ideas to practice. For a Black man in America, that was a hard-fought education he had learned from behind the scenes. He worked as a mechanic by day and a janitor at a major university by night. He would study the textbooks and chalkboards as he cleaned the rooms, getting a free college education on his own time.

“Never, *mia amico*,” Dash replied. “She has the key to my heart.”

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“She’s going to shove that key up your backside one of these days,” Bronx snapped back. “Besides, Captain’s on his way down.”

As Bronx spoke up, Corsair and Kiki stepped down the spiral staircase leading from the bridge into the hangar with the team’s final member. Nathaniel “Moon Crow” Porter was no exception to Corsair’s mismatched crew of infamy. He was a proud Apache warrior from the plains of the American Southwest. The sole survivor of the massacre of his village by American soldiers, Moon Crow was rescued by a frontier family heading west. Although they gave him an American name, he never lost sight of his Apache roots. He took the name Moon Crow from a story his adopted family had told him. They had found him on a moonlit night, holding on to a dead crow. He saw that as a sign—a vision quest. His destiny lay beyond his tribe.

He dressed like any other man of his time—a button-down shirt, vest, and pants—with a few exceptions that exhibited his heritage. Centered on a bolo tie around his collar was a large turquoise stone, a piece of his homeland he carried. On his wide-brimmed hat, crow feathers with white tips protruded on the side, held in place by a band of multicolored beads that he had woven himself. The white tips represented the moon in the night sky. A pair of tomahawks dangled from his belt, and an 1894 Winchester repeating rifle was slung across his back.

“All right, you knockers, gather round and listen up,” Kiki shouted to get their attention. Everyone moved in around Corsair to get their debriefing before the drop. They were

always excited when a new job approached, but they never strayed from Corsair's orders. His word was absolute.

"So, what's the plan, *mia amico*? Burn it down or smash and grab?" Dash joked. Bronx slapped him on the back of the head for his lack of decorum in front of the captain.

"Smash and grab, Dash, but with a purpose," Corsair said. "We've got two targets, and we need to get in and out as quickly as possible with the least amount of collateral damage. That means leaving the passengers alone this time. We don't have the time for our normal Robin Hood routine."

"You sound worried, *Kapitän*," Knox observed.

"Not worried, Knox, cautious. I have faith in my crew to do the job." He smirked as he looked around at everyone. "But this is no ordinary heist. There are more than your normal White Star security guards this time around. With Kreusi aboard, there's probably Pinkerton's on his private security detail. So, you know what that means?"

"Shoot to kill," Fox interjected. "Those bastards don't play around." The Pinkertons were the best security money could buy. They were well trained, better than most armies, and equally well equipped. Call them what you will—mercenaries or soldiers-for-hire—they were a force to be reckoned with.

"Exactly, so let's split up into two teams and hit them hard and fast. Kiki—you, Knox, and Dash will head aft. The piece of Uriel's comet is yours. Find it and get it back to the *Galeru*. Bronx, you and Moon Crow are with me. We're going after Kreusi."

"And what about *signora* Scarlett? Why can't she be on my team?" Dash asked with a wink toward Fox. She shook her head, not even bothering to look at him when she spoke.

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“I have a mission, Eddie darling, that does not include you!”

“All right then, lock and load, charge up your gear and get ready to drop. Five minutes!” Corsair ordered as everyone made their final preps and geared up for the drop. Kiki didn’t like what she heard from Fox and confided in the captain.

“Why is the Fox going solo? I thought we discussed this and decided it was a bad idea?” she asked.

“We did, but then Scarlett convinced me it was a good idea,” Corsair snipped back while he loaded his Colt revolver, not even looking up at her, making Kiki scowl.

“Yeah, I bet she convinced you!”

“Kiki,” he disrupted her scathing retort. “Fox is familiar with the *Valiant* class of airship. She knows all the hiding places the first-class passengers use to tuck away their secrets. If there’s someone or something else aboard, I want to know about it, and Scarlett has the best assets to discover them for us.”

“It’s not her assets that I’m worried about,” Kiki argued. “I don’t like it when one of the team goes solo. I may not like that ginger fox, but I don’t want her dead or captured.”

“Why, Kiki, you do care?” Fox surprised her from behind, her wicked smile and fluttering eyelashes professing her sarcasm. “I knew that deep down you loved me!”

“Love, no. Loath, yes!” Kiki groaned as she stormed away in a huff. Corsair wanted to laugh, but he kept it inside.

“Now, Scarlett, that wasn’t very nice,” he scolded her. “But Kiki does have a point. It would be best if you didn’t take any unnecessary risks. If it gets hairy, you get out of there, understand?”

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“Things never get hairy with me, my darling Corsair,” Fox retorted as she slowly and seductively dragged her finger under Corsair’s chin. “That’s why I shave my legs, to get out of those tight situations.”

Dash watched her with his eyes wide open as she walked away toward her drop tube. “*Buon Dio, sono innamorato!*” he exclaimed, professing his love for the femme fatale. Knox lifted him by his collar and carried him over to their drop tube; he dangled in the air as he tried to get away from the brute.

Corsair chuckled aloud this time. He loved his team; he would do anything for them. He would die for them. He went over to the internal communication pod next to his drop tube and flicked the switch to talk. “OK, Eager, move us into position and drop when ready.”

“Roger, oy, *gubba!* Two minutes to drop!” Eager shouted through the speaker box. Everyone stepped into their drop tubes. About the size of a typical elevator, the metal cylinders could comfortably fit three to four people. Their size was one of the reasons Corsair always put Dash with Knox. Between the two of them, they equaled three people. Even with Kiki, it was still going to be a tight fit.

Once everyone got situated inside their cylinders, the doors closed. A sheath of canvas threaded with metal rings extended down and around the tube. The trapdoors beneath them slid open, and a hiss of steam escaped as the iris unfurled, allowing the wind and rain to rush in from the outside.

“Hold on to your lunches, ladies and gents,” Eager yelled out from the bridge. “Dropping in three . . . two . . . and

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one!” Eager sent the tubes down into the airship below with the flick of a switch. Hydraulic springs forced them through the superstructure and canvas covering the top of the zeppelin, driving them onto the airship’s upper platform.

All of the world’s airships were similarly designed with an upper catwalk right along the centerline, so the crew could inspect the top of the superstructure, check for leaks in the hydrogen bladders, and man lookout positions, among other responsibilities. Once in place, the cylinders hooked onto the catwalks, keeping them steady and locked in for an easy entry and exit as the canvas retracted to the top of the superstructure. They also self-sealed to keep the elements out, so the targets would be unaware that they had been boarded.

Once the drop process finished, the cylinder doors opened, and everyone jumped out, looking for trouble.

“Pirates!” a voice shouted from down the catwalk. Everyone looked to see a maintenance man running away, shouting out the warning. Moon Crow took out a tomahawk and threw it at the frightened crew member without even thinking. His aim was perfect, hitting the maintenance man squarely in the back of the head. He was dead before he hit the ground.

Corsair and his crew knew that a stray bullet could set off the hydrogen inside this part of the zeppelin, which was why edged weapons were best in the upper reaches of the airship. Corsair motioned for the two groups to take off without saying a word. At this point, no one knew if anyone had heard the dead man’s warning. Kiki and her team headed aft while Corsair and his group headed forward. Fox found the first

available ladder off the catwalk and started descending independently.

Moon Crow pulled out the tomahawk and wiped off the blood in the dead man's hair. He didn't say a word; he never did in battle. In his opinion, words wasted energy. As they continued forward, Bronx looked around in awe at the mechanics of a zeppelin like the *Valiant*. "Geez, Captain, you sure you can't do this without me? I'd like to get my hands on one of these Röntgen Inertia Stabilizers. It might help to keep the *Galeru* flying straight."

"That's why we've got Eager. Sorry, Bronx, but I need you to focus your 'Vernian' mind on something new," Corsair explained. "Kreusi is said to have one of those new Hollerith Thinking Machines. I need you to tell me whether or not this is something worth stealing."

"Oh, I've been dying to get a look at one of those," Bronx said with childlike glee.

"OK, for now, tap into the communications grid and find that bastard for me."

Moon Crow led them to a junction box, and Bronx immediately got to work. His backpack was not filled with tools but rather electronics—a Tesla Radiographic Frequency Modulator or RFM. With it, Bronx could tap into the ship's electrical grid to visualize everyone and everything on board in his goggles, an internal radar using the electrical impulses of the airship.

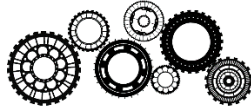
Bronx got a good look around with his oversized goggles. In his optics, they appeared as patterns—a series of blips and squiggles to the average viewer—but to a Vernian like Bronx, it was as clear as day. He adjusted the dials on his goggles to

follow the electrical impulses as they moved around the airship. He saw passengers enjoying fine dining on the main promenade; crew members were keeping them satisfied and tending to their every need, from the waiters to the housekeepers; the ship's security was making their routine patrols. He even spied Scarlett moving behind the scenes with ease and watched Kiki's team descend into the cargo hold.

Finally, he found what Corsair wanted. In the *Valiant's* nose was a first-class cabin usually reserved for politicians and royalty. In this case, it was a member of the majesty of industry. The nose cone cabin was surrounded by several brutes, both in and out, protecting a single individual. Bronx also noted a significant electrical power surge to this cabin. There was no doubt: John Kreusi was here.

"Got him, Captain, but there are at least a dozen Pinkerton goons around him," Bronx reported.

"That's OK, Bronx. I've got a plan to get us in there."



The Pinkertons were well-known for their callous demeanor and ruthless aggression in whatever job they were assigned. They all dressed the same too—wide-brimmed fedora hats, highly polished boots, and suit coats cut slightly bigger than average to accommodate the bulletproof vest they wore underneath. It made them all look bulky and broad chested. They carried either Colt M1900 automatic weapons or the new Remington Model 8 semiautomatic rifles. Anyone who would attempt to confront them would be outgunned, outmatched, and usually outclassed.

CORSAIR AND THE SKY PIRATES

There was silence in the corridor. Nobody spoke; they focused on their job and were alert for anything out of the ordinary. The cart's squeaky wheel rolling across the floor snapped them to attention. The six men tightened their grips on their weapons, ready to strike if necessary.

Bronx, dressed like a waiter, pushed the cart down the corridor. It was a simple serving cart, covered with a white tablecloth. On top was a bottle of champagne, chilling in an ice bucket with glasses, and a metal dome covering something delectable. The lead Pinkerton held up his hand to stop him from approaching further.

"Hold it right there, boy. This area is off-limits. Besides, we didn't order anything."

"No, sir, I'm sorry, sir, but the captain sent this up for Mr. Kreusi," Bronx answered, using his best imitation of a British accent. "Champagne and caviar, with his compliments!"

The Pinkerton officer looked suspiciously at Bronx and everything on the cart. He lifted the dome, visually inspecting the contents, checking underneath the tablecloth covering the cart, making sure everything was on the up-and-up. Even then, it didn't convince him.

"Why don't we call up to the bridge and ask the captain about this?" he asked sarcastically with a wicked grin as he stepped over to the intercom box.

"I understand, sir. Go right ahead. Take all the time you need. It saves me from getting back to the kitchen and helping do the dishes," Bronx replied with a laugh.

The Pinkerton thought for a minute as he reached for the switch, but the more he thought, the more his blood boiled.

“Go on, boy, get back to the kitchen and get those dishes done. I’m sure that’s all you’re good for,” he quipped.

Bronx didn’t say a word as the smile slipped from his face. He turned around and left the cart behind. The Pinkerton walked back, laughing as he reached for the bottle of champagne.

“Since Mr. Kreusi didn’t order this, we should check it out for poison. Don’t you think?” he said as the men around him laughed and agreed wholeheartedly. But when he lifted the bottle from the ice bucket, all hell broke loose. An explosion of steam erupted from inside the bucket, but instead of burning everyone in scalding hot water, it had a very different effect. The billowing mist froze everything it touched, from the walls and floors to the men in the room. They found themselves encased in ice, unable to move or even breathe.

Corsair approached the frozen Pinkertons with Moon Crow and Bronx, who had changed out of the waiter’s uniform back into his working clothes, from down the corridor. He walked up to the Pinkerton who had chastised him, still holding the champagne bottle, now frozen like he was.

“This is what I’m good at,” Bronx explained through the icy exterior. “It’s called *adiabatic reversible expansion* . . . steam held under high pressure absorbs the heat from everything around it, freezing it solid when released. I packed a steam ball into the ice bucket because I knew a greedy snob like you would want to keep it for yourself.”

Corsair let Bronx rant at the frozen Pinkerton. He knew of the hard life he had because of his skin color. He hated seeing his friend treated that way, so he let him rant at these bigots.

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The men reached the door to the suite; it was covered in a layer of ice. Corsair didn't even hesitate when he kicked the door in and attacked. There were four Pinkertons with Kreusi. The fact that they were outnumbered didn't matter to Corsair.

The sky pirate shot two men in their legs, causing them to fall over and grab their injuries. Moon Crow threw his two tomahawks with precision, hitting the other two Pinkertons in the neck, killing them instantly. While Bronx disarmed the two wounded Pinkertons, Corsair approached the only man still in the room. He leveled his cutlass at him, placing the tip of his blade underneath his chin.

The man sat quietly, trying not to agitate anyone, holding his teacup and saucer below Corsair's blade. He kept his hair slicked back, framing his face neatly, but you couldn't tell that by the bushy beard and mustache that covered his jawline. He dressed immaculately, as was appropriate for a man in his position. He was John Kreusi, second-in-command at ERP and best friend of Thomas Edison.

Corsair stepped back, keeping his sword leveled at Kreusi's throat even as he sat down in the chair. "You're looking quite well, *Herr* Kreusi, especially since you survived your bout of influenza, what . . . nearly ten years ago, wasn't it? It took you some time to recover. I hear the doctors in your home country of Switzerland are quite excellent."

"*Ja*, they are. I go back for a checkup from time to time," he said as he took another sip of his tea. "But I'm sure you know that, *Kapitän* Corsair."

Corsair was impressed that Kreusi knew who he was but had expected it of Edison's second-in-command. "Moon

Crow, watch the door. Bronx, the machine should be on his desk. Check it out while *Herr* Kreusi and I have a little chat.”

Moon Crow locked the door and stood by it while Bronx jumped at the chance to check out the machine on Kreusi’s desk. The ERP executive watched as Corsair’s men followed his every word with precision as he continued to sip his tea.

“I must say, you are exactly as I pictured you, commanding in every sense of the word,” Kreusi said. “But this adventure of yours is quite the folly. Do you think you can stop the world from advancing into a new age of industry and technology with these . . . heists?”

“I have no problem with the Industrial Revolution Tesla and Edison started, but with the cost to the people you walk over as ERP lines their pockets with money,” Corsair retorted. “Some of your inventions help and entertain everyday people, but not all of them. Only the ones who can pay your price and the governments that will help usher in a great war to further ERP’s agenda reap the benefits of your technology.”

Those words caught Kreusi off guard, but he tried his best to hide any reaction. “We provide weapons and munitions to many governments for self-defense only.”

“Self-defense? Self-defense!” Corsair screamed as he stood up and moved his blade through the beard and onto Kreusi’s throat, causing him to drop his teacup. “You call this self-defense?” Corsair reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a folded photograph, throwing it at the corporate giant.

Kreusi picked it up and looked at it, nauseated by what he saw. He held one hand over his mouth, trying to prevent himself from throwing up. The picture showed naked bodies lying in a mass grave while soldiers stood over them, shooting

down into the open grave, killing anyone still alive. It was a horrific sight to see.

“One of my shades smuggled that photo out of the Ottoman Empire. I carry it as a reminder of what I’m fighting for. It was taken in Armenia, in a small town near the Caucasus mountain range. The town doesn’t have a name anymore because you wiped it out, clearing the way to build a new ERP factory specializing in Cobalt High Energy Weapons.”

“Where did you hear that?” Kreusi interrupted, flinging the photograph at him, but Corsair’s blade quickly silenced him. The sky pirate smiled.

“I didn’t really, but you just confirmed it,” he said as he picked up the photograph and put it back in his pocket. “We heard bits and pieces, but we couldn’t put it all together until now. You’re using remnants of Uriel to power these new weapons, aren’t you?”

“Of course we are,” Kreusi snapped at Corsair, not holding back anymore. “Using them to create steam, like Tesla, is mere child’s play. Röntgen found out the true secret of Uriel, and with it, we will change the face of the world forever!”

“By building weapons that can destroy an entire city in a single blast, releasing the power of Uriel at the atomic level using Cobalt radioisotopes. An atomic bomb, I believe Röntgen called it.”

Kreusi couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Because someone exposed these closely guarded secrets of ERP, all he could do was wonder where and how they learned about it.

“But to see if he’s right, you needed to take your Hollerith Thinking Machine to work out the math,” Corsair continued.

“That’s why you’re here, not for your health, but to do the final calculations; Edison couldn’t trust anyone with this but his right-hand man.”

Kreusi couldn’t believe that this pirate could work out so much with very little information. “I see your reputation is well earned, *Kapitän* Corsair. You are indeed as clever as they say.”

“Oh, I’m not the smart one. He is,” Corsair said, nodding toward Bronx. “How’s it going, Bronx?”

“This machine is everything they said it was, Captain,” Bronx said as he stared at the wondrous machine. He typed on a keypad resembling a typewriter and stared intently at the glass data screen. An Edison projector connected to a large console projected the image on the glass. The console was where data cards—fed in and out of the machine by hand—recorded and calculated the information for the operator.

Kreusi was amazed at how easily this young Black man operated the complex thinking machine. He questioned his own bias toward their race; it seemed misplaced as he watched Bronx manipulate data strokes of the thinking machine with ease.

“There’s good and bad news, Captain,” Bronx said. “The good news is this machine is amazing, and we should take it. I can imagine something like it running the entire ship one day.”

“And the bad news?” Corsair wondered.

“The bad news is that without that data punch cards he used for his initial calculations, we may never know what he was trying to do in Armenia.”

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“Then perhaps I can help, Bronx, dear,” said a sultry voice from the doorway. Moon Crow opened the door, and in walked the infamous Scarlett Fox. She was carrying a small pouch in her hand. “I found this in the captain’s safe. Unfortunately, even Mr. Kreusi doesn’t trust the purser’s safe for his items. I decided to bring it up here right away as you might be needing it, Captain Corsair.”

She handed Bronx the pouch. Bronx smiled as he pulled out the data punch cards. “We got them, Captain,” Bronx said.

Corsair was happy until he saw the look on Kreusi’s face. He was smirking, something John Kreusi would never do in this situation. Something was off, and Corsair knew it.

“Bronx, check on the others, quickly!” he ordered. Bronx didn’t hesitate as he plugged in the RFM and lowered his goggles. It took him less than a minute to see why Kreusi was smiling like the cat that ate the canary.

“Captain, they’ve got a BOSS unit in the cargo hold!” Bronx exclaimed.

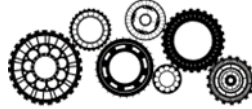
BOSS, or Brute Omnipresent Steam Soldier, was the most exemplary mechanical soldier that ERP had ever invented. These monsters were loaded with Gatling guns, Howitzer cannons, and a backpack mortar launcher powered by a small yet powerful Edison Oscillating DC Generator. It was a walking tank resembling a giant or ogre of legend, and to bring one aboard a civilian airship was dangerous, even for ERP.

“Bronx, get this machine back aboard the *Galeru*. Fox, help him after dealing with this miscreant,” Corsair ordered. “Moon Crow and I are heading aft!”

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Without another word, he took off with his Apache compatriot leading the way. After they left, Fox looked at John Kreusi with a wicked grin as she pursed her lips. “Now then, whatever shall I do with you, naughty little man?”

Kreusi swallowed hard at her threat.



The cargo hold of the *Valiant* was in a state of complete chaos. Automatic weapons fire rang out as bullets bounced around the room. Several Pinkertons and the BOSS unit—a two-person behemoth with a pilot and an engineer—were on one side. The pilot controlled the mech, including movement and firing the weapons. Simultaneously, the engineer kept the steam pressure operating the complex systems under control and the ammunition flowing into the guns. Pipes, gears, and hoses moved the mech, acting like a human frame with arms and legs but under mechanical operation.

Across the way, Kiki and her team were pinned down behind cargo crates and stacks of luggage by the constant fire. A hailstorm of bullets rang out, tearing through everything with no regard for personal or property damage. This situation was why the airship lines had insurance, especially for pirates.

Kiki braced herself against the luggage rack, a Colt revolver in one hand and her katana in the other. She looked across from her, watching Knox and Dash bracing themselves against the onslaught of firepower.

“We can’t stay back here forever, *Fräulein* Kiki!” Knox shouted over the gunfire. “That *verdammt* *maschinen* are indestructible.”

“Except behind the knees,” Kiki said. “That’s why all their firepower is forward facing.”

“Ah, then leave it to me, *signora!*” Dash countered. “Knox, I need a distraction.”

Knox knew what Dash wanted. He stood straight up and opened fire, blasting back at the BOSS. Although it barely scratched the surface of the machines, it did cause the Pinkertons to scatter. Knox took the brunt of the gunfire in his armored chest plate while Dash quickly went to work. He peeked around Knox’s massive legs, using him for protection while setting up his shot. If there was one thing Dash was good at, it was a trick ricochet shot. He loved the new western motion pictures, and he thought of himself as a cowboy trying to outsmart the villain to save a damsel in distress.

After a few good looks, he squared up and aimed with his Colt revolver. It took seconds for him to fire, bouncing the bullet off some piping before it hit the BOSS behind its right knee. The shot was near perfect, breaking a hydraulic line that started spraying fluid. The slippery mess caused the Pinkertons hiding behind the monstrosity to slip and fall to the ground, leaving them open to Knox’s barrage as he adjusted his firing to cut them down, one by one. The BOSS unit went down to one knee, forced to use its gun arm to prop itself up. It appeared to be over until the pilot raised its other arm to fire. This one had a different weapon from the Gatling gun, a 7.5 cm Howitzer canon. ERP hadn’t designed it for use

in an enclosed space like the cargo hold, but the BOSS pilot didn't care.

"*Dame dayo*," Kiki swore in Japanese when she saw the robotic soldier aiming the cannon at them. She froze in fear and thought it was the end of everything—until *he* arrived. Corsair jumped over the rail from the top catwalk, sword in hand, and spiraled toward the BOSS unit. His blade plunged through the roof of the mech, piercing the cockpit. He flipped a switch inside his basket hilt and revealed the real power of his sword. The gears on the basket hilt spun to re-form into a new configuration. The pommel's stone glowed when it was complete—a piece of Uriel activating. The sword exploded with an immense electrical discharge, sending it downward into the BOSS unit until every electrical system shorted out, killing the pilot and engineer. His rubber-soled boots saved Corsair from electrocution.

One of the Pinkertons aimed at Corsair, but he was stopped by Moon Crow up on the catwalk. His Winchester blew the gun right out of the Pinkerton's hand. He dropped to his knees, clenching his hand in pain as his gaping wound bled out. Kiki jumped out and laid her sword across his throat, ready to silence him.

"Wait a minute, Kiki," Corsair commanded, stopping her in her tracks. "We need him alive." He pulled out his sword and jumped off the BOSS unit, careful not to slip on the mech's hydraulic fluid. Corsair walked up to the whimpering prisoner, adding his blade to Kiki's. The Pinkerton, grasping tightly at the wound on his hand, looked closely at the two edges pointing at him.

“Now then, unless you want to end up like your friends, you better start talking,” Corsair insisted. “Where is the piece of Uriel?”

He trembled violently, uncertainty growing in his eyes. He decided on the latter. “It’s inside the unit.” He whimpered, nodding toward the inactive mech. Corsair pulled out a handkerchief from his breast pocket and handed it to the injured Pinkerton.

“You better wrap that tightly. You might bleed to death,” he said.

He quickly grabbed the cloth and wrapped it around his injured hand to stem the bleeding.

Corsair walked over to the BOSS to see if what the Pinkerton had said was true.

“Do you believe him?” Kiki asked. Corsair flipped his sword around, pointing the blade to the floor, grasping the hilt. He placed his thumb on the pommel, flipping another switch as the gears on his basket hilt started moving again.

“We’ll soon find out,” he cautioned as the gears finished their alignment. The gem emitted a soft light over the mechanical soldier. It moved up and down in a straight line, slowly examining the structure. Finally, it stopped below the cockpit and paused as if the same puzzle pieces found each other.

“It’s nice to see *signor* Tesla’s device at work, so *meraviglioso!*” Dash complimented, blowing a kiss with his fingers.

Corsair thought about what Dash had said before he sheathed his sword. “Cut her open, Kiki!” he ordered before lowering his goggles and adjusting the lenses.

Kiki stepped forward. Like Corsair's cutlass, her katana had a secret all its own. She twisted the outer ring of the guard until it clicked, popping open two small valves on either side of the blade collar. A spray of blue flame immediately spread up the sword, sheathing it in a superhot corona.

Kiki plunged the blade into the cockpit, carving a hole as if her sword was a superheated acetylene torch. Corsair watched intently as he casually tapped the side of his goggles to a melodic beat. "Not to worry, boys, we'll have this sardine can open shortly," Kiki said confidently.

Once she finished, the steel panel fell open, rattling off the deck. Steam rushed out, along with a powerful smell of charred flesh. The smell of death never bothered Corsair. In all his years of pirating, he had become used to it.

Corsair reached under the pilot's seat and pulled out a locked strongbox. The steel container was the size of a shoebox with a hinged lid and had a large padlock securing it shut. He carefully set it down on top of a crate, trying to keep it level. "Dash, open it!" he ordered his best lockpick. Dash winked at him. Corsair knew he always had the right tool for the job.

Dash pulled out what appeared to be a cigarette from his shirt pocket and put it in his mouth before striking a match nonchalantly off Knox's armor. He lit the "cigarette" but didn't inhale like one usually would. Instead, he let it burn slowly before placing the lit end into the locking mechanism. Within seconds, the small *pop* of an explosion burst open the lock.

"It is easy for a *genio* like me!" he boasted before Knox pulled him back so Corsair could get into the box. He pulled

the lock off and opened the lid slowly as a soft blue glow radiated from inside. It was something truly amazing to see, even for Corsair. Inside a glass cylinder, was the largest piece of Uriel's comet that he had ever laid his eyes on before. It was suspended inside the glass tube by a magnetic field generated between metal caps sealing both ends of the tube. He picked up the glass container in his hand and looked at the glowing meteorite in awe. Everyone else was equally amazed by the size of the mineral.

"Lieber Gott, that's got to be three to five kilograms," Knox marveled.

"That's enough power to run the *Galeru* for a thousand years," Kiki blurted out. "It's amazing!"

"It's bait," Corsair plainly stated. "And we've walked into a trap!" He carefully put the fragment back into the box and closed the lid, tucking it under his arm. "We need to get back to the ship now!"

Before they could move, they heard the sound of footsteps rushing into the upper catwalks. When they looked up, the ship's security quickly filed into position with some of the Pinkertons mixed into their ranks. They surrounded them from above, aiming their weapons down at the pirates, ready to fire.

Everyone looked up at more than fifty guns aimed at them. They couldn't believe the number of armed security personnel standing up there, more than double the standard complement for a *Valiant* zeppelin. "Where did all these goons come from?" Kiki asked.

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“They were acting as passengers to confuse our scans with the RFM,” Corsair said. “This whole setup was a trap specifically for us.”

A single person clapping their hands echoed in the cargo hold. Corsair watched and waited to see who led the applause, and then he recognized him immediately.

Clapping his hands with a sarcastic smirk to match his glee, an unusual-looking man strolled out onto the catwalk. His bright red hair and stark white skin earned him the nickname “The Red Ghost,” attributed to his appearance and brutal methods of getting things done. He had worked his way up through ERP, keeping workers in line, breaking up strikes, and bullying corporate bosses to accept ERP’s demands during tense negotiations. He wore a bowler hat on his head, a fine suit befitting a man of his stature, and carried a shillelagh under his arm. His name was Daniel McTavish, director of ERP security.

“Well done, boyo, but you figured it out a little too late,” he jeered. “I guess you’re not as smart as people say you are, eh, Corsair?”

“Oh, I don’t know, Duke. The smart thing wouldn’t have been letting me get to Kreusi, steal his thinking machine, or take down a BOSS unit,” Corsair sassed back, calling McTavish by another nickname he despised. He was sometimes called Duke because of his penchant for fighting, always wanting to duke it out with others. He hated that nickname because it reminded him of his lowly past and many failures. “This little venture of yours will cost ERP a lot of money, and for what, Duke?”

“For that,” McTavish said, pointing at Corsair’s blade. “Your sword!”

Corsair couldn’t help but laugh. “What, with all the brains working for Edison, he still can’t figure out how to accurately track down pieces of Uriel? Really? Tesla worked that problem out a long time ago.”

McTavish hated seeing his boss insulted by a common thief like Corsair. He held Edison in the highest regard and with nothing but respect, and this banter of Corsair’s upset him. Still, McTavish smiled, thinking he had the upper hand. “I wouldn’t worry about that since I’ll be prying that sword from your dead hands,” he said as the men cocked their weapons to open fire.

In an instant, Dash pulled a bomb out of his pack and slapped it on the box containing Uriel’s fragment, holding the plunger in his hand. McTavish’s smile shifted to a frown as he held up his hands, stopping the security forces from firing down into the hold.

“Ah, see, Duke, you’re a lot smarter than you look,” Corsair said, countering his insult. “And by the way, Dash here’s got a hair-trigger finger, so don’t try anything stupid. Now, I figure that this bomb, combined with this fragment’s power, will blow this entire ship to pieces. That includes Kreusi, the passengers, these men, and your sorry ass.”

“You’ll be dead too, mate, don’t forget that,” McTavish snapped back.

“I’m not worried about my death, Duke. Every day I meet more and more like me, ready to fight back against ERP and any other corporation willing to kill for its profit,” Corsair said. “The day of the corporate ruler is over; the day of the

freedom fighter is coming anew, and there's nothing a bully like you can do to stop it."

McTavish had thought he had the upper hand over these pirates; instead, he had to stand there and endure insults and bravado by these brigands. His blood boiled, but he would be more concerned if his intricate plan fell apart.

"I tell you what, me boyo. Why don't we settle this man-to-man?" McTavish countered. "If you beat me, you get to walk out of here with that piece of Uriel and your lives. If I win, you surrender. Pure and simple."

Corsair had the face of a champion poker player as he stared McTavish down. He thought for a moment, not saying a word, as if he was considering the offer.

"Come on, boy, what do you say?" McTavish shouted down as his anger got the best of him. "You either fight me or blow us all to Hell. Which is it?"

"Plan C," Corsair retorted. His answer confused McTavish. The head of security started laughing, thinking the pirate had gone mad.

"What the hell is Plan C?" he asked, and as if on cue, the answer came down through the ceiling. A single drop tube broke through into the cargo hold. They didn't typically extend down this far, and it had to pierce the superstructure and rip through one of the hydrogen bladders. Moreover, by forcing the drop tube this far down into the *Valiant*, there was no way to seal the opening behind it as helium poured into the cargo hold.

The downdraft choked out the men on the catwalk as McTavish could only stand there and watch the pirates squeeze into their boarding elevator. Knox had to leave his

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Gatling gun and ammunition backpack behind to make enough room for all five of them. Kiki was the most uncomfortable, getting in tight quarters with four men.

The Irish bully was so enraged that he reached into his coat and drew his own Colt M1900.

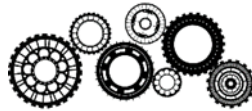
“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” Corsair warned before he could squeeze the trigger. “There’s enough hydrogen in here to blow us all to bits. Now, I know you don’t want to kill Edison’s best friend, do you?”

McTavish thought about it before he holstered his weapon. “Next time, Corsair, your arse is mine!”

Corsair smiled and sarcastically saluted as he got into the drop tube before the door shut. As quickly as it came in, the drop tube retracted through the zepplin and returned to the *Galeru*. In an instant, the pirates were gone.

McTavish stood there, boiling as he stared at the empty ceiling.

“Sir!” one of the Pinkertons yelled at him. “We have to evacuate and seal the cargo hold, or the hydrogen will suffocate us!” McTavish acquiesced before he spun on his heels and stormed out of the room. He had lost this battle, but he would win the war.



With a loud bang, the drop tube finally retracted into the hangar of the *Galeru*. The overreach tore the canvas and bent the metal ribbing out of shape. Bronx did his best to get the system under control, with hydraulic fluid bursting out from the pipes, until he could finally close the hatch and open the

door. Kiki was the first one out, pushing her way past Corsair and the others.

“Oh my God, never again!” she complained after being locked inside the elevator with four men. “And one of you is desperate for a bath!”

Knox and Dash sniffed their armpits to see if it was either of them that offended.

“Sorry, Kiki, but we needed to get out of there in one piece,” Corsair said calmly. “By the way, Bronx, glad you got my signal. That relay transmitter you put in my goggles worked perfectly.”

“Eager’s the one to thank, Captain. He heard your signal on the bridge and told us you were in trouble. The hard part was overriding the drop tube system to go that far into the *Valiant*.”

“Well, in any case, nice job getting the tube down to us,” he complimented his engineer with a pat on the back. “We’d be dead if it weren’t for you.”

“Don’t thank me yet, Captain. I overloaded the system to send the tube down to the cargo hold,” Bronx said, wiping the hydraulic fluid off his hands. “We won’t be boarding anyone until I can get this fixed.”

“Well, make a supply list, and we’ll send it on to Odysseus Station. Hopefully, they’ll have everything there before our arrival.”

“Don’t forget a new Gatling gun and ammunition,” Knox added with a glint of sadness in his eyes. “*Brunhilde* was a goddess in my hands. I hated to leave her there.”

“*Brunhilde*?” Bronx queried.

“He names his weapons after Valkyries,” Dash explained. “He is such a *romantico!*”

“*Brunhilde* did her job,” Knox lamented. “I hated to leave her behind.”

“Well, it was worth it, Knox,” Corsair said as he handed the box with the piece of Uriel to Kiki. “Let’s get this locked away for now. I’m sure Tesla will pay us handsomely for this, enough for supplies, repairs, and a little something extra for everyone.”

The crew was happy to hear that, cheering about the payday awaiting them, but not everyone was delighted.

“I wouldn’t be celebrating yet, Corsair dear,” Fox clarified. “While Bronx was handling your rescue, he left me to review the data in Kreusi’s little toy.”

“You know how to work a Hollerith Thinking Machine?” Kiki asked, perplexed. Fox smiled at her counterpart, loving every bit of this delicious moment.

“I have a great many talents, Kiki. Like many good poker players, I don’t show all my cards at once,” she cooed. “But in reality, all I did was finish loading the punch cards through the infernal contraption and wait for the final result to display on the screen, and it’s not good.

“To make their Cobalt High Energy Weapons work properly, they need a pure source of Uriel, an untainted fragment of the comet.”

“Untainted? But aren’t they all pure pieces of the comet, *cara signora!*” Dash wondered.

“The way Mr. Tesla explained it to me, when the pieces of Uriel pass through our atmosphere, it burns away the outer shell protecting the core inside,” Bronx said. “The core gets

exposed to the electromagnetic radiation that protects our atmosphere, altering the structure of the mineral.”

“English, Bronx, not all of us have your Vernian-level intellect,” Kiki countered.

“It means that the majority of the pieces of Uriel that fall to Earth are no longer pure,” Corsair jumped in. “The electromagnetic field surrounding our planet taints them. They’re looking for pieces still encased in the meteorite shell . . .” He paused for a moment as things became more evident. “They need a better way to look for pieces of the comet. Edison wanted to combine his detector with one of Tesla’s. That’s why they wanted my sword!”

Everyone was shocked as they all realized the truth behind their assault on the *Valiant*, but one question remained. “But Kapitän, where do we find such a meteorite?” Knox asked. “Can such a piece even exist?”

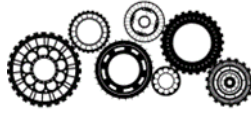
Before Corsair could reply, another voice chimed in out of nowhere. “It does,” Moon Crow said, speaking up for the first time today, surprising everyone as they turned to look at their Apache companion. “In my home, the great Apache chief, Geronimo, found a piece of the stone sent from the Creator to bring light to my people. He hid the stone so the Fox could not steal it, returning the fire to the sky.”

“The Fox?” Scarlett said with a smile.

“Not you, Scarlett, the trickster who steals all the Creator gave to his promised people,” Moon Crow clarified. “The Apache see the piece of Uriel as a gift from Usen.”

“And do you know where it is, Moon Crow?” Corsair asked.

“Yes, Captain, I do!”



London Air Park on the southeastern edge of Feltham

It took hours for the *Valiant* crew to repair the damage caused by pirates. Even with one bladder gone, the zeppelin could stay airborne long enough to finish its journey to Great Britain. Finally, the *Valiant* landed at a grass airfield on Hanworth Park House near London. The ground crew conducted the airship landing procedure with the precision and accuracy that befitted the White Star line.

Standing at the edge of the airfield, waiting patiently for the zeppelin to begin disembarking passengers, was the man at the top of ERP: Thomas Alva Edison. A worried look caused his brow to furrow under his gray hair. Here was a man, an inventor, a genius by all rights, with more than one thousand patents and growing. He was also an industrialist and a capitalist. He never let his competitors get in the way of progress.

Tesla had made one of the most significant discoveries in the world when he harnessed the power of Uriel's fragments, but in Edison's point of view, Tesla had no vision of the future. To Edison, the comet's power meant global power, controlling everything to bring about order and peace. That was what he intended to do by any means necessary.

The first to disembark from the *Valiant* was Kreusi, followed immediately by McTavish and the surviving men from their Pinkerton security detail. Kreusi didn't look as worried as McTavish over the debacle dealing with Corsair

and his sky pirates. He reached out and shook Edison by the hand.

“Everything went according to plan, Thomas,” Kreusi exclaimed. This revelation surprised McTavish to no end.

“What? Are you daft? They chewed us up and spat us out! It was nothing remotely close to the plan I laid out!” McTavish screamed.

“Not your plan, Mr. McTavish, but rather mine,” Edison interrupted. “I knew that someone of Corsair’s ingenuity would see through your charade. So I reworked it, as it were, to ensure our victory.”

McTavish was shocked that there had been another plan in play besides his. It bothered him that Edison didn’t trust him enough to let him in on it.

“Oh, don’t look so gloomy, Daniel. I didn’t tell you about the changes because I didn’t want to risk Corsair figuring things out. Let’s face it, you’re a bad liar.”

McTavish knew his boss was right about that, and he had a bit of a laugh at his own expense. “But what about the fragment and the thinking machine?” McTavish asked. “Corsair, and now probably Tesla, know what we’re looking for!”

“That fragment was a small price to pay,” Edison explained as he turned to walk back to his automobile with Kreusi and McTavish following close behind. “The canister the fragment is in has a small transmitter John designed himself. It will allow us to track that accursed pirate ship from one end of the globe to the other.

“As for the data, it will only give them a small clue about our ultimate goal,” Edison continued. “In the end, Corsair

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and his crew will lead us to the piece of Uriel we need to finish our research. Once it's in our hands, no one will stop me from achieving my dream of a global utopia . . . peace without war . . . a world government under the control of those destined to lead."

Edison got into his car with Kreusi before leaning out to give McTavish one final order. "Daniel, get your best men together," he commanded, "and contact Mata Hari in Paris. We need a shade of her caliber to keep tabs on Corsair." With those final instructions, Edison left the airfield. McTavish smiled, knowing that Edison was on top of things. The hunt was on.

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CHAPTER TWO

RENDEZVOUS AT ODYSSEUS STATION

Two weeks later, Öräfajökull Volcano, southeastern

Iceland

Towering over Iceland, the volcano was one of the island's most active and highest peaks. It was also home to the way station for pirates, privateers, and those looking for a new life. Odysseus Station was such a place.

The thermodynamic energy from deep within the earth powered it beyond the various Tesla electrical generators scattered around the station. Propellers, helium balloons, and magnetic stabilizers keep the station flying. Radio-frequency dampers, combined with the electromagnetic interference from the Öräfajökull Volcano, safely ensured Odysseus Station remained hidden from the world. This was quite an

impressive feat for something the size of four city blocks, but that was the genius of Nikola Tesla. He had designed every inch of the station to be a floating city for everyone who wanted to help lift the people out from under ERP's boot.

Odysseus Station provided for the needs of everyone aboard, from living quarters, food eateries, and bars to workshops, repair stations, and storehouses. Gangways, crosswalks, and electric trams connected the different sections, moving people and supplies where they needed them. More than a thousand people worked and lived on the floating station. It was a city unto itself.

Another thing unique about Odysseus Station was the people. Refugees from all walks of life, social classes, and races lived and worked there. From rich to poor, blue-collar to white-collar, educated to uneducated, Odysseus Station's people worked together to help Tesla achieve his dream.

The upper tier of the station was where the airships moored. Tesla had designed it to keep them separate from the station, ensuring the people's safety and security from accidents or sabotage. Elevators brought personnel, repair parts, and supplies from the base below to support the airships and their missions worldwide. Telescopic baskets and floating scaffolding made the repairs possible in the mooring area.

The *Galeru* maneuvered toward the mooring mast. The fitting on the bow of the airship connected to the mast, allowing lines to secure the airship. Once completed, the gangplank extended from an opening below it, and Corsair and his crew started to exit.

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“Welcome back, Corsair!” one of the riggers shouted with a wave. Corsair returned the greeting with a salute back as he made his way down the gangplank.

“Bronx, get the work crews started on the repairs, then join us at Gatsby’s!” Corsair ordered. Before he could answer, a familiar voice shouted to the crew.

“Hey! Bronx!” shouted a tiny curly-haired girl with a robust set of lungs. She wore simple overalls with an oversized tool belt hanging around her waist. The twelve-year-old gripped a book tightly in her little hands as she muscled her way to the crew of the *Galeru*.

“Hey, Sprite, what are you doing here?” Bronx asked as he crouched down to her height.

“When I heard you’d arrived, I rushed over here to bring you this,” she said, gasping, trying to catch her breath, as she handed Bronx the book. “It’s that book by H.G. Wells, *War of the Worlds*. They say he’s the next Jules Verne. You should read it!”

He took the novel from the little girl. Melissa “Sprite” Brandenburg, an orphan from Great Britain, was considered a prodigy by most Vernians on the station. She had a keen intellect for mechanical engineering, and she applied everything she read to practical purposes.

“Well, I don’t know about that, but I’ll be sure to check it out.”

“And how are you doing, Melissa dear? Behaving yourself?” Fox asked as she patted the little girl on the head.

“Oh, come on, Fox, don’t call me that name. Why don’t you call me *Sprite* like everyone else?”

“Because, my dear Melissa, I am not like everyone else,” she replied as she walked on. “You have to earn your name.”

The little girl frowned. Everyone on the station called the little Vernian *Sprite* because of her bright demeanor and cheery outlook. It reminded people of the character from Shakespeare. She didn’t like being called anything else, especially her given name.

“Ignore her, kid. Come on; I need to get the yard boss working on these repairs if we’re going to leave anytime soon,” Bronx insisted. The mechanic took off with the little Vernian tagging along to find the yard boss and get the repairs on the *Galeru* started. Corsair turned to the rest of his team before they went their separate ways. Kiki stood next to the captain. She carried the piece of Uriel under her arm.

“Kiki and I are going to see Tesla. We’ll meet up later,” Corsair said before he paused and turned back to the crew. “Try to stay out of trouble, OK?”

They all had innocent looks, but the captain knew better.

The crew strolled toward the center structure of the mooring mast. Two elevators operated within the superstructure, bringing personnel and supplies to and from the heart of Odysseus Station. These lifts were large enough to carry the entire crew as they all piled in, taking the trip one hundred feet down to the heart of the station.

As they exited the elevator, people mobbed Corsair and his crew with good wishes, looking for the outside world’s latest gossip, a place on the team, or a hookup for later. The popularity of the *Galeru* and its crew was astonishing, especially to them. The sky pirates never saw themselves as celebrities even though the people treated them as such.

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As the crew headed toward Gatsby's, Corsair and Kiki took off in the opposite direction. The station was divided into living, logistics, engineering, and administration, but the people had different names for each section. They saw Odysseus Station as an extension of the outside world, so they named the different sections after landmarks related to their specific activities. They called the living area the *French Quarter*, as it was always full of life, love, and happiness. The engineering section was called *Londinium* for its industrial might and precision. Logistics was named *Kansas*, as it was the heartland of Odysseus Station. Finally, the administrative area was called *Grand Central* because it worked hard to keep the station operational and for its consistently busy atmosphere.

As Corsair and Kiki headed toward Grand Central, they noticed that someone had anticipated their arrival. A tram was waiting for them as they approached the intersection, with Mr. Alley standing outside the door. Alley was Tesla's assistant, a constant presence around the great inventor. He was as much of an enigma as Corsair. His past was a clean slate, and a single name was his only moniker. He was short in stature, wearing a simple suit and bowler hat. His monocle eyepiece stood out, attached over his left eye, and adjusted with various optical lenses. Rumor had it that Alley lost his sight during one of Tesla's early experiments.

"Good afternoon, Captain Corsair, Miss Kiki," he said as he tipped his hat to greet them. "Master Tesla is waiting to see you."

"Nice to see you too, Mr. Alley," Kiki deflected. "Always a step ahead, aren't you?"

“I wouldn’t be good at my job if I weren’t, Miss Kiki,” he replied as he motioned for them to board the tram. The tram resembled a trolley car on a monorail system, using electricity from overhead cables to power the electromagnetic engine that moved it along the track.

Kiki chuckled under her breath as she stepped aboard with Corsair right behind her. Once they were aboard, Alley followed right behind them, closing the door once he boarded the tram. “Wilson, Grand Central, please!” he shouted to the conductor. The tram was off with a tip of his hat and a double pull on the bell cord.

The trams were not fast, but they were convenient. Besides, it gave people the chance to talk. “Here are the data cards from Kreusi, along with the readout confirming the analysis. They are trying to build an atomic bomb,” Corsair said as he handed Alley the pouch of cards along with the final readouts. “Any word on what happened after the *Valiant* arrived in London?”

Before he could answer, Alley tried to take the container away from Kiki, but she kept a tight grip on it. “Relax, Alley, we took care of Edison’s tracking device,” Corsair assured him. The sudden confession caught Tesla’s assistant by surprise, almost stunned into silence.

“How . . . how did you know?”

“Give us some credit, Mr. Alley,” Kiki scolded him. “Bronx found his little bug easily. We put it on a balloon heading south. ERP will be searching the Caribbean Sea instead of the North Atlantic for us.”

Alley grinned, reassured of their resourcefulness. “I guess Master Tesla’s confidence in you is well-founded, Corsair,” he

complimented. “As for the *Valiant*, our spies said Edison himself met them in London. He seems overconfident in his plan to find an untainted piece of Uriel.”

Corsair and Kiki were impressed that Alley already knew ERP’s ultimate goal. Alley liked surprising people with information. It brought him absolute joy being one step ahead of people, except of course for Tesla. Alley could never outwit his master.

“We may have a lead on an untainted piece, but getting to it will prove difficult,” Corsair added. “I don’t want to give ERP any opportunity to get their hands on it. I would rather let that one alone unless necessary.”

“I think you should leave that decision to Master Tesla,” Alley responded. “In the meantime, there may be other avenues to pursue.”

“Other avenues?” Kiki inquired.

“An archaeologist in Egypt made a startling discovery. Uriel was here before, passing near Earth. There may be more fragments than we realize,” Alley explained, surprising the two sky pirates. Before they could ask any more questions, they arrived at Grand Central.

The administrative quarter of Odysseus Station was as busy as its nickname implied. There was a flurry of activity, from assigning new arrivals living quarters to transferring food and supplies worldwide to support those in need. The service desks had long lines while pneumatic tubes stretched in, out, and around the building relaying messages to the entire station. Elevators transported people to various floors within the administrative quarter.

Then there were the Vernians. Grand Central was the hub of Tesla's research, so he kept many of these inspired geniuses on hand to assist his exploration of new sciences. They worked within the various research laboratories and invention rooms, testing their theories while collaborating on their projects and various experiments.

The Vernians gathered in groups, showing off their latest designs, discussing new theories, and exploring improvements to existing technologies. These collaborations helped Tesla affirm or dispute his ideas. Their efforts kept them one step ahead of ERP in industrial progress.

As they made their way through the madness, the Vernians overwhelmed Alley as they tried to get his attention to hopefully get Tesla's opinions on their theories. He pushed his way through with promises to hear them out later. They came to a private elevator, separate from the others, located in the center of all the activity. Alley pulled out a ring loaded with assorted keys. He searched through them until he found the elevator key.

Alley unlocked the elevator gate with a turnkey, holding it open as he motioned for Corsair and Kiki to enter. Once they were inside, he followed, closing the gate behind him. The gate locked with a click, and Alley moved the manual lever up, causing the elevator to rise. It moved upward through the ceiling and out of the station below. Above Grand Central Station was a separate tower, connected only by this single elevator. It was Tesla's private workshop and laboratory. Very few people had access to him, as he was not known as a people person by many. He was quiet and cautious, focused on his work more than anything else.

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When they reached Tesla's workshop, the elevator abruptly lurched when it stopped on the floor. "Whatever you do, please don't touch anything!" Alley quickly advised them before unlocking the elevator.

Once Alley opened the elevator gate, Corsair and Kiki stepped out into the wonder that was Nikola Tesla's workshop. Sparks and arcs of electricity danced through the air, from one device to another. It reminded Kiki of the fireworks at the Sapporo Snow Festival in Japan. She was awed at the power on display in this place.

The workshop seemed to be cluttered, but it was an organized mess. Tesla was a consummate multitasker, so he had many projects working simultaneously. As the trio looked about the room, they saw that Tesla was nowhere to be found.

"I thought you said he was waiting for us?" Corsair said. Alley, quite flustered by the absence of his master, looked around for him.

"Master Tesla!" he shouted as he continued to search until the roar of an engine announced his arrival. Tesla flew in through the open window, utilizing something Corsair, or Kiki, had never seen before. He wore a backpack that spewed a blue flame like a jet engine's exhaust. The exhaust was as intense as the backwash from the *Galeru's* propellers but concentrated in a smaller area. Tesla hovered there for a moment before the engine kicked off, and he dropped to the ground. He lifted his goggles off his face and smiled with glee. He looked as young and vibrant as the day he had met Verne more than twenty years ago.

Alley was furious as he rushed over to help him. "Master Tesla, I thought we agreed to test out your jetpack under more

suitable conditions!" he chastised Tesla as he helped him unbuckle the harness.

"Calm down, Alley. I flew once around the tower to see if the new stabilizers were working properly," Tesla assured, but it didn't convince Alley that he had followed proper procedure.

"I didn't add enough of the compound ether fuel for a test flight," Alley snapped back. "What if the engine had cut out?"

"Alley, you're acting like my mother. Besides, I'm wearing the emergency escape chute. There was nothing to worry about."

Corsair and Kiki stood there and watched as the two played out their frustrations. Once Alley removed the jetpack, Tesla finally realized that he had company. "Ah, *Herr* Corsair, *Fräulein* Kiki, how good of you to come!"

"This is an incredible invention, Master Tesla! When can I have one?" Corsair asked as he looked over the jetpack. When he reached out to touch it, Alley smacked his hand away.

"Not yet, Corsair. We're still testing it," Alley admonished him. "The fuel is quite unstable, so someone of Master Tesla's caliber shouldn't be using it!"

"All right, Alley, you win," Tesla conceded. Corsair could see the disappointment on Tesla's face.

"I bet it was fun," he softly whispered.

Tesla smiled like a child on Christmas morning. "Like you wouldn't believe!" he exclaimed. Kiki examined the jetpack more closely, looking at the engine housing. Alley let her look closer since he would never hit a lady.

“How does it work?” she asked. “It’s not like a normal engine, is it?”

“No, my dear Kiki. It utilizes a new concept: jet propulsion,” Tesla corrected. “The turbines draw in air through the top. It’s then superheated with fuel, compressed internally, and exploded out the bottom. You control speed and direction through the exhaust nozzle.”

“And what type of fuel do you use?” Corsair asked. “Did you say a liquid compound ether?”

“Ether is merely a stabilizing agent,” Alley replied. “The real power in the fuel is Uriel.” That announcement surprised the two sky pirates.

“But how?” Corsair asked.

“It’s a rather complicated process and takes time to synthesize,” Tesla explained. “However, the piece you recovered should provide what we need to complete the task.” He held out his hand to Kiki, and without hesitation, she handed over the piece of Uriel to Tesla.

“Thank you, *Fräulein* Kiki. Alley, make sure to deposit the appropriate funds into their accounts.” Alley nodded before handing the pouch of data cards to Tesla. “And how was *Herr* Kreusi? Obstinate?”

“Intolerable!” Corsair shot back. “He didn’t seem to care that ERP was murdering and relocating hundreds of thousands of people for their damned research. His dedication to Edison is ridiculous. The extremes they’re willing to go to for their vision of world peace are staggering.”

“Yes, peace at the cost of human lives, but that is what we are fighting for, eh *mein freund*!” Tesla responded with a

friendly pat on Corsair's back. "So, we need to determine where they intend to find a large, untainted piece of Uriel."

"We have an idea of one, but we'd rather not pursue that if it's not necessary," Kiki told him.

"Oh, and why not?"

"It's with Geronimo and the Apache Nation," Corsair said. "They revere it as a gift from the gods. Taking it would be tantamount to stealing from the Vatican. There's already enough tension between the United States and the Apache. I wouldn't want to add to it."

"Understandable, understandable." Tesla pondered as he rubbed his chin, thinking about possibilities. "We'll keep that one on the back burner, shall we say. Alley, ask Captain Voltaire to take the *Madame de Pompadour* to watch the Apache. We need to know if ERP sends any of their scouts that way."

Alley went off to send the message. However, Corsair knew there was more to this than Tesla was saying. "Mr. Alley said that there might be another untainted source of Uriel, something from a previous visit by the comet?" he asked. Tesla smiled. It was one of the reasons he liked Corsair. The sky pirate was as curious as he was.

"Yes, indeed. Come, let me show you," Tesla said as he motioned for them to follow him. Tesla led them over to a similar setup to the Hollerith Machine on the *Valiant*—an Edison projector connected to a large console projected a series of images onto a glass screen. Tesla punched a key as the images rotated through while he explained. The images were of various Egyptian hieroglyphics carved within an underground tomb.

“Professor Hannibal Arkady from the Museum of Natural History discovered these hieroglyphics in a dig near Thebes,” Tesla clarified as he continued to change images. “They speak about a heavenly chariot racing across the sky as the tears of Ra rained down on them.”

“Heavenly chariot, that must be Uriel,” Corsair interjected. “And the tears?”

“Meteorites,” Kiki concluded. “When was this written? Do we know?”

“Professor Arkady estimated more than three thousand years ago, but he is still looking for clues as to what course it took,” Tesla answered. “So, we have evidence that Uriel is in a cyclical orbit. My ally at the Royal Observatory estimated its journey takes a thousand years, but it always comes back near Earth.”

“So, do we know what other locations Uriel came near?” Corsair inquired.

“Egypt and Antarctica. Take your pick!” Tesla joked. Corsair and Kiki both knew the answer. “Professor Arkady and his assistant, Penelope Putnam, are currently at the dig site in Thebes. I suggest you start there. Oh, and I have one more thing for you.”

Tesla walked over to a nearby table and pulled back the cloth covering. Underneath it was a long gun, nearly five feet in length, with copper-wrapped coils separated at equal intervals down the barrel—a backpack connected to the butt of the rifle.

“This is my latest invention, an electromagnetic rail gun,” Tesla said. “No gunpowder is needed to fire it, and it has a range of more than a thousand meters.”

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Both of them were shocked to hear that. Even Dash, their best sniper, was limited by his weapon's capabilities. This new weapon had an incredible range and accuracy. "How does it work?" Corsair asked as he picked it up and stared down the sight.

"The power pack charges the weapon, generating an electromagnetic pulse down the barrel. The pulse launches the projectile at nearly five thousand kilometers per second." The two pirates were once again in awe of the genius of Tesla.

"You said that you could use the meteor fragments for power beyond generating steam, but I never thought it could do something like this." Kiki commended him as Corsair picked up the rifle.

"It's heavy," Corsair said, holding up the rifle. "I'm not sure Dash would be able to hold it up to fire it."

"That's why it comes with a handy-dandy folding tripod to keep it steady," Tesla joked.

"I thought you were against making weapons, Master Tesla?" Kiki asked, questioning the inventor's rationale for making such a device.

"We are at war, *Fräulein* Kiki, and sometimes war calls for compromise in one's beliefs," he stated. "I do not have the luxury of my morals when people die because of them. I must be as proactive as *Herr* Edison in my designs, or we will not survive this conflict."

Kiki knew she had overstepped her bounds with the inventor and quickly apologized. "Please forgive me, Master Tesla," she said as she bowed, her head reverently. "I did not mean to insult you or your beliefs."

“And you did neither, *Fräulein* Kiki,” Tesla assured her. “You merely pointed out the flaws of an old man, ones that I will have to answer for when I stand before God.” Kiki looked relieved as she straightened back up.

“I will have this sent to the *Galeru* while repairs are underway,” Tesla added. “In the meantime, I suggest you unwind with your crew at Gatsby’s. You deserve the rest!”

Alley showed the two to the elevator, leaving Tesla alone with the large piece of Uriel. As the elevator dropped down, Tesla stared at the glowing chunk of meteorite. He carefully removed it from the canister and placed it between two metal screws, suspending Uriel’s piece on the table.

He picked up a handheld scanner. The device had a readout meter with a needle and a small dome with a probe extending outward. Tesla turned it on and placed the probe next to the meteorite. The needle pinged upward on the scale, moving back and forth until it settled on one number.

“Approximately 72 percent pure! Excellent!” Tesla remarked to the empty room. He turned the scanner off and grabbed a chisel and a small hammer. Carefully, he tapped on the chisel to cut away a tiny bit of the meteor, about the size of a grain of rice.

He picked it up with a pair of tweezers, staring at it intently. Tesla picked up a glass and dropped the fragment in it. He then poured some whiskey into the glass before he drank it down, chip and all, in one swift motion before it could react to the meteor fragment.

“A little more,” he whispered to himself. “I only need a little more time.”