

2013



# DIESELPUNK

## ePULP SHOWCASE

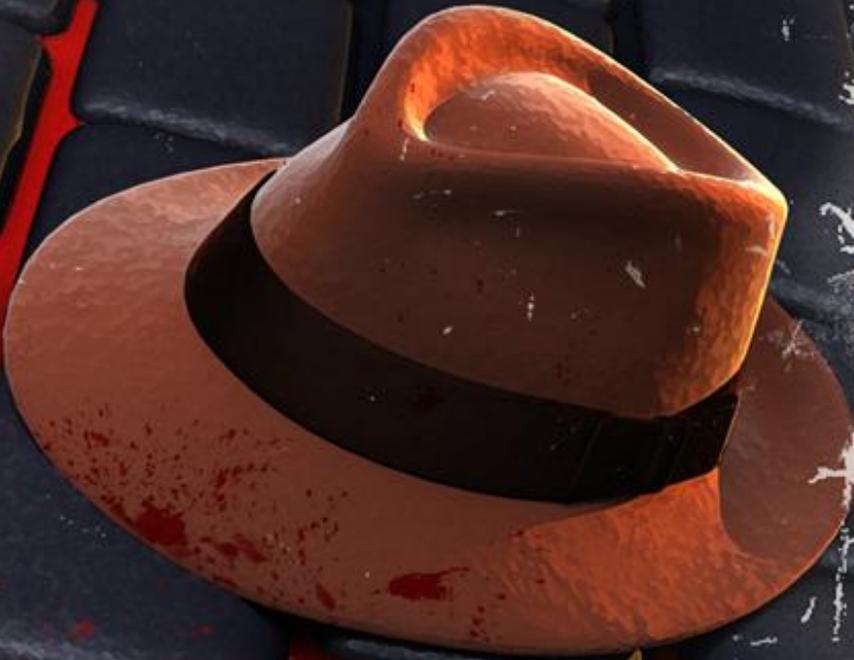
**TALES of the  
AETHER AGE**  
by GRANT GARDINER

**PANDORA  
DRIVER**  
by JOHN PICHA

**TROUBLE  
SHOOTER**  
by BARD CONSTANTINE

**WORLD of  
MAÑANA**  
by JACK PHILPOTT

**FOUR FANTASTIC TALES!**



# **Dieselpunk ePulp Showcase**

Created by

John Picha, Grant Gardiner, Bard Constantine and Jack Philpott

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## **WELCOME TO THE RETRO FUTURE**

When I started the Dieselpunks website years ago, the word “dieselpunk” was still a curiosity. Sure, it was loaded with familiar tropes like Pulp Adventure, Film Noir, and Weird Horror, but the artists were mashing these concepts together with something different, something a little more contemporary. At that time, the steampunks were just starting to climb their way from the underground and gain traction as a legitimate style, but there was something to be said about this little-known corner of dieselpunk, or "low-brow pop surrealism" as it was known back then.

Like the French film scholars who codified Film Noir as a genre years after the movies were in the theaters, I could see a similar thread binding the dieselpunk work together. Whether they realized it or not, these artists were creating work with eerily similar concepts. They were creating a future fueled by the spirit of the Jazz Age. In their world, they wanted to

see if old Sam Spade could work in an era of smartphones, or if Dillinger could make a clean getaway in a cherry red hovercar. These artists were writing cyberpunk stories from inside The Great Gatsby's mansion, and they invited everyone to the party.

What was missing at the time was a sense of community. We had fashion designers, musicians, architects, directors, sculptors, mechanics, authors... almost every artistic discipline was represented, but there was no single place they called home. That's when the Dieselpunks website started. It was created as a research site for these budding world-builders, someplace to find the weird and wacky (but mostly true) things that happened between World War I and World War II. In short time though, the community turned our quiet library into a raucous speakeasy and it's been growing ever since.

What you're about to read is a collection of short stories assembled from the best authors the dieselpunk community has to offer. Each tale will showcase a direction dieselpunk can take while still remaining true to the spirit of the genre.

I hope you enjoy these tales. I'll be seeing you again at last call.

-Tome

Tome Wilson is the owner/operator of Dieselpunks ([www.dieselpunks.org](http://www.dieselpunks.org)), the web's largest and most active dieselpunk community.



## THAT SORT OF WORLD

Created by Grant Gardiner

**THE 1920s.**

**MID-WESTERN COMMONWEALTH, CHICAGO.**

“Well if it ain’t *that* then what was it?”

“It was all those damn fool bankers in New York.”

“Bankers?”

“Yeah, *bankers*. They’re the ones who caused everything that’s happened. A huge pack of New York bankers got greedy. And the country was the one to cop it in the teeth when it all headed south.”

“Nah. It weren’t that.”

“It was too. And everyone knows it. Bankers got greedy, they sold Louisiana back to the French and that’s why the Grand Dream of the

United States of America is now just a footnote in history.”

Mickey thought about this for some time before shaking his head. “Nah, that ain’t it. That don’t explain half the crazy things that have happened.”

Mack growled. “Jus’ *listen*.” He began checking points off on his fingers. “New York sold Louisiana to the French. Which made everyone else really mad. Which made Chicago form the Mid-West militia. Which meant New York had to stop pretending and actually get serious about The Prohibition act. This made the North West secede to Canadia, which made California blame New York and change their name, which made Texas want nothing to do with no one no more, which made everyone else agree that Texas had the right idea.” He emphatically flicked his glowing cigarette butt into the cold, dark shadows. “From there it was all downhill. No more Union. No more United States of America.” He grinned. “And plenty more space ‘round the edges for young upstanding ‘entrepreneurs’ like ourselves. So we can make a little dosh on the side when we ain’t running booze for the gin joints.”

Mickey clutched himself tighter against the cold. “I’m sure that ain’t it. Me old man explained it diff’rent. A *lot* diff’rent. It had something to do with the Great War and zeppelins and aether and... stuff.”

“Well your old man don’t know his head from his toes. And that’s when he’s sober.” Mack stamped his feet in the sludge left over from the previous night’s snow. Then he started fishing inside his coat for his cigarette case. “Speaking of which – where the hell’s your hat? You look like a bum, huddled out here with no hood for your head.” He found the case and flipped it open. “You look like someone rolled you and left you wanting.”

Mickey replied with a glare but didn't do nothing about it. Instead he just turned his sullen gaze from the shadows of the alley to the dimly lit street beyond. "Bessie been complainin' that I don't dress to the nines. So I'm tryin' somethin' new. I'm goin' hatless from now on."

Mack stopped. Slack jawed, he stared at Mickey, cigarette left hanging unlit from his lower lip. There was a stretch of silence between them but Mickey refused to make eye contact.

Eventually Mack finished digging the book of matches from his pocket and stopped shaking his head long enough to light up. A bright flare cast orange light across his face, vanished instantly, and he sucked back his first lungful of smoke. He pocketed the matches and resumed his head shake. "You said some crazy things in the past, Mickey, but that one takes the cake." He exhaled. "You gotta be all outta crazy ideas now."

"What? I been speakin' to a Sicilian guy. Out at the zeppelin docks. Smart Import/Export fella who's into all that French *coo-chorr* stuff that Bessie makes me buy for her. He reckons no one will wear hats in future. That was his hot tip for the Wall Street bucket shops – he reckons that hat makers are on the slide and that I should go short on 'em for the long haul. He said I'll get at least 10 points."

Mack shook his head again as he once more stamped his feet to get the blood moving. "I stand corrected. You ain't fresh out of stupid; you're now *importing* it. The good stuff they develop in scientific laboratories or places like Wall Street bucket shops." He shook his head again as his own gaze returned to the street beyond. "Not wearing hats." He scoffed. "What sort o' world would that be?"

Self consciously, Mickey played at the front of his slicked over part. The

pomade was wet from the constant drizzle of rain that had only recently stopped. “I ain’t in charge. It’s just the way it’s gonna be. An’ Bessie wants me on the cutting edge of it.”

Mack shook his head once more as he pulled his watch out of his pocket and flipped open the face. “Hot tips about not wearin’ hats...” 9.22pm.

He snapped the watch-face shut and swung the timepiece by its chain for a few seconds, blowing smoke in the direction of the street beyond. “Ah, what’s the use?” He pocketed the watch and readjusted his gloves. “Let’s get goin’, Mickey. If this moll complains about us bein’ a few minutes early, well...” He took one more drag and threw his cigarette away. “Then we can just pull rank on her.”

Mickey nodded and stepped forward to see if the coast was clear. But he waved Mack back. Someone was coming.

It was just a horse drawn wagon. Safe, they both huddled up under their long collars and watched as it clopped past. The barrels lined along the dray said ‘Fresh Milk’ but at this time of night it could only be an emergency gin run. Someone somewhere was having a lot of fun. But on a Saturday night that probably described half the town.

When the driver was safely out of sight the two hoods emerged from the alleyway and quickly crossed the road. Firtfully they looked up and around at the various windows in case someone was taking an interest in their progress. Reaching the sidewalk they took one more glance around then shuffled down a series of steps till they were below street level and out of sight. Above towered the tenement building. In front of them was a wooden door reinforced with bars and bolts.

Mack rapped on the door and a peep hole slid open. Beady little eyes looked out at them. “What’s the password?”

Mack was already taking off his gloves. “Blue aether for green gin.”

The eyes frowned. “Mack, that’s tomorrow’s password. You’re supposed to give me *today’s* password.”

Mack glared up from his gloves. “Beady, jus’ open the damn door. You know it’s me.”

The eyes were offended. Then the peep hole slid shut and the door clicked and clunked. A few more heavy clanks and it edged open to reveal a mousy little man in a deep green waiter’s vest and ruffled bow tie. “There ain’t no purpose in having a password, Mack, if no one’s gonna use it.”

Mickey pushed open the door and the little man scurried out of the way. Mack stepped inside. “And there ain’t no need for a password, *Beady*, if you knows who’s on the other side of the door.”

Mack reefed off his final glove and began moving across the small cloakroom towards the attendant’s counter. Mickey followed, both of them ignoring Beady as he muttered to himself and returned each of the door’s heavy bolts to their original place. When the two men reached the counter they started hauling off their overcoats, scarves and gloves. They draped them across the bar in front of the pretty little hostess who waited behind the counter in a tiny hat and dress, both in matching black.

Picking up their things, she frowned at Mickey. “You lose your hat Mickey?”

The hatless hoodlum gave a sullen growl.

Mack laughed in triumph. “Y’ see? You’re a damn fool, you are.” He turned back to the girl behind the counter. “Margie, tell Mickey he’s a damn fool. He’s decided, in all his wisdom, to go *hatless* from now on.”

Margie frowned and took Mack’s hat. “Hatless?” She looked at Mickey. “You mean outside?”

Mickey, now coat and scarf less, looked daggers at Mack before he turned back to Margie. “It’s the fashion. An’ one day you’ll be hatless too.”

The girl blushed. “Mickey! You don’t go saying such things.” She gave him a stern frown as she picked up their overcoats and made to hang them up. “You’re going to get yourself a reputation talking like that.” She leaned in over the heavy garments. “People will talk.”

Mack gave one more cackle as Mickey threw his hands up in defeat and led the way past the counter. Mack winked at Margie as he passed. They pushed their way through a set of heavy curtains and began crossing the small waiting room beyond.

“Aw, c’mon, Mickey. Are ya feelin’ misunderstood?” Mack chuckled. “Does no one understand y’r fancy-pants, lar-dee-dah fashion-ability?”

They approached a door. In gilded letters the door announced it was a ‘Funeral Parlor’. In sullen silence Mickey pushed his way straight through.

The room beyond was dark, empty and lined with display coffins. It gave the room a sombre, still atmosphere. An atmosphere disturbed by their

stomping feet and Mack's incessant giggles at Mickey's expense. But there was also the waft of cigarette smoke in the still air and the sound of muffled music. A sound that grew stronger the closer they moved to the door at the back of the room. The one with 'Staff only' scrawled crudely across its face.

They pulled up in front of the new barrier and Mack groaned. "Aw, jus' take the laughs, wiseguy. What y'r doin: it's crazy. And if you can't take the ribbin' from me then you might not want to tell anyone else why y'r without a lid." Mack guffawed again. "Cause they ain't gonna be half as understanding as I've been."

Mickey snorted his disgust before rapping on the door. Another peep hole slid open and both Mickey and Mack were blasted with rowdy noise. Then the peep hole snapped shut and the door was reefed open.

"Mickey! Mack!" A portly maitre de with a waxed moustache held his arms wide in the riot of noise. "How are you, my friends? You have not forgotten your old friend Gustav after all."

Both men smiled and nodded their greeting as the beaming, rosy-cheeked maitre de dramatically ushered them into the big noisy room like they were royalty. "Your usual table?" he asked over the quick stomping band and the burbling crowd noise.

Mack slipped him a dollar and leaned in close. "No need, Gus. We're here to meet someone. We can take care of ourselves."

Gustav bowed low and then withdrew, leaving them to scan the crowded room.

Unfortunately – for Mack and Mickey – The Green Gin Joint was jumping. Smoke and patrons swirled about the big speakeasy with abandon. Music lovers crowded in on the hard drinking, hard playing band and made sure space on the dance floor was hotly contested. The raised dining section was full and the multiple bars each had a burbling scrum of eager drinkers fighting for the barmen’s attention. Here and there a well dressed thing would stumble, spilling gin and cackling as their cheering friends hauled them upright. Flappers were camped out on the laps of their jacket-less beaus – without a thought for decorum – yelling outrageous things at the band. Or, if they felt the beat, the same girls hauled their men up onto the dance floor where they literally kicked up their heels and weaved back and forth at a frenetic pace.

It was also populated with different types from all over the city. From the Italians to the Irish to the Germans and everyone in between, the crowd was cosmopolitan and colourful. Everyone was dressed up in their best furs, pearls and pinstripe suits. There was even some black couples blitzing the dance planks or seated around the tables, confident enough to flaunt both themselves and their wealth amongst the other folk.

It was a brave new world in a brave new decade. And, as the crowd was demonstrating, a loud and fast moving world at that.

Mack and Mickey started drifting through the crowd towards the dining section. They skirted the dance floor as they went. Mickey shook his head and leaned in closer to be heard over the din. “I ain’t ever goin’ to get used to this.”

“Used to what?”

“Having *them* here.”

Mack tried to provoke him. “Who?”

“*Them.*”

Mack looked to see Mickey pointing out a gaggle of flappers over by one of the bars.

Mack looked bemused. “You mean the dames?”

“Yeah.” Mickey gave the buzzing and giggling girls a troubled look as they passed. “I ain’t saying it’s *always* a bad thing having dames in saloons. But I ain’t ever going to get *used* to it.”

Mack snorted his disbelief and scanned the crowd again, almost bumping into a well-sauced couple who saluted and staggered off. He craned his head upwards and then tapped Mickey on the shoulder. He pointed towards a table on the wall with a clear view of the band. A table where an unaccompanied female sat with a cream coloured ribbon twisted all the way up and down her left arm.

Mickey nodded and followed in his wake. Soon they had squeezed past the last of the dining tables and their smiling, smoking diners to stand over the final table. To wait.

The demure little flapper just sat at the table, ignoring them. She had the mandatory bobbed hair, cloche hat and tasselled dress. Radiating a faintly amused boredom, she idly played with her fur shawl while splitting her attention between the band and an immaculately groomed and tuxedoed gent wearing a white dinner jacket at one of the bars. He was drinking dirty cocktails and she was clearly thinking dirty thoughts.

Mack waited until it was obvious she was ignoring them. Not amused, he put his hands in his pockets. “Enjoyin’ the band, dollface?”

She didn’t look up. “They’re quite good,” she quipped, “for white folk.”

There was another pause as the band played on.

Mickey scowled. “So at least *you’re* enjoyin’ yourself.”

With a dry look she slowly turned towards him. “I’ve never been more bored in my life.”

Between the confident slump of her near-bare shoulders to the relaxed bite of her eyes it was clear that staying bored around this girl would be hard work. Easy for her. Hard for them.

But Mack was all business. “You the dame from the newspaper?”

She frowned and looked them up and down. “That depends. Do you have a story for me?” Her eyes stopped at Mickey’s greasy hair. “’Cause I ain’t in the market for sob stories.”

Mack leaned in close. “How about stories that end in a very big ‘boom’?” One eyebrow crept up towards the brutally sharp cut of her fringe. She reached into her cream, fingerless driving gloves and pulled out a delicately thin time piece. She scowled. “It isn’t nine thirty yet. You weren’t supposed to meet me till nine-*thirty*.”

Mickey gave her a menacing smile. “You can enjoy the bandstand once we’re gone. But we ain’t gonna be left waiting out in the rain and snow so

you can listen to jass music.”

She scowled back as good as she got. “Some of us have a cover to maintain, you guileless fool. I happen to be a newspaper columnist by day. *A newspaper*. Which is something people *read*.” She draped a delicate arm over the back of her chair and looked Mickey up and down in disgust. “You wouldn’t be sharp enough to read. The concept may escape you... *dar-ling*.”

Mack held his hands up between them. “We ain’t here for your day job, sweetheart. We’re here to make some dosh of our own. From your *other* job. So are we talkin’ to the right person or not?”

She took one more disgusted look at Mickey then gave an unenthusiastic wave for them to sit down. Both did so and Mack quickly waved away the approaching waiter. Instead he leaned forward on the table. “So you have what we need?”

The flapper reached into her purse and produced a set of large brass keys, the sort used for large brass padlocks. She covertly placed them on the table. Mack swept them inside his jacket.

The flapper leaned back again. “Those are from a security guard at the airfield. He’s sweet on one of our agents and tonight she’s keeping him occupied with dinner, a dance and a late night picture. He won’t know they’re missing until morning. So the only way you’ll be caught is if you do something wrong on your end.”

Mickey scoffed which earned him a sarcastic smile from their informant. She looked back at Mack. “But you have to do the job tonight. You have what you need?”

“Ten sticks of the noisy stuff. But what’s gonna stop them making another one?”

“Oh, they’ll make another one. Destroying the prototype is only meant to slow them down. You destroy the prototype and it will set them back at least a year. Which will be a huge victory in the coming arms race.” The flapper shifted on her chair. “But you don’t need to know any of that. All you need to know is that the target is in hangar *A13* of the MidWest Commonwealth skymilitia complex. That’s all you need to know.”

Mack shook his head. “That ain’t true. There’s still one more important question: why us? Doesn’t New York have their own people? Why didn’t they send someone else?”

She considered Mack for a while. Then she nodded. “Fair enough. The new... *status quo* is still that: new. Most of the agents of the Old States have either disappeared or they’re operating for ‘other teams’. Unfortunately for us, we’re short on agents in this part of the continent.” She tipped her head towards them. “Hence why we need to hire local muscle with the necessary contacts to get the final job done.”

Mickey sneered. “Hence why they have to use dames.”

The flapper gave him another sarcastic smile. “Darling, there have always been women in this business. You just haven’t heard of us up ‘til now.” She leaned in with a cocky bobble to her head. “That’s how good we are: you’ve never heard of us.”

Mack held up his hands between the two. “Alright, children. We’ll be on our way before you two punch on. At least after you...” He held his hand

out.

The flapper smiled ruefully as she reached into her purse again. “Almost thought you’d forgotten.”

Mack looked unimpressed. “I ain’t forgotten. Was just waiting to see if you’d offer first.”

She plonked a roll of cash in his hand, giving him a sly look as she did so. “You profiling me, Mack? Cause that would indicate you got some real brains. And as I said, we’re looking for more resources in this part of the world. Brains might make you valuable.”

Mack pushed himself to his feet and pocketed the money. “Well we can discuss that when we come back for the other half when the job is done. Until then—“ he indicated to the tuxedoed gent over at the bar. “We’ll leave you to your recreation.”

She gave him a faintly amused nod then turned away, leaving the two men to push their way back into the crowd.

“Hey Mickey. Do people still play instruments and dance for fun in the future?”

“Ah, *shaddup*.”

\*\*\*

The gangsters retrieved their effects from the cloakroom before leaving the speakeasy the way they had arrived, returning across the road to the alleyway.

There Mickey began rummaging around in one of the trash cans. He hauled out a hessian sack and quickly emptied its contents – ten sticks of dynamite and three bottles of gin. The good stuff. Quickly they divided the ten sticks and three bottles between them, hiding the contraband in special smugglers pockets stitched into their overcoats and jackets. Once everything was squared away Mickey threw away the sack and Mack led the way down the far end of the alleyway, checking that the coast was clear. Seeing that it was, they both slunk out onto the empty sidewalk.

The street they moved down was grimy and dark. The only thing that disturbed its peace was their passing and the drizzle of rain that fell from the heavens. They slunk past the foot of dim streetlights where their shadows twisted and contorted on the concrete. Far above the cloud cover was low and heavy while dead-faced buildings loomed up over them on every side. The puddles they splashed through were cold and black like ink. The street quiet and still. The drizzle constant.

At the end of the street they turned left and continued, once more the only movement on yet another grimy, silent street. They continued heading north. North towards the halo cast across the horizon of high tenement buildings. A halo created by the bright lights of the MidWest skymilitia aerodrome.

Deep into the backstreets of Chicago.

\*\*\*

Mickey suddenly stopped, hand in the air. He was looking back down the street.

“What is it?” hissed Mack.

Mickey pointed back the way they had come and held up a hand to wait. The street appeared to be still and quiet but Mack held his breath. Waiting.

Then he saw it. A headlight beam from a distant automobile swept the street before the vehicle turned away. In its passing, the light outlined two fedora-clad figures paused at the last corner Mack and Mickey had turned down. Figures that were looking at them. Figures that then disappeared with the return to darkness.

Mack paused. Then quickly turned. "Go. Go go go."

They both hurried along the sidewalk, gradually picking up their pace. They swept under another streetlight and continued onwards. Mack waited till they moved some way further along. He looked back. Two figures flitted through the now distant streetlight in their direction. Clearly hustling to catch up.

Mack reefed his overcoat tight. "Get the lead out and go go go!" Now at a fair canter, they both reached the end of the street. It opened out onto a main road humming with late night traffic. Turning west, they lurched along the wide sidewalk. Travelling in the opposite direction, they were passed by horse-drawn carts and little Ford Ts with their buzzing horns. A tram bell could be heard approaching from the distance. The sidewalk had pedestrians and both men crashed past them with barely a thought for the startled people trying to stay out of their way.

A short way further down the sidewalk they reached a row of boarded up shop fronts and empty market carts. Without stopping, Mack looked back. The men following them were hurrying along behind, bailing up pedestrians in the dim streetlights to examine who they were. Then an

angry pedestrian who had lost their basket of shopping into a puddle pointed in the direction of Mack and Mickey. The pursuers took off, their overcoats billowing out in the stark, rain drop filled beams of the automobile headlights as they continued on the trail.

Mack and Mickey splashed through another puddle and skidded to a halt. They looked about. Mickey pointed down a nearby laneway and they both ran towards it. Mack had just enough time to look back again. He saw the trailing men now flat out, running along the sidewalk and kicking up water as they crashed through the puddles. Not letting up for a second.

Reaching the laneway, Mack and Mickey plunged in. Their shoes scraped and skidded on the dirty wet pavement, sending echoes along the narrow, high-walled space. Darkness wrapped around them as the noise of the main road faded behind. Up ahead a fire burnt bright in a forty-four gallon half-drum. As they scurried towards it their shadows began to creep up the wall, lurching side to side and growing to gigantic proportions in stark silhouette. Mack's shadow stopped and looked back. From the far end of the laneway a gruff voice called for them to stop. Mack's shadow turned again and lurched away from the fire to blend into the rest of the lane's murky darkness.

New footsteps approached the fire. Two more shadows appeared and skidded to a halt. High on the wall the fedora-crowned silhouettes looked back and forth. Then one of the shadows pointed further down the laneway and both lurched away.

The sound of their footsteps quickly receded until silence reigned once more in the alleyway. Mickey emerged from behind several trash cans. Mack cracked open the door he had hidden behind. Mickey caught his eye and gave his partner the all clear.

Mack stepped out, looked down the laneway, then indicated back the way they had ran. “Let’s get goin’. This job is gettin’ way too interesting.”

Mickey nodded, shielding his eyes from the glare of the fire as he followed in Mack’s wake. They quickly made their way back to where they had entered the laneway to scan the sidewalk in both directions. Happy the coast was clear, they crossed the sidewalk and began the tricky process of crossing the street. The wide thoroughfare was a mess of traffic under the weak street lights. Horses, trucks and automobiles fought for right of way across multiple unmarked lanes. A tram halted and began disgorging passengers as Mack and Mickey picked their way across one ‘lane’ at a time, trying to avoid the traffic, the manure and the puddles. It took a while but they eventually alighted on the sidewalk to mix with the tram crowd.

Both stopped in the moving herd to peer past the slow, halting traffic and scan the distant roadside. The tram crowd slowly dispersed around them but there was still no sign of their pursuers emerging from the alleyway to continue the chase.

Mickey, not taking his eyes from the alleyway, leaned in close. “You think we got away?”

Mack slowly nodded. “Looks like it.”

“You think they got a good look at us?”

“No chance. It’s the only reason we’re goin’ to continue with the job.”

Mickey looked at Mack. “You sure? We don’t know who they were. They

could'a been militia.”

Mack shook his head. “They could'a been anyone. It's just as likely they were Lucca soldiers. Or flatfoots after us for the Eisenberg job.” He finally took his eyes away from the alleyway. “Hell, one of my three molls could have got wise and hired help to get revenge. Either way, it's just as likely it *wasn't* militia as it *was*.” He rammed a pointed finger into Mickey's chest. “If you want t' go to the top of town, Mickey, you gotta go big. And in the circles we move in, this job is big.” He leaned in closer. “Think about it Mickey: we pull this job off and we'll have New York backing us up. *New York!* We play our cards right and we'll be the Chicago arm of *The Family*.”

Mickey looked sceptical. “I dunno. They haven't promised us anything like that...”

Mack rolled his eyes and then reefed Mickey around until he was facing the road. “Then what about that?”

As if on cue, the small herd of Model T Fords crowding the road parted. Into the break growled the long, shiny bonnet of a big Cadillac. The flaring tail of a fearsome peacock hood ornament pointed the nose of the huge seven-passenger V-63 sedan. The rain made the deep burgundy paint job gleam in the traffic headlights. The big white-wall tires crashed through puddles, splashing the small boxy Fords as it passed them by. The rest of the custom coachwork glided into view with its chrome work winking and morphing the light, the dark tinted windows of the rear cab no doubt hiding someone rich and powerful. Someone with respect.

Both men stared from the sidewalk as the uniformed driver in the peaked hat and driving gloves casually hauled the huge machine into the outside

lane, the big automobile whining up to speed as it left the rest of the halting traffic to fight amongst themselves. With one more deep growl of acceleration the mesmerising machine swung deep towards the gutter, kicking up water as it roared past Mack and Mickey.

They were left staring at the spare wheel on the back of the Cadillac as it receded into the distance. Even the spare wheel was classy.

Mack leaned into Mickey's ear. "You ever want to be driven around in one of those? With Bessie in the back seat? Your driver in the front? Soldiers at your beck and call?"

Mickey continued to stare as the automobile disappeared from sight. "You know I do."

"Then we gotta go big, Mickey. And this job is big. Brand new shiny Cadillac big. Leading our own organisation big. Getting respect *big*."

Mickey chewed his lip for some time. Then he finally nodded. "Yeah, alright. Let's go."

Mack nodded with a smile and led the way down the nearby alleyway, both fading back into the darkness of the dirty city...

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Twisting through back alleys and mingling with any crowd they could, Mack and Mickey made their way north. Every now and then they would stop to see if they were being trailed but so far it had been for nothing. Their pursuers seemed to be well and truly off their trail.

It wasn't till they were within five miles of the aerodrome that Mickey

once more halted Mack with an upraised hand.

Going still, Mack looked around. The skyline was lit up in bright haze by the aerodrome lights but the shadows were still deep in amongst the crowded wall of tenement buildings that clawed at the skies above them. Nothing moved in the darkness save for the persistent drizzle of rain. From one end of the street a domestic quarrel could be heard. From the other end two Tomcats were making a racket, brawling in an alleyway. But there was nothing else to suggest they needed to stop...

Then he heard it. A distant 'whirring' noise. From above.

Mack swore and both men dived for a nearby covered stoop. Just as they reached the dry concrete of the top landing a bright light flooded the street. They flattened themselves against the wall of their cover and held their breath.

Along the street drifted a bright circle of light which slowly grew more intense and focussed. The noise from above also grew until a soft sputtering noise could be heard. Then the beam of light began to methodically range up and down the street, illuminating its various nooks and shadowy alcoves.

From the covered safety of their hide Mack swore again. "What the hell are *they* doing here? This isn't their usual beat."

Mickey shrugged before leaning out. A new light snapped on and he lunged back into the shadows. The new light danced up and down the tenement buildings then across the rooves as the first light finished its sweep of the street. A quick inspection was made of the building at the end then both lights swept away to the east to inspect something else.

Confident the search had moved on, Mack stepped out into the drizzling rain to see police zeppelin D-58-8 slowly descend from the low cloud cover and arc gracefully away to the east, its two dancing searchlights stabbing down from the heavens to continue the inspection of Chicago's alleyways.

As darkness reclaimed the street Mack and Mickey were left staring up into the gently falling rain. The noise of the zeppelin engines faded away to be replaced by the loud curses of tenement residents unhappy with the way the Chicago police force chose to do business. It was a confusing chorus of different languages that also soon faded away to nothing. Then the street returned to silent stillness.

Mickey looked sceptically at Mack.

Mack shrugged. "We make it to the aerodrome and the guards will vouch for us. Just several more miles and we'll be home free." He slapped Mickey on the shoulder. "Then we'll be on top of the world."

Mickey sighed then followed as Mack led them in the direction of the skyline's intense halo of light.

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Mickey stared down the length of the security fence. It was an intimidating wall of barb wire-threaded steel mesh stretching towards their destination, the distant gatehouse. The gatehouse that jutted out onto the street that ran all the way down the fence. More coiled barb wire crowned the huge barrier and a well worn path just inside the fence suggested a regular sentry route. Inside the complex, through the vicious fence, the

large expanse of the aerodrome's outer training paddock revealed empty parachute jumping frames and the trainee fitness obstacle course. Much further in, the high-security section with its huge hangars and gas tanks was lit up like a theatre stage or some sort of horrifically modern surgeon's laboratory where experimental aeroplanes must have replaced Frankenstein's beautiful monster. But between that destination and the dark alleyway they now hid in, there was that long vicious fence, the guardhouse with its risky check-in, and the huge, well-lit outer paddock with its machine gun armed watchtowers and killer guard dogs barking sharply in the distance.

Mickey peered down the long fence. "There's too much light," he hissed. "If we're still bein' followed they'll see us out there on the street. They'll see us for sure." His eyes rose to the heavens. "Especially if that zepp reappears..."

Mack scoffed. "Forget about the cops. They aren't allowed in milita airspace. That's the best bit: the *militia* will protect us from cops. Same goes for anyone followin' us. If someone does follow we just yell for the guards. They all know us and will vouch for us. If we're lucky they may even shoot 'em."

Mickey's eyes darted back to the shadows of the alleyway and further dark streets beyond. "I still dunno..."

Mack straightened. "That's the best bit. You never do. *I* do the thinkin' and *you* do the followin'." He pointed a stern finger in Mickey's face. "And this is where you start followin'." With that he plunged into the bright light of the street, crossing the road to start the long exposed walk all the way down to the gatehouse.

Mickey took one more furtive look around in the shadows. Then hurried out into the light to catch up...

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They moved quickly but still had a fair distance to travel in the harsh light. Every few steps Mickey would peer about, this time looking at a suspicious apartment building, next time eyeing a shadowy stoop. It didn't help that many of the windows were boarded up to block out the round-the-clock noise and light. Some of the buildings even appeared to be abandoned, no doubt unable to attract enough tenants with all the planes and zeppelins flying in at all times of the night. It made them the perfect place for someone to set an ambush.

Then Mack hit Mickey on the arm and pointed ahead. Approaching them on the other side of the fence was a sentry in militia gray. He was whistling a tune while he stared off into space, monotonously doing his rounds. As they drew closer, they could recognise his familiar ruddy features.

Mack held his hand up. "That you Nico? It'd have t' be. You've always been a lousy whistler."

The sentry scoffed as he drew closer and came to a lazy halt opposite them. "Thanks a lot, Mack. What with all this free time on me hands I practise plenty for ya. Then all you can do is criticise!" He shook his head in exaggerated disappointment. "I think you should apologise." He nodded. "With booze."

Mack grinned. "Maybe tomorrow. Right now we gotta be on our way. The base commander is after his usual ration and we can't keep his majesty

waiting.”

Nico snorted through his nose. “Yeah. Tell me about it. I won’t keep you then.”

Mack held up a hand. “Jus’ one more thing, Nico. You seen people about tonight? We keep getting this bad feeling that we’re bein’ followed. You wouldn’t know of anyone out and about?”

Nico shook his head as he thought about it. “Nah. Not that I know of. But I can stay here and see if anyone is tailing ya, if ya like.” He grinned. “It’ll cost ya though.”

Mack scoffed. “No doubt. How’s about a flask? On the house when we do our next delivery.”

Nico gave a lazy salute. “Yessir. Private Nico, on the lookout.” He stopped and gave them a strange look. “Wouldn’t be able to pay me up front, would ya?”

Mack scoffed. “Free is free. It means we can decide when to get it to ya. We’ll see you tomorrow.”

Nico nodded, sighed with disappointment, then shrugged. “Alright. But I had to try.”

Mack took a second look at Nico before he and Mickey continued on their way. He was left shaking his head at the audacity of the young private while Mickey continued looking around at the buildings across the street. “We gonna be able to make it tomorrow to pay him? If we blow this thing up I don’t really want t’ be back here any time soon.”

Mack shook his head. “After an explosion on base they won’t let anyone on base who doesn’t have a pressed uniform. We couldn’t get in even if we wanted to.”

They continued forward as the gatehouse began to loom large. The structure filling the gap in the huge fence was a fairly good example of Mid-West pragmatism – all boxy construction and to-the-point functionality with a street going in, a street going out, boom gates to regulate the traffic and a pedestrian gate that led through the middle. The boxy wood-paling structures were nowhere near as intimidating as the concrete maximum security checkpoint located further into the base but the sand-bagged machine gun posts on either side still made it a formidable entranceway to approach.

Fortunately for Mack and Mickey most of the guards were customers or well aware that the base commander was. They were used to seeing the pair enter and exit the base at all times of the night on gin runs and knew to skip over the usual security pat down.

*Most* of them knew to skip over the usual security pat down.

As they finally drew near to the gatehouse Mickey gave one more look up at the sky, then one more look back down street. He didn’t see anyone. No one except Nico. Nico hadn’t moved. He was still leaning on the fence. Watching them.

Mickey took one more scan of the shadowy buildings but kept glancing back at the lone sentry. “Looks like we made it,” he murmured. “No one’s followin’ us. Although Nico’s actin’ a little weird. Why do ya think he’s still—“

“That’s why.”

Mickey looked forward. Mack was slowing to a halt and staring at a group of men disembarking from two black, non-descript sedans parked on the opposite side of the street from the gatehouse. The half-dozen men were all wearing dark overcoats and black fedora hats and as they made their way towards Mack and Mickey it was clear that some of them were packing heat.

Mickey watched as the men continued towards them. Then he looked at Mack.

Mack swallowed. “Run.”

Mickey was taken by surprise but took off as fast as he could. Only several steps behind Mack, they sprinted towards the gatehouse which was now only forty feet away.

“Oi!” yelled Mack at the high machine gun nest guards. “We need help! It’s Mack and Mickey!” He glanced at the quickly closing thugs. “We need help!”

Their futile escape halted some twenty feet from the gatehouse. Two huge gangsters crashed into them, skittling both across the hard slick road. They struggled to get up but the heavies knew what they were doing, slapping away fends until they had a good grip on their heavy jackets, holding them down and dragging them back across the wet tarmac. Their huge comrades also arrived to help. Quickly, Mack and Mickey were pinned on their knees by two crag-faced ogres each while every attempt to struggle free was rewarded by a third who gave them a heavy punch to the guts.

“Help us!” gasped Mickey. “Guards! Major! Help us!”

One more brutal punch to the mid section and Mickey curled up, wheezing out his last breath in ragged sobs. Mack dialled back his resistance to ‘feeble’ so he didn’t warrant another silencing attack. In the relative stillness that followed his feral eyes darted over their attackers, trying to draw a bead on who they were and what they wanted. But the heavies said nothing. In mute obedience, they just waited.

There was the firm ‘clunk’ of an automobile door closing. Then, in the smothered silence, the sound of shoes began scraping their way across the wet road.

Mack and Mickey struggled to turn and see who it was. They clearly saw the automobile parked on the other side of the road. It was a familiar, deep burgundy Cadillac with a vulgar peacock hood ornament. The driver continued to the back of the automobile and opened the rear door. With little ceremony the owner stepped out.

Making his way slowly but surely from the Cadillac was a mobster. It was the only thing he could have been – a *proper* Chicago mobster. With a jaded air he strolled towards them in his navy blue pinstripe suit. In his hand he held a fat, lit cigar. On his fingers were diamond encrusted rings. His shoes were made of bleached crocodile leather and he wore a classy fedora with a small ostrich feather in the hat band. And he was in no hurry to reach them.

Suddenly Mack and Mickey were both lurched over onto their stomachs. Huge hands held back their arms and began reefing at their overcoats, tearing them off by force before both were unceremoniously hauled up to

their knees and then twisted around. Twisted around to stare up at the cigar smoking gangster who now stood before them, an unimpressed look on his face.

There was a silent pause as the heavies carefully flattened and held up the two overcoats.

“Hey guards!” Mickey yelled over his shoulder. “Go get the major! Guards! He can vouch for us! Help us!”

The gangster scowled as he received one of their overcoats from a henchman and started turning it over. “Quit y’r earbashing. It ain’t gonna do you no good. I’m militia, same as them.”

Mack’s eyes were wide and darting back and forth but his voice was still calm. “You? You ain’t militia.” He looked closer. “I’ve seen you before. And it weren’t workin’ for the militia.”

“Nice to see you remember me, Mack. At least I get that. And you’re right, I *don’t* usually work for the militia but, unfortunately for you two today, I am...” His voice trailed off as he began to carefully dig through one of the coat’s inside pockets.

Mack snarled. “Now I remember you. You’re Cornish Pete. You’re a heavy for the Luccas.”

Cornish Pete nodded as he continued to examine something in greater detail. “It’s true. And what’s also true is that you boys are in a lot of trouble.” He drew out of the inside pocket two sticks of dynamite and looked at Mack and Mickey. “Carryin’ explosives.” He shook his head. “Not good. This close to a militia base it’s a capital offense and you boys

know it.” He raised an eyebrow at them like a disappointed school principle. “You boys have signed your fate, you have.”

Mack, still defiant, glared at the cocky gangster. “*You* were the ones followin’ us. We lost your men in the alleyway. How’d you find us again? You get lucky? Or did that dame sell us out?”

Mickey’s face was pale as he watched Cornish Pete examine the dynamite that had ‘sealed their fate’. “Yeah. We *usually* make a delivery run at this time o’ night. What made you pull us up this time? It *musta* been the dame.”

Cornish Pete snorted his amusement as he handed off the jacket and explosives to his waiting man. “Oh, we didn’t know what you were up to until *well* after you left the speakeasy. Turns out there were some people following a certain dame from New York and, although they knew she was up to no good, they weren’t sure what it was. Then we tell ‘em she was talking to two men and... well, let’s just say they insisted we chat to you boys.” He stopped to look at them. “But by that time my boys had lost your trail. Imagine how nervous that made us feel. We were getting mighty worried, we were.” He paced towards them. “So we knew there were two men out there who may or may not be about to do something the Commonwealth didn’t like but they had completely slipped their tail and melted into the streets. Which means you would have gotten away with it, were it not for one small but significant detail.”

Mack started to look wary. “What detail?”

Cornish Pete leaned forward, barely able to keep the amusement from his voice. “Well we only had one description to go on. Only one little detail to tell us who would be tryin’ an attack on the aerodrome.” He looked

sideways at Mickey and gave an incredulous smile. “All we knew is that one of you fools *wasn't wearing a hat.*”

Cornish Pete started laughing.

Mickey looked shocked.

Mack was a building storm of fury. All of it directed at his hatless partner.

The gangster continued laughing for quite a while. Eventually he cackled his way to a halt and turned back to his two unfortunate captives. “Boys, you’ve made my day interestin’. I’ll give you that. But now I have to finish the job. You know the business so you’ll understand.”

“But wait!” whined a desperate Mack. “Why would the Lucca’s go to all this trouble over us? What do they care about the militia?”

Cornish Pete shook his head. “Oh, this ain’t from the Lucca’s. Not today, anyways. This was an order given to The Lucca’s by... another organisation. An organisation that makes sure the militia is everyone’s business.”

Mickey was clearly distressed. “*What* organisation? Who are ya workin’ for?”

Cornish Pete smirked. “Today? Today the Lucca family – and I as their representative – we’re workin’ for the biggest organisation in town: The Commonwealth of the Mid-West. Or at least workin’ for the people who have a vested interest in maintaining the new establishment.” He shook his head. “You see, you ain’t far enough up the greasy pole to see it, but the Commonwealth – or at least the people who prop up the Commonwealth –

they're the people who are *really* in charge. The people who tell Town Hall what to do and say. And it's that 'inter-connected vested interest' that makes the Commonwealth the biggest organisation in town. The organisation with all the contacts. The organisation that gives mid-tier shmos like myself their marching orders. The organisation... who keeps the other organisations in line." He leaned in close. "An' you two are *way* outta line."

Mickey whimpered and looked to the asphalt. Mack just stared, dumbfounded.

Cornish Pete nodded sadly. "Yeah, you two reached too high on this one. Too high too fast. And now you're gonna accept the consequences." The gangster straightened up and pulled a .32 out of his jacket. He thumbed back the heater's safety... but then stopped.

He studied Mickey for a few seconds. His head tilted to the side and a worried look creased his face. "Jus' one more thing before we finish up: you mind if I ask you a question, Mickey?"

Mickey didn't bother to look up. "Why not," he said with a sullen whine. "It ain't like I got anything else to do."

The gangster stared for a few seconds in silence. Then he frowned. "What *did* happen to y'r hat?"

Mack glared daggers. "Yeah, Mickey. What *did* happen to y'r hat? Go on. Tell him."

Mickey closed his eyes. "Nothin' happened. I chose not to wear it."

The gangster looked confused. “What you mean you ‘chose not to wear it’?”

There was another pause then Mickey shook his head. “I been talking to a fella who knows what’s happening in the future. That in the future the world won’t be wearin’ hats. So I was gettin’ ahead of the curve.” He paused, as if digesting the idea. “Was gonna get ahead.”

The gangster looked genuinely disgusted. He shook his head, raised the gun to Mickey’s hatless head, and leaned in close. “Well, in *this* world – the one we’re livin’ in here – you ain’t gonna make it *anywhere* without a hat.”

**BLAM!BLAM!**

**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 2013 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

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# PANDORA DRIVER

**WHO ARE THE PEOPLE IN YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD**

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 their Christmas wish lists. 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.

In the spring of 1940 women wore bright red lipstick, men followed new hitter Ted Williams, kids packed peashooters, and everyone wore hats. In theaters "The Grapes of Wrath" was shown in black and white. Warm Philcos put many "In the Mood". And down-on-their-luck dreamers followed the council of a cartoon cricket by wishing upon a star.

Overseas the war in Europe expanded. Encouraged by the successful blitzkrieg of Luxembourg, Belgium and the Netherlands, Hitler's Wehrmacht invaded France. In England Winston Churchill responded with his "blood, toil, tears, and sweat" speech promising "victory at all costs. He hoped to inspire British troops and recruit international allies. But most Americans weren't listening. They had no appetite for another war and a growing number of isolationists turned their backs. They had plenty of homegrown problems to deal with.

The Great Depression nearly smothered Citadel City due to high reliance on manufacturing jobs. As the country slogged its way out of the economic downturn the unemployment rate decreased to 15%, but the modest prosperity didn't trickle all the way down.

Opportunists with a class advantage continued to pick the bones of the hungry...

## **CITADEL CITY, SPRING 1940**

Ray Walker, a Scot in his mid 20s, wasn't exactly sure where the cry for help came from when the harrowing words ricocheted in through the kitchen window of his apartment. He was working on his breakfast, but he couldn't just sit and eat knowing someone else was in trouble. He could tell the voice came from somewhere on the street below, but he didn't waste time for a peek. Instead he raced down two flights of stairs in worn socks sometimes skipping four steps at a time.

CLUMP- FUMP CLUMP-FUMP CLUMP-FUMP

THUDD

At the second floor landing he grabbed the knob of the worn oak banister and swung around it to pick up speed.

CLUMP- FUMP CLUMP-FUMP CLUMP-FUMP

THUDD

He hit the first floor with a leap then races past a wall of brass mailboxes. Bursting through the entryway of the brownstone he lands on the concrete stoop and discovers the confused and concerned faces of his neighbors gathering up and down the tenement block. From above many onlookers crane out apartment windows desperately trying to locate the source of the distress call.

An old man's voice with a distinctly Yiddish accent cries out.

"HELP ME! SOMEONE PLEASE HELP ME!"

The 100 or so witnesses all turn in unison to face Hooperman's Bakery on the South corner.

He yells again. "GET AWAY FROM MY STORE YOU FARZEENISH! FEH! FEH!" He punctuates his words by spitting twice.

The old man wore half-frame-glasses, a bowtie and a white shopkeeper's apron. He was struggling with a much larger opponent, a thug in a crisp black suit with wide shoulders and maroon Mossant hat. Growing agitated by the old man's resistance, the thug forces his exasperated victim back inside the store. After all, the original plan was to have a private meeting to make a deal. He kicks the door shut behind them.

**SLAM!**

Two more men dressed in jet-black Mossants and dark overcoats emerge from one of the few automobiles parked on the brick street. It was a sleek, dark-red 1936 Cord 810 sedan that stood out in a neighborhood of laborers like a diamond in a coal chute. Even if some residents of Colfax Street could afford an automobile they had no need to drive. Everything required for survival was either within walking distance or dropped off by delivery boys.

The foreboding pair strode to positions on either side of the bakery door. From suspicious bulges they reveal tommy guns and cock them before scanning the growing crowd for potential agitators.

Ray swallows hard to force the spit down past his pounding heart. He had heard of the guy in the maroon hat and Cord. It was the Gooch. The word on the street was he had recently begun haunting this part of Citadel City like a wraith. He was a dangerous bastard.

The Gooch was beaten into existence by his uncle. As an adult he could feel no pain in himself or sympathy for others. He was the type of guy who liked to hurt people and would do it for laughs, money, or personal advancement. The way he saw it, the world was divided into givers and takers. One day after he had taken enough from his uncle, he gave him a push in front of speeding bus. He remembered the fear on his uncle's aging face when he realized what had happened. Deep down inside the Gooch always suspected that if his uncle had time to think about it, he would have been impressed by the boy's ingenuity.

Upon impact blood spurted from his uncle's skull splattering his nephew in red. Reflexively the little Gooch licked the newfound trickle of moisture from his lips and swallowed. It tasted sweet so he licked more from his wet hands until a passerby stopped him. To this day he saved his little blood stained shirt as a keepsake. It was neatly folded in his dresser drawer, not on the floor, just like his uncle taught him.

The Gooch grew into a self-made man who pulled himself out of poverty by the bootstraps, once he collected his uncle's life insurance policy from the accidental death.

His uncle taught him that life wasn't fair. On his own he learned that you could make things fairer simply by lying. If others weren't smart enough to figure that out on their own, fuck'em. You could get whatever you wanted from people if you could figure out what they needed to hear. And if that didn't work there were other painful and permanent forms of coercion.

As he grew he realized many others shared his beliefs, oddly enough most of them were loaded. Their web of amalgamated lies provided the Gooch with the wealth and freedom to operate above the laws written for

common men. He teamed up with the takers because the givers were suckers.

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Ray stood on the sidewalk in his socks, high-waist, tan trousers and suspenders scanning the multi-cultural crowd for a beat cop. Strangely, not one was around. He spots the wrinkled face of a scrubwoman leaning out her window and calls to her. "Hey, Mrs. Carney. Telephone for the police!"

She nods frantically then ducks back into the safety of her apartment above. Below on the streets mothers were gathering their children and shepherding them away from the crisis.

Ray's eyes land back on Hooperman's store looking for activity between posed loaves of bread and a patchwork of painted sale-signs in the window. Unconsciously he inches toward the bakery. He thinks, "I have to help somehow, but I don't want to get killed in the process. I don't want to see anyone get hurt. What could the Gooch want with Mr Hooperman?"

Witnesses closest to the bakery gasp at the muffled yelling and crashes from within.

Ray clenches his fists, shakes his head and thought, "These days it seemed that the ones who care least about people, have the most power over them. The rest of us without resources are helpless to change things."

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The Gooch was a 6-foot tall Italian man, built like a bear, and missing the

lobe of his left ear. He had a serious face with thick eyebrows that converged at permanent scowl lines etched between his heavy dead eyes. The Gooch was by far the largest person occupying Hooperman's Bakery.

The warm aroma of birthday cake and fresh bread permeates the narrow bakeshop. A long glass display case ran the width of the back wall. Shelves packed with cakes, cupcakes, pastries, cookies and confections of every variety subdivide it. Handwritten signs hover over each tasty treat like they were thinking of their own prices in pennies. The glass ended at a large ornate brass cash register with a crank that was bolted to a heavy wood checkout counter.

Baskets of bagels and bread racks were strategically positioned to guide customer traffic through the store. They were stacked with options to serve the eclectic tastes of a community of immigrants. To the side, a coffee station rests against a wall near two wooden tables and a selection of un-matching chairs and stools.

Considering the volume of food packed into the space, it was actually pretty well organized. By the end of a typical day all the shelves would be empty. But this was no typical day.

The Gooch has Mr Hooperman firmly by the neck. This grip decision wasn't done so much for choking but more so he could maneuver the noisy shopkeeper around more easily. Mr Hooperman rages and carries on. The more emotional he became the less English he spoke. The Gooch can't make out any words of the German sounding gibberish but if he was going to continue and hopefully conclude this negotiation successfully, he would need control of the babbling, exasperated old man.

The Gooch grabs a chair and swings it over Mr Hooperman's head.

SMACK!

It knocks him to his ass. He sits on the checkerboard floor in shocked silence holding his head.

The Gooch replaces the chair to the floor in front of the glass counter. He points to the chair and calmly says, "Sit in it."

Mr Hooperman surrenders with his hands and cautiously complies.

The Gooch tips his maroon Mossant and says, "Thank you. I brought you back in here because I didn't want to embarrass you in front of all your neighbors out there on the street. I didn't want you to be in the uncomfortable position of making a spectacle of yourself resisting me so publicly, so theatrically, that you wouldn't be able to make this deal out of some misdirected sense of pride."

The Gooch notices beads of sweat forming on Mr Hooperman's bald forehead. The Gooch casually wipes his blotchy brow with his bare hand then sticks his fingers in his mouth to taste it. He did it as casually as one might remove lint from a jacket.

Next the Gooch produces a folded contract from inside his breast pocket and hands it to Mr Hooperman. He taps them and says with a smile, "This will release you from your lease."

Mr Hooperman sputters, "But, but, I pay my rent on time. I keep the place clean. I've done nothing wrong."

A friendly smile slithers across the Gooch's lips. "I'm not saying you did

anything wrong. In fact, you did something very right. You staked out a prime location for your store. We're even going to pay you a modest finder's fee for your trouble. All you have to do is sign."

The Gooch points to a line on the trembling papers. "It's all there in the contract. The number is right here at the bottom."

Mr Hooperman doesn't look down. He cautiously looks back at the Gooch and says through dry lips, "But I don't want to give up my bakery."

The Gooch releases a long disappointed sigh. He shakes his head and calmly says, "I thought Jews were supposed to be smart business men. Look, we want this store and we want this to be a friendly deal, but it doesn't have to be."

He reveals a revolver from his coat pocket then continues, "We want this to be a friendly negotiation where everyone goes home happy. We don't want to be forced to do something drastic. We don't want any bad blood with the neighbors as we make the transition. We want them to be our happy customers too."

Waving his revolver while gesticulating, he inadvertently points the business end at other people trapped in the bakery. They cringe.

**GASP!**

Their reaction attracts the Gooch's attention. Thirteen other people had been stuck inside since the Gooch's invasion. They were a mix of counter-girls, homemakers, old men and children spread though out the store

The Gooch looks back at Mr Hooperman to assuage his potential concerns

in a whisper. "Don't worry about them, I'm not going to hurt them. I'm just going to hurt you, unless you sign these forms. Just do what your told."

Mr Hooperman manages to produce a disarming smile as he holds up his hands to try and halt the eviction process and gently reason with the Gooch. "Please, please let me explain for a moment. You may not realize this but terrible things are happening to people in my homeland. They are not safe, and we are trying to get as many people out as possible. We send them the money we make from the bakery for safe passage to America."

"Once they arrive here in Citadel City we bring them to the bakery. Sometimes they live downstairs for a while. Sometimes they work in the shop for a while, until we can connect them with relatives across the states to take them in. Sometimes people in the neighborhood, strangers really, take them in or even help them get jobs."

"As a community, we sustain one another. This neighborhood is our home. We are surrounded by people we love. We all know what buying from the bakery means. It saves people. Times have been tough, but it's been working, we're still here."

He points to the delft-blue wall behind the counter. It's covered in a mosaic of hundreds of photos. The round and rectangle frames contain portraits, wedding photos, and a multitude of family photos across generations.

Mr Hooperman chokes up and continues, "Every week we get more letters as the word of our bakery spreads in Europe. Every week we get more letters describing unspeakable horrors that newspapers don't print. The address of our bakery is spreading. It's passed by word of mouth. They memorize the address in English. Sometime people just arrive here from a

long trip looking for shelter. You don't know what this humble little shop means to them. This bakery is like a freedom depot, and we can't risk losing this address. If the bakery is gone where will they go? Surely you can see how important my humble bakery is to me and to others."

The Gooch is unmoved. "You're making this more complicated then it needs to be. It's not that I don't understand what you're saying, I just don't care."

Mr Hooperman closes his eyes to dam his tears.

The Gooch continues, "Look, there are three ways this can play out"

He counts on his fingers as he runs down the list. "One. You sign the papers. You get your money. We take the building. Everyone goes home happy. Two. The bakery is struck by Jewish lightning for the insurance. Guess who'll be blamed for that? You go to jail. We take the building. Three. Something worse will happen."

Mr Hooperman says nothing as tears run from his eyes. The Gooch uncaps a fountain pen and hands it to him then continues. "This is the way things are done. This is how Citadel City has grown into this magnificent kingdom. So what's it going to be, the money or your life?"

"Important people are waiting."

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A 1932 Packard 8 De Luxe 904 Sedan-Limousine turned onto Colfax Street. It arrived from the North like a yacht into the waterfront. The Aztec-Olivine-Brown and Tacoma-Cream body shimmers as it gently

parks far behind the preoccupied crowd. It's hood ornament, a chrome flying-lady leaping from the bonnet, sights Hooperman's bakery from a distance.

After a moment, the Packard creeps slightly forward, then slightly back in a two-point micro-turn. A moment later, it inches slightly forward again, before stopping suddenly and rocking on precision crafted springs. Then it lurches left. It changes positions once more with a slight turn, then stops once, stops twice, then a third time. From inside the limousine a tinny voice spoke to the driver via speaker. "For Pete's sake, I just want my automobile to be in the right spot."

A large black man in a gray chauffeur's hat and uniform sits in the drivers seat holding the wheel tightly in two hands. He says nothing as he impatiently anticipates the next command. He hates this job, but jobs were scarce and he had a family depending on him. He would do anything to improve his children's lives, which meant he would do anything for his boss, the Senator, to insure the security of his paycheck. He just prayed that his boys would never find out the things he'd done.

Senator Graymoor had a face that seemed to improve with age and a thick head of salt and pepper hair. He wore a dark gray, pinstriped suit and waistcoat. A tophat sat next to him on the luxuriant leather seat. He was the sole passenger of the 7 passenger Packard. He was separated from the driver by a clear glass partition. It could easily be lowered into the back of the front seat but the Senator prefers talking at his chauffeur through a telephone of the dictograph-type. He holds it in one gloved hand while the other one repositions an architectural drawing against the window.

The chauffeur's voice croaks through the speaker, "Should I turn off the engine now, sir?"

The Senator clicks on the microphone and snaps back, "Just give me a moment."

He clicks the microphone off and tells his hat, "No one appreciates my appreciation for precision. If he would have just listened more carefully, the car would be exactly where I wanted already."

To compensate for his underdeveloped imagination, the Senator was attempting to line-up the perspectives of a dramatic charcoal depiction of a new building, and the existing buildings of Colfax Street. The new building covered Hooperman's Bakery. He and select members of his constituency decided the city would be better off if it were replaced.

He nudges the paper back and forth for a while then becomes frustrated. He decides he can't make them match because he can't see enough detail on the street. The people were in the way. He abandons his effort and plops back into his seat then barks into the microphone, "You may turn the automobile off now, driver."

The precision purr of the engine goes silent.

With his arms crossed he gazes out at the rabble in disgust. He thinks. "Look at those unkempt savages, some without shirts or a sense of common decency. This class of people is no more than beasts, animals really, who didn't understand what it means to be human, let alone know their place in the world. They live in the same district as I but they certainly don't represent me, that's for sure."

"These people must be trained like dogs. You can let them do their business in certain areas, but if you let them run wild they'll shit

everywhere, even where they eat. Their kind needs to be led."

"That's why the right people with the proper gravitas and a noble birthright were destined to take charge. The halls of power are filled with many, many, complicated things. Things animals just can't understand."

"It takes an eminent senator to understand the true value of something like Eminent Domain laws. They give me the power to take private property that's being under-utilized and put it to a more equitable use. All I need to do is fill out a few forms, and explain why taking a property will be better for the public good. And since I can't really get caught lying about the future, I can write down any economic projections I want. The bigger the numbers the better."

"Then we takeover, tear down and rebuild as quickly as we can. If the projection's numbers don't match once the dust settles, I just say, oops, I was wrong. By then it's too late to undo everything. It's easier to keep going forward. And if there is one thing I know about people, they will always take the easy path, well, most of them will."

"I can even assign an Eminent Domain project over to a non-governmental third party or corporation. Then they can handle the development. In the case of Hooperman's Bakery, one of the creme de la creme of my constituency brought the project to my attention."

"My largest campaign contributor is growing a chain of what he calls a 'super-marketplace'. The concept consolidates the products of complimentary food retailers like a dry-goods grocer, a produce vendor, a butcher and even a baker, all under one roof. He's been identifying prime locations across the city and I'm using the power of the government to help clear the way for his enterprise."

The Senator scans the street scene as he thinks. "This area is run down, but there are a lot of people living here, and they need to eat. Although by the looks of some them, not too much. I better make a note that sales may not be as good as expected at first, but in the long run everyone wins. We, behind the deal, will make a handsome profit, and these dirty hungry people will get some nice food. The owner of the bakery building is on board. Now we just have to explain things to his tenant Mr Hooperman. I'm sure the Gooch is doing that right now. He understands how to talk to animals."

"If things happen to get sticky or that ungrateful old Jew comes up with the money to fight back, we'll get him in front of an eminent judge who understands the purpose of eminent domain and they'll stick him in jail."

"If he knows what's good for him, he'll do what he's told. The laws are there to keep people like him in line. The rest of us are exempt."

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"Ray!"

Mrs. Carney's shrill cry awoke Ray from contemplation. He looks over his shoulder and is surprised to see how far he had drifted from his home. She yells again, "Ray, the police aren't coming!"

Everyone on the street heard the message. As his eyes jump from neighbor to neighbor they echo the consternation he feels. Up ahead he could see the two bakery sentries giggling. Ray thinks, "I guess we are on our own."

SKREEEEETCH!

Suddenly, a mysterious black car made a wide, high-speed turn around the corner of Hooperman's Store. It had a streamlined grace and bolted with the power of a panther running down its prey.

A-LAAAWNK!

An ominous horn bellows a warning. The witnesses standing in the street jump to the sidewalk clearing a path for the massive black and chrome bullet. The parked Packard was directly in its path.

KA-BASH!

They collide nearly head-on. Steel crimps, glass shatters and tires screech. The Packard's front chrome bumper cracks from the frame and thrown high into the air. The heavy sedan is sent spinning backward as the four-wheeled assailant forces its way through.

The Sedan-Limousine bounces and rocks to a halt as the airborne bumper clangs to the ground. The shaken chauffeur glances in the splintered reflection in the rearview mirror. He sees his own bloody runny nostrils, the face of the Senator screaming for him to escape, and out the back window the big black car spinning on a cloud of smoking tires, turning for another attack!

He fumbles with the keys and choke. To his relief, the engine turns over, but its normally confident hum was stricken with uncharacteristic clinks and clanks. He forces the car into gear and floors it. The large vehicle is at an awkward angle so it rolls up over the curb onto the sidewalk before swerving back into the street where it crosses the path of the big black car

once again.

**KA-BAMM!**

The De Luxe is scooped up by the long sloping pitch of the attacking car's hood and tossed into the air. It floats for a moment and the passengers experience weightlessness before they come crashing back down. The decimated sedan lands on its driver's side, smack-dab in front of the mysterious car. All 9 windows of the Limousine shatter (including the partition inside).

**KA-BANG!**

The heavy vehicles collide again, this time nose to undercarriage. Sparks lit the brick road as the capsized Packard skids over shredded metal parts and shards of broken glass before grinding to a halt. The mysterious car stops too. Miraculously it stands unscathed.

The dazed chauffeur wobbles up out through the passenger window, which was now on top. He sloppily drew a slippery revolver, nearly dropping it twice. A roof-hatch opens on the big black car and in one swift motion a black-hooded woman in goggles pops up with a strange gun drawn. She fires twice.

**Pffft! Pffft!**

The chauffeur feels something sting his cheek and neck before blacking out.

A statuesque woman climbs out onto the roof of the streamlined car. A brown leather holster hung in her crotch. She is clad in black equestrian

boots, matching driving gloves and hood and tunic that hid her breasts. All the fashion accessories are connected by the black-stripes of her bodysuit that outlines the slender curves of her supple form.

**THUMP-CLUMP!**

She leaps over to the tipped car then straddles the window of the rear door. Aiming her strange gun between her feet she discovers the pinstriped passenger squeezing out though the back window. She leans over the back of the car as he wiggles out, but before he could escape she fires once more.

**Pffft!**

The target goes limp and collapses in the street.

**BRAKKA-BRAKKA-BRAKKA-BRAKKA!**

Tommy guns roar as they fire wildly at the driver. A hail of bullets rips across the mysterious woman's back. She twists and tumbles from the car-top vantage point. Stray bullets penetrate the crowd causing people to hit-the-deck or run for shelter.

The bullets should have ripped the masked woman in half but they couldn't pierce the secret metal and fabric weave of her thick uniform. The impact hurts like hell and there would be bruises and numbing and but she was alive.

The mysterious driver takes shelter behind the wrecked cars. Peering through the ripped metal she monitors the lackeys in front of her. Behind her the remaining witnesses huddle behind the minimal shelter of

mailboxes, trashcans and stairs. Luckily there were no bodies, yet.

Returning her view to the Gooch's henchmen she could see them planning something. She sights her strange gun through the wreckage but the gunmen spot the movement and fire first.

**BRAKKA-BRAKKA-BRAKKA-BRAKKA!**  
**PING CLINK PLINK ZING**

She recoils as the bullets shower the car in sparks. Under the cover of fire, one of the shooters stalks along a path angling toward her.

**BRAKKA-BRAKKA-BRAKKA-BRAKKA!**  
**CLINK CLINK PLINK ZING PING**

If he kept on his course he would outflank her cover, and the people behind her would be in the line of fire. She had to act quickly.

Getting back to her feet, she takes 3 deep breaths then buries the unprotected part of her face in the bend of her left arm. She zigs out from behind the flipped Packard and zags back in front of both cars keeping them between the citizens of Colfax Street and the gunmen.

**BRAKKA-BRAKKA-BRAKKA-BRAKKA!**

They concentrate their fire on her. Bullets pummel her body as she runs right at them. The pain grows worse as she closes the distance. She guess-fires back between rapid blinks.

**Pfft! Pfft! Pfft! Pfft!**

Luckily her dart-shards find the targets. The two assailants go limp and collapse in tandem.

The masked woman asks the crowd, "WHERE'S THE GOOCH!"

Ray quickly points to Hooperman's and responds, "HE'S IN THE BAKERY."

An ample charge of adrenaline coursing through her heart propels her toward the bakery but she takes a last minute turn into the alley.

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Back inside the bakery the Gooch is frustrated.

Between yelling at Mr Hooperman and keeping track of the hostages, the Gooch wasn't exactly sure what was happening outside. He heard what sounded like an accident. He knew his goons were shooting at something. The piles of bread displayed in the window and patchwork of sales signs didn't help either. The view looking out was as obstructed as looking in, but he chose not to tear them down since they masked his activities inside as well.

He knew his men had left their positions at the door and he was waiting for a report from them. He thought, "It only sounded like two guns firing. It couldn't be the cops. Maybe they had to mow-down agitators. It wouldn't have been the first time."

The Gooch stomps to the windows and peers through a gap between signs. "The Cord is ok. It's parked where I left it."

Across the room from him a 9-year-old boy with a large head sits silently on a tall stool in front of the display counter. He wore short-pants and had a grouch-bag around his neck. It contains a few toy soldiers made of lead. Young Herschel was new to America and he'd seen many unusual things since arriving from Poland. He didn't understand why the bad man came into Mr Hooperman's store or what he wanted, but it appeared there were bad men no matter where he lived.

From his raised seat he could see behind the counter, into the kitchen and to the back door of the building. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the door slowly open and close by some unseen force. Moments later, a hanging apron moves as if brushed by a ghost. Then, like a magic trick, a head slowly arose from the counter stopping at goggle level. The large green lenses and smooth black head had an insect-like appearance. They stare right at the boy for 5 seconds. Then the head tilts to reveal more human looking features. A gloved finger covers purple lips that were so dark they seem black. She mimes a silent "shhhhh" then slowly disappears down as the Gooch abandons his post at the window. He returns to Mr Hooperman's side.

Since the baking ovens were left on, the room had become hotter over time. The Gooch set his revolver down on the counter for a second to remove his suit jacket. His task is interrupted as he makes eye contact with young Herschel. He sits silently, but points to a corner in the front of the shop. The Gooch looks but the space appears empty. The boy stops pointing and smiles. The Gooch mutters, "Crazy kid."

He reaches back for his gun but it was gone. He turns just in time to see the sole of a black equestrian boot strike him squarely in the face. It is attached to a long slender leg that attacks with all the force it can muster as Pandora Driver vaults over the counter at him.

CHUNK!

He sees stars then crashes into a loaded bread cart shattering it.

CRUNCH!

In anguish Mr Hooperman gasps. "That cart cost 5 dollars!"

The masked woman winces and says, "Sorry" in a tiny voice. She didn't want to break any of his stuff.

The Gooch collects himself and launches back at her. As they scuffle it becomes difficult for the masked woman to defend herself while protecting Mr Hooperman's property. She spends more time dodging and not enough time striking.

The shop was too confining. Between the glass counters, shelves, food, and the frightened counter girls scurrying back and forth, she was fighting with too many handicaps. There weren't even enough witnesses to accomplish her ulterior goal.

The Gooch threw himself at her again and she dodges. His momentum would carry him through the massive display window if she doesn't stop him.

Mr Hooperman screams, "No, not the window, that cost 48 dollars!"

She digs her heels into the floor and grapples his leg, stopping him short. He falls to the ground and his weight pulls her on top of him.

He tries to grab her as they roll on the floor but she manages to snake away. In the process she tugs and traps his hands. She uses the leverage of his own body to force him back on his feet.

The Gooch was undoubtedly stronger than her. She held him in what should have been a painful wristlock with his arm twisted high behind his back, but it didn't seem to hurt him. She struggles to maintain control of him, and tries to point him at the front door.

She yells out to young Herschel, "Kid. Get the door!"

The boy just watches without moving.

Mr Hooperman cries frantically. "Herschel, ofn der arayn tir!"

The boy leaps into action and swings the front door wide open. Above the door a silver bell rings a friendly jingle as the Gooch is ejected.

Ting-a-ling-a-ling.

The crowd gasps as he stumbles out onto the street before rolling back to his feet. His opponent exits to greet him in the open air of this city block coliseum. The diminutive woman with the svelte figure and ferocity of a jungle cat circles her much larger prey.

In the crowd Ray hears someone say, "It's like Daisy vs Goliath."

The Gooch edges around an invisible circle loosening up his shoulders and rolling his clenched fists in the air. For the first time he gets a good look at the aftermath of the mysterious driver's handy work. He spots his teammates lying on the ground. They look dead but he could always hire

more.

He asks with a smile, "A little girl like you did all this damage?"

Empty goggles gaze back as she circles opposite him.

He scans the harrowed faces of the crowd. He knows they won't be a threat. And he knows no matter what crimes they witness here today, he'll get away with it. The laws were in place to punish the dregs of Citadel City, not people of the upper echelon. He just had to flatten this little striped bitch then he'd be done for the day.

A giggle escaped from his granite jaw. "You surprised me back in there, but I'm ready for you now."

She circles silently.

He asks, "Who the fuck are you anyway?"

She responds coldly, "I'm the chaos bringer."

He shrugs and smiles mockingly. "What the hell is that suppose to mean?"

She promises, "You're about to find out."

He chuckles and says, "Ha ha. Ok toots, let's make this quick. Say good night Gracie."

He steps into her and fires a heavy fist at her head. She spins at him simultaneously, attacking unlike anything he'd ever seen. She swoops in under his punch striking his elbow with her open palm as it passes over

her. It's a solid hit but it doesn't seem to hurt him.

He nearly loses track of her. His meaty body was strong but relatively slow. He swings again. She dodges and twirls slinging back a long kick to the side of his head. He's unfazed.

He smiles then swings and misses.

She dances around him sending a series of quick attacks but with no effect. Each blow is fiercer than the last or connects with a supposedly more vulnerable area.

He swings again. She grabs the limb using it to pull them together to amplify the impact of her blow. It was the hardest hit yet but it appeared feeble. She couldn't hide the surprise on her face as she jumps back out of reach.

The Gooch laughs, "Haw haw, not working huh? The doctors told me I have a high pain threshold."

Part of her plan today included beating the Gooch into submission to inspire the crowd but it didn't look like that was going to work now. She feels the weight of her holstered dark-gun as it bounces at her hip.

He swings a near miss.

The Gooch smiles. "Once when I was a kid my uncle broke my arm. He was giving me an Indian burn at the dinner table, trying to make me eat something and it just popped. I didn't even feel it. I didn't even cry. I just stared at him to prove to him I could take whatever he could dish out."

He adds. "I think he was more scared than I was... Now he's dead."

The adult version of that arm swings at her again. It had grown into a huge arm. Now massive muscles power it. All those muscles needed to be fed by oxygen.

She says, "Thanks for the tip."

The mysterious driver moves in closer to her. She was well within his reach now and at this range his attacks came quicker.

She speaks as she parries. "It's surprising how fragile the human body is, regardless of its size."

He swings at her and she arches back all the way to the ground, plants her hand on the street bricks then donkey kicks a heel into his chin. His head snaps back opening up his torso.

"If just one vital system is disrupted..."

She pinwheels up to strike him with a two-palmed attack to the solar plexus. She could smell the bacon on his breath as all the air from lungs explodes out, along with a stream of partially digested egg yolks and toast.

"...The whole machine breaks down."

His arms swing in over her. She blocks before hooking them with her hands. As he draws in a big breath she kicks the same spot again. She pulls him into the kicks, to increase the force. The rest of his breakfast sprays her.

"You could be the biggest monster in the world, but without a constant supply of tiny little o2..."

Each time he tries to inhale she strike the same spot again and again like a horizontal, heel pile driver. Spittle dangles form his mouth as he staggers off balance.

"...You're just dead weight..."

He rises protecting his stomach with his arm.

"...If I go too far, you're dead."

She grabs his arm and yanks it away hard. He resists the force trying to pull it back. She lets it go and he strikes himself hard in the gut. Then she kicks the limb in even deeper.

"If I go too little, I could lose..."

As he fumbles past her she jump-kicks him in the back of the head sending him to the ground.

"...But if I play it just right you'll taste defeat..."

The crowd gasps as the Gooch hits the street bricks mouth first.

She jumps in the air and comes down hard on his back, not hard enough to break any ribs, but hard enough to knock all the air back out.

"...Say uncle."

His muscles burn as he lies in the street. A tiny voice devoid of air leaks out of him. "Uncle."

She steps off in him and he curls into a ball as his lungs wheeze.

With her chest pumping, and nostrils flared, she glares over the fallen body of the Gooch, silently daring him to get back up. The fight's gone from him. She removes her strange gun from its holster. Using her foot she tilts his head down to reveal the meaty part of his thick neck then aims and fires.

Pffft!

He blacks out.

The crowd stands in silence as she grabs fistfuls of fabric from both of the Gooch's shoulders then drags his heavy lifeless body to her car. She opens the heavy passenger-side door and struggles with his weight as she clumsily stuffs him inside. One-by-one she repeats her collection process with the Gooch's lackeys, leaving the fallen Senator and chauffeur. She packs her passengers in with a slam of the door.

The masked woman climbs back up onto the roof of her car and stands proudly. She scans the crowd reading the mix of expressions. She thinks for a moment before yelling out, "THE ONLY REASON YOU DON'T HAVE POWER, IS BECAUSE YOU BELIEVE YOU HAVE NO POWER."

The criticism struck a raw nerve in Ray. Feeling insulted he shouts back, "THAT'S EASY FOR YOU TO SAY. YOU'VE GOT THAT CAR, AND

THAT WEIRD GUN... AND APPARENTLY YOU'RE BULLETPROOF."

She listens with a nod then adds, "I UNDERSTAND THAT, BUT WE CAN WORK AS A TEAM."

She opens her arms presenting herself and her arsenal. "MY METHOD ISN'T THE ONLY WAY TO FIGHT BACK! COLLECTIVELY YOU HAVE A WEAPON FAR GREATER THEN ANY I WIELD ALONE."

She points an accusatory finger at the unconscious politician who remains slumped in the street. "DO YOU SEE THIS MAN? I REALLY HATE GUYS LIKE THIS. AND I BELIEVE YOU WILL TOO, ONCE YOU FIND OUT WHAT HE'S BEEN UP TO. SENATOR GRAYMOOR IS SUPPOSED TO BE OUR REPRESENTATIVE BUT HE ONLY WORKS AGAINST US. HE'S UP FOR REELECTION. VOTE TO DEFEND YOURSELF."

Another voice yells out, "I THOUGHT YOU KILLED HIM."

She responds, "NO. HE'LL JUST BE ASLEEP FOR SOMETIME."

The crowd murmurs.

The driver continues in an even pace. "SPREAD THE WORD OF ALL YOU'VE WITNESSED HERE TODAY. IF WE WORK TOGETHER, WE CAN ELIMINATE HIS KIND."

"REMEMBER, THE TRUTH IS THEIR ACHILLES HEEL."

She points to the bodies loaded inside her car.

"I'LL TAKE CARE OF THE REST OF THESE MONSTERS. THEY WON'T BE ABLE TO TAKE ANYTHING FROM YOU EVER AGAIN, I PROMISE."

Dropping to the driver's seat she vanishes into the darkness of the roof hatch as the lid slams shut. The engine roars to life and the mysterious black car backs up from the wreckage of the Limousine then zooms away. It makes a wide turn around the corner of Hooperman's Bakery before disappearing into the concrete canyons of Citadel City.

The crowd goes wild.

A shaken Mr. Hooperman enters the celebration in front of his store and soon finds himself next to Ray Walker. He asks his frequent customer, "What are we going to tell people about what happened here today?"

Ray announced through a beaming smile, "We're gonna' tell the truth."

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Later, after the festivities die down, the wreckage wrought by the mysterious driver was cleared from Colfax Street. Ray and four other men pushed the dark-red Cord 810 to the curb and parked it. It was one of the few cars on the street and it stood out from the rest. Overtime, it would become something of a monument. No one ever came to reclaim it.

Eventually Senator Graymoor awoke and staggered his way home to cautiously complete his final term in office. He would lose the upcoming election by a landslide.

Mr. Hooperman's bakery remained open and its proprietor continued to help those in need until the day he died. He was a giver and the world was a better place while he was in it.

## **EPILOGUE**

The Gooch snaps awake with a start. Although his eyes are open, he can't get his bearings in the near pitch-black space. The air was musty and he is seated on an uneven earthen floor. Cautiously, he scooches back on his ass until he bumps a brick wall. Probing the stone with his arms he realizes he is in a room about the size of a closet. In the distance he can hear faint voices chanting rhythmically.

"2 of clubs, 8 of clubs, 9 of clubs, 4 of clubs, your trick. You lead. Ace of diamonds, 10 of diamonds, 3 of diamonds, 5 of diamonds, your trick. You lead. Queen of clubs, King of clubs, 4 of hearts. Wait. Are you sure you don't have any more clubs? You're positive? Ok, hearts are broken."

The Gooch realizes the words were drifting into his room from above. Dim flickering lights outside his locker reveal a small barred window. The luminance reminds him of the Carton automatic lighter in his pants pocket. He shifts to his knees, fishes it out, then click-lights it.

A heavy metal door stands before him. The lonely flame reveals words scrawled into its surface...

"Abandon all hope ye who enter."

**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](http://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](http://www.takejohn.com)

[www.youtube.com/johnpicha](http://www.youtube.com/johnpicha)

If you 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](http://www.pandoradriver.com)



## WHAT THE WISE MAN SAYS

Created by Bard Constantine

### INTRODUCTION

After the Cataclysm nearly wiped out humanity, the remnants of mankind survived in Havens: city-sized constructs built to reboot society and usher in a new age of mankind.

However the new age was not the type that the architects had envisioned. The same greed and lust for power that existed before the Cataclysm had resurfaced, and the Havens quickly became quagmires of political and economic conflict that threatened to destroy the future envisioned by the Haven's founders.

This is the world of Mick Trubble, a man without a past. A man with nothing to lose. But when your luck is down and no one else can help you, he can. He takes the cases that no one else will touch. The type of trouble that no one else can handle.

Mick Trubble is...

The Troubleshooter.

## **THE WISE MAN SAYS**

It's not the way you start that counts -its how you finish, so the wise man says. Perfect advice if you were a man without a past, like me.

It only made sense to take note of the counsel of mugs that have seen and done things. You know, been around the block long enough to know a thing or two. So I listened to what the wise man said.

Theodore Wiseman, that is.

Ol' Wiseman was in the crowd that had gathered around when I was fished outta the river the night I lost most of my memory. He let me crash in his basement while I 'got myself together,' as he put it. Wiseman was a pretty decent mug. He knew that I wouldn't have lasted long on the streets of New Haven without a helping hand. And in turn I was more than happy to lend him a hand with whatever it was he needed.

Turned out he needed a partner.

Although he didn't want to admit it, Wiseman was an old codger who had lost the spring in his step. He was a tough old fossil, though. Most mugs

would've sat back and retired, but Wiseman scoffed at that.

“Listen, Mick. A man retires when he's ready to die. I may have lost a step or two, but what I lost I gained back in wit and cunning. Figure it evens out. I'd like to take you on the beat. It's been real dead lately, but we're about to change that. If you wanna wake something dead, then you gotta make a lot of noise. So we're gonna pound the streets and scare up some work. See if you can get a handle on my kind of gig.”

We played poker like we did most nights when the rain poured down and still didn't cool anything off. We didn't sleep much. I had trouble with nightmares, and Wiseman just didn't seem to need it. Said that he'd sleep when he died.

I laid my cards down. Pair of aces. “Sure thing, Mr. Wiseman. What is it that you do?”

“I'm a Troubleshooter.” He slapped a full house on the table.

I looked at him and shrugged. “What does that mean?”

He tapped the cards with a pleased grin. “Means that I win again.”

“No, I mean what does a Troubleshooter do?”

His yellowed teeth flashed in a lopsided smile. “Means that I shoot trouble, son. It's an occupation that never goes out of style in a town like this. When business is trouble, then business is good. You'll see. Might be right up your alley. You get some sleep. We'll pull stakes in the morning and beat the streets.”

I poured a shot of Jack. “You go ahead, Wiseman. I don’t much feel like sleeping.”

He eyed the bottle and frowned. “Lean on something too long and it becomes a crutch, my boy. Better ease off the hard juice a bit.”

I knocked the shot back and enjoyed the burn. “Only way I can snooze.”

He nodded. “Nightmares still got you?”

“Yeah. Every time I fall asleep, I dream of drowning.”

He patted my shoulder. “It’ll pass, Mick.”

I stared into the contents of the bottle. “What if it doesn’t? What if I never get my memory back?”

Wiseman flipped a playing card in the air and caught it. “It’s not how you start, but how you finish that counts. You got a new beginning the moment you washed up outta that river. A lot of folk would kill for a chance to hit the reset button. So the question is: are you gonna fret about what you don’t know, or get to doing what you do know?”

I sighed. “Yeah, but what do I know, Wiseman?”

He chuckled. “Keep an eye on me and you’ll know a lot, son. I’ll see you in the morning.”

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It turned out that I took to troubleshooting like a dog to chasing cats. I may

have had holes in my memory, but I knew a lot about guns and self-defense. Just the set of skills that kept a Troubleshooter in business.

I learned a lot about Wiseman in the next couple of weeks. It turned out that being a Troubleshooter meant spending a lot of time hiking cabs from one part of town to the next, and visiting nightclubs and bars. Just the kind of gig for a mug like me.

At the same time, Wiseman tipped his mitts on the business of troubleshooting. How to check the zones before you waltzed in and out of a building. What to look for when a mug tried to grift you. Twelve different ways to clock a mug with one punch. How favors were more valuable than cabbage a lot of times. And above all, when to pull your iron out.

“You gotta know when to throw lead and when to keep cool. Gunplay is like playing cards. You gotta know when to hold and when to fold. A lot of mugs are fertilizing New Haven right now because they thought a piece of iron made them invincible. Lemme get that straight right off the back –a heater is no substitute for quick thinking. You get into a jam with your lead. You get out of it with your mind.” He tapped his temple.

Wiseman knew a lot of folks, and ended up chinning it up about old times when he was really supposed to be spotting up for a case. While we beat the streets, Wiseman gabbed nonstop to me as well.

He waxed on about his past, how he was born and raised in New Haven. He’d seen its glory days, and its downfall once the mob syndicates muscled in and infected the city with corruption.

“It was only a matter of time. Mankind ain’t got it in ourselves to do much else except cut each other’s backs out. That’s what got us all caged up in

these Havens. We survived the Cataclysm but we still haven't learned a thing. Look at this city. It breeds strangers like the night sky breeds stars. Everyone isolated and on edge. Makes you wonder how we managed to last this long."

We were in a dive called Moontide in the Flats. Not as bad a neighborhood as the West Docks, but worn and battered just the same. I didn't mind. I felt comfortable with the folks there. Rough around the edges, but they were some pretty decent chums to burn time with on a hazy night. Always a game of eight ball to be played if you wanted to lose a few dibs.

There were some decent lookers that hung out at Moontide, too. Tough dames, but you could always find one that didn't mind a little company, especially if a mug covered her tab. Good thing the booze was cheap. I had a sweet dish named Sal on my arm that night. Blond hair, blue eyes, and just the right sway in her hips to cloud a man's mind like moonshine. I was just about to let her sweet talk me to her pad when Wiseman interrupted.

"Heads up, here comes pay dirt." He walked past and sat at the bar. I sighed and excused myself from Sal. She didn't take that too well, and huffed off to carouse with a big mug on the other side of the joint.

I shrugged. Like they say: easy come, easy go.

As I worked my way to the bar, a rotund dame in a sequined dress sidled over and sat beside Wiseman.

"Buy a girl a drink?"

Her voice was a thing to hear. Every honey-dipped word exhaled like opium, the perfect blend of whispery shivers down your spine. She was a big girl: big brown eyes, and big everywhere else. But she stepped with the dancing grace of a dame half her size, and her voice belonged on a siren out at sea. Many a mug would jump into the fathomless depths at the sound of her tone, and I was no exception.

Wiseman just gave an easy smile. I knew right then that they were sweet on each other, despite him being old enough to be her father. I was almost jealous.

“It’d be my pleasure, darling. The usual?”

“As always.”

He motioned to the barkeep before introducing us. “Elvira, this is Mick Trubble. Mick, you’re in the presence of Elvira Stole. Sweetest dame in New Haven, and the best handler a Troubleshooter can ask for.”

The barkeep set a Cuba Libre up for Elvira and another Rusty Nail for Wiseman. I tapped the counter.

“Gimme a Bulleit Neat.”

Then I turned and tipped my Bogart to the lady. “It’s a pleasure, Ms. Stole.”

She wagged her fingers. “Just call me Elvira, sugar. Ms. Stole makes me sound sophisticated. Theo’s told me about you. You two partnering up now?”

I shook my head. "I'm more like a stray mutt he took in."

Wiseman chuckled. "You'll have to excuse Mick's rather morose view of himself. I need the backup, and he has that handy look about himself. I'm pretty sure he'll take to troubleshooting like a fish to water."

I winced as flashbacks of the river flickered through my mind. "Don't mention water."

Elvira smiled. "Well, I'm glad that Theo has someone watching out for him. He needs it. Still thinks he's young and full of grits."

Wiseman gave her a wry look. "Elvira here has contacts with a lotta high hats around town. They give her the wire on situations that require a less... judicious touch."

Elvira nodded. "Like the transport problem that one of my clients has right now. Seems that their goods have been nabbed on the regular, and the thieves have proved pretty elusive. Making fools out of the rent-a-cops."

The barkeep set a loaded glass in front of me with a nod. I tipped back the bourbon. "Why's that?"

"Because the theft takes place in midair. The transport is a zeppelin."

Wiseman lit a smoke. "What's being transported?"

"Sensitive goods."

"How sensitive?"

She sipped her drink. “No human trafficking or narcotics. Nothing that you’ll lose sleep over, Theo.”

I tapped the counter and nodded at the barkeep for another reload. “Airbus robbery. Takes a mean set of stones to pull something like that off.”

Wiseman shrugged. “Nothing we can’t handle. You give me the time and place of the next shipment, Elvira. We’ll be on board and see if we can’t sort this little theft situation out.”

\*\*\*

Zeppelins claimed the highest airspaces in the city, so the view was pretty spectacular. Air traffic whizzed by beneath us as the floaters whizzed to their destinations, and beneath that was the city itself: towering monoliths so massive that the entire upper section of the city hung in the air, interconnected islands of commerce that grew like barnacles from their colossal host buildings. It was night, and the city lights winked and glittered from Downtown to Bayside, counterfeit stars that pumped adrenaline into a city that never relaxed, much less slept.

“Nice view.” I leaned against the outside railing, puffing smoke into the breeze. The airship was a ghost that floated along its computer-navigated course by way of its massive helium cells. Passengers relaxed inside the cabin at the cocktail lounge or in their suites, but only a few braved the thin air and cold drizzle outside. I pulled my collar tighter and ignored the light rain.

Wiseman nodded as he gazed over the railing. “Nice to take it in from a bird’s eye view. Makes you remember this city can be a thing of beauty.”

I flicked my gasper butt into the open air. “You gonna tell me what the plan is, or kill me with the suspense?”

He grinned. “Maybe I’m testing out your investigative skills.”

“I thought you said your occupation was shooting trouble. So far there really hasn’t been any.”

“Don’t take everything I say so literally. And as for shooting...” he pulled his flogger back so that I could clap eyes on the heat he packed in a holster under his arm. “Let’s just say that I’m always prepared.”

“Well that makes one of us.”

“Yeah, that reminds me.” Wiseman reached into his flogger pocket and pulled out a mean snub-nosed revolver. It was an older model, but looked well cared for. Mech enhanced only to preserve the shot quality and ammo load.

He handed it to me. “That’s a mean ol’ broad, but she’ll do the trick. I’ve carried her for as long as I’ve been troubleshooting. So do me a favor and don’t lose her, pipe that?”

I hefted the heater and smiled. The weight was balanced, and the grip was sure. She felt as though she’d been modeled for my hand.

“A Mean Ol’ Broad, is she? I’ll do my best, Wiseman.” I slipped her in my flogger pocket and nodded to the lounge inside. “Now from what I can tell, this isn’t a freight airship. It’s a luxury cruiser. The folks inside are high pillow types in glad rags, overpaying for romantic views of the city and the chance to soar above it all. So the robbery can’t be for anything

large. I figure someone on board has to be transporting something extra valuable, something restricted that our thieves are trying to get their mitts on.”

Wiseman gave me an appraising look. “Not bad. Now, what could the payload possibly be?”

I frowned in thought. “Dibs are out –holoband hacks are too easy to trace. Energy cells are too common. Wouldn’t need to move ‘em like this when there’s hardheads on the streets that do it every day on the cheap.”

I shrugged. “Maybe my mind isn’t that inventive, Wiseman. Robbery of moveable goods isn’t exactly a common crime in New Haven. Too easy to get nabbed by the button boys to bother with it.”

“For moveable goods, you got a point. Most robbery done nowadays is by folks sitting in their boxers eating yesterday’s pizza while nabbing identities and personal info. But there’s something that you might not be taking into consideration,” Wiseman said.

“What’s that?”

“Access.”

I frowned. “Access? To what?”

Wiseman scanned the sky. “There’s so much more that a mug can access when he has the funds to make things happen. A lotta high hats on this cruiser have just those types of funds. They can open doors that normal mugs like us can’t even get a peek at. Doors that lead to places.”

I shook my head. “Why don’t you try to be more vague, Wiseman? I almost understand what you’re gabbing about.”

He nodded upward. “We’ve got company.”

The shadow fell over us as he spoke. It was a manta, gliding just above the airship. The thin craft was aerodynamically designed to evade radar detection and could carry two or three passengers. A pair of masked mugs rappelled down zip lines at that moment, aimed right for the deck of the gondola. I did the obvious and went for my heater, but Wiseman placed a hand on my arm.

“Not just yet.”

I stared at him. “Are you gonzo? What do you wanna do, wait until they got the drop on us?”

“Just relax and let me handle this.”

The goons made it to the deck and detached the lines from their heavy flight suits. Both of them were heeled with odd-looking guns. The gas masks that covered their entire faces made them look downright sinister as they stared at us.

Wiseman waved them over. “Looks like you boys are here to lift something.”

They looked at Wiseman, then at me. “You didn’t say nothing about anyone else,” one of the goons said.

I stared at Wiseman. “Wait... what the hell is going on, Wiseman? You

working with these mugs?”

Wiseman had accepted a mask from the goon and slipped it over his head. “Well, you can’t say that working with me isn’t full of surprises.”

“So... you’re the one behind the robberies?”

His laugh was muffled from behind the mask. “See. I knew that your deduction skills were top rate.”

I figured out what the odd-looking guns were for. It became pretty obvious when I choked on the thick gas fumes that billowed out and sent me straight to dreamland.

\*\*\*

I woke up from nightmares of drowning. Light flooded my vision, blinding me for a minute. My head pounded with that severe hangover type of throb, and I generally felt like I’d been run over by a dump truck. I sat up with a groan. Something yanked on my wrist, preventing me from sitting up straight.

I was shackled to a bed. The room was gloomy, lit up only by the consoles hooked to the bed, and some flickering overhead light that was probably faulty on purpose. I knew exactly where I was.

The slammer.

The door slid open, admitting a doctor and a sour-looking mug in a rumpled flogger who could only have been a dick. He flashed his brass in case I needed help figuring that out.

“Ah, our guest finally has awakened,” the quack said. The light reflected off his round spectacles as he examined the monitors. “And none too worse for the wear, it seems.”

“So he can answer questions?” The dick had strode over and hovered by my head in a very irritating manner.

“He’s all yours, detective.”

The dick frowned down at me. “Where are the rest of your partners?”

I rubbed my head groggily. “You gonna offer me a gasper or something? A drink, maybe?”

The dick nodded to the quack. “Get the man a drink, willya?”

The dick pulled a gasper pack from his pocket and took his time extracting a smoke and lighting it in front of me. “My name is Detective Flask. You might wanna consider cutting to the chase and dropping dimes real quick like. Save yourself the trouble of harder time later.”

The quack returned with a plastic cup that I gratefully accepted. I downed the contents and immediately choked.

“What... what the hell is this stuff?”

The doc’s eyebrows lifted. “It’s... water.”

I set the cup down and looked at Flask. “Isn’t this kind of torture illegal?”

Flask didn't exactly get all teary-eyed. "Just start 'fessing up and it'll go better for you."

"You gonna uncuff me so that I can stretch out a bit?"

"Nope."

I sighed. "Didn't think so."

Flask opened his holoband screen and scanned some crime reports. "Let's talk about the robbery. Your crew put a lot of important people to sleep and made off with some valuable commodities. You might start by telling me where we can find your partners and what they're planning to do with what they stole."

"And what exactly did they steal?"

Flask glared at me. "I'll ask the questions. Like who the hell are you? 'Mick Trubble' sounds like an alias to me. Your holoband only has a name—no address, no files, no nothing. Nothing on you in the databanks at the precinct either."

He shut the screens off. "I figure your holoband was flashed by some underground streetcoats. Not too hard to do these days. Bad thing is that a flash job is a federal offense. So is carrying an unlicensed firearm, even one as old as that relic we found on you."

He gave me one of those grins that aren't worth much of anything except for giving a mug the creeps. "Know what, though? An older firearm like yours makes for easy tracing. Seems it fits the bill for a number of unsolved murders around town. Put that with being caught red-handed on

a robbery and you're looking at being locked away for good. Unless you get real good at singing, that is."

I rubbed my head. "Thing is, I was real good at sleeping, from what I can tell. Breathed in a chest full of foul air, courtesy of the gang that did the actual robbing. I'm a Troubleshooter. I was there to stop the damn thing from happening in the first place."

Flask snorted. "Right. A Troubleshooter. One that no one's heard of, who just so happened to be the only stiff on the cruiser that wasn't logged on the ship's records. On a ship, by the way, that was robbed at that exact time. A lot of coincidences, and I don't believe in coincidence. Maybe you want to try again."

I gave him a bleary-eyed stare. "Nothing else to say. I was double-crossed. My partner flimflammed me into getting on board, then set me up as the patsy to take the fall. You think that one guy just so happened to be knocked out cold by accident while the others got away? If so then maybe you might wanna sharpen your skills a bit, shamus."

Flask frowned and exhaled a cloud of gasper smoke in my face. "Know what I think? I think that you got set up, all right. But that doesn't mean you weren't in on the job."

He gestured with his gasper, tormenting my nicotine addiction with the vapor trails. "You see, every crew has a screw-up. One of those guys who aren't so quick on the draw, catch my drift? Always mucking up the job and making it harder for the rest of the crew. Know what happens to that particular brand of screw-up?"

He looked around at the dim cell. "This happens. So now that you've been

sold out, you really don't owe any loyalty to those lugs, do you? Time to start thinking about your future. You drop names and locations, and I'll drop some of the charges. Make it so you'll be able to see daylight again – after a bid or two, of course. Still, it's better than what you're facing right now. A lot better.”

He put his hands behind his head and leaned back with an expectant look on his mug.

I shrugged. “Love to help you out, Flask. I really would. But it just so happens that I don't know nothing. I was just a mug in the wrong place at the wrong time. Happens to the best sometimes.”

Flask narrowed his eyes and gave me his best intimidating stare. I guess it worked pretty well on the lowlife skels that he was used to dealing with.

Not so much on me.

Finally he angrily straightened up. “Looks like Mr. Trubble is choosing to be uncooperative. Maybe he needs a little time alone.”

He unlocked the handcuff and shoved me to the wall as the quack wheeled my bed out of the cell. Flask kept his hand on his iron as he joined the doc at the door. “Or maybe a lot of time.”

The door closed behind them. The lights cut off soon after.

I was alone in the dark.

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It's real hard to judge the time when you're marinating in the meat locker. Especially when they got you in the bing ward, segregated from the rest of the population. But judging by the meals served, I couldn't have been there for more than two days before a pair of bulky, uniformed androids lumbered in.

"Come with us."

I made a big show of yawning and stretching until my joints crackled. Didn't want the lugs to think that they'd gotten to me. The androids didn't care too much for my show of nonchalance. They grabbed me by my arms and hustled me out of the cell, ignoring my protests.

"Hey –you lugs wanna go easy? What's the rush? I get a lawyer or something? What the hell gives?"

"You act like you like it here," Flask said. He glowered a few steps away with his arms crossed. "We can always set up more permanent accommodations if you can't find it in your heart to leave." I blinked stupidly as the comprehension slowly dawned. "You're letting me skip out?"

He shrugged. "The manacle on the bed was more than a restraint. It was a lie detector. While attached to your wrist it took data on your responses. Turns out you were telling the truth, so you're free to go."

"You had those results two days ago. Why let me cool my heels in the meat locker?"

"That was in case you were holding back on us. And for wasting my time."

I stared. “Your time? You were the one who dragged me in here, remember?”

“You were the one knocked cold on the floor while thieves stole some pretty important data. Next time watch the company you keep.” Flask nodded to the guards. “Get this carcass out of my face.”

They didn’t bother to respond. They just dragged me down several scuffed-up hallways before pushing into a brightly lit office and depositing me in front of a glass-plated booth. A fat mug in uniform looked up from his girly magazine and grunted.

“Checking out? Don’t get many of those. What name?”

I straightened my rags and glared at the impassive guards. They didn’t appear impressed.

“Mick Trubble.”

The portly clerk chuckled. “With a name like that, I’m sure you’ll be back. Here you go. One dusty trench coat.” He passed it through the slit in the window.

“Flogger, you mean,” I said as I put it on. It was rumpled and a bit worse for the wear. Just the way I left it.

The clerk gave me an irritated glance as he pushed the next item through. “One beat up fedora.”

“Bogart, Mack. Get it right. It’s called a Bogart.” I placed it on my head

and tilted it just the way I liked it.

He glared. “You trying to leave or stay, wise guy?”

“Sorry. That all?”

He grunted. “One last thing. Your antique revolver. Minus the rounds, of course. You got a name for that, too?”

I grinned. “You bet your third or fourth helping of pork pie I do, Mack.” I accepted the Broad and span the cylinder. “The Mean Ol’ Broad is what I call her.”

“Yeah, well keep her away from other mugs and we’ll all be happy. See you again soon, kid.”

“Not in this lifetime, Ace.” I turned and walked out into the thick foggy air of New Haven freedom, hoping that Flask wasn’t yanking my chain just for the fun of it. Since I didn’t get pummeled by android thugs or yanked back inside the slammer, I guessed that somehow I was let off the hook.

Only I knew I wasn’t.

One thing about justice in New Haven is that one mug was as good as the next when it came to pinning the blame. The brass had me nailed to the wall, then let me outta the cage with no further questions. And even let me keep my heater. Sure, packing heat was legal in New Haven, but supposedly they suspected this particular bean shooter had been used in multiple crime scenes.

The whole thing stank to high heaven. As I rode in the cabbie toward the

city, I knew that somehow they were tailing me. Hoping that I'd lead them to bigger fish they wanted to fry.

I started with the obvious first, and hit pay dirt right away. A homing tag was attached to the butt of the Mean Ol' Broad. Metallic-colored and thin as skin, it was pretty hard to spot at a casual glance. I made sure to leave it in the cab when I got out. After that I flagged down another cabbie to get to my destination.

It took a few hours of beating the streets to get the info that I needed. After that it was a quick stop at an older complex in the Flats. When I crept down the hall, I noticed that the door I was headed for was ajar. I stepped close and listened.

“It was one helluva job, Wiseman.”

I recognized the voice. The masked goon that gassed me. His voice was clearer since he wasn't wearing the mask. It didn't improve much, though. Sounded like he ate barbwire for breakfast and washed it down with a tall glass of crushed gravel.

“One for which you were handsomely paid, Turk.” Wiseman said. His voice was tense. “As agreed, you keep the dib transfers. They've been cleared and made untraceable thanks to my connection with the labcoat at Commerce.”

“So you say, Wiseman. But you're skipping town. So if we happen to get nabbed then you're untouchable. You might short change us the way that you did your boy on the cruiser.”

I grinned. Karma was a helluva thing, and there was no honor—or trust-

among thieves, it appeared.

“What are you gaming at, Turk? A deal is a deal. You knew what was gonna happen before it all went down. Why try to pull a grift on me now?”

“Because I got to thinking, Wiseman.”

“Really? You didn’t hurt yourself, did you?”

Turk chuckled. “Wise guy. I figured that me and Bert here did most of the work on this gig. Seems to stand that we should get in on those Transit passes. They’re way more valuable than the berries.”

I moved in closer and peeked in at the scene. Turk and Bert had their backs to me, blocking my view of Wiseman. It was Elvira’s pad, so either she was out somewhere, or I just couldn’t see her either. Turk and Bert were pretty big lugs. Good thing I had an equalizer with me.

I pulled out the Mean Ol’ Broad and checked her rounds. Good thing slugs were cheap, and readily available. I’d bought a box just around the corner at the liquor mart.

Wiseman’s voice sounded confident. Too confident. “No can do, gentlemen. The deal stands. Now rotate your heels before things get ugly.”

“It’s already ugly, Wiseman.” Turk gave a slight nod to Bert, who pulled a sawed-off scattergun out of his flogger and pointed it at someone just beyond my range of vision. Had to be Elvira.

Turk confirmed it with his next words. “You seem pretty stuck on this fat dame of yours, Wiseman. I figure you either hand over the Transit codes

or she's gonna lose weight real fast.”

I pushed the door inward and stepped inside. “You forgot about the third option.”

Bert span around a lot faster than his bulk suggested he could, but the Broad already had him lined in her sights. One shot put him down before he could fire a round. Turk cursed as he reached for his iron. Another shot rang out, dropping him cold.

Elvira had a smoking gun in her hand, and a hardened glare on her pretty round face.

“Call me fat, will you?” She ran her free hand across her rounded parts. “Anyone will tell you that this is all the more to love, sugar.”

I tipped my Bogart. “I’m sure it is, Elvira. What I’m not sure of is why I don’t just finish the job they started. You set me up, and I wanna know why.”

“I knew you’d get over that little road bump, kid.” Wiseman had his fingers on his wrist like he was checking his pulse or something. “You hung around me for a whole month. Figured you’d pick up on how to get outta a jam or three.”

He eyed the Broad in my hand. “You gonna put her away, or you gonna plug me? Make it quick either way. I got a train to catch.”

I sighed and holstered the Broad. “You serious about skipping town, Wiseman? That’s what this whole gig was about?”

“Serious as a sin sandwich, my boy. Comes a time when a man sees where he’s been and thinks about where he’s going. I can’t do this anymore. This town... it’s gone to the dogs. I won’t spend what’s left of my life watching the rain wash grime down the gutters. I’m pulling stakes and moving on. There are better Havens out there. Couldn’t afford to leave on my tiny nest egg, so I had to set up this gig to get a couple of seats on the next tram out of here.”

He checked his holoband. “And we’re almost late.”

“Waitamminute.” I raised my hands. “You could’ve ran that grift any time after you took me in. Why go through all the trouble of showing me the ropes and all?”

A smile creased his face. “Someone’s got to take care of things when I’m gone. Every town needs a good Troubleshooter, son. A mug that takes out the trash without worrying about getting his hands dirty. You’ve got skills, my boy. Don’t know how you got ‘em, but it doesn’t matter. You’ll do just fine.”

Elvira placed a hand on my shoulder and smiled. “We’re sorry for crossing you over, Mick. We knew they didn’t have anything on you, and would’ve let you out after the minimum bid.”

Wiseman had pulled a couple of suitcases from the closet. “Which should’ve been a couple of months. Don’t get me wrong, I’m glad for it. Makes me feel a lot less guilty. But how’d you manage to pull that one off?”

“I didn’t. They let me go.”

“That’s good, Mick. That’s...” Wiseman paused. His bushy eyebrows

lifted. “You say that they just let you go?”

I lit a gasper. “Yeah. So what?”

“Mick, you dammed fool!” Wiseman ran to the bed and flipped the mattress over. A Thompson was stashed underneath. As he slammed the rounded magazine in place, Elvira ran to the door and peeked around the corner.

I laughed. “If you’re worried about a tracer, I already found it. The brass are tailing an empty cab right now.”

“That was just a decoy, Mick.” Wiseman finished loading the Thompson as he peered out the window. “The real tracker is probably inside of you.”

“Say what?”

Bright light flooded the room, and the thrum of rotor blades announced the arrival of an auto-piloted Hunter/Killer outside. Wiseman cursed and leaped back as a familiar voice blared over a megaphone.

Flask.

“Attention criminals: you’re surrounded with nowhere to run. You have thirty seconds to surrender.” Flask paused. “Better make it twenty.”

“Go!” Wiseman ran past me to the door.

I tried to grab him. “Damn it, Wiseman -you’ll never make it!”

It was too late. He grabbed Elvira by the wrist and they ran down the

hallway. I hesitated for a second, then cursed myself for a fool and followed.

Black-suited figures in heavy body armor stormed in from down the hall. Heavy masks covered their faces, and they moved too quickly for armored men. That was because they weren't men. They were android street sweepers. They did the only thing that they were programmed to do.

They pulled triggers.

Survival instinct is an uncanny thing. I didn't have time to think. I just moved at the exact second they opened fire. My shoulder hit the nearest door, splintering it off of its hinges as my body weight carried me inside the empty room. Bullets whizzed by.

Someone screamed. It wasn't Elvira.

The silence that followed was louder than the shriek. The only sound was Flask's voice, ordering the street sweepers to stand down. I shakily stood and staggered to the door.

Elvira was dead. She didn't have time to make a sound because she was riddled with bullet holes. Wiseman held her tightly, ignoring the slugs in his leg and shoulder that spread a widening stain of crimson across his rags. He rocked her with his head thrown back, his voice spent but his mouth still trying to find just one more scream. One more shriek to give voice to the anguish that broke his heart.

Literally.

He clutched his chest and collapsed, still holding Elvira with his other

arm. I ignored all common sense and ran to them. The street sweepers encircled us, silent inhuman witnesses to the tragedy.

“Mick.” Wiseman’s bloodshot eyes looked up pleadingly.

“Don’t sweat it, Wiseman.” I tried to pull him away from Elvira’s body. “Stay down. Lemme get something to stop the bleeding...”

“Damn... the bleeding!” He pulled away with a wince. “Been... shot before. It’s... my heart. Got a... bum ticker. That’s the reason why I had to... get outta this place.”

His quivery hand found mine and gripped hard. “Too much... stress. This place is hell, Mick. I... had to leave. It’s the only reason why... I’d ever have crossed you over, Mick. Sorry, son.” Tears streamed down his craggy cheeks as he looked at Elvira. “I’m so...” He sagged over Elvira’s body as he exhaled his last.

I offered no resistance when the street sweepers roughly seized me and dragged me away from my friend.

\*\*\*

Holding cells are like purgatory. An in-between place of waiting. You’re not sure whether you’re gonna be locked away to damnation or be redeemed to freedom, so you wait. You try not to get your hopes up, but at the same time you don’t want to sink into depression. So you wait. You try to nod off, but every little sound wakes you up, thinking that your time of judgment has arrived. It never does. So all you can do is wait...

“I’m sorry about your friend.”

I looked over at Flask, who stood on the other side of the laser bars. He had this fake solemn look on his mug. A real mask of sincerity. He was good, ol' Flask.

I offered my best sneer of contempt. I'm pretty good at sneering. It's a useless talent for the most part, but sometimes it turns out to be the perfect response, especially to the kind of bunk that Flask spouted.

"I'm serious," Flask said. "I wanted to take them alive. But once gunshots were reported, I was ordered to send in the sweepers. Command came from the top. Captain Graves was under a lot of pressure to catch that crew. Transit is one of the most secure departments in the city. To have a robbery in that division was unheard of."

I stared at the ceiling. "Is that right? That explains the tail. Where'd you hide it? Wiseman said something about inside of me."

"The nanomachines were in the water you drank. Takes a couple of days for the individual parts to come together and form the responder that we traced you with. No need to worry. By now it's already passed through your digestive system."

I nodded as I slowly sat up. "Because the machines are protein based. I may not know much, but everyone knows about that, Flask. Still don't see why you had come in with guns blazing. Wasn't like the old codger or his moll could do those tin cans any real damage."

The laser bars threw shadowed lines across Flask's face. "Captain Grave's boss came down hard on him, and Graves came down harder on me. It was an embarrassment that needed to be resolved quickly. This probably wouldn't have ended any other way."

I folded my arms. “Yeah, I’m sure you had a pretty rough day, Detective. Why confess to me? I’m no priest.”

His face flushed red. “Just want you to know that it’s nothing personal. Your friends knew the risks. They did what they thought they had to, and so did we. The main thing is: don’t do anything stupid, Trubble. I’d hate to find out the next stiff that the sweepers tag is yours.”

“What, you’re letting me go?”

“Yeah. You served your purpose. Most of the stolen property was recovered, and they’re calling it an open and shut case. We could book you for accessory, but we need the cell space. So you walk. Just... stay out of trouble, will you?”

“Hey Flask.”

He paused in mid-turn.

“You said ‘most’ of the stolen property was recovered.”

“That’s right. One of the transit passes is still missing. We figure it’s on the black market. Only a matter of time before we track it down.”

He walked away as a pair of hulking androids appeared right on schedule. I couldn’t tell if they were the same ones from earlier, but I doubted it. They probably all had the same face, modeled after some sour-faced supervisor in an understaffed production factory.

“You’re to come with us,” one of them said.

I held up my hands. “Yeah, yeah. I know the drill.”

\*\*\*

About an hour later I hopped out of a cabbie. I was in the Flats, my familiar stomping grounds with Wiseman. I’d spent my last few dibs on a full scan by a streetcoat, just to make sure that I wasn’t still tagged. Turned out that Flask was right. All traces of the tracer were out of my system. I was clean.

I was also broke.

I pretty much had only the rags on my back and the Mean Ol’ Broad at my hip. A lot of mugs would have taken the easy route and pointed the heater at someone in order to tip the scales back in their favor. That wasn’t my style. I didn’t know much about myself, but I knew what Wiseman taught me. He’d get the stink face if I turned to crime to solve my problems.

I pulled the transit card out of my pocket.

Ol’ Wiseman had slipped it to me when he gripped my hand right before he croaked. I’d flipped it down into the gutter when the street sweepers loaded me up in the squad car. First stop after getting sprung was down a manhole and a slimy crawl under the street. I was lucky that it hadn’t rained for once. The card was still there.

I could’ve tried to hawk it, but you gotta know the right type of scumbag for that sort of deal. With all the heat on my back, I probably would have ended up getting my elbows checked again. I’d had enough of cooling my heels in the slammer.

So I kept it. I figured it would come in handy one day when I might have to get the hell outta Dodge. One day, when I had the answers that I needed. The memories that had melted away like fog in the morning.

But at that particular time all I had was my wits and my game face. I strode into the nearest apartment complex like I knew where I was going. The name of the joint was The Luzzatti. Wiseman had history with the owner, said he was on the square. I figured if I was gonna start anywhere, might as well start there. Because it's not how you start, but how you finish that counts.

And eventually every mug catches a lucky break. That's the thing about life. You weather the rough storms and eventually the seas get calm and the clouds break, if only for a little while.

A Wiseman once told me that.

**THE END**

**Bard Constantine** decided to write seriously when approaching his 30th birthday, and has been doing so ever since. He often spends his time taking himself too seriously and expounding on frivolous subjects like movies and his favorite novels. When not procrastinating about writing, he's usually pounding on a keyboard in a dank basement with a single flickering light bulb. Rumors of his sanity have been furiously denied. Troubleshooter Logo design by Stefan Prohaczka featuring Mark Krajnak of JerseyStyle Photography

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*the*  
**WORLD**  
*of* **MAÑANA**

**A FRIEND OF SPIRITS**

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 writ large, the naïve self-assuredness of the summer of 1914, 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, 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 faces up against radical futurist ideologies, emerging global corporations, and the burgeoning nationalism of a thousand composite cultures our world never saw. 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 Island Time, The World of Mañana is a new, 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. Call it “Parrotpunk”, if you will.

## **A FRIEND OF SPIRITS**

He bolts down the tangled alleyways through rubbish-strewn gaps. Illusions of a new-found family burn away in a crucible of trust betrayed. His feet, clad in thin, soft leather, connect silently with cobbles stained black by two centuries of smoke, spill, and refuse. A frightened stag might move thus through forest and briar, skirting old growth oaks.

Jacob dodges a stack of barrels and a pile of coiled rope. He runs for his life and freedom within the endless passageways of his home. Bells, whistles, and barking dogs pursue him far behind, their sounds clear to his veteran ears even over the industrial cacophony of the inner harbor. In the ancient past an ancestor of his might have thus fled from a rival tribe, calloused feet dancing among the living forest undergrowth as Jacob’s dance atop the lifeless cobbles of the cold city streets.

Jacob knows these streets from his short lifetime upon them. He knows them with an intimacy normally reserved for a lover. He knows each roadway or alleyway by the feel of the bricks and cobbles, by the smells from each window or drain. He searches for a place where they cannot find him, where their dogs will not smell him, and where he can fade once again into the tangled undergrowth of a city that has outgrown its modest name.

\* \* \*

“Netoppewokeesi,” she had said, “A friend of the Spirits.” A preserver of the Old Ways, of the Powwhite ways before Walter the First staked claim over the land. She’d chosen Jacob and his gang, she had said, because she “could feel the power of the Old Spirits within” them.

Jacob thought that instead, perhaps, she had been impressed by their half-shaved heads and spiking hair, their handmade tattoos, their street moccasins and makeshift tamahaaks. In his youthful cockiness he liked to think she had been attracted to him in particular, by his exuberant manliness born of the street, or by his rough-hewn handsomeness. Whatever drew this older but strikingly beautiful lady to them (and lady she surely was, for the naïve arrogance of aristocracy was obvious upon her), Jacob was thankful for it. Though he couldn’t exactly single out why.

“Friends,” she had said. “We have lived too long by rules and customs forced upon us!”

She spoke in the manner of a priest or shaman, rather than that of a noble on the wrong side of Roanoketown.

“Too long the ways of the English have been imposed over the rightful

ways of our people. My own people once turned to the Weroance of Pamunkey for guidance, rather than to a distant King who had never trod these shores. Yet today the portrait of said King's distant descendent hangs in many households. I sense in you boys – no, young warriors – the strength of the clans of old.

“I sense you would turn your back on the distant whispers of the aloof God of distant peoples and open your hearts' ears to the screaming calls of the Spirits all around you. I sense you would cast aside the pale breads of the conquerors for the hearty *pone* of your ancestors. I sense you would help tear down the foul, smoke-puking stacks of the wage-slave factories and bring back to this once-crystalline bay the ancient towering trees of old.

“The Spirits of those trees are the Spirits of those ancients whose blood burns inside you. I call upon you all to recognize that ancient call and to rejoin your ancient family!”

Her words mesmerized. They touched a deep part inside of him. He swore he could hear those ancient Spirits, feel those ancient trees. Or maybe it was the raven cascade of her long, jasmine-scented hair, her long, lithe, cocoa fingers. Her high, elegant cheek bones. The breathy sway of her ample bosom as she spoke passionately of Spirits and Family. The root cause hardly mattered. She had him – had all of them – snared like Alewife fish in a river cairn. When she had finished her rallying cry his was not the only shrieking war whoop heard in that abandoned warehouse.

It was the first of many such gatherings. The subject would vary, but the message remained clear. She spoke not just of the Spirits, but of the ways of the clans and the families, when each warrior and woman had a share of the bounty of earth and sea. When families were sacrosanct and duty was

to clan, not company. When the Weroances earned their headdresses by the will of the clan, not by the randomness of paternity. Jacob found himself drawn further in, desiring nothing more than to please this woman who was at once more worldly and awake, and yet more pure and innocent than the tired, cynical girls of his streets.

He found himself volunteering to set up and clean up at the rallies where previously he'd avoided such empty chores. He dutifully hung posters he couldn't read late into the night when before he'd regularly skipped out of school and church. He served as a peacekeeper and guard for her gatherings when he'd once derided such men as tools and would-be gendarmes. Over time she noticed more and more his burgeoning belief in the Cause and his fledgling loyalty to her and the Family. As the weeks stretched by, his loyalty was rewarded with more opportunities to serve and more responsibility within the growing Family.

Family. A word he knew, yet had never understood. Once he thought his alcoholic prostitute mother and bratty sisters were family, but they were just relatives. More recently he thought his gang was his family, family he could bully and charm into serving his whims, but they were just associates. This...this was Family! Loyalty, service, belief, a Cause. These other Friends of the Spirits – fellow street folk, members from his and rival gangs, reformed prostitutes, disgruntled wage slaves, young runaway aristocrats, teahouse intellectuals – these were his true Brothers and Sisters. These people he would die for. These people he would kill for. And above it all was *her*, like a mother, a goddess, a true love. She was the forge that melted away their past, their fears, and their sins into discarded slag and hammered them straight and strong into instruments of the Spirits and weapons against the Oppressors.

The next morning the city seemed new, the haze-clouded sun brighter, and

his spirit buoyed by her lofty words. He felt it everywhere. From the canoe-choked brown waters of the rivers and canals to the auto-choked stone streets. From the scrap-built slums of the fringes to the sky-reaching buildings of midtown and the venerable brick buildings and monuments of old town. The city suddenly seemed alive with hope and possibility. For the first time the world seemed to have a purpose and a central meaning beyond scrambling for food and pleasure. Now his Indian blood felt warm and ancient, not merely an invisible burden that limited his opportunities in this Anglo-dominated colony. With the Family – with *her* – he would make this city into something more.

The months burned by in the fire of her presence as he stood silently alongside her, never invited further into the hearth, but content to bask in the warmth nearby. He was chosen to stand tall among the group by the podium while she spoke. He was trusted to lead teams of poster-hangers or organize speaking events. He marched by her side, banners held aloft, through the streets of the wealthy.

He and a few other Brothers and Sisters were eventually chosen for special, secret tasks. Tasks which were so secret that even most other Brothers and Sisters could not be told about them. He ran letters and packages across the city. He whispered select phrases into the ears of people identified to him only by their red kerchief or leather handbag. He helped offload heavy crates from a dark-painted seaplane at the dockside one night while a frightening, burn-scarred, one-armed, patch-eyed man looked on.

Then the greatest desire in his heart-of-hearts came forth from her. He was called to meet her, alone, in a hidden location. He was awash with nerves and anticipation as he slipped through the city night. He nervously checked his reflection in grimy windows and still puddles. His heart

thudded in his chest as he made the secret knock at the secret door. It opened to soft, warm light that gave an ethereal glow to her soft face. Her smile was the warmth of the sun and he fidgeted, at loss for words.

“Come in, please,” she said warmly, and he followed her into the warm embrace of her secret room.

His heart nearly stopped as he entered the room, noticing first the soft glow of the candles, the delicate layering of fabrics bringing simple elegance to hand-carved furniture. His heart nearly broke in disappointment when he saw all the others: men and women of varying ages and builds. All had but one thing in common, and that was the aura of Family. He recognized immediately his Brothers and Sisters, though he had met but two of them before. His sudden disappointment was quickly replaced by joy and belonging.

“Welcome, Brother Jacob,” an old man with a shaman’s accoutrements said. “This is a very special day for you. Already you have served the Spirits well, but today, you shall meet them face to face.”

It was his first introduction to the Inner Circle, the highest and most loyal of Brothers and Sisters. He was special and important, and a new profound sense of belonging completely pushed away the small disappointment of earlier. They began with chanting and then a slow rhythmic dance that pulled him away from his earthly body. He was painted and anointed and then handed a cup of foul-smelling tea which he sipped without hesitation. He recognized the bitter taste as God’s Eye flower, a pungent white-flowered weed with spiky seed pods often found poking through the cracks of the street. As a kid he had, like most his age, chewed the seeds for the delirium it brought. He soon felt the familiar disassociation he’d known as a child, but enhanced by the chanting, the rhythmic drums, and

the jumping dance. It pulled him along into another world far beyond his own, a world of dream and spirit where the thin webs tying the universe together were at once tangible but beyond comprehension.

There he met the Spirits. The ghosts of lost friends and unknown family passed in and out, blurred and faded into one another. They became the Spirits of trees and fire, sun and clouds, love and war. Time and place were interchangeable. All faces were one, all people one. A vestigial piece of his human mind knew it was not the God's Eye flower he had consumed, but the *Gods'* Eye flower, an earthly connection to the myriad Gods and Spirits. And there, just forming at the edge of his mind, out of reach like a just-forgotten word on the tip of the tongue, was The Answer. It faded away with the tide of his consciousness, and a fog overtook his mind.

\* \* \*

Fog still occupied his mind as he slowly clawed his way back from the Spirit Realm into the temporal one. A soft, angelic face framed by straight raven hair blurred into focus above him. *Her*. He almost called out her name, but the face cleared to reveal instead one of the young Sisters of the inner circle.

“You return to us,” she said adoringly.

He nodded. “Where is...”

She hushed him. “The others have left back to their personal territories to make ready for the coming actions.”

“Coming actions?”

She just smiled knowingly and went to the kitchen to make him breakfast.

His face was sore. He looked into a gilded mirror and saw that he now sported new tattoos on his face, lines and dots like the ones on the faces of the ancient Indians from Powhatan's day as drawn in Governor Walter the First's notebooks. While Jacob bathed, she brought him fresh clothing in a modernized version of traditional Indian style. Washed and dressed, hunger sated with a hearty breakfast of hominy, beans, and bacon, he hugged her once and left while she watched him from the doorway.

He walked away with a new purpose, strutting down the cobbles, past the dirty waters of a canal already choked with the boats of petty merchants travelling from their inland farms to the floating markets of the town center, much as their ancestors had for centuries. *As the gods are my witness*, he told them silently, *you will all be freed*.

\* \* \*

Moons passed and more secret Inner Circle meetings were held. Some days they did not chant or dance, but quietly spoke, read, and recited works by shamans and priests, philosophers and revolutionaries. *She* led them in the teachings of Menzoni and Communalism, of the melding of God with Community and Commerce into a Sacred Communion where all Brothers and Sisters shared the fruits of capital and production. Yet in her version they discarded the Christian God and His Holy Communion, substituting instead the Shamanic guidance of Spirits and the Powwhite rituals of old.

Very rarely did they drink tea of Gods' Eye flower, and then only in carefully measured amounts with at least two Brothers or Sisters never

partaking. Remembering how close The Answer had always been, and wanting to break that gossamer wall, Jacob had asked for more.

“Powerful is the Gods’ Eye,” the Shaman had said, “but dangerous, even if taken carefully. It is but the width of a butterfly’s wing between visiting the Spirit Realm and entering there permanently.”

Jacob buried himself in the Family, working hard to smooth his crude ways in hopes that *she* might notice him for more than his loyalty to the Cause. The young Sister from the Inner Circle met him outside of the meetings to teach him to read. She watched him with bright eyes and an open smile, but always he thought about *her* instead, always tantalizingly close but unreachable, like that allusive Answer the Gods’ Eye held.

Then one day while he led his branch of the Family in a chant of belonging, *she* arrived with a smile and an invitation. He met her in an abandoned factory boiler room, he and seven other hand-chosen Brothers. They were chosen for a most special mission, a mission which would be the first great strike against the Oppressors. It would be a dangerous mission, possibly deadly, but one which would sound the first great war drum in the final ultimate victory for the Friends of the Spirits. Any who did not wish to go could walk away now and still be accepted as Family. None of the eight even broke eye contact with her. None, that is, but Jacob, whose gaze darted for a brief moment to the side, chasing a hint of peripheral motion among the shadows.

For the briefest of seconds Jacob thought he had seen the scar-crossed, one-eyed man from the docks.

\* \* \*

The drums and chants of the protesters were loud in the night air. Their fires flared and smoked. Their signs and banners waved defiantly. “We fight for them,” said the Brother paired with Jacob for the mission, a wiry and scar-faced bruiser with the light walk of a pugilist. They watched the protest from the shadows of an alley. A stiff-backed cordon of management toughs stood by the factory gate, truncheons ready. A disheveled mob of Worktribe men stood opposite them, various makeshift clubs and tamahaaks in hand. Too-small a number of gendarmes stood between to keep the peace. The gates were locked, the machines still, the factory near empty. Inside, Owners and Worktribe Weroances met across a table, mediated by a team of politicians that included the Lord Mayor himself, to discuss longstanding grievances. The standoff had raged for weeks. Patience was strained. A small spark could set the whole place aflame.

Jacob and the Brother slipped from the shadows and walked along the edge of the restive crowd, just two more curious passers-by. Jacob saw two distinct, opposed groups: Whites and Indians, English and Powhites, though each side bore a full spectrum of light skin to dark, of European blood to American to African. Many of the Company toughs wore medicine pouches or tribal tattoos. Many of the protesters wore crosses. This ambiguity was as invisible to Jacob as the Spirits had once been.

Jacob and the Brother slipped again into darkness and then bolted to a shadowed stretch of the fence. The Brother pulled out metal clippers and started opening a gap in the wire mesh. With all eyes on the protest, none saw them slip through the fence and run to the wall of the factory.

The Brother cut the lock on a side door while Jacob watched for guards. They slipped into the factory, the Brother using a small electric torch to read a small map. He pointed and the two ran off down a corridor. As they

turned a corner they came face-to-face with a surprised guard holding an electric torch. Without sound or hesitation Jacob ran forward and dropped the guard silently with a few hacks from the tamahaak. The Brother helped drag the body into a shadow and they continued forward, past twisting tangles of pipes and conduits.

Strange and menacing shadows were cast by their torch as they ran, giving an illusion that dark spirits were dancing at the edges of their vision. They passed through a large room with two great blue metal boilers that radiated waves of heat and spit small hisses of steam. The thrum of the boilers sounded to Jacob like the call of a war drum. They ran past large skeletal pistons and gears that stood still and cool, but still reeked of friction-charred lubricant oils. Jacob surprised and then cut down another guard and they stopped to hide the body.

The Brother led him past another corridor and then motioned up a metal ladder bolted into the frames of the machinery. Jacob climbed quickly up the ladder like a squirrel up a small oak and, noticing no one on the steel platform at the top, motioned the Brother up. The Brother led him down a catwalk to a metal door plastered with red-lettered warning signs. In seconds the Brother had picked the lock and they slipped inside.

Even in the darkness Jacob recognized the tall black rectangular cabinets as electric cases by their switches and gauges. Row after row of them, connected by parallel runs of conduit. They hummed quietly as if in meditation, perhaps to keep in the lightning they held. Jacob now opened his backpack and pulled out the half-dozen bundles of explosives and half-dozen timers. As they had practiced, he and the Brother connected the timers to the bundles and set them to the cabinets, placing them exactly where their crude reference drawing indicated. Other teams of Brothers would be doing the same at other strategic points throughout the factory.

Once the timers were set, Jacob and the Brother began running back out the room, practically sliding down the ladder.

“Hey!” yelled an authoritative voice. “Stop right there!”

A torch beam illuminated their faces for a second. They saw the silhouettes of at least three guards, two armed with guns.

Neither Jacob nor the Brother hesitated. According to plan, they split up. Jacob ran deeper into the factory, not noticing which way the Brother went.

He knew he only had a short time before the explosives detonated and hoped he was running in the correct direction to get out. An alarm cut through the silent air, followed closely by the sound of large metal switches being thrown. Section by section, the factory began to light up. Cursing, Jacob hugged the dwindling dark, ducking under and around strange machineries, hoping that the inadequate cover they provided would save him from a bullet to the back.

He heard the hard breathing of a guard behind him and decided to hide just past a stone bucket taller than a man. The guard ran past the bucket and Jacob struck out, hitting him twice in the head with the tamahaak. Not bothering to hide the body, he took the guard’s dropped revolver and ran on. The pistol felt strange in Jacob’s hand. He’d never fired one, but how hard could it be?

He ran down a short hallway, hoping to find a door out. Instead, he came upon a man in black. The man spun around with rattlesnake speed and aimed a long-magazine automatic pistol at his head. Jacob froze and almost fell over, but the man paused and raised the pistol to the ceiling.

Jacob recognized the man from the patched eye, the single arm, and the burn scars visible through the eye-gap in the mask: the man from the dock. The man winked (blinked?) his one good eye and turned back down the hall.

Then Jacob heard worried voices from further down the hall: "...found two trespassers. Probably just kids, but we need to take precautions nonetheless..." "...why can't we just stay locked in the meeting room..." "...considering the bomb threats..."

A small group of men spilled quickly into the light. Jacob recognized several, including local politicians, businessmen, the factory owners, the Worktribe weroances, and the Lord Mayor himself. Without a second's hesitation the one-eyed man stepped forward. The fully-automatic pistol made a jackhammer sound with each trigger squeeze, straining eardrums in the confined hall. The one-eyed man shot all the men in the group in quick succession, taking a moment to step in and put finishing shots in the heads of each.

*Why? thought Jacob. He's killing good Worktribe Brothers and friendly politicians along with the Oppressors...he even killed the Lord Mayor! Nothing can come from killing all these men but anger and a full-on war!*

As the man stopped to swap out his magazine Jacob got a sudden burst of fearful premonition. The Spirits were warning him! He'd seen too much. The man would kill him too!

He bolted, running in blind panic until he happened upon a door. He bolted out of the factory and climbed recklessly over the fence, cutting himself on the razor wire at the top. He was running down an alley he was too panicked to recognize when a flash of light made his shadow dance on

the ground. A split second later a loud explosion cut the night air. It was followed in quick succession by several more, each blending together into a long, loud peal of sound like late summer thunder. Jacob ran and ran until his legs and breath gave out and he collapsed, gasping in a pile of old newspapers and rags. He fought to regain control of his breath before getting up to run some more. He couldn't dare stop running, possibly not ever.

\* \* \*

Jacob bolts down the dirty passages of the tangled city, the corridors of his only home. Distant sounds of dogs and whistles ring in his ears. His heart races with his feet, sprinting down the crabbers' alley, past crab pots and fish nets. He reaches the fishermen's wharf. Scents of fish and fuel and chum mingle with the scents of a thousand transient fishermen; the perfect place to hide from human eye or canine nose. He shimmies up a drain pipe onto a roof and nests in the shelter of two adjoining gables. Perhaps he can hide out for a few more days until they give up the search. Perhaps he can get shelter among some sympathetic Brothers and Sisters, among his Family. Assuming there is still a place in his Family.

He feels used, somehow. *She* had told him their actions would merely cripple the factory for a while, cost the Owners some of their stolen money and unite the people against them with a grandiose display of solidarity. But the one-eyed man is starting a war. The Lord Mayor is dead. The factory is completely destroyed. The tensions of the city will surely erupt now in fire and blood. The army may enter the city before the last flames die out. Does *she* know? Is *she* in on it with the one-eyed man, or is she another pawn like he?

Morning is a long time coming after a fitful night of fear and vulnerability.

He should stay here, but he can no longer live without his Family. Not now. Not in his time of need. Not with war burgeoning. He drapes a filthy blanket from the trash over his head and walks head-down along the street. His face, in graphite form, already hangs on posters across the city, eyes angry, mouth thin and cold. The bloody, lifeless face of the Brother, his partner from last night, appears in a stark photograph on the front page of the newspapers. As best as he can tell only their two faces had been identified. There is no word of *her*. There is no word of a one-eyed man.

He runs to his branch house, but they turn him away. “You...you murdered those people! Our people! The Lord Mayor!” “You have to get out of here!” “We want rights, freedoms! Not a damned war!”

The Inner Circle! Perhaps them!

The secret meeting room is empty, even the potbelly stove long cold. He doesn't know where any of them live, not even the young Sister who'd shown him such attention.

Days pass. Jacob hasn't slept well, hasn't stayed in one place for more than a few hours. He steals food when he needs it, runs away whenever he sees or thinks he sees recognition in someone's eyes. Patchy beard spots his dirty reflection in dirty windows. All across the city people curse him and his Brothers. They blame them for the death of the popular politicians, for the destruction of the factory. Even the Worktribes, now left without a means to earn money to feed their families, curse his face. Is there nowhere to run?

*Her*. He has to find her. It was the one-eyed man. He betrayed them! The plan was just to destroy the factory machinery, ruin its ability to make slaves of men, right? A few collateral casualties were acceptable in service

to the Revolution, but she'd never have agreed to the assassinations. He spends precious days looking for her, but she has left him. Has left them all.

He has to escape the city. Out into the countryside, maybe? No. Every road out of town will be patrolled. A ship, maybe? Perhaps he can stow away on a freighter to anywhere, start life anew in another nation. He slips down the walkways of his home streets for the last time. Nostalgia tugs at him, but he won't turn back. If he stays here he will die. He has no family, not even the Family.

The freighters' wharf. Large ships and transport crates. Skeletal cranes that rise like bare trees into the smoke-choked sky. He pulls the wool blanket up over his head. One of these freighters must surely be ready to disembark soon. Wait. It's *her*! She holds a shawl over her head like an old Spanish woman, but it is unmistakably her! The eyes give her away immediately. He wants to rush to her, but not here in the open. She moves quickly, head down, like she has somewhere to go. He follows her, slipping unnoticed through the crowds of foreign merchantmen and tired longshoremen.

She slips into a wharf-side tavern of the type known for late-night brawls that often end with a drawn knife or gun. He slips around back, sliding in through the staff entrance. The kitchen is empty at this hour. He makes his way to the front and takes a seat at the empty bar. He can see her, there in a back booth. She is not alone. A long, burn-scarred face, one eye behind a black patch, stares back at her.

“What do you want, cousin?” asks a voice, causing Jacob to jump. It's the barkeep. Jacob feigns not understanding and points to a tap at random, sliding a copper bit on the bar. The barkeep draws a pint, but Jacob is too

absorbed by what he sees in the back booth to notice. She's distraught, shaking. Jacob wants to run to her, but not with *him* there.

The one-eyed man says something and her head bolts upwards, shaking back and forth. He leans in, face a mask of concern. She's crying, but places her small, delicate hand on his wrist. He leans over and whispers to her. They get up and he leads her out the door. Jacob slips out too, leaving the beer untouched.

He follows them. She leans on the man, head down, both her hands grasping his left arm. They go down a side pier where the small dark blue seaplane bobs in the brown waters. They get aboard. Jacob wants to run to the seaplane, to yell to her, but his legs and tongue are frozen. From a discrete vantage point he watches the plane's engine start, a longshoreman untie its moor, and watches it taxi away into the Sound.

\* \* \*

Alone. Abandoned by Brother and Sister alike. Feared and hated by all on the streets he calls his home. Abandoned, perhaps, even by the Spirits themselves.

The Spirits. Will they not take him in? Is he not a true friend of theirs? He must know. He must find The Answer. A short search finds the bright white eye of the gods staring out amongst sharp-edged leaves and purple stems. Several of them push up through the bricks, the older blooms already turning into the spiked green balls of seed pods. He walks to the flowers, caresses one like a lost lover. Regrets vie with abandonment for dominance in his mind. If only he'd gotten to her before the one-eyed man found her. If only he'd never met her to begin with. If only he'd been more receptive to the kind little Sister who in hindsight so obviously

adored him.

If only he had The Answer. Such a short time ago it seemed so near, so within grasp. But now it seems so distant and unobtainable. He wants nothing more than to find a way back to it.

But there is a way. He greedily plucks and devours the white Gods' Eye bloom, then another, then another. The pungent, bitter taste fills his mouth, churns in his empty stomach, but he keeps choking them down. By the fourth he still feels nothing, so he has a fifth and then a sixth.

Straining to keep the bitter blooms in his churning stomach he rolls onto his side. His heart thuds manically in his chest, his temples throbbing with each beat. Slowly the numbness, the slight calm and apprehension of the flower's effects, sink in and the disassociation starts. The feeling of the cool, grimy bricks on his face vanishes. The far wall blurs into inconsequence. The whole of the temporal world fades into unimportance and he sees *her*.

Smiling warmly to him, she beckons. A bright white light, perhaps a streetlamp, glows behind her, outlining her as both halo and aura as she walks to him. All is forgiven and all misunderstandings are forgotten. She sees now his deep love for her and can't help but reciprocate. He stands up and walks to her completely effortlessly, as though leaving the weight of his body and fears behind. She takes his hand and leads him away into the warm white light of a passageway where the Spirits and the ultimate Answer await them both.

**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 digging 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 more exciting adventures from the World of Mañana (they're not all this dark, we promise!) in the upcoming Twit Publishing Dieselpunk Anthology ("Cocktails on the Street of Bones") with even more stories to come...mañana.

To find out more about Jack visit him on Facebook or Goodreads.

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## LAST CALL

I see a bright future for dieselpunk. Every day, new artists are sharing their ideas, and every day I'm seeing the genre evolve more from where I thought it would go. From the Indiana Jones inspired neo-pulp of the early 1980s, to Europe's new electroswing clubs in 2013, I'm seeing a living, breathing style just breaking through to the mainstream after 30 years in incubation.

I hope you enjoyed these tales of adventure! If you want to see more, you need to speak up and let us know. Rate or review it in your favorite ebookstore, tell your friends, and share your own tales at

[www.dieselpunks.org](http://www.dieselpunks.org)

We look forward to hearing from you! Until then, the door is always open.

-Tome

