

**MECH**

AGE OF STEEL



— A RAGNAROK PUBLICATIONS ANTHOLOGY —

# MECH

AGE OF STEEL

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*“When I, who is called a weapon or a monster, fight a  
REAL monster, I can fully realize that I am just a human.”*

—Hiromu Arakawa, *Fullmetal Alchemist*

*“Gigantor, the space-age ROBOT!*

*He is at your command.*

*Gigantor, the space-age ROBOT!*

*His power is in your hand!*

*Bigger than big, taller than tall,*

*Quicker than quick, stronger than strong.*

*Ready to fight for right against wrong!*

*Gigantor! Gigantor! Gigaaaaa-a-an-torrrrrrr...”*

—Mid-sixties animated *Gigantor* cartoon based on  
Mitsuteru Yokoyama’s “Ironman 28”





# OF THE FIRE

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PAUL GENESSE

A Prequel to "Of the Earth, of the Sky, of the Sea" in *Kaiju Rising: Age of Monsters*  
and a prequel to "Machine Heart" in *Mech: Age of Steel*

*February 21, 1838*

*The Sikh Kingdom of Punjab, Northern India*

*The Battle of Gujrat during the Second Anglo-Sikh War*

**L**ieutenant Robert Cameron led the advance against the entrenched Sikh infantry under withering machinegun and mortar fire. Bullets and shrapnel crashed against the steel armor of his Juggernaut like a monsoon of hot lead.

The thunderous impacts only hardened his resolve, and Cameron fired his chest cannon into a death-spewing machinegun bunker. The explosion filled the air with black smoke, and Cameron shouted in triumph, wanting to kill as many of the enemy as possible and avenge the hundreds of men who had died charging that lone gun.

Cameron drove his Mark I Juggernaut onward against a new barrage and used the smoke as cover. He led his squad of steel giants across the flat battle plain pockmarked with craters and blocked with barbwire fences. He had promised he would open the way for the final infantry assault that would defeat the Sikh army at last, winning the Punjab for the crown and East India Company.

He stood inside the driving crucible, an armored capsule filled with levers, knobs, and gauges within the chest of his contraption,



never before seen on a battlefield. Between the volleys from the enemy, the rush and churn of the steam engine was his constant companion, as vital as his own heart's pulse.

He shifted his lumbering giant into its fastest gear, barely the speed of a man marching with a heavy pack. He purposefully walked on the corpses of the fallen, using their flesh as steppingstones to keep his heavy, fourteen-foot tall colossus from sinking into the rain-soaked ground of the Punjab.

The evidence of two failed infantry attacks, dead British regulars in redcoats, and their Bengali allies in tan uniforms, sunk into shallow graves with his every footfall. These men would be the last to die so needlessly on the killing fields of Gujrat. If only the warmachines his family invented had been allowed to enter the battle sooner.

A wave of force thumped in the center of Cameron's chest, rattling bolts and bones alike. His earplugs and sound-dampener muffs only partially protected him from the deafening explosions as his Mark I toppled over. Head spinning, he somehow managed to extend metal arms and catch himself before he hit the ground.

The smell and coppery taste of blood brought him around a moment later. Cameron slowly regained his wits and wiped his nose on his sleeve. His hands found the control levers. Righting himself after falling over was always a challenge, but he managed to push his Juggernaut to a standing position. He extended and swiveled his main periscope on the top of the machine's head to see if his four squad mates were still behind him.

Through the dust and smoke, he spotted Lieutenant Edwards and Philips. The dull steel of their armor was undamaged but covered in mud as they marched toward his flanks sweeping the field of enemy strong points.

Clive's rig lay face down behind them, near a smoking crater. The steel legs had been blown off and the rear chassis was crushed like a tin of biscuits struck with a hammer. Clive was done for. The

shock left Cameron stunned until staccato machinegun fire raked across his forward armor. He split his focus on what lay ahead with trying to see what had happened to the fifth member of their squad, Lieutenant Rawlinson. He finally spotted the wreckage covered in reddish Punjab dirt. Geysers of steam escaped from the seams in the frame. If his friend had not died in the initial explosions, the ruptured boiler housing fused like a backpack onto the Juggernaut had surely burned him alive.

Cameron slammed his fists against the instrument board as the pain of losing Clive and Rawlinson made his eyes blur and his chest ache. He wiped his face and searched for the location of the heavy artillery thought to have been knocked out the previous day. If he could find the enemy guns he would fire on them with everything he had. Another thunderous bombardment informed him the Sikh cannons were hidden far to the rear of the enemy lines in the jungle beside Gujrat.

Cameron quickly signaled with his Juggernaut's arms for Edwards and Phillips to take cover in the shell craters. He steered into a pool of rainwater and blood at the bottom of large crater. He bent low, hoping his friends would do the same. Explosions rocked the battlefield and guilt filled his soul. His friends would have been alive if he had not boldly volunteered them during the General's war council.

"Gentlemen," General Gough had said, "we shall attack again after another artillery barrage." His aristocratic Irish accent colored every word.

The dead silence and angry stares of the officers might as well have been murmurs and groans. Over a thousand men had fixed bayonets and died that morning trying to cross the no man's land in front of the town of Gujrat. Twice that many lay wounded and dying in the overflowing field hospital. Charging the machinegun nests a third time would accomplish nothing but more useless deaths.

Every British soldier had seen it before in the past decade, this mindless attrition, this deadly inability to adapt. Paving the way to a crumbling Empire on the blood of the fallen.

“Their heavy guns are destroyed,” Gough said, chastising the insubordinate officers and scowling at them through his large white mustache and huge sideburns.

“General, sir.” Lieutenant Cameron marched away from the edge of the tent and faced Gough. “My Juggernauts can cross half the plain tonight during an artillery attack that will hide the sound of our engines. We’ll conceal ourselves in the shell craters until first light, then we will attack and destroy the central machinegun and cannon positions on our own, and clear several paths through the barbed wire. We will open the way for your men or die in the attempt.”

General Hugh Henry Gough raised a bushy eyebrow. “Lieutenant, you want me to order your five untested contraptions to attack the center of the Sikh line with no infantry or cavalry support?”

“Yes, General, and if you send large cavalry detachments both east and west as suggested by you and your staff, the Maharaja will weaken his central position at Gujrat to counter our flanking attacks, which will only be feints. With their heavy artillery already destroyed, my men and I will be invulnerable to their light cannons and gunfire.”

“Nothing is invulnerable in war,” Gough said.

“Forgive me, sir,” Cameron said, “but if you see my Juggernauts in action—”

“No one has seen them!” Gough interrupted.

“Sir, they are ready,” Cameron said. “*We* are ready.”

“You’ve been here for three days, and you look like a school boy playing soldier,” Gough said as he eyed Cameron.

The young officer was acutely aware of his baby-face and unruly red hair. Cameron’s pale and freckled skin had not even attained a proper sunburn yet.

“I’m twenty-nine, sir,” Cameron said. He kept his head high, though he wished more than anything that he could grow a proper mustache and look older than he was. “I fought in the first Sikh war as a cavalymen in the 16th Scarlet Lancers.”

“You left the 16th,” Gough said, eyeing Cameron’s naval uniform, “and the army all together.”

The insult opened a painful truth. Cameron had departed from the army and accepted a commission in the Admiralty because they had agreed to help him build his machines. “The Royal Navy was daft to send you and your airships,” Gough said, “and why is Admiral Lawrence not here in your place?”

“He fell ill two days ago, sir,” Cameron said, “and he wished for me to command the 1st Armored Juggernauts in his stead.”

“Sir Lawrence is a fine man, but while you were both in England building your shambling machines and sipping tea, we were here sweating and dying. You’ve had eight long years of luxury while we have been learning hard lessons in battle.”

“Forgive me, sir, for leaving, but I have not stopped thinking about my last action when I proudly served under your command at the Battle of Shukoor.”

“You were there,” Gough said, the edge gone from his voice at the mention of the costliest victory the British Bengal Army had ever won. Gough had nearly lost his command and faced court martial.

“Sir, I was wounded on the last day when we took the enemy camp. I was sent home to recover afterward, and when I was in England I spent months thinking of ways to break stalemates like Shukoor...and here.”

The general stared at Cameron with the eyes of a hawk. “You think five men can win the day when five thousand failed? Lieutenant, I will not allow you to make me look like a fool in front of my entire army. I never should have let Admiral Lawrence be represented by

such a junior officer. Your infernal machines and useless support staff are not needed here.”

Cameron let the harsh words pass without comment. He respected General Gough, and in the sincerest tone any officer could muster, he began, “General Gough, sir, we are your men. We would follow your orders to fix bayonets and enter the gates of Hell. If you ask any of us to cross the open ground, we will do it, just as we have done before. I merely ask for the honor of leading this attack and clearing the way for those who will follow.”

Gough looked at the ceiling of the tent and shook his head, perhaps pondering Cameron’s sanity.

“Sir, if I may,” Cameron said, “when the first great general came to India, he once climbed over the wall of a Multanese fortress with only two men. His shield bearer and a trusted bodyguard. Three men changed the course of the battle.”

“You have the audacity to speak to me of Alexander the Great?” Gough asked.

“Yes, sir. When his men saw him fighting his way into the fortress, they were so inspired they climbed the walls and captured the citadel. General, you bravely wear your conspicuous white coat during battles and the men know you would be the first to climb the wall as you did in your younger days. We all know and respect that you charged the guns many times and earned your glory as a cavalryman.”

Gough sat up straight, his hand on the handle of the old saber he had used to kill many men.

“Please, General,” Cameron said, “let me be the first to climb this wall and charge those guns. My men are ready to do our duty and follow your orders. This battle will be written about for centuries, and when we have taken Gujrat, you will be named the general who ordered the first Juggernaut attack in history.”

Gough smiled more like a tiger than a man. “You think of yourself as Alexander?”

“No, sir,” Cameron said, his voice cracking as he lied. “I am the shield bearer who would follow his general into the Multanese citadel.”

Sir Hugh Henry Gough sat rigidly for three long breaths, then stood slowly. The Irishman blinked and saluted Lieutenant Robert Cameron, the young officer in command of the 1st Armored Juggernaut Company. “We will be right behind you, son.”

Mortar shells exploded around Cameron’s Juggernaut’s as he crouched down trying to take cover. A blast of force and heat entered his crucible, shattering one of the pressure gauges and cracking the glass on one of his six periscope viewing lenses. Despite the scarf over his mouth, Cameron tasted dust and smoke. He waited for the Sikh heavy guns to be reloaded. One more direct hit from those and his foolish attack would be over.

The general had been right. Five untested Juggernauts against the forward Sikh infantry position had been a mad plan. Attempting it with only three was suicide, just as Alexander’s attack on the Multanese citadel had been. Rashly climbing over the wall with two trusted men to shame his soldiers into following him had been the pinnacle of arrogance. The Macedonian King had slain many Multanese in single-combat on top of the battlements and in courtyard below after he jumped into the fortress, but an arrow pierced the young King’s chest and almost ended his life.

A hail of heavy cannon shells fired by multiple batteries of the Royal Artillery arced over Cameron and struck a position to the left rear of the enemy trenches. Cameron prayed to all mighty God for the series of rolling booms to disable the Sikhs remaining big guns.

Cameron told himself he was not going to die today and be remembered as a glorious failure. He was no shield bearer either. He was a warrior king at the very beginning of his legend. He climbed out of the crater and pressed his forehead against the front gun sight.

Sweat dripped down his cheeks, and he tasted salt in his mouth.

He aimed at men in light orange turbans who manned a belt-fed Maxim machine gun. The diabolical German Kaiser who was maneuvering to conquer Europe and seize large swaths of Africa had undoubtedly supplied most of the advanced weapons the Sikhs used. Heavy artillery from the Krupp cannon factories had killed Clive and Rawlinson. Cameron would not forget, and he would make certain the German Empire paid.

The stifling heat inside the crucible intensified, and Cameron realized his fans had stopped working. His eyes fixed on his targets. He banged his palm against the main fan housing. It squealed, but otherwise refused to engage.

"Nothing is invulnerable in war," he said, imitating General Gough's accent. Cameron grasped his canteen and poured the last of it over his head. It clattered to the floor of the crucible, and he dragged one arm across his face to clear his vision.

Scores of Sikh riflemen in trenches appeared in his gun sight. Many used old Enfield muskets, and they reloaded, frantically tamping musket balls into the long barrels while men with newer rifles rapidly shot cartridge after cartridge at him.

The rank of soldiers before him opened fire. A thick cloud of gunpowder smoke, smelling of hot metal mixed with charcoal, filled the crucible. Without the fan he struggled to breathe. He would have been blinded from the caustic vapors had he not been wearing his gray-tinted goggles.

Cameron pulled the trigger and fired his short chest canon. An explosive shell struck the machinegun position, blowing men into the air. Their orange turbans flew like autumn leaves.

Killing them made him hunger for more. He reached the first trench and the wide-eyed soldiers scattered left and right. He stepped over it, then paused, leaving one giant snowshoe-shaped foot on the far side. Cameron spread his Juggernaut's arms and fired his grapeshot canons at the same time in both directions. The cloud of

iron pellets passed through dozens of men and blood sprayed into the air. He reloaded and fired again to deadly effect until the entire section of trench was a mass of perforated corpses with their innards spreading across the surface of the mud.

Phillips and Edwards reached the trenches on his flank and according to his plan, they swept right. Cameron would have to take the left alone. A few of the brave Sikh soldiers stood their ground as he marched toward them. They fired at point blank range into the joints of his Juggernaut and flung small bombs at his feet. A few even struck at the machine's legs with shovels, picks, and their curved Kirpan swords. Their efforts were in vain, but he respected their courage.

Cameron saved his ammunition. He squashed them underfoot, enjoying their satisfying screams as he struck them down with the telescoping steel cudgel extended from his Juggernaut's hand. He crushed and bent every large gun he found. The Sikhs had less than twenty-five Maxim machineguns, and he had already disabled nine and broke four small cannons. War was science. War was depriving the enemy of the capability to resist. If one could break their tools, he could break their will.

At the second line of defense, a huge mass of soldiers waited for him. They attacked with ineffective grenades, but they drew his attention long enough for artillerymen behind him to uncover three field canons. They fired point blank while he was in mid-stride.

The impact knocked him off balance, and the Juggernaut fell into the trench shoulder first. Straps held him in place in the crucible, but he banged his left arm so hard he could not feel his hand or work the controls. Angry soldiers swarmed over him and bashed at his armor with swords and shovels. He thought he heard a sound like pouring sand. He was confused for a moment, but when he smelled gunpowder he knew exactly what they were doing. Dear God, he had to right himself, and he had to do it fast.

Wedged into the trench, he could not get the Juggernaut's legs under it. His only hope was to reach up with a free arm and try to pull himself upright. He clawed at the ground and blindly dug the long metal fingers inside the dirt, trying to get a handhold. The slick mud of the Punjab sloughed away and gave him no purchase. He managed to grab one of the saboteurs crawling against his chassis and flung the man across the field, but no matter what he did, he could not right his machine. He pushed and pulled inside the cloying confines of the hot driving crucible.

No one could control a Juggernaut as well as Cameron. He extended the metal bludgeon pole from his right arm and stabbed the rod into the ground. Using it as an anchor, Cameron manipulated the control levers as if he were conducting an orchestra. He pulled and pushed himself out of the trench inch by inch until his feet were under him.

"Clear off!" Cameron shouted through his speaking tube as he regained his feet. He plucked two men from his Juggernaut's head and tossed their crushed bodies aside. The others leaped off him and joined rank upon rank of Sikh soldiers. Hundreds of men with long black beards and orange or blue turbans surrounded him as his engine coughed, sputtered, and died, leaving him motionless.

Cameron gritted his teeth in frustration. If he was operational, he would slaughter them in droves. The engine had overheated in the thick of the enemy. The main fan gearing must have failed, not just for the crucible, but for the engine as well, and he was standing in an oven.

Cameron heard the hiss as grains of gunpowder fell through the cracks in his warmachine the instant before the enemy began a roaring thunderstorm of bullets. The armored chassis would hold, or it wouldn't. He could do nothing about that now. He had to get his engine started again before they found enough explosives to blow him apart.

More soldiers came out of their trenches and fighting pits to join the attack.

“All right, then.” Cameron said, throwing the steam purge lever. That would relieve the overpressure. Engaging the cold water overflow, he let over half of his remaining reservoir spray against the engine housing. A cloud of steam vented from the metal giant and settled in the trenches like fog. He manually cranked the engine as the Sikhs gathered and came in close. Still his engine would not restart, not yet. He needed time for it to cool.

Cameron switched on the pneumatic pump but could not tell if it was working at first. The pressure gauge moved, and he watched the needle build to the red line.

The soldiers stopped firing. He heard yelling. Did they believe they had caused some grave damage? He had not moved in some time. A few began to shout in joy, while many prayed with their hands together. Others must have heard the pump rattling to life and chattered fearfully, quieting the others. The riflemen reloaded while gangs of artillerymen repositioned cannons to fire at the boiler on his back at close range.

Cameron turned the crank as if his life depended on it, and the sharp telescoping nozzle extended from his Juggernaut’s faux mouth. He flipped the switch and the tiny pilot flame came to life at the end of the barrel. Cameron released the pressure valve and the Sikh soldiers gasped as the jet of fire erupted from the behemoth, immolating scores of bearded men. Soldiers caught flame and Cameron swiveled the Juggernaut’s head around 360 degrees, burning everyone in a spinning stream. Their turbans and long hair underneath to honor their faith burned like candlewicks.

The gunpowder on the surface of his Juggernaut smoked and sparked, wreathing him in a white shroud. Through the smoke, he tried to find Edwards and Phillips with his top periscope. Far down the line, they followed his lead and sprayed their own flamethrowers.

No reinforcements arrived from the weakened town of Gujrat as Cameron's plan to draw the enemy away to the flanks appeared to have worked. Thousands of terrified soldiers fled from their well-fortified positions and gun emplacements in the line and ran for the lives.

The warmachine's engine finally sputtered to life. Cameron blew his steam whistle, designed to sound like the wail of a vengeful demon, signaling the main attack. British and Bengali infantry had crawled partially across the field as he suggested, and now they surged through the many breaks in the wire.

The Sikh infantry fled even faster as Cameron expended the ammunition of all his guns, cutting down as many of the enemy as he could. When he was out of shells and his machinegun malfunctioned, the belt jamming, he stepped on the wounded, giving no quarter as they had done the same in many other battles, including Shukoor. He thought of all of his friends who had died, and the need for revenge became an all-consuming hate. Along with Edwards and Phillips, Cameron painted the iron legs of his Juggernaut red with blood.

Trumpets signaling a full charge reached Lieutenant Cameron's ears as a regiment of British Army Dragoons and the 16th Scarlet Lancers galloped around him in pursuit of the enemy. They would butcher the fleeing troops, as a rout was when the true carnage occurred in most battles. He wanted to climb down and find a horse, rejoin the 16th for one more ride, but his battle was over. He needed water to cool the boiler, refuel, reload, and assess the damage to his machine. If he didn't fix his crucible fan, he'd likely die an ignominious death from heatstroke.

Cameron scaled the ladder and popped the hatch on the top of his Juggernaut's head. He climbed out and stood tall in the harsh sun. He gulped in the dusty air, and gagged at the smell of burned hair and flesh. He breathed through his mouth until the wind shifted and a breeze from the distant snowcapped Himalayas cooled his sweat-drenched body.

The cavalry cheered as they rode past him, sabers and pistols gleaming in the sunlight. Cameron knew what he must do. He buttoned up his red tunic, though it was smeared with grease and saturated with sweat. He straightened his white pith helmet with its shiny brass spike. Suitably attired, he pulled the hidden flagpole from the secret compartment and attached the Union Jack he stowed in a niche below the top-hatch.

Cameron stood tall and waved the blue, white, and red flag at the ranks of thousands of British Bengal Army soldiers riding or quick-marching toward the captured enemy trenches. The men cheered as they crossed the killing ground that Cameron and his surviving squad mates had conquered in less than half an hour. Every one of the soldiers would see the destruction his machines had wrought and know to whom this great victory was owed. Even as his legs shook and his vision threatened to go black with exhaustion, he waved the Union Jack aloft for all to see.

General Gough himself, in his bright white coat, rode a tall piebald mare and jumped over the trenches of the captured Sikh line. The General rode up to Lieutenant Cameron's Juggernaut. Many officers, some from the 16th Scarlet Lancers, and the General's personal guard, ringed the victorious machine.

Cameron stood at attention while holding the flagpole and saluted them all.

General Gough bowed respectfully before meeting Cameron's eyes and gave a rare smile. "Lieutenant, Alexander himself would have been proud to have you as his shield bearer." The old warrior raised his saber and shouted, "For Queen and Country!"

"For Queen and Country!" Lieutenant Cameron shouted along with hundreds of cavalry and infantrymen. The young officer surveyed the troops with pride and wondered how many of them owed their lives to his deadly machines.

*March 4, 1838*  
*Northwestern Punjab*  
*British Bengal Army Camp outside Rawalpindi*

**B**loody bastards!" Cameron shouted as he stared through his periscope at the scattered muzzle flashes at the edge of the dark jungle. He suspected the Sikh army would steal across the river and launch a surprise attack at night. They had no hope of victory otherwise, though little chance remained of them keeping control of the rich Punjab territory.

The Maharaja's broken army had run for twelve days into the rough country beyond the River Jhelum. Lieutenant Cameron provided critical information by observing their retreat from his large dirigible, Her Majesty's Airship No. 8, carrying the three surviving Juggernauts. Cameron was determined to make the luddites at the Admiralty who favored wooden sailing ships over airships and Juggernauts eat their words. The slow decline of the British Empire would come to an abrupt halt when the leaders embraced the new age of warfare and made him their champion.

Cameron watched from high above and reported to General Gough as Hindu, Sikh, and Muslim villagers fled with the remnants of the Sikh host by the thousands. They would rather abandon their homes than risk an attack by the terrifying metal giants the British had brought to exterminate the Punjabi people. Holy men of every faith spoke of the fiery end of the world and a day of judgment.

Lieutenant Cameron counted on the exaggerated stories keeping the populace in line once the war was over. A dark, secret facet of his mind gloried in being seen as a herald of the apocalypse. He'd first discovered this hidden face in the mirror after a battle as a young cavalry officer when he killed several Sepoy rebels with his saber. There would come a day when he would kneel and ask forgiveness for the pleasure he felt after killing his enemies. Cameron had to believe

the Lord forgave his warriors and saw their bloody hands washed clean. For now, this dark and brutal part of him served its purposes.

The Maharaja's army and the many refugees finally halted their retreat at the city of Rawalpindi and camped on the western bank of the Indus River. General Gough anticipated an official surrender in the morning but prepared his forces on the east side of the river.

Near midday, an emaciated Hindu holy man with wild eyes, a long gray beard, and his face painted white, had wandered into the camp. The old man shouted at the three Juggernauts, hurling insults or curses.

"Tell him to shove off," Cameron ordered one of the native porters. "We have no need of his mummery here, and he's annoying my mechanics."

"A humble sorry, sir," the porter said and bowed low. "I cannot speak to this man."

The guru took something out of his robe and threw it at Cameron's Juggernaut. The clay object shattered, leaving a sunburst splash of red on the base plate of the torso armor.

Cameron grabbed the guru by the front of his robes. Lifting him clear off the ground was like lifting a pile of dry sticks.

"Bugger!" Cameron shouted. He pressed the barrel of his Webley pistol against the guru's forehead and cocked the hammer.

"Lieutenant," Edwards said, putting his hands firmly on Cameron's shoulder.

"He's one of their holy men," Phillips said.

"Cam," Edwards said, "he's nothing more than a nuisance."

The gun clicked as Cameron un-cocked the hammer. As he holstered the revolver the guru grinned. The old man's eyes filled with mad glee, and he touched Cameron's face, smearing him with red paint.

The guru yelled something, then began to shake as if he were having a seizure. His eyes rolled back and he went limp.

Cameron let the guru collapse to the ground and glared at the reddish stains on his hands after he wiped his face. "Have this barmy fool thrown from the camp!"

The old man lay still. His dark brown skin soon took on the gray pallor of death, shocking Lieutenant Cameron, Edwards, and Phillips.

"Get this filth out of here," Cameron ordered some porters.

None of the Hindus would touch the body, and the porters who spoke Punjabi would not tell Cameron what the guru had said before he died.

A pair of Muslim corporals finally disposed of the corpse in a manner common in the barbaric territory. They left it in the forest for wolves or wild dogs to eat.

Disgusted with the bizarre practices of the natives, Cameron stood on a ladder and scrubbed at the blotch of paint on his machine with a wire brush. He could not stop thinking about the dead guru. Part of him wished he would have pulled the trigger, but he felt instantly ashamed for his bloodthirsty thoughts. Was he a murderer or a soldier?

"Sorry, mates," Cameron said to Edwards and Phillips, who stood at the base of ladder smoking and watching out for their commanding officer.

"He was a loony bastard, sir," Phillips said. "If it had just been us, I would have shot him myself."

Cameron grinned at his friend's jest.

"What the devil was he up to, sir?" Edwards asked.

Why had the old man marked him and his Juggernaut? It all meant something.

"The Hindus are prattling on about mysticism and magic," Phillips said.

"A Christian man puts no stock in the superstitions of the heathens," Edwards said.

“But singling out my Juggernaut could serve a tactical purpose,” Cameron said. “The Punjabis are up to something. Be ready tonight. Sleep in your warmachine, hatches locked tight, boiler lit.”

When the attack came that very night, Cameron pulled a lever to feed the engine extra coal. He stood and worked inside his dim crucible lit by orange-red thermolamps as gunshots, bugles, and shouting soldiers filled the darkness.

The pressure and temperature gauges quickly increased. He pulled the chain and blew his Juggernaut’s whistle three times to summon Edwards and Phillips and roust the entire camp into action.

Cameron shifted into first gear, and his Juggernaut stomped forward among disorganized soldiers. He expected to find a horde of Sikh soldiers charging and maiming with their large Kirpan swords. Instead he found an empty field with a few dead Bengali pickets at the edge of the camp. Was this only a feint? A diversion from the real attack?

The rumble of his engine blocked out most of the outside sounds, but Cameron heard something coming from the jungle, a chorus of thousands of voices chanting together. He put his engine on idle so he could hear better as squads of Bengali soldiers formed firing lines on both his flanks. English officers and sergeants barked orders below him.

The chanting in the jungle gained in volume. He had to hear what was happening and climbed the ladder and popped the top hatch.

Tens of thousands of voices from inside the forest chanted a word over and over. At first he could not understand what they said, but it became clear after a moment. “Ganesh. Ganesh. Ganesh.”

The name of the elephant-headed Hindu god vibrated through the humid nighttime air. The strange religions of India repulsed and fascinated Cameron and, if he knew one thing, it was that the Sikh believed in one god, and they did not worship the ancient Hindu deity, Ganesh.

Who was attacking them? Had the Maharaja raised a Hindu army from his local subjects? Why had they stopped firing?

The tops of trees shook as something crashed through the forest on its way toward him. A deep thrumming coursed through the ground, like the feel of a cannon fusillade while on the gun deck of a frigate. A gigantic bull elephant with one long tusk and one broken one burst from the trees. Cameron stood transfixed as it let out an ear-splitting trumpet call and faced Cameron's Juggernaut.

The chanting gained in volume. "Ganesh! Ganesh! Ganesh!"

Cameron gasped. Had the guru said something about Ganesh before he died?

The elephant flared its sail-like ears, stomped its feet and bellowed again. Its eyes were filled with a balefire gleam of hatred. It was nearly twice the size of any elephant he'd ever seen, covered with old scars, trailing bits of tree limbs where it had forged a path through the jungle.

Lieutenant Cameron slid down the ladder and into the crucible. The fools had herded a rogue elephant toward the camp. He would show these natives what his Juggernaut would do to a mass of unarmored pachyderm flesh. He took aim at the beast with his main cannon. The elephant reared up, and Cameron fired. The shell struck the beast's chest and a bright yellow explosion blinded Cameron. He blinked and, for an instant, he thought he saw the elephant standing like a man with four human shaped arms and hands painted red with intricate Hindu symbols.

Had his shot misfired? Cameron ejected the spent shell and loaded another. When he took aim, the elephant stood in front of him. The monstrosity wrapped its trunk around the short cannon barrel protruding from the chest of his warmachine. Steel creaked as the elephant twisted the barrel into a curve as if it were soft clay.

Horrified, Cameron stared into the frightening eyes of the beast. A deep, rumbling voice echoed in his mind. "YOU WILL BE DEVoured."

Reeling, Cameron reached for the controls and punched both arms of his Juggernaut into the monster's chest. He expected it to be pushed away, but Cameron found his machine falling backward, propelled by the force of his own blow. He slammed into the ground and banged his head—fortunately protected by his pith helmet—against the padded headrest inside the crucible. What was happening? Cameron struggled to understand.

The chanting of the people outside increased in volume and shook him to his core, “Ganesh! Ganesh! Ganesh!”

Massive hammer blows fell on the warmachine. The gigantic elephant stomped on his chest plates again and again. Cameron pressed himself backward as metal caved in and bent. The boiler would burst under this assault, and he'd be cooked to death in a moment. He had to get the damned creature off him.

Impossibly, an ivory tusk pierced the reinforced steel and narrowly missed Cameron's head. His mind raced, trying to imagine a rational explanation. His cannon hadn't missed. His armor hadn't suddenly turned to plaster.

“God preserve me,” he prayed.

The tusk pulled out slowly, the scraping sound painful to his ears. Cameron looked through the circular hole at the elephant god as he crawled toward the top of the warmachine and his only escape route. He reached the handle and opened the hatch as the tusk penetrated one of the Juggernaut's faux eyes. Cameron jerked out of the way as the tusk broke two rungs on the metal ladder and embedded itself into the aft bulkhead.

Ganesh reared, lifting the Juggernaut into the air. Cameron fell like a rag doll down into the crucible. His ankle struck hard and broke with a loud *snap*. Cameron screamed as the searing pain shot through his leg. The elephant trumpeted in victory, deafening Cameron and leaving him stunned on the floor with pieces of his broken machine.

Cameron had to act. He grabbed the arm control levers and threw them forward hard and fast. He wrapped the metal limbs around the monster's head and locked the fingers together. The Juggernaut began to squeeze, pressing the elephant's misshapen skull against the Juggernaut's faceplate.

Ganesh shook the Juggernaut side to side, trying to free itself. The tusk piercing the faux eye broke off, cracking like the branch of an old oak tree. Cameron squeezed harder. He noticed the elephant's ear canal near the spot where the front of the large ear attached to its head.

Cameron turned on the pneumatic pump and extended the barrel of his flamethrower toward the ear hole, which was directly in front of the nozzle. The pilot flame failed to light on the first try, and Cameron flipped the switch again. The flame stayed alight and the telescoping barrel poked into the beast's ear canal, penetrating it like a spear.

The elephant god punched the Juggernaut with its four arms, knocking Cameron from the flamethrower's release valve. He crashed into the side of the cockpit and felt his ribs break. In agony, he dove toward the controls. His broken ankle grinded painfully inside his flesh as Cameron reached for the valve.

Ganesh reared up, trying to dislodge the nozzle from his ear.

Cameron screamed in pain and pushed himself toward the valve. He released it with a hard twist and a jet of flaming naphtha streamed onto the elephant god. The fire spread over its slate gray skin, searing flesh. The liquid flames shot forward under high pressure and quickly burned through the ear canal and entered Ganesh's skull.

The elephant bellowed and screamed, thrashing and trying to dislodge the Juggernaut. The heat from the fire turned the crucible into an inferno. Cameron could not stand the burning pain and pulled the controls to release his Juggernaut's grip on the elephant's head.

The instant the steel hands opened, Cameron and his

warmachine were thrown through the air. The Juggernaut crashed hard into the ground.

The pain turned to blackness, and Cameron found himself staring into the charred face of a Hindu god. The trunk had been mostly burned away. The smoking elephant skull, missing its ears and most of its gray skin hung disembodied in the air before him.

“YOUR NEW WEAPONS WILL FAIL.” The deep voice rattled Cameron’s bones and echoed inside his soul.

“What are you? A demon from Hell?” Cameron shouted.

“I AM THE PAST AND THE FUTURE. MY KIND WILL RETURN TO DEFEND OUR PEOPLE WHEN YOU COME TO ENSLAVE THEM. YOU WILL AWAKEN US ALL BEFORE THE END.”

The god opened its mouth and let out a wet trumpeting sound filled with hate. The blackened skull flew at Cameron to swallow him whole. He stared down its throat into the utter oblivion of the void.

*October 27, 1838*

*Liverpool, west coast of England*

*Harborside Manor*

**T**he choking odor of burnt elephant skin filled the bedroom as Captain Robert Cameron thrashed awake in the south wing of Harborside Manor. The nightmarish afterimage of the fiery skull remained despite his wide eyes. The horrifying vision persisted, like it always did, as if he had been staring at the sun.

He turned up the dim gas lamp on the wall beside his bed and lifted the King James Bible from his nightstand, pressing the leather book to his chest. He muttered the Lord’s Prayer:



Our Father, who art in heaven,  
Hallowed be thy Name.  
Thy kingdom come.  
Thy will be done,  
in earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread,  
And forgive us our trespasses,  
And lead us not into temptation;  
But deliver us from evil.

The skull faded from his eyes as he spoke the last line, but the sharp, rank odor of burned flesh permeated the room as if pieces of the corpse were under his bed. The sharp smell even polluted his blankets and nightshirt, a reminder he could not escape from the dark power he had faced in India.

He flung away his clothes, found a robe in the armoire, and fled the stinking bedchamber. He hesitated at the top of the stairs, lamp in hand. His heart ached with the longing to go and see his wife, Rose, and their young son, Henry. But Rose...

She never saw the elephant skull, but she always smelled the burnt flesh after Cameron's frequent nightmares, and poor little Henry would always wake up screaming if Cameron stayed in a room near him. The four year-old boy often drew the long black trunk and the single tusk of the monster that visited him in his room.

Cameron kept far away from his family and retreated to the kitchen. He made himself a small pot of Darjeeling tea. As it steeped, he squeezed the edge of the wooden counter until his knuckles turned white. His life and career would be progressing perfectly if only his family were not being tormented by an evil spirit, and if he could sleep through a single blasted night.

Cameron took the tea to his study and wrote more in his journal. In the eight months since he returned from India to recover from his

wounds, he had filled two large journals and had recently started on his third. As he turned the pages to find a blank spot to scribble out his thoughts, he stopped on the illustration he made of the elephant skull. He had not gotten the eyes right, but how could he capture the essence of the devil with simple pen and ink?

He had shown the drawing to an Anglican priest in London. The man was said to be an expert in the field of demonology. The visit garnered little comfort, no protection from the nightmares, or any further understanding. The skeptical priest did leave Cameron with a verse so overused it was laughable, Ephesians 6:11, “Put on the whole armor of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.”

Later that night, in a pub filled with veterans of the second Anglo-Sikh war, Cameron made a toast to the priest, “Thank you for your good counsel, Father. I’ll make the armor much thicker in the Juggernaut Mark II to protect myself from elephant tusks.”

The next day, he took the train back to Liverpool, angry he had wasted his time speaking to the priest. No one in England could help him. The heroic Bengali soldiers who had pulled him from the wrecked Juggernaut had seen the four-armed monster.

“Sir, there is no doubt,” the Bengali said in awe, “You defeated the avatar of Ganesh himself.”

“It might have been an Asura,” another said. “A demon in the form of Ganesh, but who can say?”

Regardless, everyone from Calcutta to London celebrated the victories of the brilliant and brave warrior, Robert Cameron. The Admiralty even promoted him to captain, but when he was not in public speaking to his admirers, he felt like he had lost the two battles in India. The ominous warning repeated itself almost nightly during his troubled sleep. Who would he awaken before the end? More monsters like the elephant demon?

Science had little power over the divine, or the occult, and that’s

what worried him. His superiors rarely mentioned what had become known as the “Bull Elephant Attack” or his triumphant fight against the rogue beast, whose dead body was found to be overly large, but possessing the usual number of legs and no human-shaped arms when inspected after the fight. Cameron hated having to show visitors the lone tusk of the behemoth, now displayed on the wall of his front parlor, a surprise trophy from well-meaning General Gough. The old Irishman had visited him, delivering the tusk in person on his way home to Dublin and a well-deserved retirement. After a dinner filled with banal pleasantries, General Gough and Cameron sat alone behind closed doors.

Gough admired the tusk hung on the wall while smoking a cigar with Cameron.

“What news from India, sir?” Cameron asked.

“The Maharaja has honored the terms of the surrender. The Sikhs are now our allies and have broken off all contact with the Kaiser.”

“And the Hindus of the Punjab?”

“They say British rule should remain in place for generations to come. The death of the elephant was a sign from their gods. By divine will, we rule India.”

“Quite right, sir,” Cameron said and took a puff of his aromatic cigar.

“You don’t believe in such poppycock?”

“No, sir. I am a man of science,” Cameron said, though he had no doubt about the existence of forces beyond the realms of men. The smoke of the cigar suddenly afflicted him with an uncontrollable racking cough.

When he finally managed to stop, General Gough said, “You didn’t catch some disease in India did you? The Admiralty offered to send their best physicians with me on this visit to examine you, discreetly of course. I was told of your illness. You’ve lost what, two stone since I last saw you?”

“Not that much, sir. It’s just that I haven’t been sleeping.”

“Or eating, it seems. My good fellow, you are not the first to find that the battle has followed him home. One must take the good sea breeze and allow the calm of home and hearth to settle his nerves.”

“I’ll be all right,” Cameron said, though he barely recognized the gaunt man in the mirror when he looked at himself. His work had suffered as well. He could barely concentrate, and he thought of what happened in India far too often. “I will recover soon enough.”

“Splendid, because the Admiralty has plans for you. I’ve been given my last orders before retirement, and they pertain to you alone, Captain. No one else is to know a word of this.”

“Understood, sir.”

“Large-scale production of the your Lawrence-Cameron Mark IIs will begin under your direct supervision within the next month.”

“Smashing news, sir,” Cameron raised his glass of cognac for a toast. Cameron found that, even in the moment when his dreams were being realized, the joy he’d hoped to feel was beyond his grasp. He was just so damned exhausted.

Gough frowned and sipped his drink while keeping his eyes downcast.

“What’s the matter, sir?” Cameron asked.

“Nine more factories will be built here, and the War Department is sending their best engineers and scientists to Liverpool to help you.”

He was getting all he had asked for and three times as many factories. His home city would become the industrial center of England. His father’s dream, now his, was coming true. He would have to put aside his personal troubles and see that the new production went on with all efficiency. Whatever was required to end his affliction, he would do.

“You know what this means?” General Gough asked.

The realization hit Cameron hard enough he almost lost his

hold on the cigar. There would be war, and soon. “We have time yet. Time to prepare for the Kaiser.”

“Not just him, I’m afraid,” General Gough said. “Tsar Nicholas signed a secret treaty with his cousin, Kaiser Wilhelm, a month ago. They have already begun joint work on a large navy, and the Zeppelin air fleet will grow rapidly, if they meet their schedules. Worse still, I’m afraid they’ve stolen the plans of the Mark I and will soon have their own Juggernauts.”

“They can have them, sir,” Cameron said. “Those were just a beginning. The Kaiser’s engineers are twenty-years behind us. We’ll crush their armies before they can truly challenge us.”

“Crush their armies? Are you so eager to fight the Kaiser and the Tsar?”

Cameron wanted to say, “Yes.” Instead, he shook his head and leaned back into his leather armchair. Fighting in mainland Europe as Wellington had battled Napoleon was a dark dream he would admit to no one. The prospect of it daunted him though, when he allowed his rational mind to consider the true peril. The Kaiser possessed one of the best militaries in the world. Even with help, England would be hard pressed to defeat the combined forces of both empires.

Gough snubbed out his cigar in a brass ashtray. “You know as well as I do they have four times our manpower and resources.”

“Then we will have to acquire more men and *matériel*, sir,” Cameron said. “Africa, the Middle-East, Afghanistan, China, Japan. We must take what is necessary, as I’ve already advocated to the War Department.”

“I told them you would say as much, but what if they not only match our forces, but build twice as many Juggernauts and airships?”

“We will outmatch them in the sky and on the field. The Lord God favors us.”

“So you say.”

"I do, sir. Our machines will win the war for us," Cameron said. "Have no doubt."

"I do not doubt your courage, or your sense of duty, but I think you put too much stock in your creations. How many cannon could we field with the metal from one Juggernaut? How many men could we add to a regiment for cost to produce only one of your giants?"

"We must build them, sir. There is no other choice."

"The Russians and Germans agree, Captain, but they are not a sparse people living on small islands in the North Sea."

"We can defeat them, sir."

"At what cost?" Gough asked.

"Whatever the cost."

General Gough's expression soured. "I pity you, Cameron. Winning India and keeping it was my life's work, but you shall have a much more grand and difficult task. The wars of this time will be far worse than have ever been seen before."

"I will do my duty, sir, as you did yours."

General Gough raised his glass. "For Queen and Country, and the men who are never coming home."

Cameron made certain the old General did not stay at Harborside Manor that night and risk experience the haunting. Suitable lodgings in the city were arranged, closer to the port, so the Irishman would be sure to catch his ship the next morning.

After midnight, Cameron found Rose in his study, sitting in front of the fireplace reading the latest gothic novel by the scandalous author, M.M. Yardley. Their child, Henry, lay curled with his head on her pregnant belly. His wife twirled her chestnut hair in her slender fingers while she kept reading and purposefully ignored him. She was haggard, with dark circles under her eyes. He still found her to be very beautiful with her large brown eyes and full lips. It was his fault she looked much older than a few months ago when he returned from India. He had brought the demon into their house.

He sat down across from her. “Rose, I have news.”

“Are you leaving?” she asked, the bitterness in her voice chilled Cameron. Did she truly hate him and want him gone?

“The War Department agreed to my proposal.”

“You’re not going on another campaign then?”

“Is that what you want?”

“Will *it* follow you if you go and leave us in peace?” She glanced at sleeping Henry, then her eyes darted toward the shadows on the ceiling and in the corners of the room.

“I don’t know,” he said. He had no idea what would happen or how to end the devilish torment of his family.

“I’m going to take Henry to see my mother,” she said.

“When will you depart?”

She shrugged and pretended to read.

“How long will you be away?” he asked.

“Does it matter?”

“I want to take Henry to my father’s grave on Sunday after church. Everything he worked for is coming to pass. I will not forget his legacy, and neither will our son.”

“Legacy?” She slammed her book closed and Henry whimpered. Rose soothed him with her hands and soft voice, then whispered to Cameron, “You *want* the legacy of your father? You want your wife to leave you? Unlike your mother, I believe I could tolerate your work, but this is not living.”

“I’m trying to find a resolution,” he glanced at the pile of occult and rare books he had acquired on his desk, “and I spoke to a priest in London a fortnight ago.”

“A fortnight ago?”

“I will find another, a man more qualified to help us.”

“There’s no time,” she said. “I’ll not bring up another child in this evil house.” Her hand rested on her swollen belly. “I’m leaving with Henry, and I don’t expect to come back. You are not welcome to visit.”

She scooped their four year-old son and left without another word.

Cameron felt numb as he moved to the couch where she had been sitting. He felt the warmth of her and little Henry's bodies on the leather. How could she take away his son? He wanted to teach the boy, as his father had taught him, about engineering and design. The boy would grow up in his workshop and at the factory, as he had. Henry would carry on the family tradition.

Two nights later, Cameron had barely seen his wife or Henry. He could not face trying to sleep in his room and, instead, sat alone reading in his study. He hoped Rose would join him and tell him she changed her mind about leaving him.

An hour passed, and Cameron put down his Bible, unable to tolerate the preposterous Book of Jonah any longer. His tastes had gone in a more blasphemous direction as he tried to understand what had happened in the Punjab. Rare book collectors in his employ had searched for everything they could find that might explain the ghostly demon.

Cameron brushed aside a stack of dispatches from the Admiralty and instead picked up a rare translation of the *Bhagvat Geeta*, the Hindu 'Song of God.' He had already read the 1785 Wilkins translation, *Bhagvat Geeta or the Dialogues of Kreesbna and Arjoon*, but this was from an infamous occultist named Crowley, who had translated an older Sanskrit manuscript stolen from the Govinda Dev temple in 1757. Cameron had just begun reading it the day before, and found the large tome contained many new passages about an age of awakening, echoing the cryptic words of Ganesh. He found a parallel in what multi-armed Vishnu said to Prince Arjoon, "Now I am become death, destroyer of worlds."

Cameron needed something beyond prayers to permanently rid himself of the elephant god, and he hoped he would find answers in the old book. Crowley's translation was intriguing and, as he turned a page, he found a single sheet of folded paper tucked into the spine.

He opened it and was surprised to find a note written in old-fashioned letters that made it difficult to read at first. He was shocked to find it addressed to him.

*To Captain Robert Cameron of Harborside Manor,*

*I know what you saw in the East. In my possession is the book you seek. Only to you will I sell this tome, as your agents are not to be trusted with something of this value. On the night of Samhain, come to the village of Cúig Maen in Breconshire. At the crossroads, we will meet at sunset. Bring no payment. Once you have seen the book, a fair price and delivery will be discussed.*

He read the letter several times and kept searching for a signature or date, but found none. The book had been delivered by his agent, Mr. Alfred Deeks, the day before. Was this some clever ploy by Deeks to sell an overpriced book using an intermediary? Meet on Samhain? The old Gaelic festival was October 31, two days hence, the final day of the harvest before the beginning of winter as the Welsh used to reckon.

Cameron had been through Breconshire on his way to Swansea several times when he negotiated with the copper smelters there, but God only knew where to find the village of Cúig Maen. He checked his maps and could not find it anywhere. He was needed at the factory in the morning, and all week for that matter. He could not avoid his duties and go off on some fool's errand.

On the way to the door the next morning, he decided to find Rose. He wanted to see Henry and kiss his wife goodbye, but she looked angry he had come into her bedroom. Instead, Cameron mussed the little boy's hair, making him smile.

"We have things to discuss," Rose said. "Will you be home for supper tonight?"

He stood with his mouth agape. Would he?

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“I’ve got business in Breconshire this week.”

“What ever for?” she asked, straightening the collar of his sharply pressed uniform.

“I may have found something to help with the dreadful nights.”

Desperate hope colored her expression. “Another priest?”

“No, there’s a book.”

She sighed and shook her head. “We’ll be gone when you return.”

Cameron had to restrain himself from shouting at her. “No. You’re going to wait for me.”

“We’re not staying one more night.”

“Stay in the guest cottage, but you’re not taking my son from me.”

Rose met his eyes and stared hard into them, finally nodding.

Henry started to cry. Cameron picked the boy up and held him to his chest, but he would not quiet. After a long moment, he put the boy down. Henry hugged himself against Rose’s hip, looking away. It took all of Cameron’s will to remain impassive.

“I expect I won’t be home until after the first of November,” he said.

“What’s really in Breconshire?”

“An end to our nightmares,” he said and touched Rose’s beautiful round belly.

Her eyes misted over. It was unclear whether it was a thin thread of hope or the final abandonment of it that they held.

Cameron hugged and kissed her, then Henry. “Wait for me.”

She nodded, holding in her tears.

Cameron left the Juggernaut factory in the afternoon, wearing the brown suit and coat Rose had sent him, as he had not even packed a bag. He caught the train to Birmingham, went on to Gloucester in the morning, and found himself in Breconshire, in the sleepy old

village of Brecon by the early afternoon of October 31.

He had learned from a surveyor map that the village was several miles outside Brecon, near the ruins of an old Roman fort up in the hills. “Which way to Cúig Maen?” Cameron asked the station agent.

“Excuse me, sir, but there’s nothing up that way worth seeing on a cold day. You’ll freeze your arse off, if you don’t mind me saying.”

“Thank you very much, my fine fellow, but I came here to take a ride. Please direct me to a man with a good horse.”

Three hours before sunset, Cameron found himself mounted on a strong mare, looking at a sheep track that climbed into the green hills beyond Brecon.

“Please, m’Lord, wait until morning.” The kindly old Welsh farmer, Mr. Peddowe urged.

Cameron handed him two extra coins.

“Start home long before sunset,” Peddowe said. “It won’t do for my best horse and a gentleman like yourself to be out in these hills after dark.”

“I’ve been out after dark in far worse places than the English countryside,” Cameron said. It was more than he’d intended to say, his tone too harsh.

Peddowe tried to meet his eyes but flinched and looked away. “I expect you know best, M’lord.”

The trail passed through scattered woods and over a hill into a small valley with a collection of abandoned sod-roofed houses no one had lived in for decades. The whole place had a forlorn sense of decay about it. The only crossroads was two sheep tracks in the center of the old village. Cameron rode slowly into the valley and noticed the hilltop on the far side had five short standing stones in a circular pattern at the summit.

In the middle of the crossroads, Cameron stopped the horse and dismounted. Only the wind and the mare’s hooves on the wet dirt road disturbed the quiet. A faint light appeared inside a house

with a partially intact roof, a stout door, and an unbroken glass window. A wisp of smoke drifted up from the gray stone chimney.

Whoever waited for him knew he had arrived. If they proved to be staging a game at his expense, they'd have a taste of the back of his hand for it.

Cameron tied the horse to a post and stood before the weathered and ancient door wondering if he would need the pistol in his breast pocket. It was madness to be here. Then again, it had been so long since he had an undisturbed night's sleep that madness was as close as a long blink of the eyes.

His horse whinnied and pulled at its tether. "Easy, girl, I won't be long." Cameron knocked and respectfully stepped away from the door and stroked the horse's neck.

"Come in then, if you will," an old woman said.

He opened the door and the smell of wood smoke and damp earth wafted out. A crone in a plain peasant's dress with a woolen shawl over her shoulders sat at a narrow rustic table in front of a soot-stained fireplace. A copper teakettle from the last century hung over the fire on a black iron hook.

An old book with a faded leather cover sat on the table.

"Sit down if you please, Captain Cameron," she said, gesturing with her age-spotted hand to the wooden bench opposite her. The woman lit a slim candle to illuminate the book and stared at him with a mischievous smile. Her body was bent and her skin wrinkled, but her eyes, the color of spring green hills mixed with gold, were bright and full of guile.

"Who are you?" he asked.

She turned to the fire. "I am a woman of Clan Meadors, and a cup of tea will be offered, but open the book if you will while we wait."

"Madam, did Mr. Deeks put you up to this?" Cameron asked. "This whole thing is highly irregular."

“He put me up to nothing,” she said and began to hum while tending the fire under the kettle. “I slipped in the note without him catching on.”

Cameron moved the candle closer and opened the book. The pages were old and fragile, from the early 1700s he guessed. The text was Gaelic, written with Old English letters. He skipped the words and studied the horrifying illustrations of one-eyed demons and fiery goblin creatures eating newborn babies. This was no fairy tale. He stopped at an illustration of a nude woman with wide hips and full breasts. She stood in the center of a circle of stones under a moonlit sky. This was the sort of book that could ruin a man’s reputation were anyone to know he possessed it. There had been a time when books like this would have gotten someone excommunicated, even burned as a witch.

Cameron glanced up at the old woman. “What is this?”

“It’s a book of old secrets,” Madam Meadors said.

“What kind?”

“Would you like me to translate it for you?” she asked.

“Madam, I’ll find my own translator, thank you very much.” Even as he said it, Cameron knew that having a text like this translated would involve risks he didn’t care to take.

“Pity, for I’ve already done so.” She lifted a similarly sized book from the bench beside her and pushed it toward Cameron. It appeared very new and he could smell the ink and fresh glue when he opened the rigid cover. Inside, he found the same distinct lettering as the old book, as if it had been rewritten by the same hand, but now in English.

He turned the thick pages carefully and was stunned to find the exact same illustrations. He compared them side by side and found only the tiniest differences. “Uncanny,” he whispered. “The artist who copied this is quite brilliant.”

The old woman grinned, showing him her yellow teeth.

Cameron had read about the time before the Romans came to Britain. Priestesses wielded Celtic magic, performing rituals to summon powerful spirits of the land who demanded sacrifices of blood. It was witchcraft. The fact that he did not recoil revealed his desperation.

He found the identical image of the nude woman and read beneath it, *The Queen of the Britons and the Low Landers will be a matriarch of the Meadors Clan until the gods return to claim their lands.*

Cameron glanced up at the crone. Her smile was gone.

“They are coming back now,” the Meadors woman said, “because of the machines men like you are building.”

“What?” he asked. “Who?”

“The gods and spirits of the elder days,” she said. “You saw one of them in India. Your machines summoned him, a messenger of the elephant deity himself.”

“How did you know that?” Cameron asked. Had she found out what was in his journals? Or spoken to servants who had fled his service after witnessing the haunting?

“What happened in India was quite unexpected. The elder spirits have taken notice of you, Robert Cameron, and so have I. There is great power to be gained if the ancient gods return.”

The memory of the smell of burning elephant flesh made him cringe.

“I will stop the nightmares, and much more,” she said. “I can make you into the man you’ve imagined. A conqueror. A legend. The man who saved England. I can give you victory in every battle to come. You know what we face, and without my help, Britain will fall to the Kaiser and his allies. Your deadly machines will not be enough, and you know it.”

“Who are you to promise me these things?” Cameron asked, wondering how she could know the truth about such delicate military matters.

Her eyes focused on the page in the book, and the illustration of the unclothed woman. “The first name given to me was Melanie of Clan Meadors. Now I am known as the Queen of the Britons and the Low Landers.”

“There is only one Queen of England,” Cameron snapped, irritated at the barmy and deluded woman.

The crone grinned. “The Queen is nothing. It will be you who determines the future of the Britons. If that witless girl Victoria keeps her throne, it will be because of us.”

Cameron seethed at the insult to the crown, not Queen Victoria herself, but what the monarchy represented. However, he did like the thought of being the man to save his people.

“The fate of the Low Landers is also in your hands.”

“Low Landers?”

“The Dutch. I rule over them.”

“Are you mad?” he asked and thought about absconding with both books and riding away. He thought about putting a bullet in her head to prevent some sort of blackmail. The wicked thoughts of his basest self were so much closer to hand of late.

“Robert Cameron, you will bring the doom of both our lines if something is not done. You will not leave me now.” She looked him in the eyes. “Not yet.”

“I will not abide this,” he said. He rose from the chair, towering over her.

The old crone turned her eyes upward and met his angry gaze. “I dare that and much more. With the weakness that is in you, what harm could you do me?” she asked.

Her eyes were all he could see. Exhaustion suffused him, his legs shivering with it, his very deepest fiber enervated. He sagged back into the chair, clammy sweat upon his brow, his head reeling.

She hummed the same odd tune and turned toward the fire. Cameron slumped in the chair, dazed and slack-jawed. She waited

only a breath or two before the teakettle's shrill whistle surprised Cameron.

The crone reached for the burning hot kettle and lifted it off the iron ring above the fire with her bare hands.

Cameron gasped, expecting her flesh to burn.

She poured the steaming liquid into two chipped cups and set the kettle on the table. He could feel the heat coming from the copper vessel. "What do you want from me?"

"You will have victory in every battle," she said. "It will not matter if you face the gods of the old world or machines from this one."

"What do you want in return?" he asked.

"You will come and see me in this village every year on Samhain until the end of your days. If you are on campaign, you must return."

"Every year on the same day?"

"The same night. If you want what I have offered, meet me at the top of the hill in the circle of stones." She stood in front of the fireplace. "If you would rather see everything you care about destroyed and England fall to the Kaiser's army, mount your horse and ride away."

She shuffled out the front door without another glance at him. The room instantly became colder, though she had shut the door. The sudden lassitude he'd been stricken with began to pass, his head clearing. He wondered if the lack of sleep had finally weakened him to the point where he'd fallen ill. The entire scene had seemed illusory, the product of a brain fever.

Cameron touched the scalding tea inside the cup and withdrew his finger in pain. This was witchcraft, and he was being offered a deal from a pawn of Satan. Either that or some form of mesmerist's trick.

"Bugger this." He took both books and left the house. He did not see the old woman on the winding path leading to the summit behind Cúig Maen. Cameron stowed the books and rode away toward Brecon.

A dark impulse that kept him company on foreign battlefields... his shadow self who relished in the killing and destruction whispered in his ear. Why should he not chase the tail of mysticism and give in to superstition? Claim all powers offered, regardless of the taint they might carry?

He made it halfway to Brecon before reining his horse and coming to a halt. The witch was right. Even with his glorious machines, the enemy outmatched them. Any advantage must be explored.

“Curse it all.” He turned around. He would go to the hill and speak to the barmy old woman once more. He would find out what game she was playing, arrange for payment for the books, then he would ride away. If she spoke to him, he would listen, that was all. He had promised Rose, and he would not reject any slight chance of remedy for his curse.

Cameron reached the summit as rain clouds on the horizon swallowed the sun. Five short gray stones with rounded tops in a circle poked out of the grass. The stones were barely taller than his waist and were partially covered in moss. Of all the stone circles in Britain, this one would be considered insignificant.

He tied the horse to a bush and entered the ring. He saw no sign of the Meadors woman as he stood on a flat stone in the center of the ring. For a moment he thought he smelled lamp oil, but a sudden chill wind made him shiver and erased the scent.

The crone stood with a satisfied smile on her face. She sat behind one of the stones and now faced him.

“Tell me how you knew about India.”

She walked toward him, her back straighter, her steps stronger than before. “I have known men like you since I was a young woman. I watched them lead armies or navies while pressing the interests of the Britons or the Low Landers. Many men have sought me out and asked for my help over the years. A man named Wallace was the first, and Admiral Nelson was the last.”

“Admiral Horatio Nelson?” Cameron felt the blood rush from his face.

“None other.”

Nelson was the hero of Trafalgar, the greatest ironclad battle in the history of the world. This woman had helped him?

“If others hadn’t meddled, and he had kept his word,” she said, “Nelson would have lived to be an old man and one of your teachers.”

“His word?”

“He did not meet with me as we agreed.”

“Here?” Cameron asked incredulously.

“No, I choose a different place for each man.”

“You want me to return next year on this day?”

“Yes, and every year hence, always on Samhain.” She walked toward him and stood an arm’s length away on the flat stone in the center of the ring. “If you keep your word, you will become the greatest leader the Britons have ever known. Our line will become the rulers of England and far beyond.”

“Our line?”

“You must give me a child.”

He thought of Henry and his unborn baby. The illustrations in the book of infants being eaten by demons made him seethe with anger. “No, you will not have my children.”

“Those you can keep. I wish for a girl child between you and I. She will become our heir.”

He was a fool for speaking to this crone. She was insane. “I will send my man Deeks with a fair payment.” He stormed away, angry at himself for believing in her delusions and becoming caught up in them.

“If you wish to be known as Cameron the Great, the Alexander of Britain, you must stay with me.”

How could she have known his most private thoughts? Outraged, he turned to demand an explanation.

Moonlight shone on the old woman's face revealing a sly smile and a devious expression. Her long hair blew in the wind as she cast away her shawl and scarf. "I wear this form to take the true measure of the men I approach. I am no hag at the end of my life." As if he were dreaming, Melanie's hair turned the color of bright straw. Weathered skin became pale like cream. Her face and her body changed. A curvaceous young woman at the peak of her beauty stood before him.

Stunned, Cameron gasped. His mouth hung open as he realized she perfectly resembled the drawing in the old book.

"I was once like you, but I have taken the power of elder beasts and gods. I have lived for many centuries and will never die. I have chosen you as my champion for this age. The messenger of the elephant god will have no hold over you or your family once this rite is over. You and I shall prosper, and our people will grow stronger under your leadership. Come to me." She stripped off her dress revealing her enthralling naked body.

Cameron thought of Rose and the hope in his wife's eyes when they last parted. He must do whatever he must to drive the evil spirit from his house and away from his family. The whispers of his shadow self grew thunderous in his ears. *Take her now.* The savage within only knew desire. It didn't count costs.

Cameron stepped into the circle as the wind died, and the darkness blocked out the world beyond. Melanie reached and grasped the back of Cameron's head. She ran her fingers through his red hair and pulled his face toward hers. She kissed him, and tugged off his clothes. They lay in the center of the ring on her discarded dress and shawl. She put his hands on her body. The heat of her skin shocked Cameron.

She hummed the same odd tune and yellow flames erupted from the ground at the base of each of the five stones. The odor of burning lamp oil filled the air as the fire followed straight lines and

connected the five standing stones, surrounding them in the center of the star shape, a pentagram.

“You are under my protection now,” she whispered in his ear as she straddled him, pressing her hips against his. “I will grant you victory in every battle, but our family will be cursed to love war and never know peace.”

There was nothing of tenderness in their coupling. Melanie was strong and hungry. As her green eyes locked with his, everything within him that held back his darker nature seemed to evaporate. He was not himself. He was an animal. A wolf-hearted monster. Cameron lowered his face to her shoulder and dug his teeth into Melanie’s supple flesh until he tasted blood in his mouth. She cried out and clasped him against her with manic vigor.

The pentagram burned out after he spent his seed inside her. Black lines remained on the ground as Cameron left the circle. In Melanie’s embrace, he had not felt the cold, but now he was chilled to the bone and sick with the sin he had committed. No amount of prayer could wash this away.

“I shall send one of my servants,” the witch said. “Be generous to him, and he will serve you well for the rest of your life.”

Cameron could not get away fast enough. The horse carried him to the village of Brecon in the dark, and Cameron paid the farmer extra for a bed and some stew. He dreamed of Melanie all night, her body against his as they coupled in the fiery circle atop the hill. He had sinned and risked his immortal soul but, for the first time in eight months, he did not dream of the burned elephant skull.

He woke before dawn to the smell of cooking bacon. The farmer’s wife offered him breakfast, and he sat in her kitchen bleary eyed. She put a lamp on the table and, when he saw her face in the light, he nearly flew from the house. Mrs. Peddowe had the same weathered visage as the old crone Melanie had first shown him in Cúig Maen, though the farmer’s wife’s eyes were brown and simple.

He left Brecon on the first train and thought about never coming back. When he reached Liverpool the next day, he went straight home. Guilt and consternation weighed heavily upon him, and he could not hide his shame.

“What happened?” Rose asked.

He blinked as he took her by the shoulders. “I cannot speak of it, but I believe we will never have those troubles again.”

“The last two nights...” she said. “Nothing has happened. Henry slept straight through.”

He hugged Rose and Henry as fiercely as he had when he first returned from war.

Over the next days, Cameron and Rose slept in the same bed, blissfully enjoying being husband and wife. Peaceful sleep rejuvenated them, and the trials of the past months began to dim.

“Forgive me, sir,” Reginald, Harborside Manor’s senior butler appeared during lunch one Sunday afternoon. “A man who claims to be your new steelmaker is waiting for you.”

Cameron tried not to appear worried. “Did he give his name?”

“Forgive me, sir, but I cannot remember it. I believe he is an Arab.”

“Daddy, can I see the man?” Henry asked.

“No,” Cameron said. “I’m afraid not. Stay with your mother.”

Cameron put a Webley pistol in his coat before going to meet the stranger, who had somehow gained entry into the locked workshop. He found a tall, dark-skinned man inspecting the new engine for the Mark II Juggernaut.

“Sir, I must ask who you are?” Cameron asked.

The man turned and bowed elegantly with a flourish. He wore an expensive French suit with a white sash and a red Arab style head cloth. His dark beard and mustache were neatly groomed and his eyes shone like black onyx gems.

“Many call me the Moor,” the Arab said, “but I am Hisham al Nuri, recently of the foundries of Damascus.”

“What are you doing here?”

“She sent me to serve you, and so I shall.” The Moor touched his hand to his heart in the Muslim custom and formally extended it, offering to shake Cameron’s hand. Hisham al Nuri’s grip was strong and his skin was warm, like the handle of a cast iron stove.

Cameron tried to pull away. He could not reach his gun with his left hand.

The Moor’s grip tightened. He laughed, showing his white teeth, and a wider grin. He leaned toward Cameron. “There is no man who can make better steel than I.”

The Moor released his grip.

Cameron slowly backed away. He withdrew the Webley pistol from his left inside pocket and placed it on a table between them. The barrel pointed at Hisham. “Has she sent a demon to watch over me?”

“You are a bold man, and I shall forget this insult if you prepare a room where I may live inside your warmachine factory. Do not fear. I am no demon, and I will not harm you or your family.”

“You want to live in the factory?”

“I will live where I can smell the steel being made. She said you would do this for me.”

“I do not take orders from her, but I will allow you to live there.” Cameron wanted the Moor far away from Rose and Henry. If he wanted to reside inside the hellish foundry, so be it. He would have his men watch this foreigner very carefully, but he had to know more. “Sir, what is the reason you do her bidding?”

“Perhaps we shall take each other into confidence, but not this day when a gun stands between us.”

Cameron returned the revolver to his coat, all the while keeping a hard stare on Hisham.

“I believe she was right about you,” the Moor said, matching Cameron’s stare.

“About what?”

“She said you were a man I would go to many wars with in distant lands,” Hisham glanced at the Juggernaut, “and that I would enjoy myself immensely.”

“You enjoy war?” Cameron asked.

“Not as much as you.”

Cameron averted his gaze. “I will have one of my servants escort you to the factory.”

“Do not think of me as one of them.”

“As a servant? We are certainly not partners,” Cameron scoffed. “I shall pay you a fair wage for whatever service you provide.”

“I shall provide service, but never forget, I am *her* servant. She will not let me, or you, forget as much.”

Hisham al Nuri worked every day and many nights. His skill at metallurgy, casting, and alloy making were beyond compare. The men were frightened, but accepted him when he saved the lives of two foundrymen by dragging them to safety after they had been overcome by fumes.

Boilers and engines always performed better if the Moor was close at hand. When Cameron stood in the crucible during Juggernaut testing, the heat did not affect him nearly as much as all the other drivers. His fuel lasted longer too, and he never succumbed to the extreme temperatures and fainted. The Moor became indispensable. Incredible progress was made as the year passed.

“Cracking good show today,” Cameron told Hisham as they enjoyed tea together after another successful test of the new Mark II armor.

The Moor grinned and gulped down the steaming liquid as he always did. “I will see to the casting of the new arm mold while you are away.”

Cameron had been trying not to think about the rapidly approaching end of the month and let out a sigh.

“My friend,” the Moor said, refilling his own empty cup, “we

shall go to war together many times if you keep your bargain with her.”

“If I do not, you will leave?”

“She will not allow me to stay, and I will not cross her. Neither should you. Keep the bargain.”

“We have come a long way,” Cameron said, “but I am not ready to see you depart. We have many more years of work ahead of us.”

“Decades before the Juggernauts reach their potential,” Hisham said.

Cameron nodded and raised his cup to the Moor. “You will be staying, for I am a man of my word.”

*October 31, 1849*

*Breconsbire, Wales*

*Village of Cúig Maen*

**A**dmiral Cameron waited for the witch, Melanie of Clan Meadors, in the fierce wind on the hillside behind one of the standing stones. As the darkness deepened, he wondered if she would appear. He thought about searching for her again in the village or further up on the hillside. Over the past eleven years, she he had never kept him waiting this long.

Would he wait until midnight, or dawn? Was this one of her blasted tests? He shivered and pulled his coat tighter about his neck and settled into the cold ground.

She arrived two hours after sunset, a wraith in the darkness except for the crunch of her feet on the dry grass. Her green eyes reflected the moonlight and a smile creased her beautiful face. “You thought I would not come.”

“I hoped,” he said, no longer caring if she knew how much he

despised her. He could not stand how she made him perform for her like a slave. Laying with her, God help him, felt like a violation of his soul. The violation was all the worse by the fact that the savage half of him ached for it. Here, with Melanie, the ravening wolf ate its fill. Here, where there was naught but lust and unchecked hunger.

One night every year he betrayed Rose, and it was becoming more and more difficult. What would be the cost in the end? Rose's love? His own salvation? He hated it that, just sometimes, he would look down at Rose as they embraced, and he would see the witch's face. Her influence reached to the deepest tissues of him, invading all those things he hoped to hold sacred.

Melanie grinned and reached for his belt.

"What of the last time?" he asked, brushing away her hands. "Was there a child?"

She ran her fingernails playfully down his chest. "Makes no difference."

He expected her to say what she had said every other time, *The child who will succeed us has not been born.*

Cameron grabbed her arms. "Is there a child?"

"Are you still worrying I'll take one of your brood if your seed does not take in me?"

He glowered at her. He was still worried, but Cameron would kill the witch before he let her have Henry, Clive, or tiny Edward.

She stepped away. "Take off your clothes. It's too late to grow a conscience now."

"No."

She ignored him and made a pentagram inside the stone ring by squeezing lamp oil from a goatskin. When she was finished, she took his hand. He resisted at first, then walked to the center on his own.

"There is another war to be won," she said. "The Kaiser will attack soon. His navy will steam out of the Baltic with hundreds of

airships protecting them. You are not ready, and if the Moor leaves your service...you will fall...as will England.”

“England will carry on without him *and* you. No matter what.”

“You’ve become so arrogant after your second triumph in China, but did you forget what I did for you?” She stepped closer. She gestured with her hand, producing a red poppy flower that could never survive the cold chill of the English climate, waving it beneath his nose. In an instant, he was back there again, at the sundered Chinese village.

He could never forget. Like she had in all of the other campaigns since India, he had heard Melanie’s voice in his mind, whispering warnings as he guided the army to victory after victory. She also saved him from a demon during the first Opium War.

“It will come tonight,” she had told him three years before, in 1846, as he sat in his tent upriver from Shanghai. “You must prepare yourself.”

Hisham al Nuri waited for him beside the Juggernaut. “The boiler is as burning hot. The engines are ready for battle.”

“What is coming?” Cameron asked.

“She has challenged the mystics of this land. They will send their champion. If you defeat it, the Chinese warlocks will die or become her slaves.”

“She makes slaves of the warlocks she defeats?” Cameron asked his friend.

“Those who she thinks will be useful are allowed to live so they may serve her,” Hisham said.

“She found you useful, did she not?”

“She bound a part of the fire spirit, the *Ifrit*, I foolishly sent against her long ago to my own body. I have served her ever since. If she releases the spirit from me now, I would perish, and there are many more places I wish to visit in this world. Many more things I wish to see.”

“Then let us survive this night, Hisham. I will need all the help you can give me.”

The giant ox-headed demon walked out of the Yangtze River on two massive legs. It bellowed and attacked with a long-handled hammer-staff, battering Cameron’s Juggernaut and nearly knocking him unconscious as the inside of the machine rang like a bell.

Many British soldiers saw the monster and went mad. Cameron arranged for a few of them to live in a sanitarium outside Liverpool. The world was not what Cameron or his countrymen thought. The ancient gods and monsters slouched in the shadows at the edge of society, mocking the reason of man. Only a precious few could behold them and remain whole.

“Fight him!” Melanie shouted inside Cameron’s mind from halfway across the world, rousing him from his stupor.

The beast hit him again, but Cameron blocked the strike with his steel arms crafted by Hisham al Nuri and strengthened by the Moor’s presence. Cameron grappled the ox-headed monster, locking his Juggernaut’s metal hands on the beast’s horns. He twisted violently. The thick muscles in the demon’s neck tensed like iron, but Cameron’s machine was powered by two Huxley steam turbine engines.

The ox demon tried to break the Juggernaut’s grip. Its mouth and eyes glowed with green lightning.

“Now!” Melanie shouted. “Do it now!”

The witch’s magic coursed through him. He knew how to kill the monster. He reversed the force of his attack and twisted the ox demon’s head around backward. He twisted until the bones snapped. Cameron severed the head with the thick bladed sword he extended from his warmachine’s right arm.

The cabal of Manchurian warlocks who summoned the ox demon died that night along with their champion. Cameron could hear their screams in his mind. The witch Queen of Clan Meadors shouted in victory, and Cameron understood she claimed the power

of the ox demon for herself, extending her already impossibly long life. She wanted him to awaken these beasts and many others.

The wind on the hillside above Cúig Maen stung Cameron's face. The poppy flower scent was gone, but the memory remained, playing behind his eyes with so many other nightmares. When had his victories become so bitter? It had been so long.

"Your new rank will not save you if you turn away from me. You will die as any other soldier in war without my protection, and I cannot allow that to happen. There is much more to do. I know you see it."

War with the German Empire was coming. Everyone knew it. England and France did not have enough strength to win decisively, and the Papal States of Spain and Italy could not be trusted. Cameron still needed Melanie and any edge he could get. That did not prevent him from aching whenever he was forced to act as her pawn again.

The witch stripped off her dress and pulled him down on top of her. They wrestled on the stone and the pentagram flared to life. The bright fire, heat, and smoke overwhelmed him.

Melanie scratched his shoulders, drawing blood, and making him focus only on her. Cameron slapped her across the face as they fought. He turned her over and pushed her into the ground as he thrust like a beast, trying to injure her. He wanted to kill Melanie, smash her head against a rock.

She goaded him with lascivious words, knowing how to call to his secret, savage self. That part of him would always be complicit with the witch.

He sat sulking and seething with anger when they finished. Having relations with her always left him furious and disgusted at what he had lost. Every time, upon returning home, he felt like all the warm feelings he ever had were gone. He stayed away from Rose and the boys, a distant father with a cold countenance. When he was on campaign or at the factory, he cared little for the men under

his command. For so long, he had striven his hardest to save lives in war, but now he accepted their deaths in production or battle as necessary and inconsequential.

What was she doing to him? He glanced at Melanie and thought about the small folding knife in his trouser's pocket.

"Would you rather cut my throat or thrust the blade in deep?" she asked as if she were pleased.

"Do you always know my thoughts?" he asked, furious at her constant invasion of his mind. "I would look you in the face and push the knife in slow." He turned away after a hateful look and pulled on his clothes.

"I understand you more than anyone else. I know what you want and who you are. That's why you hate me. I have seen below your façade and into the stinking viscera."

He glowered at her, fingers flexing, nostrils flaring. He would bury her body on the hill. He gave in to his shadow self, and reached for her. Strangely, Melanie let him wrap his hands around her pale throat, a thing that felt so very good that he squeezed with a delight, a sheer, unbound glory he hadn't felt in years, not since meeting this foul, controlling woman. Her eyes filled with madness as he squeezed harder, the two of them feeding off one another as she neared death, and he came ever closer to committing this unforgivable crime. He'd never killed in cold blood before, but this would feel so very, very good.

A baby's cry cut through the night.

"Witchcraft," he said as he choked her harder, but he knew it was a real child, their child.

"Our daughter," she rasped.

Cameron let go of Melanie. He stood, shivering with rage, his hands hooked and claw-like before him, his shadow in the firelight monstrous. The cries continued. He ran into the darkness on the ridge from whence she had come. He found a baby girl, perhaps

three months old, wrapped in blankets on the cold ground. Wisps of red hair, the same shade as his own, blew in the wind. The beautiful baby stopped crying when he picked her up.

“Her name is Vivian,” Melanie said, as she put on her dress. “She is our heir.”

He stood dumbfounded. He hated that look on Melanie’s face. Then again, the innocence of the babe in his arm called to the tatters of man he had once been.

“You will bring her up in your home. She must be with her father and learn from you. It must be so.”

He looked at the beautiful baby girl and did not want to think of her as a bastard. “Henry is my heir.”

“She is the one with your true birthright. All the others are of no consequence, mere distractions. Look into her eyes and tell me you don’t see it.”

Cameron looked down. The baby’s gaze was not filled with the placid wonder one would expect. No, Vivian’s eyes studied him, eerily cognizant. “My God,” he whispered.

“You will take her, but what will your dear wife think?”

He clenched his teeth. Rose would never forgive him, but he could not leave the child with Melanie to be corrupted and turned into some sort of pawn of the witch. She would be his daughter, and he would protect her.

“You should be afraid of what she will become. Vivian will be stronger than you. She will be more a part of the machines you love than a child of flesh. War will be inside her. The most basic element of her nature.”

Melanie smiled and walked down the hillside into a ravine that ended at a sheer cliff. Something gigantic shifted on the ground at the base of the drop-off, as if two boulders scraped against the stone. Cameron knew something from the other world was there, no doubt summoned by Melanie.

The witch Queen said three or four words in Dutch, but the only word Cameron heard clearly was a strange name, Arveldegond.

A towering giant, a hideous troll from the legends, with black eyes, a bulbous nose, and jagged teeth stood from the shadows. Its head and shoulders crested the hill like a mountain emerging from the fog.

Cameron's heart hammered inside his chest. He wished this was a nightmare but, as he cradled baby Vivian, he knew what he saw was real.

The troll's enormous lungs created clouds of white mist that surrounded Melanie. She walked confidently through the vapor and stepped into the giant's outstretched greenish gray hand. He turned and carried her deeper into the hills, his footfalls shaking the ground.

Cameron stood on the hill with his daughter cradled in his arms. He had to get Vivian away and never let Melanie get her hands on her again. He would guard the baby girl from the monstrous world of the witch and the black arts Melanie would undoubtedly try to teach her.

Vivian smiled at him and the ice around his heart thawed. His ability to express warmth and feel love had been leeches away by the witch over the years, but he experienced the same intense feelings of hope and responsibility felt at the births of his sons. Vivian would be the only good that came from his time with the witch. As he caressed the soft skin on the baby's cheek, she giggled, and Cameron smiled at her. The babe grasped his index finger in two chubby hands, fascinated. She worked the joint through its movement, as if trying to figure out the underlying mechanism. "You are your father's daughter, then," he whispered, wrapping her tighter against the chill air.

Three days later, Cameron entered Harborside manor with the farmer's elderly wife, Mrs. Peddowe carrying baby Vivian. The

widowed woman had agreed to accompany him as her husband had died two years before. She was quite lonely in Brecon, with her family departed to Birmingham to find work, and too poor to ever return home.

Rose met them in the hallway. She put her hand to her mouth when she saw the sleeping baby and Cameron's remorseful look.

He introduced Mrs. Peddowe, then sent her to the kitchen to find milk as he held the child.

"Who is this child?" Rose asked, though her shrewd expression told him she knew already. Rose had suspected for years his trips to Brecon were of an unwholesome nature, and never believed Cameron's denials.

"This is my daughter. Her name is Vivian."

The hurt and betrayal on Rose's face was a white-hot nail pounded with a hundred small taps through Cameron's chest. He thought about explaining, but it was better if his wife never knew the details of his bargain with the witch.

Rose gathered her composure after a moment, smoothed her dress, and summoned the servants as if nothing had happened.

"This child is the daughter of one of my husband's close friends from the Admiralty. She will be staying with us for some time. Please make the necessary arrangements and see to the needs of her nurse, Mrs. Peddowe."

A maid took the baby from Cameron's arms and disappeared. When they were alone again, Rose said, "Welcome home, dear Robert." The pained smile affecting her mouth did not reach her eyes. "Supper will be at six. In the meantime, find a comfortable room in the south wing for you will never again share my bed. Perhaps it would be best if you didn't come home after your next campaign."

"What would you do to Vivian if I didn't come home?"

"Bastards of all kinds have no place in this house."

*September 7, 1852*  
*Liverpool, west coast of England*  
*Harborside Manor*

**C**ameron and four year-old Vivian stood on a scaffold underneath a large Juggernaut engine dangling on heavy chains. The smell of grease filled the workshop. The Welsh Gryffud warmachine stood in the center of the garage as they worked on its gigantic engine.

“Hand me the ten and half inch spanner, Viv,” Cameron said.

The girl held a wrench like other girls held dolls. She already had it in her hand and placed it in his. “Here, Daddy.”

He removed the bolt and Vivian examined it carefully as he worked on the next one. A grease smear marred her freckled face, and her hands were as black as his own.

“Daddy, this one is no good.” Vivian showed him the bolt. “Don’t put it back.”

She handed it to him, and Cameron inspected it carefully. Under the head, he found small cracks in the steel. He pitched it into the refuse bin where it clanged loudly, then sent her for a replacement. “Good girl, Viv.”

It was not the first time she noticed such defects. The little girl had a knack for such things.

Cameron’s two teenage sons galloped on their horses across the field outside, shouting at each other as they raced to the edge of the property. Vivian glanced at them through the giant doorway as she returned with the new bolt.

“Do you want to go out and watch them?” he asked.

“No, Daddy. I’ll visit the horses when we’re done,” she said.

She loved horses, but the outcast red-haired girl had no interest in playing with her half-brothers or the servant children. She wanted to climb into the Juggernauts and play with the machines so unlike

his sons. They had taken on his wife's opinion that the physical work Cameron did was beneath their status, and any time spent in the workshop beside their father or at the factory was punishment.

Mrs. Peddowe entered the workshop at the height of the muggy afternoon with tea and biscuits on a worn platter suited to the dusty garage. The old woman set them down and Cameron looked at her out of the corner of his eye. Was it Melanie masquerading again with the farmer's wife's face? Sometimes her eyes were full of guile, and other times they were dull brown. Regardless, Cameron had realized Mrs. Peddowe was Melanie's servant, a spy in his house.

Vivian and Mrs. Peddowe exchanged a look before the old woman left.

The little girl hummed the same tune Melanie had many times inside the circle of standing stones above the village of Cúig Maen.

Cameron blanched. "What are you humming, Viv?"

She stopped. "Nothing."

"Did you learn it from Mrs. Peddowe?"

"I'm not supposed to tell."

*"Vivian."*

She took her father's hand and led him to the table. "Time for tea, Daddy. Do you want a biscuit?"

He sat down with her. "No biscuits unless you tell me."

The little girl sighed. "Mrs. Peddowe taught me. It's a song from my mother for when I really want something."

A chill ran down Cameron's spine. "What do you want?"

"Why won't you let Mrs. Peddowe bring me to visit my real mother, Daddy?"

Cameron offered her the tray of biscuits.

The little girl wiped her hand across her shirt before taking one.

"What did Mrs. Peddowe tell you about your mother, Viv?"

"That she will teach me many songs someday. Secret songs. I want to visit her, Daddy. Please. May I?"

Cameron poured his daughter a small cup of tea and a larger one for himself. “When the mechanics put the engine back into the Juggernaut, I’ll take you for a ride in it. Would you like that, Viv?”

“Yes, Daddy.”

“Splendid. Now drink your tea. We have a lot of work to do.”

“I still want to visit her.”

Cameron picked Vivian up and set her on his lap. He hugged her to his chest and put his face in the curly hair on her head. “I’m afraid she might never return you to me.”

Vivian began to cry, but when she stopped, he wiped her eyes and they went back to work on the engine.

Vivian didn’t mention her real mother again, but she hummed under her breath. Sometimes, he would catch her looking at him with too much intelligence for a girl of her age.

“What are you wishing for?” he asked.

She looked sheepishly at her feet.

“Um...” Vivian bit her lip. “I want to ride in the Juggernaut with you.”

“You will, Viv,” he played along. “I promise.”

*October 30, 1852*

*London, England*

*Westminster, Houses of Parliament*

**T**he First Lord of the Admiralty, Robert Cameron, the youngest man at forty-five to ever hold such a high ranking position, stood outside parliament, waiting to make the most important speech of his life. Queen Victoria, all the members of the House of Commons, and the House of Lords, along with every important minister, would hear his plea for war against Japan.

The rich ports had to be opened and their isolationist emperor shown the error of his ways. Opium and other goods would enter Japan, and silver would flow to England or there was no hope of countering the threat of the Kaiser and his long alliance with the Tsar.

Cameron wore his finest red and white uniform, decorated with golden epaulets, medals, and ribbons from his numerous campaigns. The Victoria Cross he earned against the Kaiser's airships in the Baltic Sea War was pinned right over his heart. His speech had already been delayed for a week, and Admiral Cameron could not wait in London any longer.

A fast airship would take him to Breconshire as soon as this was over and he would keep his meeting with the bloody witch as he had every year.

One of Queen Victoria's advisors, a corpulent man named Hamilton, exited a side door and approached with a grave look on his face. "My apologies, Lord Admiral," he said with his annoying posh accent, "but Her Majesty has requested an adjournment for the evening."

"This will not do," Cameron said as he considered calling in every favor owed.

Hamilton leaned in close. "We don't have the support, even if you sway a few tonight. Perhaps tomorrow. We need nine more votes if we are to get what we want."

"I shall return in a few days," Cameron said. "My staff will arrange it."

"Her Majesty would like you to speak to a few of the Lords tonight, and have tea with her and some others at the Palace tomorrow afternoon."

"Please send her my humble apologies. I am forced to leave London. An airship is waiting for me."

"The vote will take place tomorrow night. If you do not speak, this measure will fail."

The Witch Queen of the Britons and the Low Landers wanted him in Breconshire. Her Majesty Victoria wanted him in Buckingham Palace to convince some stodgy old fools to risk men and ships on the other side of the world and thereby save the empire.

For fourteen years he had made the trek to Cúig Maen, supplicating and debasing himself. Since Vivian had entered his life three years before, he had agonized about keeping his word to Melanie. The witch took away his humanity, and no longer would he be a part of her schemes. He would be his own man once again and would win or lose with his own merits. The witch could die for all he cared.

“Forgive me,” Cameron bowed. “I am at the disposal of Her Majesty and shall cancel my other engagements.”

He spent the evening drinking cognac and felt free, as if a chain had been removed from his neck. He told members of parliament about the newest Juggernaut model, the Huxley-Stratton Mark III, which had superior armor and could defeat any of the new German Eisen Donner models. In three hours, he earned three votes, and decided he was never going to see Melanie of Clan Meadors again.

The next day, he drank tea and ate lunch with the royal consort, Prince Albert, who was extremely interested in the science behind the Juggernaut steel and the mysterious Arab, Hisham al Nuri.

Queen Victoria, seven months pregnant with her sixth child with Prince Albert, arrived later making apologies. The Duke of Cornwall accompanied her and, after listening to Cameron’s Japan strategy, the Duke promised to deliver two more votes. It was a good rehearsal for when both houses of Parliament assembled later that afternoon. He waited outside the storied chamber, pacing as if he were on guard duty, a task he had not performed since he was a young Scarlet Lancer twenty-three years before.

The gas lamps were lit as thick London fog blocked out the setting sun, and finally they invited him inside the musty old chamber. Cameron stood at the podium. As the most decorated, famous, and

respected man in the British military, he was given a resounding ovation. His victories in the Baltic Sea War against the Kaiser had raised his status to that of a legend on par with Admiral Nelson and built upon his victories in the East Indies, China, Afghanistan, and the Punjab.

He followed the expected course of pleasantries and delivered a preamble to draw them in before launching into the main thrust of his speech, which he delivered in a measured, somber style, crafted to win their hearts, not browbeat them into changing their minds.

“The vote this evening will not be to decide if we are to go to war with Japan. It will be to decide the fate of our beloved empire.”

He let his words settle throughout the room as he thought of his children, especially Vivian, the curious little girl would not be separated from him whenever he was at home.

“This is not conquest. It is survival. We will force the Japanese to open their ports or we fall to the Kaiser and the Tsar in a decade. That is our stark choice. The Russian and German alliance will soon have a larger heavy industry than we do. They are rebuilding their losses in the Baltic War. In a few years, they will have thousands more Juggernauts than we have in our entire arsenal. Ours will be better, but they will have an advantage in numbers our allies will be unable to counter.

“We have one last chance to gain an advantage, and that is in Japan. With their ports open to trade for only us and our Dutch allies, we shall increase our strength enough to have a chance of victory when the largest war in the history of man comes to pass.”

Some men scoffed at his assertions. Others looked as if they had swallowed a live eel. His predictions—supplied to him by the witch—had always come true.

“Many of you understand this as I do. We shall be tested like never before, and I say it is better to fight our enemies in Belgium and France than in Kent and Essex.”

Murmurs of dissent filled the room.

“The next battle for England’s future starts in the Orient. When our armada arrives in Japan to bolster our eastern fleet, Emperor Osahito and his generals will see our true strength and understand our resolve. If they do not capitulate, we will make them rue the day they defied us. We shall carve out colonies as we did in Singapore, Shanghai, and Hong Kong.

“This campaign against Japan will need my full attention, and, therefore, I shall resign my current position and accept the command of the Far East Fleet.”

Gasps broke the silence.

“With our warmachines, with our power, we will force the Japanese to submit to our terms. We will give them culture and civilization and invite them to part of the world they have shunned. If they resist, I will firebomb their cities and unleash wrath upon them like they have never seen before.”

He looked slowly across the room. “This is not conquest. It is survival.” When men began to nod, he shouted, “God save the Queen!”

The ovation was exuberant, but the vote was tepid and passed by only one vote.

*May 7, 1853*

*East China Sea*

*160 nautical miles south of Kyushu, Japan*

**F**irst Admiral Robert Cameron descended on a gently swaying rope ladder from his airship to the uppermost deck of the Dutch battleship *van Leiden*. The entire crew met him and stood at attention in blue caps and crisp white uniforms as the ship rocked gently on the East China Sea. He saluted

them and accompanied their commander, Admiral Huurluyt, on a brief tour of the ship, which smelled of grease and sweat. They paused on an observation deck to admire the hundreds of British and Dutch naval ships of all sizes in the flotilla around them and the five-dozen British airships floating in the clear sky.

Inside a stifling war room in the center of the vessel, Cameron's staff and the entire Dutch high command waited. As they planned the attacks, Cameron wished Hisham al Nuri was in the room. He would have enjoyed the heat. The Moor had accompanied Cameron to every war since Afghanistan in 1840, but Melanie ordered him away once Cameron broke the agreement.

"I will miss the factory and the war," Hisham said, bowing on the day he departed the gigantic industrial complex in Liverpool. "It is unfortunate that we were brought together and wrenched apart under these circumstances, my friend. Perhaps it can be said that we made the best of these years, yes?"

Cameron took Hisham's hand and shook it in a gesture that felt inadequate to the trials they'd been through together.

The Moor's ability to build and maintain the warmachines was extraordinary. When the warlock Hisham was present, even a thousand yards away, Cameron's Juggernaut would not overheat even in the worst conditions. His engines burned hotter and stronger, but Cameron himself felt impervious to the scorching temperatures inside the crucible.

"I don't know how we'll manage without you," Cameron said.

"I must do as she commands. I learned long ago I am unable to cross her. I'm afraid you will learn this as well, my friend. Be very careful now, and do not trust her words. She is the mother of deception and vengeance."

"I worry more for my family than myself."

"I wish I could help. I will look in on your Vivian if I am able. She will be strong as Damascus steel, like her father."

The planning meetings on the Dutch ship lasted several hours and, after dinner, Cameron found himself in Admiral Huurluyt's private office, drinking a glass of Dutch gin. The juniper berry flavor was odd, but enjoyable.

The metal door to Huurluyt's bedroom opened suddenly and Cameron choked on his drink. He coughed as the witch of Clan Meadors stood smirking. Melanie wore a fine cream-colored dress fringed with white lace, a corset that exaggerated her large breasts, and wore her blond hair piled atop her head in the latest European fashion.

Admiral Huurluyt left in a hurry.

"Pour me a drink," she said and sat in Huurluyt's seat across the desk from Cameron. He could smell her musky French perfume.

"What is the meaning of this?" Cameron asked.

She filled a glass of gin for herself. "I've come to help you."

"I don't need your help." He got up to leave, uninterested in hearing whatever falsehoods might come out of her mouth.

She raised an eyebrow. "You made a grave mistake not meeting me last Samhain."

"My mistake was made years ago." He reached for the door handle, refusing to be in the room with her.

"What of our daughter?" Melanie asked.

Cameron stopped, remembering the ride he had taken Viv on in the Welsh Gryffudd, and when he had said goodbye to her.

"You've taught her about your machines," Melanie said.

"Vivian is not your concern."

"Fool man, of *course* she is my concern. No weapon you've ever seen roll from your factories is half so potent as she will become."

Cameron's jaw tensed as murderous thoughts ran through his mind.

Melanie shook her head. "You do not understand what is going to happen."

"Tell me then. Or does it give you pleasure to make me wait?"

“I want a victory as much as you. I will fight in this battle. I will come to your aid, and I will become more than any other of my kind. The ancient gods of Japan will serve me, and I will rule in the East and the West.”

“Why should I believe anything you say? You claim to know what will happen, but this is just more of your lies.”

“Did I lie to you in the East Indies?”

He narrowed his gaze at her and thought of the man-eating Barong lion of Bali that hunted his men during the native rebellion against the Dutch. It killed only Juggernaut drivers and their support crew during the East Indies War in 1847. Melanie had come to him in a dream and showed him where the monster’s lair was hidden. Cameron had gone there and slain the lion, but not before sixty British and Dutchmen were slaughtered.

“My power will defend you one more time,” she said and sipped her drink. “You are still under the spell of last year’s offering.”

Cameron’s blood went cold, though he suspected a ruse. “Offering? What are you speaking of?”

Melanie’s green eyes flashed with malice. She swallowed the rest of her gin in one gulp and stood. “Every year you lay with me, a baby was conceived and born.” She took a step away from him toward the Huurluyt’s bedroom door from whence she had come.

Cameron’s stomach felt as though it were filled with broken glass.

“Our blood, mixed, is a potent combination indeed. The old gods gladly accepted the innocent flesh we created. So you see, Cameron, that has been the source of your power all along. You were given everything you wanted in exchange for them.”

Cameron was in a daze. He could not move as the horror overcame him. She sacrificed her own children, his children? He wanted to vomit. “You are lying to upset me. Even you couldn’t do something so vile, not to your own babies.”

“You have no idea what power I have gained from you, or what

I can do,” the witch said with a cold smile. “Vivian was the only one chosen to live, but the other thirteen were chosen for the fire in the ring of stones at Cúig Maen.”

Cameron imagined tiny newborn infants, crying and wailing as they were thrown into a bonfire. “You burned them?”

Melanie merely stared, her own eyes burning like those innocent children.

Cameron charged, intent on bashing her head against the metal floor. She sidestepped his attack, moving as swiftly as a hummingbird’s wings. Her knee slammed against his gut, and Cameron fell over in heap, gasping for breath and vomiting up his cognac.

“You disappoint me,” she said and slammed Admiral Huurluyt’s stout bedroom door. Cameron regained his feet and pounded against the door, but there was no hope of the metal succumbing. There was nothing in the room he could use to bash through the steel or pry it open.

He shouted curses at Melanie before sliding to the floor. His eyes blurred with tears and his body shook. Cameron sat with his head in his hands and wished for his own death. What would happen now to the fleet he led and his family at home?

“The gods must be paid,” the witch said, though he heard her mocking voice only in his mind.

*May 28, 1853*

*Kagoshima, Kyushu Island*

*Kagoshima Prefecture, Southern Japan*

**A**dmiral Cameron ordered another fire-bombing run over what was left of once beautiful sprawling city of Kagoshima. It was the most populated area his airships had attacked in Japan. Cameron would burn it all to teach

the Japanese the price of their refusal to accept Queen Victoria's generous terms.

*Her Majesty's Airship Athena*, Cameron's command ship, released incendiary bombs onto the tightly packed wooden houses three hundred feet below him. He could not hear the people screaming, but he could smell the smoke from wood and flesh. He did not want to think about the women, or their infants, who were caught in the flames. He had sent warnings to them to evacuate but, in their pride, not all of the Japanese had listened.

His own pride had hurt him as well. He had agreed to the witch's bargain years before. Had she truly sacrificed newborn infants? Thirteen of them? He shook his head, and Captain Adam Taylor noticed his consternation.

"Something the matter, sir?"

"The stench is foul," Cameron said and covered his mouth.

"Aye, sir." Captain Taylor, a tall and slender man with piercing blue eyes did not appear to accept his explanation.

Seven other airships joined the onslaught and walls of orange flames spread almost instantly. Cameron had delayed the bombardment until the weather had been right. A westerly wind carried the fire away from the shore and deep inland until they reached the rice paddies and canals. He had his signalmen relay orders with their flags and flashing colored lights for the fire-bombing to continue and strike all of the villas and temples on the western side of the bay. In a few hours, every important structure would be on fire. He had wanted to make a statement, but was this too much? Looking into the conflagration, it was impossible to dismiss the nightmares that had now haunted him in broad daylight. He saw his own children fed to the fires. He saw Ganesh and all the others looming above him, their thousand blackened claws blocking out the sun.

He watched from his high vantage point over the city as the

ironclad British battleships and Dutch cruisers destroyed the puny wooden war galleys in the bay. Marines and sailors had repelled all the attacks during the night when enemy soldiers had tried to board them. Melanie had told him they were coming, though she apparently stayed out at sea on the *van Leiden*, which watched over the rest of the fleet.

The battle was progressing almost exactly to plan, but Cameron felt uneasy, as if he had neglected to account for something critical. Today was the doom of the Japanese, but why did he feel like he had blundered into an ambush? Knowing the wickedness that had given rise to his success in battle, he no longer trusted it. If Britain could live only by these devil's deals, should the empire persist? The taste of burning elephant flesh returned to his mouth, choking him.

The officers waited for his next command. When he realized they were all looking to him, he forced a confident smile and said, "Captain Taylor, send the signal for the marines to land. We shall teach them the strength of our soldiers."

Six hundred Royal Marines of the 2nd Regiment, led by two-dozen Huxley-Stratton Mark III Juggernauts, landed unopposed south of Kagoshima's center. They set up a defensive position with machine gun nests and rifle pits in front of the docks. Japanese soldiers massed for an attack a few hours later when the fires had burned lower. Admiral Cameron had the signalmen relay the enemy positions and fifteen-inch guns from the *H.M.S. Northumberland* and *H.M.S. Agincourt* annihilated the enemy from afar, scattering the survivors into the ruins.

The Japanese warriors regrouped and fearlessly charged the machine gun nests and Juggernauts at midday. Many of them were mowed down, but the survivors took cover and were too close for naval gun support. The warmachines counterattacked and chased the enemy away, inflicting heavy losses.

Cameron ordered a pair of the smaller airships to strafe the

fleeing soldiers as they were bottlenecked in the streets. Machine guns and cannon decimated the outmatched warriors, but it had only been their first assault. More suicidal charges came, and thousands of enemy lay dead before the beaten remnants finally withdrew.

In the afternoon, two rifle companies of Marines and a pair of Juggernauts probed the city for resistance. Cameron kept a close eye on them, ready to deploy reinforcements or provide gun support.

A force of enemy archers attacked the Royal Marines at close range from their hiding places inside the bombed out ruins of Kagoshima Castle. A group of swordsmen leaped out from a smoldering building and hacked Marines to death with their razor-sharp katanas.

“Captain Taylor,” Admiral Cameron said to the commanding officer of the airship, “drop the 1st Armored Juggernauts.”

“Yes, Admiral. Right on top of them.”

Six Huxley-Stratton Mark Vs launched a moment later out of the rear of the airship. They glided down into the smoldering city using their winged glider rigs and a pair of large silk parachutes to slow their fall. As always, they came down hard. Cameron watched the drivers run expertly along the ground as they landed and crush enemy infantry in the courtyard of the ancient castle. The drivers disengaged from their glider harnesses, leaving the wings and tail behind. They paused only to pull in their gigantic and irreplaceable silk parachutes. Some were burned or damaged, but they could be repaired.

The Japanese shot arrows at the metal giants, and some brave men attacked with their swords. Cameron did not know if they were samurai or peasants, but these Japanese fighters had courage and died valiantly.

Cameron wished he was among the 1st Armored as they crashed through the ruins where the archers hid. His men drove them from their hiding places. More enemy soldiers attacked, and the warmachines turned and raked them with machinegun and cannon fire.

The Royal Marine patrol withdrew, and the metal giants helped carry their wounded. When they had gotten sufficiently away, the leader of the 1st Armored Juggernauts, Lieutenant James Dalton, started a new fire with his flamethrower. He used the rising smoke to conceal the retreat of the Marines and then his squad. Dalton paused only to have his men retrieve the glider rigs, even the ones with damaged wings. They could be salvaged and the wings replaced.

The squad of warmachines marched to the beach where Cameron landed his airship and picked them up as the metal giants quickly entered the hanger via the ramp.

The airship was soon flying high over Kagoshima Bay. Admiral Cameron found Lieutenant Dalton in the hanger and saluted the young man. “Good show, Lieutenant. To fight at your side would be an honor.”

“Thank you, First Admiral. The honor would have been ours. You trained us well.”

“Be a good chap,” Cameron shook the officer’s hand, “cool the boilers and get your squad rearmed and refueled.”

“Yes, Lord Admiral.”

Cameron grinned from ear to ear to keep up the morale of the men. He doubted he would ever smile honestly again. He had dreamed for so many years of a way back, a way to live down all the horrors he’d enacted. Those dreams were gone now.

Worse still, when he had landed on the shore to pick up his men, he felt the witch’s presence. She augmented his senses and wanted him to know that the land seethed with anger, as if the ground itself were about to erupt and attack. The bombs and the warmachines were disturbing something.

A deafening roar rattled the entire airship. He sprinted up the stairs to the command deck and peered out the front observation window. Every man stood stunned as they watched the city below.

“What’s happening?” Cameron asked.

“I don’t bloody know,” Captain Taylor said, shocked so badly he showed weakness in front of his crew.

Cameron stared out the glass. His breath caught in his throat. Kagoshima Castle had been leveled. A serpentine monster with a diamond-shaped head and two eyes on each side of its skull, a gaping maw filled with stone fangs, and basalt plates covering its segmented body, plowed through the city. The six-hundred foot long behemoth with no limbs was larger than every airship in the sky and battleship in the bay. It destroyed everything in its path as it raced furiously toward the Royal Marines on the dock.

The others had never seen gods before and were stunned. Cameron had known of them since India and reacted instantly. “Signal the Marines to retreat to the ships! We will start bombing runs and kill the monster. Prepare to attack with every airship, one after another.”

The officer frantically relayed the orders.

“You did this.” The voice in his mind was Melanie’s. “You have awakened the elemental dragons of this land with your machines as I hoped. The Earth Dragon has risen!”

A few British landing craft steamed away from the docks as Earth Dragon arrived. The giant monster crushed the men and Juggernauts who remained or gulped them down its throat. Cannons and machine guns had little effect on his impenetrable hide, but one cannon shell to his face appeared to cause pain.

*Athena’s* crew screamed and pointed toward the ships in the bay. A leviathan with blue-black scaly skin and a head like a shark crossed with an oriental dragon leaped from the water. The large wave swamped the landing boats of the marines and crashed into the men gathering on the beach.

“Dragons,” Cameron whispered, hating Melanie for her message and her failure to warn him. “You wanted this to happen.”

“Of course I did,” she said, “now watch your precious ships be destroyed.”

The Water Dragon was larger than the Earth Dragon and jumped from the water and landed on the *Northumberland*, breaking the battleship in two. Ammunition magazines in the center of the vessel exploded a moment later, sending a plume of metal debris into the air.

Water Dragon attacked the other ships, rending holes in their hulls with her jaws or tipping them over. Dutch and British sailors in the water screamed for help, but they were snuffed out, sucked below the waves as the leviathan swam below, pulling them down with the passage of her serpentine coils.

“Admiral!” Captain Taylor shouted. His gaze fixed on a crashing airship in front of them and the monster tearing it apart. A two-headed serpent with a dozen pairs of legs along her underside and the wings of a giant falcon clawed great rips in the top of the bulbous sacks of the airship.

*You did not warn me on purpose, Cameron thought, but will you help me now or is everything you told me a lie?*

“Sky Dragon has come.” Melanie’s mocking voice echoed in Cameron’s mind. “I will not help you. Not yet.”

The lithe and pale monster attacked another airship, shredding it apart. Sky Dragon attacked relentlessly, and crashed the smallest of the dirigibles into one of the large ones. The bombs in their gondolas exploded when they clanged together. The burning wrecks fell into the bay.

Cameron knew what he had to do if there was any hope of saving what was left of the air fleet. He ordered all but the two largest of the airships to flee. *Monarch* remained with *Athena*. Cameron ordered Captain Taylor to pull along beside his sister ship and fly as close and as fast as possible, but slightly higher in elevation. He communicated his further orders directly to the captain of the *Monarch*, who matched their speed. Both ships readied their guns.

The Sky Dragon attacked the *Monarch* from above. Cameron gave the order and Captain Taylor dropped their remaining ballast, including the last of their bombs and water tanks. The *Athena* ascended quickly.

The *Monarch* plunged downward, pulling the Sky Dragon with it as their brave Captain followed his orders. All of *Athena's* cannons and machine guns came to bear at point blank range and fired into the Sky Dragon's body. Red blood burst from the monster.

The dragon's wings became entangled in the rigging of the *Athena*. Her many claws were lodged in the *Monarch*. The airships spun in a circle as *Athena's* gun crews kept firing.

Sky Dragon roared in agony as blood burst from her body, painting both ships red. She thrashed all her legs, but all the mighty twisting of her body could not free her.

"Admiral!" Captain Taylor shouted. "Launch the Juggernauts! Get yourself and your warmachines off my ship!"

"I'm staying," Cameron said as the fusillade of the guns firing one level below them nearly drowned out his reply.

"If we get rid of the Juggernauts weight, we might be able to pull free." Captain Taylor shoved Cameron toward the stairs. "Please, save my ship." It was a grand and gallant gesture. Cameron remembered when he'd been capable of such things.

The Admiral hesitated and looked out the window. One of the pale eyes of the Sky Dragon fixed on him for an instant. Their minds connected.

"YOU DO NOT OWN THE WORLD, TINY CREATURE!  
CURSE YOU AND ALL YOUR KIN!"

Cameron stumbled away from the window, rebuked and shaken.

"Go now if you want victory!" Melanie's voice in his mind urged him toward the steep stairs. Cameron slid down the handrails using his gloved hands and boots. He reached the hanger at the bottom, and the flight door was already open. The seven Juggernauts were

in line, working glider rigs in place and the launch crew waiting for the command.

“Launch now!” Cameron ordered, his voice muffled by the wind, but his hand gestures left no doubt. Lieutenant Dalton and other drivers were already in their machines, engines revving.

The launch sergeant pulled the lever and the landing platform dropped, angling down like a slide. Steam-powered conveyor belt hooks attached to the noses of each glider catapulted each rig forward and flung them into the air.

One after another, they shot out the rear of the airship and deployed their double parachutes. Cameron climbed into the top-hatch of last Juggernaut, furthest from the exit. His own was the newest model, the Welsh Gryffud. The giant machine had been painted entirely as a Union Jack, the armor covered with the crossing patterns of blue, white, and red.

*Athena* spun. Once Cameron engaged with the catapult the combined forces flung out his Gryffud. The parachutes, both decorated as gigantic Union Jack flags, deployed the instant he left the door, and he glided toward Japan.

He noticed one of the other Juggernaut’s gliding for a distant cruiser trying to escape the carnage in the bay, but the man would never reach the ship. Depending on the wind, the gliders and chutes had a minimal range from the location from where they were dropped. The man plunged into the dark blue water of Kagoshima Bay and disappeared.

Cameron watched helplessly as the tangled *Monarch* and *Athena* spiraled downward, both ships unable to free themselves from the wounded Sky Dragon. *A coward, Cameron. You’re a bloody coward.* Still, he had more to worry about than the *Athena* and the *Monarch*. His own battle was just beginning.

Earth Dragon slithered across the ruins of the city toward the two airships as they augured into the ground. A moment later, a

tremendous explosion and shockwave filled the air. Fire engulfed the wrecks as the *Monarch's* bombs exploded.

Cameron glided away, following the flight path of his men. The survivors of the squad aimed for the beach as far away from the Earth Dragon as they could.

Perhaps they could escape by marching south and making contact with the rest of the surface fleet outside the bay?

First, they would have to evade Earth Dragon who closed in on the burning and mangled wreckage where Sky Dragon had fallen. He pushed the ruptured airships and his sister's body toward the waves, dousing the flames. He pulled the blasted and burned corpse free. He roared in anger as Cameron and five others landed on the shore a mere three hundred yards away. The 1st Armored Juggernauts detached from their glider rigs and parachutes, letting the silk blow into the ruins.

The raging and roaring Earth Dragon came for them like a speeding freight train the size of a mountain. Lieutenant Woodbury, the closest to the behemoth, tried to run. He plodded along in the sand for a few strides before being bitten in half by the stone jaws. His torso slipped out of the Juggernaut chassis and fell onto the wet sand.

Cameron stood his ground. He was not going to die running. Lieutenant Dalton and the others put themselves between the monster and their leader. They all aimed their cannons and fired everything at the Earth Dragon's face and his two pairs of jade eyes. Explosive bullets and cannon shells struck true. The warmachine drivers reloaded at an amazing rate, firing again and again. Rust colored blood ran from Earth Dragon's wounds like streams of mud. He reared back in pain, held off until the warmachine's ammunition ran out.

He struck at them and crushed the front four Juggernauts into the sand.

Admiral Cameron and Lieutenant Dalton sprayed their flamethrowers at the monster's face, but the fire only burned away the rust colored blood and left the stone clean and pure.

Dalton charged, and the monster knocked the brave Lieutenant aside, flinging him and his Juggernaut end over end into the deep water of the bay.

Alone, First Admiral Robert Cameron of the Royal British Fleet faced the doom he had sensed at the beginning of the battle. He extended the eight-foot long steel blade from his metal arm and raised the sword.

Earth Dragon struck like a cobra. Cameron stabbed the creature's mouth as stone teeth pierced his armor. Metal collapsed around Cameron as his crucible shrank. He was pulled into Earth Dragon's mouth and tipped upside down. Blood rushed to his head as he slid down the long gullet of the gargantuan monster.

The Gryffyd's boiler ruptured. Steam screamed out of the fissures, and only his goggles prevented him from being blinded. Heat flooded over Cameron and the metal walls of the crucible wedged him in like a vise. None of the controls worked, and he was plunged into blackness. Upside down and helpless, he smelled steam, hot metal, and his own blood.

The steel began to burn his legs as if his thighs were being pressed between two frying pans. He could move his arms, but his lower body was trapped. The crucible compressed even tighter as he was crushed and slowly cooked.

Cameron despaired and stopped fighting his fate. The agonizing pain in his legs was a reminder of his utter defeat. The campaign against Japan had failed. He had failed. England would fall to her enemies now. What would happen to Rose and his children? What would happen to poor Viv?

"She will be far better than you," Melanie said. "She will be the first to have power over machines."

"Stay away from her!" Cameron shouted.

"I will teach her all the darkest secrets. She will learn the truth about power, something you were always too weak to grasp."

“I knew you lied about helping me in the battle,” Cameron said. “You sent me to die.”

“I don’t need you anymore. Everything I’ve ever given you, our daughter was born with.”

The hot metal seared Cameron’s legs, and he clenched his teeth in pain. He regretted his entire life and every choice he had made since meeting the witch. She had pushed him to war and the deaths of so many. He wished he would have died in India and never met Melanie of Clan Meadors.

“Your life is not wasted,” she said. “You have awakened the ancient gods of the East as I planned. Their strength is pure. I shall take their spirits as my own servants and become the most powerful of my kind. I shall have dominion over all the elements now: air, earth, water, *and* fire. Once you are gone, our daughter will have the single element you possess, and what I have cultivated in you as I did the other war leaders I helped, the element of war.”

The burning tar smell of naptha from his flamethrower pooling below him intensified with the heat. “You betrayed me like all the others you claimed to help in the past. I am such a fool.”

“No, you are a builder of deadly things, a master of war in this new age of steel machines. The days of sacking cities and putting armies to the sword like in the time of William Wallace and his revolt against the crown are long over.

“With machines and bombs, tens of thousands will die in one day, in one hour. All of the deaths you have caused in war over the past fourteen years, by your own hand or by your orders, were sacrifices that fed my power. You are the most successful killer I have ever known. I thank you for your prowess, Cameron the Great.”

The magnitude of his failure overwhelmed him. Alexander and other infamous conquerors had been cast into the Seventh Circle of Hell in Dante Alighieri’s poem, *Inferno*, and Cameron would soon join them in their seething river of boiling blood. It was nothing

less than he deserved.

“You will be the final sacrifice. When you die inside Earth Dragon, I will have a hold on its spirit,” Melanie said. “It will take a decade, but I will control it before the largest war the world has ever seen comes to pass. Millions will die,” she said gleefully.

“By God, you *want* it to happen,” Cameron accused.

“I am pushing everything toward the flames.”

“You never cared about Britain or the Netherlands.”

“Those are small places, and I will be queen over half the world when the war is over. What do I care if the Britons, who have been burning my own sisters for centuries, are crushed under the Kaiser’s boots? I’m done hiding in the hills while men I choose fight my battles. Soon, I shall lead armies, and I will have the greatest weapons, invulnerable to everything, including your machines.”

Earth Dragon undulated, and roared. Cameron’s broken Juggernaut rattled inside the belly of the angry beast.

“You will be my offering, a blood sacrifice just as every other war chief I supported over the past eight hundred years. But I will not let you escape my grasp as Nelson did when one of my rival sisters helped a French sniper break my enchantment and shoot him through the spine. You will die in great pain as Wallace died. King Edward I knew the power of sacrifices. He had him emasculated, eviscerated, and his body drawn and quartered. Wallace’s death and all the men he killed kept me alive for a hundred years, but you, dear Cameron, will keep me alive for a thousand, though for that gift you must die screaming in a fire.”

The naptha beneath him sizzled, and the smoke stung his eyes. The heat was so intense that Cameron couldn’t understand how he was still conscious. Without Hisham protecting him, he should have been cooked to death almost instantly. He would never see his friend again and wanted more than anything to see his family and escape death, but that was not possible. Rose did not love him,

though his sons did, and tiny Vivian. She was such a sweet little child, so unlike her mother. The thought of Melanie whispering her hatred into that innocent babe's ear was far more painful than the superheated metal cooking his legs.

He had only one option left. "I will not help you," Cameron said. Melanie had plans to plunge the world into an apocalyptic war, but what if he could stop her? She must not gain control of Earth Dragon. Cameron drew the Webley pistol from his belt and pressed the barrel against his temple.

"Stop!" Melanie screamed. She used her witchcraft to try and paralyze his mind, but he resisted with everything he had left.

On a bright sunny day, Vivian stood before her father in the grassy field behind Harborside Manor on the eve of his departure to Japan. Wind blew her curly red hair off her freckled forehead. The four-year-old girl's eyes filled with tears, and she shook her head after he told her. "No Daddy. Please. Stay with me. Don't go away."

The memory shook his resolve. Cameron moved his finger off the trigger.

"That's right," Melanie whispered. "Put it down."

"No, I'm done with you," Cameron said, but he could not feel the gun in his hand.

He opened his eyes and Melanie stood inside the circle of stones on the hill of Cúig Maen. The pentagram burst into flames, trapping him inside the walls of fire. She smiled and reached for him.

"You are the queen of lies," Cameron said.

"I am your queen, and I command you to burn."

"I don't give a damn," Cameron said. "I know I'm going to Hell, and I don't care as long as I get away from you for a while." He felt the gun in his hand.

Vivian smiled at him in the grassy field. "Oh, Daddy."

Cameron pulled the trigger and blasted his brains out the instant before the inferno engulfed the crucible.





# MACHINE HEART

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PATRICK M. TRACY

A Sequel to "Of the Earth, of the Sky, of the Sea" in *Kaiju Rising: Age of Monsters*  
and "Of the Fire" in *Mech: Age of Steel*

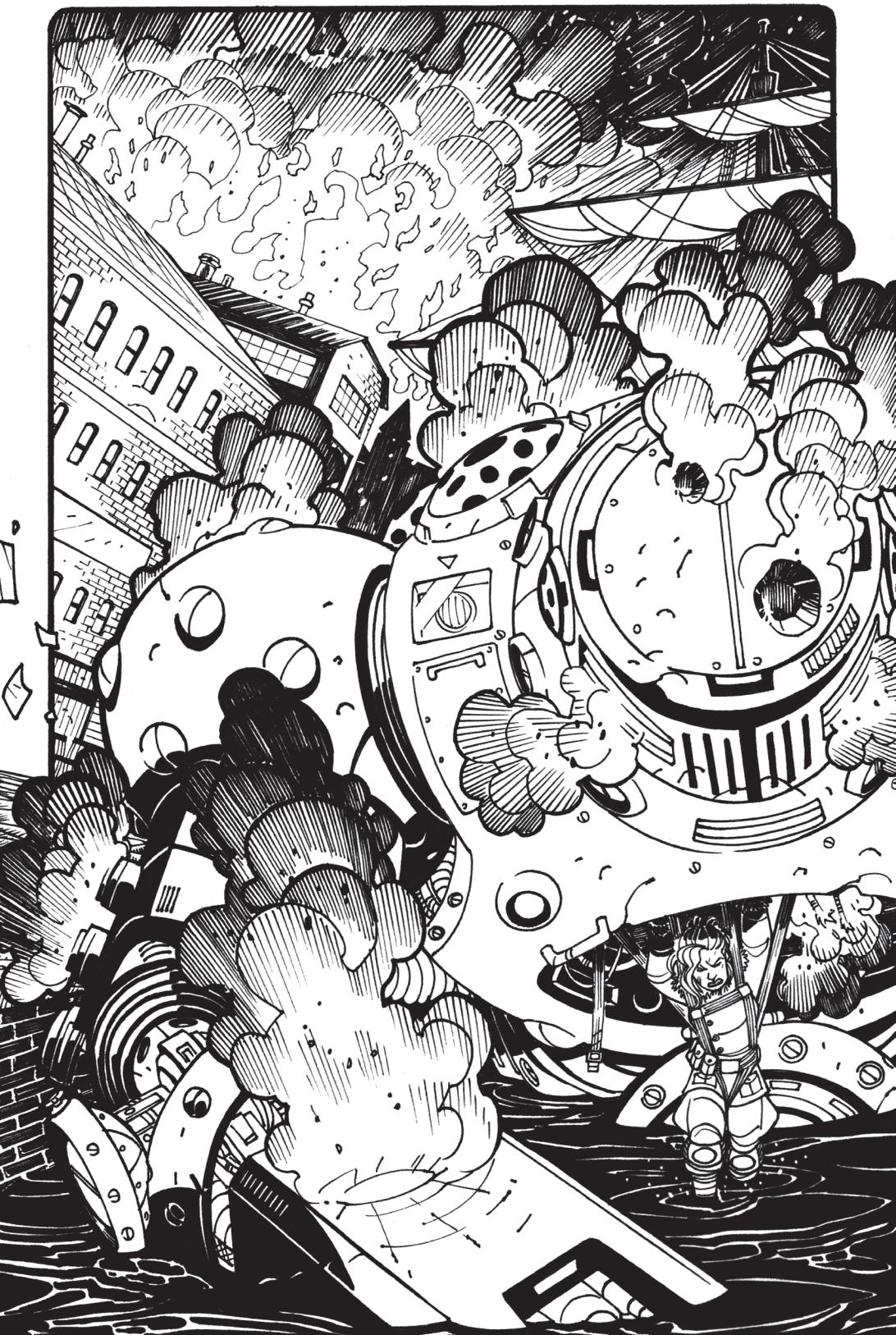
*November 14th, 1882*  
*Occupied Liverpool, England*  
*The 12th Year of German Occupation*

I took but little pleasure in killing the Kaiser's men. It was just kicking at vultures after the battle had long since been lost. Still, every Hun I sent screaming into the afterlife was one fewer obstacle between me and the vengeance I'd sworn.

Japan would fall.

Their monstrous gods would fail them. They would pay for killing my parents. For destroying London and Amsterdam, they would come to know pain such as they had never imagined. They had brought twilight upon the British Empire and, for that, I would bring the long night down upon their rising sun. I'd spent almost twenty years with that vow on my lips.

I needed only to fight my way to the dockside, through the ghetto walls and concertina wire. Only that, to overcome hundreds of hardened German infantry, heavy machine gun emplacements, and however many Type IV Benz-Bavaria Juggernauts they could bring to bear against me. There were a hundred easier ways out of the city, but it wasn't enough for me to slip away. No, my exit would



have to shake the pillars of the earth.

By the time the night was over, everyone would know what my warmachines were capable of. The whole strength of the Kaiser's detachment in Liverpool would fall before me, one woman in an untested prototype. I would have no trouble finding a patron after that. Every war-hungry army, every oppressed multitude, would want Vivian Meadors as their designer.

The resistance would hate me for what I did, but it didn't matter now. I had lost patience with them, with their cowardice, with their inability to affect real change after years of oppression under the combined banners of the Kaiser and the Tsar. Tonight was the night. The Kaiser's navy was away on maneuvers, bristling against Iceland, the only remaining freehold east of The Americas. Their garrison was depleted, ripe for attack. It was only a matter of time before the resistance found out how much of their resources I'd funneled into my own project over the years.

I'd certainly made better use of it than they could. Unlike them, I saw the clear line of progress. The old world was dying, trampled underfoot by the implacable power of fire and metal. The new paradigm, powered by gears and pistons, arose from the wreckage. The true magic lived inside machines now. The power lived inside me, passed down from my parents.

The witch and the warrior.

My power was the one thing the Japanese couldn't take away. With England beneath the German boot heel, I had been no threat to them. That would change. Tonight, I would fight my way free of the homeland that Japan's fearsome gods had ruined. The way forward would at last be open. One day, there would be time to fight the Kaiser and his empire, but my business was in the east, and I had no illusions there would be a road back.

I closed my fists within the driving crucible of my Steel Goliath. The fuel stacks charged as I pumped the levers. With the throttles

pinned, I engaged the spinner coils. A high, shrill whine pierced the dark, soon to be erased as the alcohol-burning engines flared. Even with my ear canals packed with felt, the terrible noise of spinning camshafts and gnashing gears was akin to the damnation of an evil spirit. I tilted my head forward, engaging the twelve-phase hydraulic drive. The metallic clatter grew even louder. The Goliath burst through the side of the abandoned brewery building, the whole structure caving in behind it. Breaching the wall held no more resistance than a cobweb before a charging bull.

I reached out into the machine and felt with its armored skin, saw with its crystal eyes. The night sky turned from black to bruised purple above me as the flames bellowed out the Goliath's exhaust stacks. Hydraulic pressure reached optimal levels, every ram, pushrod, and pivot alive, known to me as present and controlled as my own flesh. The Juggernaut models had never been capable of anything more than a lumbering march. The Goliath could run, and run I did, each giant step leaving powdered cobblestones as markers of my passing.

It was after curfew. All the natives of Liverpool had long since scuttled into what remained of their homes. The German troops in the square had only a moment to look at the gleaming alloy steel of my creation and cower before I engaged the shoulder cannons, launching fragmentary bombs into their midst.

A storm of tungsten needles burst forth from the bright orange explosion, millions of death shards taking away all sense and shape, killing everything within a city block. I saw all of this and felt nothing. It was hard to remember a time before this night. There was only now, there was only killing until the bombs were gone, the engines sputtered out, the Goliath used up. I could not hear a human scream inside the driving crucible. Not even my own. There was no more Vivian, only a softer component inside the machine. All the doubt and fear, all the troublesome human cargo slid away.

Onward. Onward into darkness. I lost myself, and was glad of it.



The city roared with unchecked structural fires when I came back to myself. The horizon was ninety degrees askew, the arms of the fire and the darker smudge of smoke reaching up to the stars on my left. The Steel Goliath rocked slightly in the waves at the seaside, slowly shipping water.

The Mercy River estuary.

I had killed my way to the sheltered anchorage that had made this town wealthy upon a time. My warmachine was destroyed, every system burned up, seized, or shot through, but I had made it.

Hanging in the webbing of the crucible, soaked with sweat and utterly exhausted, I felt my magic give way, fading out of the steel and back into flesh. Flashing remnants of the battle burst through my brain, vivid snippets of fiery chaos within the inky void where I had given over fully to the machine. I remembered the engines revving, the high-speed guns chattering like the laughter of the gods of Hell. I recalled turning on the oil afterspray and vectoring the exhaust stacks to the side so that everything within twenty feet on either side was bathed in flame. I remembered pulling the arms off a Juggernaut.

Visions of using my pneumatic super hammer to pierce a Type IV's fuel stack, then hurling it into a barracks, flashed across my mind. It was an unending dream of blood, fire, and death, the Goliath's power at maximum, the night alive with the fitful flash of gunfire. An element within me whispered that this was the first night I have ever truly grasped my destiny. It was this hard, dark part of me that drove on when every human instinct begged me to quit.

I couldn't delay or the remnants of the German garrison would find me. The crucible was nearly impenetrable to their small arms but far from waterproof. They would need only to push me into the estuary and wait for the brackish water to do their task for them.

I pulled the two levers that engaged the explosive bolts on the driving crucible. One set fired, one didn't, and seawater poured into the crucible, now shaped like a clam's shell. Cutting away the webbing straps, I groped into the water, clawing blindly until the way to shore became clear. On the thin spit of rocky beach, I saw Liverpool with my own eyes, witnessing the utter devastation I'd left in my wake.

"Oh." I whispered. I felt my knees hit the sand. I made a fist and pushed it against my mouth to keep from crying out. "Angels, turn your eyes away from my deeds this night," I whispered.

I hadn't imagined it being this way, the rampant fires, the screaming of men with bodies torn, the blaring claxons. I had not considered that my actions could endanger the whole city, my countrymen; everyone. I swallowed, the blaze becoming indistinct in my vision. It was possible that the city would burn flat, that the survivors would be refugees.

At best, the Germans would exact a grim retribution for my actions. There would be great suffering. I recalled the sound of so many voices that had urged me to cool the rage within. All these years, I'd never been able to do it. War was inside me, a curse that granted no peace. I clenched my teeth and waited for the unwelcome wash of guilt and self-hatred to pass.

"You are a Meadors," I said to myself. "Daughter of Admiral Cameron and Melanie, Witch Queen of the Isles and the Low Lands. Harden your heart and carry on."

It was not the first or the hundredth time I'd recited those words. Every time things appeared too difficult, every time people had told me that I wasn't strong enough, I'd had this one thing, this talisman phrase to renew my resolve. It seemed to work less and less, like a tool that had lost its temper and threatened to fail. Like the overstressed and seized connecting rods in my Goliath's engines.

I shook my shoulders and turned away from the wreckage I'd made of my own city. I dug into the pocket of my engineer's jacket,

extracting the detonator I'd created. It sent a powerful ultrasonic beam when I spun the coil generator, setting off the self-destruct mechanism in my downed Goliath. It had always been the hardest part of the plan, destroying the finest warmachine ever devised. Finding the will to do so had been the work of many cruel midnight hours. Much as I hated doing it, I couldn't let the Huns capture the technology. White phosphorous flared as the Goliath scuttled itself.

I couldn't stand to watch. I made my body, aching and chilled with seawater as it was, move. The sand pulled at my sodden boots, the thick woolen trousers and jacket I'd worn to protect me from the heat of the crucible now hung from my body like a suit of lead. The Goliath's broken chassis flared behind me, bright as day, cooking the estuary water, melting the steel, keeping my innovations from the hands of both ally and enemy. Liverpool's funeral pyre rose at my right, leaving only one safe avenue to consider. Only the calm, silent depths of the sea would accept me now.

Panicked soldiers and people in their night clothes ran in every direction, their movements as nonsensical as the scurrying of ants around a bruised apple. They did not interfere with me, and that was all I needed. I had to get to the boat, and to Christianne, who had sworn she would be waiting there. In exchange for the schematics I carried in a sealed envelope, Chrissa would grant me passage to France. From there, I'd head east, destroying anything foolish enough to stand in my way.

I could see the slim little cutter that Christianne had described in detail to me. No one would mark its comings and goings. It was no threat to anyone. That night, it was the sum total of my hopes. Chrissa, at least, I could trust. Chrissa was a witch, more of a sibling to me than my father's legitimate children, had any survived the German purges. In the end, we were bound to each other far closer than to any country or alliance.

If fate had not been cruel, the witches should have ruled Europe

by now, with Melanie, my mother, as their empress. As it was, I had been forced to hide my identity from all but a few trusted souls, the witches who had done their best for me, tried to see that I was well situated. To everyone else, I'd just been the bastard daughter of a dead hero.

For years, it had just been Mrs. Peddowe and I, living near the Juggernaut factory in Swansea. Now and then, a witch would come for a day or a week, slipping us enough money to eat. Mrs. Peddowe, an old farmer's wife my father had brought in to be my nanny, had become my whole family. Her health failing, I had been left alone with my voracious appetite for knowledge by twelve years old. By then, the witches had long since failed to provide. Alone and hungry, I tucked my hair into my collar and pretended to be a boy, working at the factory for my bread. Then the occupation came. The resistance turned no one away, regardless of gender or age. I could swing a hammer. I could read. I worked sixteen-hour days in the sweltering heat of their foundry without complaint.

Now, I was finally free. All my debts would be paid. I would see that witches got the respect they were owed. When I brought Japan to its knees, when the Last Fleet returned from the east, they would all recognize me as the true heir to both the Cameron and Meadors family. But that was far away, my journey's first halting step just now taken.

The boards of the quay betrayed the exhausted drag of my feet. My body was numb all over, the chill of the night air against my wet clothes slowly sapping the last of my energy. Another set of footsteps sounded behind on the boards behind me.

"Vivian!" a rough voice called out. The accent was that of Merseyside, the voice I recognized as well as my own.

I turned, teeth clenching to see the truth of my betrayal written on the face of someone who had almost been a husband to me. "Sean?"

"Who else would it be, Viv?"

“Why did you follow me, Sean? You’ll be caught, for a certainty. Have you gone mad, to come all this way alone?”

His handsome face twisted, the dark smudges of ash on his face and the anguish in his expression turning him monstrous. “Mad? Oh, Viv. Do you not see that you’re the crazy one here? We begged you. *I* begged you not to do this. Why couldn’t you have loved me enough to stay?”

“I...” There was no answer I could easily give. A part of me had wanted so badly to be with Sean forever. He had been a friend in some of my hardest years growing up, then a comrade as we fought against the Kaiser’s oppression. Finally, a lover, someone to hold in the night when it seemed that we would never be free.

“Your father isn’t out there, Viv. He’s just bones and dust, less real than memory. We were your family, if only could have ever seen it.”

The raw sound of emotion in Sean’s voice stung my soul, but it made no difference. I set my jaw. “You never understood. All that I had to give, I gave to vengeance a long time before we met.” I pushed my red hair out of my eyes, forcing myself to stand straight. “I swore an oath, and nothing but death can keep me from fulfilling it.”

He breathed out, a puff of vapor upon the freshening wind. His face was unendurably sad. “An oath? You swore an oath, and so you betray us to run off and fight the wrong war for the wrong reasons.”

“If that’s the way you choose to see it, I’m sorry. I told you that the resistance was not my destiny. I...”

Sean reached into his jacket and produced a Webley revolver. “So you can determine your own destiny, is that right, Viv? The oppression of your own people is too petty a matter for your attention? You decide what is important and leave the rest aside?”

I squinted at the revolver, at Sean’s shaking hand as he pointed it at my chest. “You can’t take me back, Sean. I won’t go.”

He gave a furious shake of his head. “That’s not why I’m here. Wellington and Starkey sent me. There have to be rules, Viv. Limits.

No matter how much you're hurting, you don't set your people on fire just to accomplish your ends. By God, you put a hole in my heart, Woman. I mean to put a hole in yours."

"Wait, Sean. Don't!" I felt my throat go dry as he extended the pistol and clenched his jaw.

"Goodbye, Viv." The report of the gun seemed almost trivial, the impact pushing me back a pace like a punch. It was just a tiny piece of lead, propelled by a pinch of powder. Something so small. Within the steel Goliath, I would have been totally unaware of it. Inside a machine, things were simpler. Understandable. Such things as human frailty were of no concern. Costs and consequences were barely heard questions above the din. Outside, however, the cruel teeth of mortality, of humanity always waited.

Everything pinwheeled, my legs numb, my mind reeling. A taut mooring line caught my foot, and I fell backward into the black water of the estuary. The flames rising from Albert Dock painted the topside of the still water as I felt the pull downward, felt the water push in and mix with the blood where the projectile had pierced me through. I would have no vengeance. I would never step out of my own shadow. If any memory of me lingered, it would be the memory of a traitor to the crown. I closed my eyes. I would allow the water into my mouth and nose, and then would come oblivion.



There was an angel in the deep, her arms coming about my waist, her bright hair flowing around like the soft waving of seaweed. The angel's lips touched mine, pushing breath into my lungs, life into tissues gone cold and bloodless. A light like the dawn over a placid sea bloomed around me.

Buoyed in the arms of the sea's angel, I rose from the mire of the estuary's bottom, into the smoky night, onto the decking of a small craft where I was born squalling, vomiting seawater onto the

wooden slats, chilled to the marrow.

I awoke again hours later, the soft roll of the cutter, the splash and skirl of the hull moving through the Irish Sea bringing me around. The below decks on the cutter was like being under the floor joists of a house with no proper cellar. Cramped and low and close. Still, the tiny coal stove burned warm, and the hammock held me softly. My head was filled with cotton, my eyes barely staying open. Behind the veil of the laudanum, the bullet wound throbbed in my right shoulder, a few inches below the collarbone. In the dimness, the angel of the waters loomed over me again, putting a spoon against my lips.

“Chrissa?” I whispered. Her face had not changed since I had last seen her, almost twenty years before. She was still beautiful and blonde with mysterious eyes whose color had no name in any language.

“Quiet now, dear one. I had to pull you from the teeth of death, and it will take time to regain your strength.”

The drug, a cloying sweet atop a bitter undertow, pushed me back down into a dark purgatory once more. The cutter rocked me like a babe in arms, and I did not wake for a long, long time.

*November 30th, 1882*

*North of Bayonne, France*

*Disputed Territory between the German Empire and the Papal States*

**M**y legs were steady enough to carry me the short distance to the foundry now. Christianne walked nearby, and we were also accompanied by a handful of engineers and machinists to whom I had not been introduced. I didn’t speak more than a smattering of French, in any case.

“They have been all atwitter about your schematics, Vivian. Though their male egos balk against such things, they have said

that you are a genius.” Christianne kept one hand on my elbow in case my strength should fail.

“*Mozart* was a genius. I merely have a talent for war.”

Chrissa raised her eyebrow at me.

“No need to give me that scolding look.”

“You’re not a child. It’s not my job to scold you, dear.”

“I’m sure it would suit your ends if I were not so hard of heart.”

I clenched my teeth around the words.

“My only concern, Vivian, is trying to help you. God knows that I wish I could have done more. It shames me that I left you to such harsh days as you lived. I couldn’t help you when you were alone and far too young, but I will help you now, if you’ll let me.”

I shrugged. The movement still hurt. The bullet had gone clean through, but it had left me weaker and in more pain that I cared to admit. The near-drowning hadn’t helped, nor had the burden of knowing my own people had ordered the murder. Much as I didn’t wish to acknowledge the mess I’d made on the way out of Liverpool, I would have to face up to it. I’d always known the cost I’d have to pay would be high. It was the price others would have to pay that I had fooled myself about.

At the foundry, they showed off the rough castings they’d made. The lead engineer, Jean Richard Montblanc, blathered on and on, obviously happy with himself for some reason.

I looked the castings over, placing my hands on the steel, letting myself push into the metal and feel its quality. I couldn’t suppress a sigh. “This is rubbish. There are voids in the casting, and the quality of the steel is poor. It needs more carbon, more chromium, more vanadium. There’s too much dross, as well. Whoever did the smelting did a lazy job of it. What are they using for flux? Don’t ask them that, Chrissa. It’ll be the start of a whole separate argument. Just tell them this: they’ll need to improve their processes before they’re ready to build. The quality of everything, from base stock to casting



to machining, they all have to be top-notch or they'll never get a working Goliath."

Montblanc knew without understanding my words that I'd delivered bad news. Chrissa interpreted, though it sounded like she'd softened the blow somewhat. It was probably for the best, egos being what they were. I hadn't even addressed the question of getting someone to drive the Goliath, provided they could craft one. I'd have to help them simplify the controls, and that would cost them in terms of maneuverability and quickness. What they would end up with would be a compromise solution. There was no way around it. It would still be a potent weapon, better than anything they'd seen.

Back in Liverpool, and in Swansea before that, I'd built them the time-tested Iron Juggernauts. The Welch Gruffyd. The classic Huxley-Stratton Mark II. They were simple, proven, and tractable. They had won a lot of wars back in the '40s and '50s, but they were outmoded now. Compared to the new Benz-Bavaria Juggernauts, they were slow, weakly armored, and under-gunned.

From the ground up, I'd designed the Goliath chassis for myself. No one on God's green earth could drive one like I could. No device that could be operated by a lone human had ever been so powerful. The Goliath prototype had made the German Juggernauts look like toys. It was only a hunk of twisted steel now, my dreams again reduced to sketches on paper. All the work up until now had been but a preamble. The real journey started now. If every step of the way were so punishing as escaping Liverpool, I had to wonder if I'd always been a fool. Could I really take vengeance upon a whole country, one all the way on the other side of the world?

I had to.

It was my sole purpose.

There was nothing else.

Still, my heart was like a cold anvil in my chest when I looked forward into the maelstrom of revenge. I hadn't expected to be

injured like this. The plan had been to be on a ship and halfway to the Ivory Coast by now.

“I’m tired.” I said. “Take me back to the villa, if you would. I’ll write down some things that the engineers can work on to improve their systems. I hope they’re well-funded, because good steel doesn’t come easy.”

“I’m sure they’ll appreciate any help you can give. This encampment is one of many, funded by the remnants of noble families that have lost so much to the occupation. While their wealth dwindles by the season, they are willing to give their last coin to see the Kaiser toppled and the Pope driven back to Rome. Jean Richard won’t rest until your requirements are met.”

My legs almost folded under me, and I had to cling pitifully to Chrissa’s arm to keep from toppling to the dirt. “The villa, please.”

“Of course,” Chrissa held me hard against her and led me away. The Frenchmen stayed at the foundry, now bickering about the way forward. It would take a lot more than empty words.

The faintness passed, replaced by the implacable churning need to go forward, to steer ever into the teeth of the wind. “I’ve delivered what you asked for, Chrissa. How long must I stay here?”

“You are not a prisoner. I was under the impression that you wanted my help, wished a place to stay until you decided what you wanted to do next.”

“You know what I mean. It’s just that I wish to be on my way, to get on with my sworn duty. That way lies east, and I need a ship to take me there.”

“Oh, I see. You are ready for a hard journey now, Vivian?”

“I soon will be. I can convalesce on a ship just as well as in a villa.” I was so used to adding a note of surety to my voice that my own doubts and frailty did not make themselves audible. The fact that the faintness had returned, and I leaned harder upon Chrissa’s arm by the time we arrived at the steps of the country house put

the lie to my bravado. I looked upon the five steps up to the grand door as if they were the foothills of the Alps.

“And it will soon be winter. Don’t be foolish. Regain your strength. Give the fighters here a little time, and you will find them to be good people. You know they cannot act upon your schematics without your help.”

“I’m sure they’re wonderful, but their difficulties are none of my affair.”

Chrissa withdrew her arm, without which I couldn’t climb the stairs. “The resistance here is friendly to women like us, dear one. Not many are. The Pope’s army would certainly spare us no mercy. What do you think I am doing so close to their borders? We must keep an eye on them at all times.”

“The Papists,” I spat, my skin turning cold at their mention. There was no count of how many witches they’d tortured, burned, and drowned during their inquisitions.

“That’s right, my dear. We cannot have them aligning with the Germans. It would be the end of all witches. Luckily, the Kaiser fears the Tsar, and the Tsar distrusts the Pope.”

“May they all fall into a deep, dark hole and never be seen again.”

“May it be so. Just as you say.”

*December 28th, 1882*

*North of Bayonne, France*

*Secret base camp for Les Épines de Fer (The Iron Thorns)*

It was easy to allow routine to take over, to become subsumed into a process. I wiped my sweaty brow and slipped my heavy welding gloves off, shutting down the augmented-coil plasma torch. Looking up, I surveyed the bare chassis of what the French rebels called *Le Centaure*. It wasn’t a Goliath, nor was it simply a

Juggernaut with some alterations. It was a whole new design. It was my best work yet. It would be easier to pilot with the improved primary balance of a quadrupedal design. I called it the Warhorse.

It would be tricky to coordinate the four legs at first, but I already had a good idea of how it could be accomplished. If I geared the motion of the legs such that the step pattern was specific to the speed, it could be as simple enough for the pilot. Select the gear, engage the clutches, and hang on for the ride. The quality of the steel the French were able to make had dictated a design that was heavier than I cared for, but the chassis was strong. Weight was not quite as great a concern with more legs upon which to spread the burden. Being able to use more mundane materials would make the design easier to mass produce, and the rebels would need a lot of warmachines. If they were to chisel their country from the side of the Kaiser's empire while keeping the Papists from coming up from Iberia, they'd need anything that could spit fire.

It was a good six weeks from completion, but I could already imagine the Warhorse coming to life under my hands. I hadn't thought about revenge in days. My nights had not been tortured with dreams of dying unknown, having never achieved my purposes. These were the best days. When I was designing, building, and testing, nothing else mattered. It was as close as I ever came to happy. In another life, perhaps the fire and steel of the workshop would have been all I needed. It had been enough for my Grandfather, the one who had laid the groundwork for the original Juggernaut. My father completed his work, showing the world something it had never seen with the Cameron-Lawrence Mark I.

A momentary flash from when I'd been a tiny girl came to me. I remembered reaching up, handing father the Appolon Spanner he'd asked for, so he could take a half turn out of one of the retaining bolts on his Juggernaut. I could no longer picture his face or hear his voice, but I remembered the broad, grease-stained hand, the

calloused thumb he would run against my jawline. I treasured the memory of him holding those thick and reassuring hands over my ears as the mechanics pushed a rough casting against one of the grinders. The workshop had been filled with a shower of sparks finer than any fireworks show.

“Oh, Daddy,” I whispered.

I turned from the Warhorse’s skeletal form and pushed out the door, onto the snowy ground. The sweat froze on my arms and brow, my breath catching at the sudden change from the sweltering shop to the winter’s chill outside.

It was good. It was as good as a slap across the cheek, bringing me around from the moment of childish reminiscence. It would be dark soon, and they would be serving dinner. The French favored rich, savory fare, but the constant work at the anvil, the English Wheel, and the welding torch kept the fat from sticking to my flanks. Every morning, I hiked up the steep hill to the north of the camp, doing the calisthenics the German soldiers did to keep themselves in fighting trim. My body had been so weak, the pain so fresh and intense the first few times.

Now, the bullet wound was well healed, and I could once more swing a hammer equal to any man. Chrissa had promised that she would put me in contact with a ship’s captain in Bayonne soon. He knew the route to Indochina and was willing to take me there for the right price. The money would be a problem, but the resistance would pay richly for a working Warhorse.

For now, I just had to keep working and stay strong. Weakness could be driven from the body by a force of will. As the daughter of Admiral Cameron, I’d grown up with the story of him forcing his left leg, shattered in the Opium Wars, to knit again and regain its former strength. I flexed my hands, stooping to the snow to scrub some of the soot from them. The blast of sharp, burning cold was part of being alive. Comfort yielded nothing. Sentimentality was

weakness. Doubt was an enemy to be vanquished with effort and determination.

Snow up to my knees, I stood looking out at the tree line beyond the encampment. It took all my philosophy, all my remaining strength not to fall prey to the weakness of the average, to want surety and a safe home. “You won’t have those things. Not for a long time. Perhaps never.”

Everywhere I went, I was consumed by conflict, cursing myself and everyone nearby to suffering and tribulation. What good had I ever done on this earth? Had I ever amounted to anything worthwhile? It seemed that I was doomed to forever swim in the deepening gyre of war, but was my sworn vendetta the right war to fight? Was I a madwoman? Sean had believed it to be so. I didn’t know. I only knew that it was impossible to stop now. Whatever my faults, I would never quit. Though it would be easy to stay here, a place that was beginning to feel like home, I had to keep moving. If Chrissa wouldn’t share her connections in Bayonne, I’d have to make my own.

The hunger in my belly intensified, making me all the more forlorn. I’d go and clean up, then take dinner in my rooms. I would just check the larger workshop first. My plans to have the French mechanics retrofit piston engines to their handful of LaSorte Juggernauts were coming to fruition. They had the engines built to my specifications and were installing one. I needed to be there. They would have to be careful about regulating pressure as the piston engine’s output was over a far greater range, and it could create spike pressures that they’d never been forced to contend with on the old Bourdeaux steam power units.

I pulled my jacket hard around my shoulders, shivering a little as I crossed the bare space between my small workshop and the huge hangar where the Iron Thorns built and maintained their warmachines. Inside, I listened for the constant muttering sound

of the Frenchmen bickering, joking, and complaining. I knew just enough of their language to know they couldn't simply do one thing. They had to be grouching about the quality of the wine or the fact that their woman was cruel or that their working conditions were lamentable. They also seemed to be incapable of working without stinking up the place with their cigarettes, cigars, and tobacco pipes, all of which I found revolting.

All the expected smoke and rumor was missing. I knitted my brow, my heart pounding with worry. Too much quiet was no good in a workshop. It generally indicated that a machine had gone awry and someone had been injured or killed. I burst into the first working bay and found no one. The Juggernaut was gone, as was the crew. There were splashes of yellow paint congealing on the floor and the whole shop was a shambles. Tools were not put back where they belonged. Cupboards stood open. Cups of coffee stood upon untidy work benches half full and forgotten. The second workshop was the same, as was the third.

Heart in my mouth, I stepped into the fourth garage. The Juggernaut was still there. The crew, however, consisted of just one man. I didn't recognize him but came forward nonetheless, calling out a hello in my poor French.

The man turned around, wiping oil from his hands. He was quite tall, with the muscle of a pugilist, but the eyes of a scholar. His hands, long and adroit, flicked the shop rag in such a way as to have it land on the workbench to his left. In the dimness of the garage, I was quite near to him before I realized how dark his skin was, how his beard glistened like obsidian. I looked up into his eyes and was momentarily at a loss for words. His age was impossible to estimate. He had the taught, clear skin of a young man, but some ineffable quality made him seem much older.

"You are the English woman? The one who has the magic of machines?" His English was clear, but I couldn't place his accent. I

got the impression he knew exactly who I was and was not surprised to see me. For just a moment, I thought that I'd seen this man before. No, it was impossible. That was when I was a tiny girl, and this fellow could have been no more than a boy then, even if my surmise about his age proved true. I was just tired and hungry.

“Where is everyone?” I asked, regaining my self-possession.

“I sent them away. They were incompetent,” he said with a wry grin that told me was only half-joking. “Without their meddling, I have the engine installed and ready for testing. I rigged up an expansion tank and a pop-off valve to combat the pressure spikes.”

I brushed past him, climbing the ladder at the back of the Juggernaut. I swung the engine cover to the side and surveyed the work. I could find no fault and said as much.

“Thank you, my lady,” the unknown mechanic said, sketching a small bow.

I approached him again. “Who did you say you were?”

He smiled. His physical beauty was more than a little distracting. “I neglected to introduce myself.”

“Perhaps you had better.”

He nodded. “They call me ‘The Moor.’”

“I’m sure that they call me a variety of things, as well. The most frequent seem to be “The Witch” or however you say “Flame-Haired Slave Driver” in French. I think a proper name is always better than an epithet, however. Call me Viv. What shall I call you?” I put my hand forward for him to shake. My propensity for brusqueness is an unfortunate but intractable character flaw. I made my peace with it long ago.

“I am Hisham al Nuri.” He deftly scooped up my hand and brought it to his lips. A blast of warmth coursed through me, erasing any lingering hint of the winter cold outside. Such familiarity would earn a slap for most men, but I failed to protest or pull away. A long moment passed before he released control of my hand. The feel of

his beard against my knuckles was not altogether unpleasant.

“I haven’t seen you here before, Hisham,” I said, if only to dispel the tension of his gaze.

“They brought me here because I know metal, and because I know machines. And, of course, I have significant philosophical differences with the Papists.”

“What sort of differences?”

“I believe they should weigh themselves down with stones and hurl themselves into the sea. They are not disposed to do so.”

I studied this stranger. I sensed that there was a lot more to his tale, a long road behind him. I felt almost as if he knew me well before today. I remembered that my father’s men sometimes spoke of a man from Damascus when I was a tiny girl, but I’d never been allowed to speak to him. In any case, that fellow would have been an old man by now. I pushed the thought aside.

“My sisters across Europe are no friends to the Pope. You are a long way from home, Hisham. Your enmity with the Papists must burn strong inside you.”

Hisham gave a smile that was more feral than kind. “It burns strongly, indeed. My family lived in Cordoba, once. I am not as far from home as you might think. I live for the day when Iberia can be my home again.” He seemed to be able to step closer and closer to her without actually moving. Up close, Hisham smelled of scented oil and spice beneath the workshop smells of carbon and oil and hot metal. “What is your story, Viv?” He said the name strangely, and with a smile I didn’t quite know how to interpret.

“I intend—” I began, but somehow couldn’t quite articulate my life’s destiny to this handsome stranger. “I only intend to be here until spring. I am helping the French rebels with their warmachines.”

“Helping? Completely revolutionizing, it seems. I saw a small piston engine in Damascus, running on vegetable oil, but it was a mere novelty. These alcohol burning power plants you’ve designed are

miraculous. Do you know the functional lifespan of such an engine?”

It was at that moment that the door burst open and an injured resistance fighter tumbled in, his breath coming in a gasp, half his face covered with a deep burn. He reached out, jabbering too quickly for me to catch anything more than the stray word.

“What is it, Raul? You’re talking too fast for me to understand,” I told him.

“Battle, mademoiselle. You,” he stopped to gasp for breath. “Help us.” He segued back to French, but I got precious little more out of his second try.

“He says the rest of the Juggernauts are engaged in a desperate battle. He wants to know if you can pilot the prototype, and if you’ll help them.”

I cracked my knuckles, stretched my shoulders, and climbed up to the LaSorte’s cockpit. “It seems I must,” I said over my shoulder. “I’ll need your help mounting the guns, if you don’t mind.”



*Les Épines de Fer* were clever. They’d caught wind of a Papist scouting party coming north, and they’d quickly painted their Juggernauts with the Kaiser’s yellow and black. The thing they hadn’t counted on was how potent the Papists’ new steam chariots were. The French had the Pope’s scout force hemmed in at the back of a valley. They were tattered, their Juggernauts short on fuel, water, and ammunition.

My hybrid Juggernaut bristled with every weapon we’d been able to mount, including a powder-fired captive bolt gun I’d been working on for the Goliath chassis. The weight made the Juggernaut perilous to drive, but having three times as much power did a lot to defray the extra mass.

It would do no good to wait and try to make a plan with the resistance. I thundered past them and into the contested ground, scooping up the smoking remains of a Castillo-Vultaggio *Espada* and

plowing forward, using it as a shield. I charged at the corner of their lines, and a steam chariot came forward, its automatic gun chattering. The chariot was low to the ground, rolling on three wheels. It seemed big enough to only carry one pilot, its outward exterior covered with light armor. There was an opening no bigger than five inches where the pilot could see out. The automatic gun rode atop the chariot and was fully articulated. The fast *tap, tap, tap* of concussions against my armor let me know that its armaments were not of inconsequential power.

I reached through the perforated back of the Castillo and grasped its fire control stick. Its chest cannons roared, the lead slugs slamming hard into the oncoming chariot. As it slewed into me, I planted my Juggernaut's feet on the hurtling chariot, smashing the metal inward, and destroying its cockpit.

The kinetic energy of the impact launched my warmachine upward, and I felt myself kicking the Juggernaut's legs as it soared through the night air. All around me, the sparking traces of machine gun fire cut through the purple heavens. A firebomb went off a yard below the LaSorte's feet, a momentary sun above the plains of *parabellum*.

In battle, there was ecstasy unparalleled by anything I'd ever known. I laughed to think that I'd ever be happy simply inventing machines. No, I had to experience them *in extremis*. Nothing else would ever suffice.

The dust and snow burst upward in a cloud around my Juggernaut as it landed. Another steam chariot appeared from my right, and I swung what little was left of the Castillo's chassis against it. The chariot slewed, turning on its side and revealing its unarmored belly. Slinging the Castillo aside, I punched into the warmachine's turbine drive, then engaged my tungsten carbide bolt gun. Steam exploded outward. I could faintly hear the sound of the driver's scream before I shuddered under the impacts of a heavy gun further into the Papist's line.

At the gloomy border of the trees, their Juggernauts lumbered into view, all red and blue and gold. I forced the LaSorte to go to a knee and took shelter behind the downed chariot. A dozen guns trained on my position, hammering the downed chariot into scrap. Billowing clouds of steam obscured my position, but the flashing of the enemy guns still marked them out, even through the darkened fog and airborne dust. Engaging my automatic firebomb cannons, I swept from left to right, setting the trees aflame.

I followed that barrage, spraying in the other direction with my high-speed machine gun. Saplings and tree limbs shook and fell to earth under the constant deluge of lead, the entire scene devolving into madness. The enemy fire slackened under the assault. A burning Castillo *Espada* Juggernaut toppled, hydraulic lines bursting and adding to the blaze.

Seizing the initiative, I forced the LaSorte, now down to one useful arm, to lumber into the woods. I was faintly aware that the rest of the resistance Juggernauts followed. I knew there was nothing on Earth that the Papists feared like they feared a witch.

They were right to do so. Drawing upon the deep reserves of my magic, I forced the warmachine forward against them. Steel reformed into the voids left by enemy cannon shot. The engine roared, pushed well beyond its safe operational range. The church's knights had always been the ones covered by steel, with armies at their back. My sisters had fallen to them one by one, burned or drowned or beheaded. They had never seen a witch like me.

The darkness of the wood danced with lambent fire. The Papists, trapped in the deep end of the valley, fought as best they could. Their steam chariots, slowed by the rough terrain, were of little use, and the few remaining Castillo Juggernauts fell before us, either blown apart or abandoned. I tried to chase the retreating enemy, but they'd placed a shaker mine in their wake. Its explosion took one of the legs off the LaSorte prototype. I went down hard. They pulled

me out of the burning wreckage of my warmachine, ears wringing, both eyes blackened by the impact, blood in my mouth. It was the taste of victory.



After the fight was over, after the tears for the fallen and the toasts to the heroes, the hybrid Juggernaut was held up as the only reason that they'd prevailed. Along with striking a solid blow to the Papists, they'd been able to do so under the Kaiser's banner. Beyond that, they'd been able to capture three chariots and a few Castillo Juggernauts that were whole enough to be repaired.

A few of the younger pilots, Alphonse and Fabrice, stood close by and regarded me with the adoring eyes of puppies. Chrissa had insisted that I wear a dress to the victory soiree. It had been a poor idea.

I was uncomfortable with the drunken praise from the French pilots, but it seemed to have run its course at last. Alphonse's eyes turned to another, more receptive woman and Fabrice was deep enough in his cups that he would soon sleep. I nursed a glass of Champagne, exhausted but filled with enthusiasm for the work ahead.

"You know what this means, Chrissa?" I asked. "It means they can mount further hostility under the guise of the Papists, urging the Kaiser into a war he doesn't want. It works to our favor. In an extended engagement, the Huns would notice that there were no Spanish Juggernauts, but now we'll be able to field a few. If we could capture some Benz-Bavarias..."

Chrissa put a hand on my cheek, her eyes patient. "I think it means you have begun to feel a kinship with *Les Épines de Fer*. Your eyes are looking at things nearby today rather than off to some distant horizon."

Chrissa's words sobered me for a moment. "Well, I am here, and it is winter, and there are enemies to fight. For the moment, it is enough."

“Enough?” Chrissa inclined her head to where Hisham stood. I saw that he eschewed alcohol, drinking goat’s milk. He nodded my way, his dark eyes filled with fondness that I had done nothing to foster. “Is our life so filled with poverty that we must endure on *enough?*”

“The last man I tried to love ended up shooting me in the chest. I am no good at romance.”

“It can sometimes be about something simpler than that.”

I felt my cheeks redden. “I have always attempted to be a lady in such matters.” I did not feel it was necessary to share that my attempts had frequently been unsuccessful.

“You will forgive me, my dear, but we are in France. In any case, remember that there were no marriage vows spoken over your parents. Sometimes the world puts us in certain places, certain configurations. We merely have to find the grace to do what is sensible.”

Mentioning my parents put a damper on the celebration. I rose, slipping out into the growing blizzard. I didn’t need any adulation from the rebels. I would help them. That was all. Becoming involved in their fight as anything more than a tactician or an engineer would be a mistake. If I happened to pilot one of my prototypes from time to time, it meant nothing. I had an array of enemies. Many were shared with the Iron Thorns. Here, I could develop my warmachines in the heat of battle, a value higher than price in these matters. Everyone benefited.

As to the handsome Moor, I would refrain from giving him any evidence of my fondness. Surely, any romantic entanglement was out of the question.



Within the workshop, every day taught me more about the metal, about my talent. When I touched a machine, I had knowledge of it. Knowledge like they said God possessed of the living things on



the earth. Just as a sparrow couldn't fall without His cognizance, I knew every burr of wear on a camshaft, every pinhole boil where the coolant of an engine failed to flow as it should.

While the black of deep night still held sway, I would burst awake, my body rejuvenated, my mind turning again to the work. The Warhorse was nearly finished, weeks ahead of what I dared to hope. With Hisham's help, the French engineers had all their LaSortes converted to my alcohol burners, and they'd managed to retrofit one of the Castillos and one of the chariots. Of all their modifications, the chariot was the most promising.

It was almost dangerously quick with the increased power. The engineers had dubbed it *Diable Rapide*. None of the current tactics for warmachine engagements could cope with its maneuverability. It was capable of over fifty miles an hour on rough terrain, and well more than that on a smooth track. The basic idea was ripe for further advancement. They could be made larger, faster, tougher. With their relative simplicity, they would be able to field hundreds of them, rather than dozens. It would change everything. Juggernauts would rule on the toughest ground, out in the unsettled brush at the edge of civilization, but where there were roads . . .

My morning ritual of exercise had progressed from a hike to a run. In the gray false dawn, I pressed myself to run a little harder each day. The winter-bare limbs of the trees scratched against my oilcloth coat as I brushed by at speed.

Bursting onto the clear, craggy hilltop, I almost regretted that the run was over. The sun nipped at the horizon behind me as I looked west, my breath coming out in puffs of mist all around me. It was the best I had ever felt, the most purposeful.

There was work to be done, fascinating work. It went to a good cause. Every warmachine I built could push back my enemies and assure that my sisters in witchcraft would remain safe from harm. The Papists could not be allowed to attempt another purge. The

Germans needed to feel tribulation at every step and be kept at odds with Rome. Whispered news said that the Tsar's grip on Russia was tenuous and that any significant failure on his part would doom him and plunge his whole empire into chaos.

As I did my calisthenics, a smile stole upon my lips. All it would take was enough of a tremor in the ground, and all the matchstick houses my enemies had built would come crashing down. I could arrange for that tremor.

"When there is hard work to be done, a good man is well pleased," I told myself as I stretched and prepared for the run back to the encampment. The shop foreman in the Gryffud factory at Swansea had liked to say it when the men trailed in late and hung over, complaining of the work and the heat of the forge. Often as not, Mr. Greyfeather had spat the words at the malingering workers like a curse, but I'd always found comfort in them. He'd never had to say them on my account. No one had ever had to urge me to work.

With the thrill of the science in my heart, I didn't have to think about how far I was from fulfilling my oath. Japan was a world away, and the people directly responsible for my parent's death were likely wizened oldsters, if not long dead. I didn't have to think of the deep longing in my belly, how my mind kept turning to how it would feel to have Hisham's arms around me. I could even put aside the shameful longing for what I'd had with Sean.

I rose up on my toes and started the downhill run to the encampment. Troubling thoughts could be pounded into shape, just like the twisted armor of a battle-scarred Juggernaut. Perhaps they didn't yield so easily as steel, but that did nothing to deter me.

When the familiar form of one of the villa's servants appeared at the side of the trail, swinging a heavy limb at me, all thoughts of what I wanted and what I wished for cracked like a poor weld.

As the wood caught me low on the belly, swung as hard as a cricket bat, the air blasted from my lungs. The deep and fundamental

pain took all the strength from my legs. I was suddenly tumbling downslope, a rag doll in the clutches of gravity. The morning pinwheeled, sky and earth trading, the ground stomping at random parts of me like a heavy and malignant boot heel.

I crashed against the base of a tree, ineffectually trying to pull air into my lungs. My mouth was filled with chalk and acid, the enormity and scope of the pain overwhelming. I raised one hand before me, missing half of its nails, blood dripping down onto my face as I gaped like a fish by the riverside.

The servant appeared, his face twisting into a wrathful snarl. “A pious man cannot suffer a witch to live,” he said in Italian accented English.

He drew back his foot and kicked me. The impact was savage, delivered without aim, digging the hard toe of his boot into my flesh from every angle. I did my best to cover up, to roll into a ball, but the beating went on and on. I tried to scream, but lacked the strength to utter more than a muffled cry as the blows kept raining down. Would he kick me to death here, almost within sight of the villa? Would this be my ignominious end?

At some point, the shock descended, and the pain was not as bad. I felt my body jump, felt the flesh bruise, felt a rib crack with almost clinical distance. The idea that someone, a whole group of people, could hate my kind with such venom frightened me on a deep level, a level beyond even the fear for my own life.

Strangers would go to great lengths to hunt me down and kill me just because I was a witch. There had never been any choice for me. I’d been born into it. Like my red hair or propensity to freckles when I got too much sun, it was an inevitable feature. A kick landed against my tailbone so hard that lightning sparks traveled down my nerves and rendered my legs insensate.

Without air, my body seized. I could no longer summon the energy to cover up. Face up, blood coming from one ear, my nose,

my mouth, and a gash above one eye, I looked into the face of my attacker.

My killer.

He met my eyes, the fury burned away, his breath coming hard with the exertion of the attack. Drained of his manic hatred, he was utterly forgettable, a faceless man.

A perfect spy.

He knelt, bringing out a rag and a small flask. He wet the rag down and put the stopper back in the bottle, tucking it away in his jacket. He pushed it into my face. I tried to turn away, to shield myself, but he batted my hands away with bruising roughness and held my chin still.

The rag smelled like ether. The light fell out of the dawn.



I awoke to the creak of wagon wheels. I tried to move but found that I'd been trussed up thoroughly, with no eye toward economy with the use of rope. My ankles, knees, hands, and arms had all been meticulously bound. My mouth was filled with fabric, such that I could barely breathe. My whole body was bruised down to the bone.

My captor leaned from the driving bench of the wagon so that I could see his unremarkable face. "For your sake, I am sorry you proved so easy to capture. It would have been a mercy if I had been forced to kill you." He shrugged. "Ah, well. It's better for me that I caught you alive. You are worth more. Still, a man doesn't like to think of any woman being put to the question by the Inquisitors. Perhaps even witches do not deserve such a fate. Then, of course, there is the thought that all these blueprints will go to your enemies. In the end, you will admit everything, if only for a respite from the pain. All secrets will be revealed, all knowledge passed to the Pope's ears. Of course, all your friends will also die screaming."

A bitter sea of dread washed over me. The Inquisitors were



fanatics. They would stop at nothing. There were no limits to the methods they would employ against a witch. They would break a woman, then continue torturing her for weeks longer, just to be sure before putting her to the torch. The whispers of their crimes filled me with a cold fear I couldn't shake.

A desperate, small voice reminded me that I was still alive. He had not broken me yet. Better men than this one had tried. I clamped my eyes closed and tried to rest. There would be a chance. He would make a mistake, or whoever came after him. If they thought that I would go easy, that I would give up, they didn't know me at all. I was hurt so badly, though, so thoroughly. As strong as I had made my body, no human could absorb a beating that bad and simply walk away.

He didn't stop until well after dusk and, by then, I was so sore from the constant jostling of the wagon and the tightness of my bonds that he had to carry me like a sack of grain. Hunger gnawed at me. I shook with weakness. Everything felt leaden, swollen, and half-dead.

The Vatican spy pushed me down in the mud and dug out a fire pit, lining it with stones. He left my hands bound before me, but I was otherwise untied. I looked out into the gloom of the forest, but the darkened boughs' song of freedom was a false one. Any feeble attempt I made to steal away would not take me far. I was beaten for the moment, and the Papist knew it by looking into my eyes.

There was plenty of deadfall wood nearby, and he soon had a fire going. Until the warmth touched me, I didn't realize how bone-chilled I was. The weakest part of my mind shouted of the futility of my life, of the fact that I would be tortured, made to tell all I knew, and finally killed. My parents would be ashamed of me. So much time wasted. So many bridges burned, and for what? Was I so different from this zealot? Hatred clogged my heart and blinded my eyes. I lusted for the death of strangers and threw those

who befriended me into the bonfire of my dark ambition. I did not deserve to live, to win.

I rolled away from the fire, hiding my face, and wept.

The spy busied himself with preparing food, having at least enough human decency to leave me alone with my shame. I wallowed in despair until a rustling came, then a quick, angry word, then a gunshot. The quality of the fire had changed. It roared and whipped, rising higher than a man's height suddenly. Sparks burst all around. A low word, guttural, sounded from the edge of the road.

The Vatican spy, backpedaling, tripped over my legs, going down hard and losing his pistol. His eyes met mine for a moment, then he looked beyond my shoulder. I had never seen such abject terror in my life. His face contorted like running candle wax.

*"Non avrete la mia anima!"* he shouted, crossing himself and scrambling backward.

Without thinking, I forced myself to my knees, my hands still bound at the wrist, and grabbed for the pistol in the leaf litter. I had not seen a model like it, but as my fingers touched it, I understood its every working, my powers flaring. Injuries forgotten, I knew this was the only chance I would get, my one opportunity. Whatever nightmare loomed behind me was a distant second to this.

I pointed the gun and pulled the trigger again and again, until the spy's face was an unrecognizable mass of blood and bone and the mechanism of the weapon locked open. The smell of cordite and burned powder rising from the barrel and the breach was familiar, a smell I associated with victory.

I only wanted to run, but I was far too weak. I crawled away, away from whatever it was in the surging firelight. Maybe I, a witch, a murderess, a madwoman, was truly the sin against God that they said. Perhaps a burning angel loomed over me with a sword made of light.

I could crawl no further. The one panicked moment of effort had



expended all that I had left. My body swayed, shivered, and went slack. I allowed my face to come down in the leaf litter. It was over, whatever came next. I was beaten. I closed my eyes and waited for the end. I wouldn't beg or scream. If they were foolish enough to let me live, they would quickly find the error in their ways.

Soft footsteps came nearer. A hand touched my shoulder, smoothed my hair, so gentle. I felt a touch at the crux of my knee, felt my body roll. White-hot pain as my broken rib was forced to bear weight shocked my eyes open, a cry upon my lips.

Hisham was the burning angel, his hands so warm against me, so gentle as he hoisted me up from the muddy floor of the forest and carried me. The light of the fire was in his eyes, the lambent coals standing against his brow like a crown of embers.



Night turned to day above me, every rut upon the road a punishment, every hour an eternity of pain. I felt myself slipping away. Something was broken within me, bleeding inside. Hisham looked back, his dark eyes filled with fear and sadness. Through the night, he would hold his hand out to me from the driving bench of the horse cart. When his skin touched mine, warmth flooded through me, pushing aside the chill and clinging preamble of death. By dawn, I could no longer move. My eyes closed, but I knew neither sleep nor death.

Within my own mind, I walked through a jungle such as I had seen in paintings from India. I wore nothing but a tattered gray shift, my feet bare to the clawing, sawtoothed vines. Instead of lush green, every frond of the close tropical forest was leeched of color, the smell of dry old death. The grumble of jungle cats arose from the trees. I could see their eyes burning in the dimness. A giant creature moved in the forest, knocking down trees as it charged in my direction. The forest canopy shook, the ground trembled. I ran, my lacerated feet leaving bloody prints in my wake.

At last, it was silent again, but for my labored breathing. A battlefield spread out all around me, with the mortal remains of a thousand men piled high. They had all been torn asunder by the instruments of war. A sepulchral chill was in the air. Before me, the wreckage of many Mark I Juggernauts, their armor pierced and burned to uselessness. Within their twisted chassis, I saw the old bones of their long dead pilots.

Behind me, across my shoulders, a monstrous shadow fell. Like an elephant with a hundred arms, it reared, growing to colossal proportions. Exhausted and beaten, I fell to my knees before it. The shadows of a hundred scimitars rose up, but as they arced toward my neck, the earth below me cracked open, and I fell, swallowed whole.

The fall deposited me, with the bizarre logic of dreams, into a plain stone room lit with a single hanging lantern. Looking up, I met an old woman's eyes. She was of the Far East, I knew. Perhaps from Japan. I had no way of knowing. She knelt on a thin reed mat, some sort of shrine nearby. As she regarded me, her eyes filled with pity and perhaps disgust. I bowed down, knowing I was worthy of both sentiments.

"Hatred leaves little room for wisdom," she said, her voice echoing as if from an immense distance. "Destiny is a chain we throw across our own shoulders, a method by which we enslave ourselves."

"Who are you?" I asked.

"I am an old woman whose day has come and gone. The vital questions involve you, War Witch. Will you damn yourself, as your forebears did, or will you find a worthy purpose?"

I tried to answer, but couldn't utter a sound. I put a hand to my face, feeling bolts and rivets holding a steel plate over my mouth. I tried to scream behind the armored gag, but I could only make the sound of grinding metal. The old woman faded, only the lingering, damning presence of her eyes remaining.

The ground beneath me shook and gave way. All else was obscured as a dragon of the mountain's root arose, towering above me. It spat forth a misshapen skull, itself taller than I was. Looking into the depth of an empty eye socket, a glimmer of green like an emerald held up to candlelight shown. I fell into that glimmer, into a deep pool where fools drown unknown.



Golden hair flowed around me. Life flared. The shades of death receded into the far corners of the room. Chrissa's hands cupped my cheeks, her face drawn with fatigue and filled with worry.

"Dear child," she whispered. "I should have protected you so much better."

I opened my mouth, but she put a finger across my split lips.

At her shoulder, Hisham's face appeared. I recognized the wallpaper from the villa. He reached and clasped my shoulder. My magic stirred in response, as it had never done but for the touch of metal. "This will help you heal." His hand went to his belt, where he unsheathed a curved dagger. The brass hilt and pommel were beautifully crafted, but the blade itself was the marvel, all wavy lines of light and dark metal, flowing together so intricately that the eye couldn't follow it.

"The steel my forefathers in Damascus invented. A thousand folds, Viv. You will not see its equal."

Weak as I was, he had to help me grip the hilt. My magic plunged into the complexity of the forge weld, an endless frothing ocean. Flaring, surging, the talent was awake, strong as it had ever been. It was more than my flesh, more constant and lasting. It drank from the earth and the secret places that had no name. I was, at last, warm. For a time, everything was gone, and there was no pain.



Hours or days later, I opened my eyes to the sounds of voices in my outer room. I still gripped the hilt of the dagger. Setting it down, I found that much of my strength had returned. Yellow bruises covered me, but the deep pain was gone. I touched my stomach and ribs, where the worst of it had been. I was still tender. It would be many days before I could swing a hammer again, but I was alive. I sat up, the movement revealing how weak I still was. I opened the letter I'd left on my nightstand. It was from Captain Elias Cora, a Belgian ex-patriot and ship captain. I'd been corresponding with him, and the letter gave preliminary agreement to take me as far east as Bombay in return for building him an alcohol burning engine for one of his landing craft. We were scheduled to meet in Bayonne on the first of June. It was settled, then. I would do all I could for the Iron Thorns until then and wish them well thereafter.

People moved in the room outside. I hid the letter, laying back down. I turned my attention to the voices outside the thin bedroom door.

"We almost lost her out there," Chrissa said. "It's time we told her the truth. She deserves to know."

"Her heart knows she is cursed. It has always known. As to the rest, if you think she's ready, so be it," Hisham said.

"You know how important she is, Hisham. We must protect her."

"She will come to protect us in the end, Christianne. I've seen it in the fire."

"I think you've seen it in your dreams more than anything. You hope you can make up for all that you did on her mother's behalf. You know very well what will happen if Viv goes down the paths Melanie did. If she turns, we will not be able save her. I love her like a daughter, but I've made promises that can't be broken."

"She's never called upon the dark. All those books were locked away. You assured me no one has ever told her about her mother, not the truth."

“None of us have, Hisham. Why would we? She deserved a chance to start her life without that hanging on her shoulders. We have to remember, though, she was with Mrs. Peddowe for years, and that woman was Melanie’s creature. We can’t know the sort of poison that the old crone poured into the girl’s ear. The nature of her gift drives her on into the black winds at every turn. With a gift like that, no seer could tell what will come. She is the axis upon which so many destinies twist.”

“We can only hope, and have faith. We can only love her as best we can.”

I strained to hear more, but their voices faded away, leaving me alone with a thousand questions. Who was Hisham really? How did he figure into my struggle? What did they mean about the curse? What did they mean about my mother, about Mrs. Peddowe? What truth had been withheld from me? I didn’t even know what calling upon the dark was, let alone how to do it.

I searched my memories, considering the trajectory of my life. Yes, it was easy to imagine a curse hung upon me. Nothing good had ever lasted. Every friend and lover had been torn from me, often by my own actions. If there was a battle, I was doomed to be at the center of it.

I had always thought the world cruel and myself to blame for most of my troubles. In the end, it didn’t matter if there was a curse. I had always been able to bring down suffering on myself and everyone around me. Had it been the same for my mother? What was the truth?

The fatigue and pain weighed on me once more, and I closed my eyes. I would make them tell me the whole truth. I just needed rest. The dreams from before didn’t return, but I still felt the old woman’s eyes on me.



“I know there are things I haven’t been told,” I said.

Chrissa put down her fork and gave me a grave look over the top of her bowl of honeyed apples. Hisham sat back in his chair and sipped his coffee. “For instance, who are you really, Hisham?”

He nodded, putting down his drink. “Is that were you’d like to start?”

“I saw the crown of embers when you came for me.”

He squinted. “I did not think you’d remember that.”

“I remember a great deal. Speak the truth now.”

He looked to Chrissa. She shrugged. “Your mother got me involved with this war a long time ago. She heard that a few of my kind still lived and sought me out. Melanie was a queen, and what she demanded, I did. I was one among many, but that doesn’t mean I am not accountable for the things I did. She ordered me to come to Liverpool and apply my skills to the Juggernaut project.

“Through so many campaigns, I was there. I stood behind your father because Melanie wished it, but I grew to love the man and respect him. In the end, I went to Japan in secret, even after Melanie sent me away. I was always behind him, repairing the Juggernauts, sometimes piloting them. I used any power and artifice I could to keep him alive, to keep him winning. I was on one of the few ships that escaped. Defeated, I found the walk home from Korea too short to assuage my shame. In the end, I couldn’t save him.”

I sat very still. “That was so long ago, and you have every appearance of a young man. How is that?”

“My people aspire only to be peaceful craftsmen. We love the heat of the forge and the smell of the metal as it glows in the flames. We have been making swords and armor since history began. We have a talent for fire and all that can be created using it. Sadly, we are hated for our gift, called warlock, wizard, demon. There are but few of us left, killed equally by greedy warlords and hateful zealots.”

“You have said a lot and told me nothing,” I said.

Hisham let out a breath. “We are *Ifrit*. Bound with fire, our souls encompassed by rings of steel. I tried to resist Melanie’s power once, and she captured a part of my magic. She was too mighty. From that moment, she ruled me. She made me betray Admiral Cameron, a true friend, to his demise.”

“And I suppose your appearance here is no accident,” I said.

“I owed it to your father to make sure you lived. He was a good man, in his way, and I couldn’t stand the thought of his daughter paying the price for your mother’s sins.”

My skin went cold. “Her sins?” I wasn’t sure I wanted to hear any more. With every word, they chipped away at the truths I’d always used to justify my actions, my views, my bloody goals. Cowardice would not do, and so I pressed on.

Chrissa broke in. “Your mother was—”

“A monster,” Hisham finished.

I made a fist and held it against my chest. I wasn’t ready to hear this. In my younger years, I would have burst from the room, run half way to Bayonne fueled by wrath, and sworn to never speak to either of them again. That day, I couldn’t take that road. The voice I’d heard in my dream told me that I couldn’t afford to.

“Mrs. Peddowe said she was a good queen. Stern, yes. Filled with a zeal for power? Of course. But not evil. She swore to me that the reason my mother had not come was the weight of her duties, all the many threats to us from the growing tyrants of Europe. My mother loved me, loved my father.”

“Mrs. Peddowe lied,” Hisham said flatly.

I pushed my plate away, the emotion of the moment causing me to overturn it, shattering the porcelain. “I don’t believe you. Not a word of it.”

Hisham’s eyes hardened. “Whatever you were told about your mother, it was far from the truth. It was a story made up for little children. Melanie was a queen who ruled through terror and force.

Those she could use, she enslaved. Those who fought her did not survive. Your father fought to keep you away from her with all his might. He had come to know the evil within her. In you, she didn't see a child, but a weapon to be honed for battle. Robert Cameron and I were brothers in this, both simply disposable tools to serve Melanie's ambition."

I tried to summon air to speak, but my throat worked to no avail. Whatever pain I'd suffered during my abduction paled before this.

"I am so sorry, dear one. We didn't want to tell you about these things." Chrissa reached out, trying to touch my hand. I pulled it away.

"I deserved to know," I told them. I made myself continue. "The time for ignorance and innocence has passed." I wiped furiously at my face, irritating my bruises and cuts.

Chrissa pushed her lips together. "We lost your mother to the dark so long ago, before I was born. Before my mother or grandmother was born. She sought out power anywhere she could find it, and had no compunction in doing anything necessary to grasp it. In our past...there was a time when witches performed rites that we are ashamed to admit today. The old ones would make sacrifices in blood. They would call upon all the unclean powers that hunger for agony and life extinguished.

"Those rites are forbidden, and have been for many centuries, but Melanie was not a woman who would be constrained by laws. It is our sin that we were too weak or frightened to hold her to account. Some that hold hatred for us do so for justifiable reasons. Every sin the Papists accuse us of has been committed. We are wiser now, but the stain of our past will take a long time to wash clean."

"These sacrifices, did my mother make them? Did she call the dark powers to aid her?"

Chrissa's eyes were hollow and devoid of hope. "Yes. All the worst deeds you can imagine, Melanie performed."

“This is my bloodline? One of sin and evil? This is my curse?”

They looked at each other, both of them clearly uncomfortable.

“You have always been more your father’s daughter,” Chrissa said, but her voice lacked conviction. “We hoped that you would find your way and avoid the darkness.”

“And now?” I asked. “You have seen how imperfect a creature I am.”

Hisham shook his head. “We still hope. No one has ever seen a power quite like yours. It can yet be used to good purpose.”

“The only thing I’m good at is creating killing machines. My soul is built for war. Where’s the good in that?”

“The gift chooses us, but we decide how to use it. Some of us are born beneath a shadow, but we are not damned from birth. I refuse to believe that,” Chrissa said, reaching out to me. “We all have an opportunity to walk out from under that shadow.”

“Tell me the real story of how they died,” I demanded. I couldn’t let myself stop to think too long or I would lose the heart to go on.

Chrissa withdrew her hands. “When Melanie told us that she wished to go east and challenge the Revered Grandmothers in Japan, we urged her to reconsider. Auguries had been thrown. Their magic was fading. In a decade, there would have been no danger. Trade could have been established in peace. We told her the consequences of failure, but she wouldn’t listen.”

I pushed away from the table and stood. My chest felt hollow. “She pressed for a war with Japan, didn’t she? Did she go there specifically to invade?”

At the window, I watched the snow fall. It would likely be the last significant storm of the winter. Hisham came to my side and put an arm around me. In my anger, I wanted to pull away, but I couldn’t. I needed the contact too much.

“Your mother was a woman of towering ambition. She was the most powerful witch in Europe, but it was not enough. She

met your father, and in him she saw her opportunity to do what no one had done since antiquity. Ambition turned to obsession. She summoned the spirit of war and bound it to your father, to his whole line. Melanie had lived so long, seen generation after generation die. To her, people were simply tools to forward her schemes. Her lovers, even her daughters.”

I felt my lips quirk. “I am the only one left.”

“You have magic of your own, greater magic than your mother’s. There is a chance you can break this curse.”

“Why didn’t you come for me all those years ago?”

Hisham turned me, holding his palms against my neck. “Melanie banished me from England. The magic holds true, even beyond death. I couldn’t go to find you there, no matter how much I wanted to.”

“I don’t know what to do now. Everything I’ve ever striven for, I don’t trust it any more. Show me the way.”

He shook his head. “It isn’t so simple. The spirit of war has a reason for being, and it will not abate until that mission is accomplished or the last soldier it possesses is no more.”

“Am I destined to go to Japan, to fight?” That had always felt true, every day of my adult life. Nothing felt true now, every hope forlorn, every way forward a mistake.

Chrissa came to stand at my other shoulder. “We don’t think so, Vivian. We did not know the Revered Grandmothers then, but we have come to know them since. They are not our enemies.”

The snow became indistinct outside the window glass. “They killed my family, destroyed everything I love,” I whispered. “Mrs. Peddowe said so.”

“On the battlefield, fighting for their country’s survival, they defended against an invader.” Chrissa came to me, bringing my face against her shoulder. The story I had built my life upon crumbled. It was not bedrock, but sand. For the first time since I was a girl, I had no idea what to do next.



Food tasted like sawdust. Though the day was bright and the glare upon the surface of the snow made me squint, I existed within the shadow of my own confusion. Everything I had imagined I understood was wrong. The purposes that had consumed me, the ambitions that had driven me forward...I found them all suspect, seeds of a tree grown in poisoned soil.

I stood in the workshop, looking at the cold and inert hulk of the English Wheel, unable to think of what I needed to do next. Did I need to do anything? Was anything I did worthwhile? I wanted to think that it was. The will to believe was absent. When I placed my hand upon a stack of sheet metal, the magic flared, the turmoil within me expressed upon the steel, which crinkled up and blackened as a burning sheaf of parchment would. I drew back. My hand hovered before me, no longer to be trusted.

No one was helped by my presence here, not like this, not in the state I found myself. I would go. I didn't know where, or for how long, but I couldn't stand being in familiar surroundings when everything inside had been shattered.

As I saddled a horse at the small stable on the south end of the encampment, I saw Hisham watching me from thirty-paces away, a Swiss military rifle slung across his shoulder, a heavy brown coat buttoned to his chin. I waited for him to call out, to ask me something or tell me what I should do, but he simply regarded me, his hands clasped beneath the butt of the rifle.

Looking at him, his handsome features, his perfectly clipped beard, I wanted so badly to admit my weakness, to fall into his arms and ask him for comfort. Such avenues were not open to me. I carried the weight of all my disjoined hopes alone.

My body was still sore and tender, the chill and deep snow making it unresponsive as cold steel beneath a hammer. It took me

several tries to get up on the horse, and I felt the lingering pain in my ribs go from a dull thrum to a sharp tenderness in the process. As the horse, a large, coarse blue roan just this side of a draft animal, began to walk, I knew the journey would be far from comfortable.

Several workers watched me as I made my way through the camp and south, not by the woods road where the Papist spy had gone, but toward the trail that hooked up with the road to Bayonne. I had no preset destination and only took this course because it was the one I had not traveled. I no longer trusted my ambitions or the ground they had been built upon.

I looked behind me as I left the encampment behind and cut through a field of deep snow. Hisham followed, his rifle across his knees, riding a better horse than I had selected. My roan struggled in the deep snow, making a low chuffing sound in its chest and blowing steam from its nostrils. My horse cut the path for the two of us, and would tire sooner.

Honesty often stems from pain. I knew that I would tire soon, too. Beyond the winter field, beyond the nearly impassible snowdrifts that had fallen across the trail out to the main road, I found myself in the bare, stark rows of an apple orchard grove.

My mind filled in what it would have looked like in summer. The shimmering heat of Southern France. The air moving just enough to turn the green leaves. The sweet smell of the growing fruit, the buzzing of the honey-bees. It was an illusion, a dream I used to distract myself, just like so much of my life had been.

I didn't have to rein in the struggling horse. Without my urging, it stopped on its own, standing sullen beneath the bare limbs of the trees, its huge dark eyes turning to Hisham's horse some twenty paces distant.

Dismounting, I narrowly avoided falling into the snow. I moved slowly through the knee-high powder, the remnants of my determination driving me forward.

I kicked the snow away from the base of the nearest tree and eased myself down, putting my back against it for support. Hisham still sat his horse, scanning the orchard for any signs of attack. It seemed unlikely I would be abducted again, but I sensed that anyone who presented themselves within a hundred feet of me would find themselves shot.

Every tribulation I had suffered in my adult life had been dealt with privately, secretly, silently. It had only been in the last months that I truly understood how small I was, how frail. It galled, but I needed help. Needed friends, more now than ever before. Those few who stood with me, even knowing what my mother had been...

"Hisham," I called. It was clumsy, too little. There was much I wanted to say but it stuck in my throat.

He understood, dropping off the horse with the grace that seemed to inhabit all his movements. He approached, a tentative ghost of a smile on his face. I thought he might say something, but he did not, instead pushing the snow into a solid bulwark and sitting across the cleared space, facing me. The horses in the background drifted together, standing facing opposite directions, their flanks touching. A horse could do nothing, could simply exist, a skill I had never learned.

"The things you told me yesterday," I started. "I don't like to believe them, but I do."

Hisham nodded. His hands gripped his knees. I wanted him to reach for me, but I couldn't manage to ask. This fault in my character only made me feel more forlorn.

"I don't see a path forward."

"You can go away from this place or stay, Vivian. No one holds you in thrall. We are your friends, if you would have us, but never your captors. You decide what becomes of your life."

"I always imagined fate decided that when I was a girl."

"Fate is a forge weld with a thousand folds. Choices fold the

steel, the acid of time reveals the pattern. Wherever you choose to go, you will have to live with the weight of your past and all that your family has passed down to you through their actions. Just as we all must do.”

“We are not all born cursed.”

He smiled. “No, we are all born blessed. We exist upon this world, a bright fire against the night sky. We eat. We work. We rest. If we are especially lucky, we love. Some few of us get to touch the great mechanism of the world and change it in some small way. In that respect, you are far luckier than most.”

“If I change the world, is it just as likely that I’ll change it for the worse? Consider my parents and say that it isn’t so.”

“We believe in you, Vivian. Everyone in the resistance has bet their lives upon the notion that you can shake the tyrants from their thrones.”

“I want to believe that I can. More than anything.”

“Then do so. You have proven your mettle before. You are the same person as you were yesterday. Your deeds remain, as do those who love you.” He rose easily, and I felt longing burst within the bruised confines of my chest.

“You?” I asked, a glimmer of hope kindling.

He extended his hand. “Yes. Of course,” he assured, pulling me to my feet.

I pulled one glove off, touching his bearded cheek, feeling the soft, dark hair and the angular jaw beneath. He covered my hand with his. I hoped that it meant what I needed it to mean. The tattered flag of my belief yet flew, and that was enough for a winter day.



The superheavy cannon for my Warhorse was so huge we had to build a new crane system to lift it into the chassis. Twenty-two feet long, it was ten times more powerful than any gun they’d been able

to mount to a warmachine. No armor could withstand it. Tied onto the front shoulder of the Warhorse, I steadied the cannon as it slid into the open center section beneath where the driving crucible and the *head* of the horse would later be mounted.

“Easy, easy!” I shouted to the engineers. They’d been forced to learn some English as my skill for French had not improved. They slowed the traverse of the arc the gun was describing, but it still hit the locking lugs at the back of the aperture hard enough to lift the front feet of the chassis off the ground and nearly bounce me free of the harness where I hung.

“Jean Richard, your men are dunces!” I shouted. “Their carelessness could have gotten someone hurt.”

“Apologies, Madame,” the lead engineer called up to me. “I will have words with them.”

He turned around and began a tirade that had the other engineers and workman red in the face. I found myself enjoying the parts I understood, but I lost track when Chrissa got my attention, motioning me to come down. Her face was filled with worry. I climbed down to her, quickly issuing instructions for Jean Richard to finish hooking up the gun in my absence.

Hisham joined us as we went into a small office shielded from the noise of the hangar. He looked as concerned as Chrissa.

“Out with it,” I ordered.

“Our spies sent us this message.” Chrissa handed me a letter. It had already been decoded and was in Chrissa’s handwriting, hastily done. What I read froze my blood. My mouth went dry. I dropped the paper, my hands shaking.

The Holy Mechanized Order was being gathered. It was the elite expeditionary force of Juggernauts for the Pope. These were their best pilots, piloting the fearsome Beretta warmachines that had never been bested in a fight. It was only a fraction of the whole Order, but the numbers were still not in our favor.

I looked around the small office, hearing the rumor of the engineers outside. Of everything I'd ever done, this was the one thing I was proud of. What we were building here was important.

"We have roughly two weeks, dear one," Chrissa said. "It is enough time to get everyone to safety."

Hisham pushed my hair aside and kissed me on the neck. "I have a ship. We can go anywhere you wish, even east," he whispered. "No one will think less of you. We are far from ready for what's coming."

I stepped away from them. "I'm not leaving. This fight, this work we're doing here...it's too important. When the Pope's Juggernauts come, they will find themselves facing the most potent warmachines the Kaiser ever built."

"You really think you can trick the Papists into thinking that this is a German outpost, that we're creating experimental warmachines for the Kaiser here?" Hisham asked.

"I know we can. I know what Benz-Bavarias look like. We can create sheet metal that will mimic them well enough. I intend to stay, but the decision should be put to a vote. If the French have the will for this fight, I say we must take part."

"I'm with you, regardless of what you decide," Hisham swore.

"Chrissa?"

She hugged me hard. "I trust you, dear one."

We left the office. I touched Jean Richard on the shoulder and explained to him what was coming. His face paled. A drop of sweat slid down his forehead, but he clenched his teeth and nodded.

"We have the advantage here, Jean. They haven't seen our new hybrid warmachines. They don't know the terrain as we do. The defender always has the upper hand."

Jean Richard smoothed his uniform and turned to his men, calling them from all parts of the workshop. Within a few minutes, the entire hangar was crowded with engineers, workers, and Juggernaut pilots, their faces filled with concern. Clearing his throat,

Jean Richard stepped up onto a sturdy crate and told them what was afoot. He spoke plainly, without artifice. I could follow almost every word. Silence filled the workshop as his speech ended.

One person at the back of the crowd raised his hand. It was Alphonse, the Juggernaut pilot. He asked if I would be staying with them, fighting by their side.

I stepped up next to Jean Richard. “Wherever there’s a fight, I will be there. I swear it. Will you follow me?” My voice had risen to a shout, my fist raised high.

Whatever else I might have said was unimportant, drowned out in the shouts and applause. They would stay. We would win together or die.

*March 18th, 1883*

*North of Bayonne, France*

*Secret base camp for Les Épinés de Fer*

**N**ot a single scrap of paper remained in the encampment, not the least scribble of French. Every noncombatant had withdrawn to a second base, deep in the mountains. The villa and the workshops stood, echoing with quiet, every valuable tool and machine cleared out. I didn’t believe in leaving anything to chance. In the case of a total rout, there would be nothing to prove that their base had not been a German workshop.

Our scouts told us that the Holy Mechanized Order were coming forward in an unimaginative fan formation, with conventional cavalry behind them and a supply caravan well to the rear. The Papists were used to victory. They had been crushing the Turks in every battle for a decade. Consequently, they had never learned subtlety. Winning never taught cleverness. Such lessons were conferred upon the losing side. I had spent my whole life getting kicked in the teeth.

London.

Liverpool.

Swansea.

Some nameless clearing north of Bayonne.

It was time to show the Pope's men all the dirty tricks I'd ever discovered.

The leaves were just coming in on the trees. If we were victorious, perhaps that would see hope blossom again on the continent. We could prove the age of tyrants was ending. Today, I'd either fall victim to my mother's curse, or I'd begin breaking it. Standing below my Warhorse, I reached out, taking Hisham's hand, squeezing it tight.

The other pilots geared up beneath the shade of their warmachines. Taking Hisham with me, I went to each of them, shaking their hands, thanking them for their courage and all the tireless work over the last few months. Most of them were so young, some having never seen battle before. Their fates were in my hands. I had to remember that. Every brave soul counted. The face and name of every man and woman who would lay down their life was to be remembered. As I looked into Fabrice's eyes, wide and bright in his boyish face, I told myself this again and again.

*"Bon chance, mon ami,"* I told him.

He grinned, perhaps a bit too quickly to cover his fear. *"Bon chance, Mademoiselle."*

"I am proud of you," Hisham said. "That was done as your father would have. The best part of him, before darkness ate away at his soul, was the fierce love he had for his comrades."

"I know we will lose some of them today. For the first time in my life, I'm close enough that it scares me."

"Allowing yourself to feel is the greatest courage, Vivian."

"Then I was a coward all these years."

He took me in his arms. I brought his face down to me and kissed him hard, hoping it was not for the last time.

“Fight well, my love,” I whispered in his ear.

He nodded, walking to the Castillo Juggernaut he’d be piloting. Like the others, it was double-armored now, with a façade that made it look close enough to a Benz-Bavaria at range for our purposes. All of our warmachines were painted in the Kaiser’s colors, every pilot carrying a poison vial to avoid being captured by the enemy and revealing the ruse. We were ready.

Hisham held his hand on his chest and blew me a kiss. I did the same, the old familiar rush that came before battle gripping me. “Don’t let me lose him,” I begged, though I didn’t know who I was asking. God? Whose side was he on? Would he strengthen the efforts of witches and heretics, mad women and idealists? I hoped he would. I hoped he despised oppressors and would aid the rebels who fought against an unjust tyrant.

Turning away, I climbed up into the driving crucible of the Warhorse and activated the engines. The whole chassis rumbled. The front two engines routed their exhaust out the nose of the Warhorse. I turned the knob and activated the afterspray, blowing a mist of oil into the superheated exhaust. A whirlwind of fire burst outward. All other systems had been tested. The new chassis was as ready as it could be.

Behind me, all of our Juggernauts started and went through their system checks. It was only a matter of minutes now. I dug my feet into the treadle controls and brought the Warhorse onto its back legs, then let it come down to earth again in a thundering fashion. The Decimator, the superheavy canon below my feet, swayed and returned to center.

In the distance, the explosions started. The enemy had encountered our vibration-activated bombs. I heard the banshee wail of the Iron Chariots revving their engines. They would be shooting through every gap in the Papist line, peppering the conventional cavalry with bullets, overrunning them and creating as much havoc as possible.

The portable claxon sounded behind us. It was Chrissa, signaling the charge. I pulled the gear lever to full gallop and kicked the treadles to their stops.

Cresting the hill, the enemy came into view. Dozens of the Beretta juggernauts shone in the sun, the nickel steel of their armor blinding. Behind them, priests began a litany of prayer, calling upon the armor of God to protect the knights within and help them win the day.

For a moment, I was shaken. The Berettas were so beautiful, every piece smooth and gleaming, their chassis bristling with guns. This was the moment. I would see if my decision had been hubris. As fast as the hybrid Juggernauts were, the Warhorse was faster, coming down from the hilltop and hitting the edge of the Papist line like an avalanche. My Decimator gun thundered, blowing a Beretta Juggernaut backward down the hill. Its fuel stores caught on fire and in a moment, its magazines exploded, superheated shells perforating it from the inside out.

I collided with another enemy Juggernaut, knocking it down and trampling it into the grass without slowing down. As I passed through their lines, several of them opened fire, but the Warhorse moved so quickly that only a few shells landed. The armor held.

Although they were huge and finely crafted, the enemy machines were slow, slower than Castillos or Benz-Bavarias. As I emerged at the rear of their lines and wheeled, I could see our hybrids outflanking them at every turn, causing them to slew fire into their own units, causing their tactics to break down. I downshifted and strafed their rear guard.

I allowed every element of my being to suffuse the Warhorse. I could feel its hooves in the dirt. I could breathe through its induction stacks, scream through its exhaust. I was completely alive, the heart of the machine. Unlike so many other times, this time I was not hiding from myself, I was acknowledging it. This was my world. These

were my people, and I would fight for them until my dying breath.

I pressed on my high-speed guns, spraying one enemy Juggernaut after another. Wheeling again, I took aim and shot into the churning mass of enemy steel. Every thundering report from the Decimator blasted pieces of torn metal into the air. In moments, the whole meadow was awash in flame, smoke rising into the wind with the sound of tortured metal and chattering guns. Europe would be whole again, set free from its chains. With my sisters, I would rise up and topple the emperors. Not to replace them with our own despots, but to safeguard the hope of all people. The blind urge for power had damned my family for so long. My eyes were finally open, and here was the just cause that gave meaning to my gifts.

After so many years, I was at last fighting the right war, for the right reasons. Perhaps the curse would still consume me, but I would claw and fight every step of the way. They would know my name before the end. Not as a witch. Not as a conqueror. As my father's daughter, a woman who was willing to give all she had to win back the freedom that tyrants sought to steal.