

E
PULP

ePULP

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Sampler

VOLUME 1

DEAD RECKONER

by MATTHEW J DAVIES

RURIK of the DEMONWATCH

by RUSS BOPP

WILD MAJORAM

by N.R. GRABE

PANDORA DRIVER

by JOHN PICHA

SKYRACOS

by JOHN PICHA

FANTASY · WEIRD WAR · ALT HISTORY · SUPERHERO · SCI-FI

FIVE FANTASTIC TALES

ePulp Sampler Volume 1

Created by John Picha, Matthew J. Davies and Russ Bopp, and N.R.
Grabe

Edited by Kilroy

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WELCOME

You may not realize it yet, but you're actually holding a time-and-space-machine in your hands, and we're about to go on a journey. Whether you're reading this ePulp while commuting to work, between calls at your desk, on the toilet pinching a loaf, or in bed as your significant other sleeps off a headache, we are leaving the doldrums of the modern world behind us.

Get ready to explore strange worlds, visit forgotten pasts, and delve into parallel histories. Prepare to encounter an eclectic mix of heroes walking the line between life and death. Duck as Rurik's blade carves demons in the Celtic landscape of dark fantasy. Witness the Dead Reckoner, a battlefield ghost looking for absolution in a weird war tale. Face Nazi occupation of the USA with Wild Marjoram in an alternate past. Race through the Great Depression on an errand of mercy with Pandora Driver, a noir superheroine. Fly across the universe with the Skyracos in a retro sci-fi adventure.

This action packed ePulp anthology unleashes 5 new tales inspired by the pulp magazines of the 1920s - 1940s. They are not for the faint of heart. Things will get intense and stuff on these pages can't be unread. But whether you're a nostalgian, dieselpunk, pulp or pulp-curious fan, sci-fi and fantasy aficionado, or ebook spelunker, there's something in this collection for you. However, I suggest you sample them all.

Oh, I almost forgot to introduce myself. I'm Kilroy, the ghost in this machine, the messenger between the lines, and the spirit of pulps past all rolled up in one. I'm the phantom voice dwelling the pages of this ebook. I'll be your host and time-and-space-travel-agent. As we

voyage ahead, I'll reappear between stories to help you acclimate as we open and close doorways between worlds. I'll also offer insights, tidbits and extra info about each story. I'll even try to bring you back in one piece, but I make no guarantees. You might be different on the other side.

Our journey awaits. All you need to do is touch, tap or click to continue. I hope you have as much fun exploring as we did inventing.

Now let's talk pulp...

E PULP

WHAT ARE ePULPS?

Sex! Murder! Crime! Corruption! Hard-boiled action! This was the stuff of the pulp magazines of pre-World War II America. These adventure serials were called pulps because of the inexpensive, “pulpy” stock paper they were printed on, as apposed to the “glossies”, or “slicks”. The forerunners of comic books, pulps were inexpensive escapist entertainment for people in hard times, at a cost they could afford.

The original Pulp stories of the 1920s - 1940s were a lot more spicy and violent then people would expect. Some were even banned or placed behind the counter due to their content, still they hid behind the innuendo of cryptic noir-speak to soften their content for a more ostentatiously genteel audience. Our ePulps re-imagine the world of the pulps in modern language, for a modern audience. You'll find no

“heaters squirting lead through some joe's mug” in our ePulps, but they but maintain a distinctly retro feel. They are unflinching in their depictions of violence and graft, and seek to show the “good old days” as they really were. By unmasking the true visage of a romanticized era, we hope to reveal a doppelgänger of our own time.

Our ePulps are independently produced and published stories, they are the raw creations of their authors, beholden only to you, the audience. They are the attempt of a few writers and authors to hold the human condition to the light to dispel the darkness of corruption that haunts us through the ages. EPulps are a product of their times and of their creator's sensibilities just like the original pulps were. They are produced and distributed electronically not only from a practical zeitgeist, but also from an environmental concern. Pulps killed trees, ePulps just kill bad guys.

The Pulp Magazines of the 1930s and 1940s became outlets for the frustrations of a culture beaten down by the greed and ineptitude of the elites. Sound familiar? Our ePulps carry on the real pulp family legacy, with an eye to reveal the stark realities of evil and corruption without the restrictions of corporate censorship. Want to see the truth? Join us on our duty-bound quest as storytellers to show the hidden nature of power's true intent, and marvel at the courage and inner conflict of the heroes duty-bound to fight it.

Our journey begins...

RURIK OF THE DEMONWATCH

Our first story spills us into a dark time when horrible creatures infest the Hinterlands, and the barbarians of the Demonwatch patrol a nightmare beat. They solve problems when they face them as judge, jury and executioner to stave off a madness infecting their realm.

As a rite of passage young Rurik faced a Demonhound. During his trial the creature's flaming tentacles scarred Rurik leaving a mark coiling up his arm, shoulder and chest. After he triumphed in battle, Rurik carved a bone from the slain creature's body then sharpened it into a strange looking sword. Now he patrols the badlands for more monsters and slays them with the very remains of their dead brethren. As the man grew so did his legend.

Rurik of the Demonwatch was forged in the mind-fires of Russ Bopp. It's pulp inspirations lead us back to the works of Robert E. Howard and H.P. Lovecraft where Russ seems to have uncovered a hidden connection between Bronze Age lore and Cthulhu Mythos.

Let's find out what happens when Celts and Demons unleash hell on Earth in a time of dark-fantasy. I hope you packed your battle axe...

RURIK

OF THE DEMONWATCH

Arena of Death

By Russ Bopp

The Empress Sabula lounged upon her pedestal throne of velvet duvets feasting off a food plate made of gold. Her jet skin glistened in the torchlight and would never be as black as her heart and the void where her soul would have floated. She was in the incarnation of evil - only the lords of the abyss would be written in history as fouler. Before her stood Rurik.

He is from Rodmar – the Northern Steppes from the civilized lands. His stock is hearty. Jet locks run off his head to a thick neck like that of an aged tree. His eyes are equally obsidian peering from beneath the coif. Wind burned skin covers his iron cabled muscles. A scarlet scar serpentines down his right arm. Never healing its pink wrinkles make the strongest take note and caution. Kilt and hide girdle make his garments while his feet are bound with raw, hide boots. It is as if

the mighty winds have cast him from their icy bosom.

Her munching at the goodies below her sweaty flab disappeared into her floppy jowls leaving juices, crumbs and bits to bounce, adhere or dribble from the numerous rolls attached to her neck. Rurik's stomach turned as the sounds of her eating ebbed at his constitution. Never had his intestinal fortitude been so challenged at the present sight.

Slaves, half naked and half starved, stood like upright skeletons at her wings awaiting the bellowing gurgle from their mistress of malign gluttonous revulsion. "Now, savage, what is it that you seek in my domain? My scouts observed you sighted on the borderlands at an unreasonable hour, with an equally unreasonable armaments carrying an unreasonable appearance. There must be something of great importance for you to attempt such a deed."

"I only wish safe passage through your lands. I mean no harm or spite."

No answer, save the crunching of food between her ivory teeth, emitted from the Empress. A large gold nugget of a tooth beamed at Rurik while Sabula snacked.

"Passage? But my honorable cache of guards inform me that your are armed with a most stunning array of battle-tackle that they have ever seen."

"I only travel with all that I require to protect myself. My war is of my business."

“Surely a sword is enough for many a foe for someone piled as mightily as yourself. You have been outfitted for war,” she snapped dropping clean bones from greasy fingers onto her plates.

“I have fought many foes that have slipped passed our world’s borders not just travellers marching through kingdoms into another.”

Ignoring Rurik’s rebuttal, Sabula continues picking through the foul buffet. Her eyes falling upon Rurik's crimson ripple of a scar cursing along his right arm. Few know of its origin and the mantle it holds. For he is Rurik of The Demonwatch. Sworn protectors of the known world from the shadow realm. Crazy wizards and necromancers seeking absolute power use their vile skills to breach the gap of this plane and that of inhuman blasphemy. Rurik's seeks out these hosts and their conjurations unbeknown to rest the world. She knew all too well the prize she held before her. Mere humans would not fare well against the devil-slayer. She needed to be cunning as rumors had placed her.

“Well, my dear emissary from the hinterlands, we will have to see for ourselves how just and honor bound you are. Take him to the dungeons and prepare him for the morning's sport. He will truly be a worthy game piece!”

Before Rurik could defend himself from further captivity, six large brutish warriors donned in golden mail brandishing net and lashings enveloped Rurik. Their strength was inhuman. Rurik had fought the beast men of Kracken-Bur before – an unholy stock of man and beast.

In between slurps Sabula gulped another order, “If you serve us well

on the field of battle we will see what other fields I allow you to tread.”

“Heed my warnings your royalness – I have but short time and even shorter patience!”

He is dragged away by the bronze plated guardsmen of the laughing Sabula. It was a lie and Rurik knew it. In his journeys he knew deception when it presented itself. Enemies of The Demonwatch had been alerted of his capture – why else was he not executed immediately as the bloody crucifixes on Sabula's borderlands had shown?

Within the deepest recesses of the bovine majesty, Rurik is tossed into a dank pit. Its walls sweating with moisture and effloresce. His eyes begin to adjust to the dim light from blackened torches wedged in the brick outside the gate.

Skulls and bones, devoid of filth picked cleaned by a larger prey, lie strewn about the damp earthen floor. Rurik is alone. Food is slopped into the same wooden bowls he is to use for waste. He does not eat - rage will feed him.

At dawn, Rurik of The Demonwatch, is hauled out of his prison before the bloated queen once more. And once more he denies her satisfaction - an act she seldom encounters.

Instead of his cell, Rurik is led to a large iron cage raised pinioned on barrel-like wheels. It is a barred cart driven by eight horses. Inside is littered with stinking offal speckled hay - stained red with blood and rust.

Locked inside, Rurik's eyes scan the landscape before him. A city in tears. No sun shines in the cold morning air. After a time the horses are whipped and the cart moves along the bumpy muddy paths used as streets and avenues. Quiet melancholy drones linger like shadows of their former selves along the roadside. He has never seen such strife. A glimmer of what the city used to be can be seen under aged crud. Faded walls of color appear beneath its dank visage.

Having bore witness to the condemned parade of woe, the carriage slams to a halt. A squad of armed guards in glistening mail and polearms gather him from the cart. He is led again into more halls of pitch. Corridors echo with cheers, cries and calls opposite the stone tunnels. Beyond a thick iron door, he is placed in front of racks of weapons and armor. His eyes widen at the chance of escape only to spy two large ogrish women at the room's only portal. Shoved by his escorts to the racks Rurik begins choosing his tools - knowing full well what the slovenly queen wishes of him.

A woman emerges. Her globular shape lumbers into the room and eyes Rurik hungrily. She slurps from a head-sized goblet with a sheepish grin as she spies Rurik with lust.

"Her royalness Empress Sabula wishes you to be her champion for today," slurs the woman spilling both wine and saliva from her fat lips as cheers ring out in the coliseum. "Her great nation has need of you today. Should you succeed, you will be spared," exclaims the woman running a thick hand down her sweaty neck stopping on her spilling bosom.

Rurik ignores her as he fastens the last of his battle-worn armor

donning a rusted buckler. His face disappears behind a shielded helm marching off with the two female guardians.

Rurik is led into a dank hallway littered with rusted weapons, skulls and bones. At its end a bleak sun shines through a gnarled portcullis. Barbed teeth twist along its edifice. Beyond the bars he spies the cold wind swept landscape. Clanging of metal is heard and answered by a tumultuous roar of cheers. Rurik's eyes adjust to the sights before him at the portcullis.

Twenty or so men and women are battling in a colossal primitive arena of stone. Along the earthworks hold the crowd. A massive throng of jeering bloodthirsty onlookers. Their roar is deafening, fueled by drink and death they are at near-frenzied state.

Spotted with slobbering oafs and gangly imps the audience is a worse lot than those appearing before them. Speckled throughout are the rich land barons, dukes and manor whores under Sabula's governance. Richly clad Rurik can smell their bloody gold stained souls over the carnage of the earthen stage.

As their gladiators wage a mini war the spectators suck on fruit and tankards of wine. They yell with full mouths dribbling the waste down their gullets. Scantly clad concubines also writhe and chew upon their patrons flesh during the blood-orgy.

Rurik is horrified not by battle but by the gruesome audience observing.

At the rusted rise of the gate before him he snaps his helms face plate down. On cue with the lull the crowd draws forth Rurik of The

Demonwatch steps into the gore riddled field. His crimson scar a contrast against his allies. His jet eyes glint from beneath his helm seeking his captor.

All heads swing toward a parapet littered with food waste and stained satin. Stretched out for all to see her ebon hide rolls Sabula. Skinny albino eunuchs fan her with palm fronds and feathered stalks.

“As you know Northman I have need of you and if you serve me well you may go free. If you do not you will, well how should we say it politely, be disposed of?”

The crowd ushered a chuckle at Rurik’s expense. He watched the other pit-fighters pant, catch their breath and re-ready their weapons.

“But, I will not waste my time or fighters with watching you bring them down. As I know all too well of Rurik sworn to The Demonwatch.”

On that note some of the gladiators pushed out their chests while others snickered making their way to a gate opposite Rurik’s entrance.

“Mmm, mmm, mmm – how delicious will this be? I know you think that we are fat beyond our means – pigs I heard you utter in disgust. Well, here are the true pigs of the land. Northman – meet a real challenge!”

A series of low gates beneath Sabula’s parapet fell forward when the two female guards let loose a mighty chain. As the chain dropped they leapt into the stands.

Low wet grunting came forth from the pupil-like culverts. As Rurik watched the last of the pit-fighters exited the arena floor two pairs of yellow eyes pierced the gloom below Sabula.

Twisting the haft of his axe in his hand Rurik scans for more tools to aid in his fight.

Broken remains lay scattered where the melee raged earlier. Darting to the piles, his opponents charged also.

Two pale skinless boars the size of cattle fly to Rurik's position. Gathering a spear half he spun wildly for the faster of the two hogs. Glistening with purple hideless fury full of hungry rage it charged.

In lightning form Rurik launched the spear tip at the boars shouldered hump. Squealing madly as the iron tip plunged into its flesh resulting in a black geyser of blood gushing parallel with the spear. Grunting to a halt causing a trench to be cut while its weight and speed came to a halt.

Ignoring its partner the second boar snorted wildly continuing the charge at Rurik. Readying his axe the Northman waited for the beast. Deafening was the cheers from the stands. Rurik could see Sabula standing beyond the attacking pig. In a split second he thought of loosening his axe for her thus canceling his chances with the beast. Instead as the pig galloped closer Rurik went low on the boar cleaving a hoof from under its massive weight. Not escaping completely Rurik felt a dull bite in his thigh. The boars tusk grazed his flesh enough to peel back a length of flesh from his leg.

Hunter and hunted down on their wounded knees both turned for another assault. As the boar began its limping charge at Rurik a well tossed axe throw caught its skull full on. Stunned the hell-pig shook its skinless head for a beat. Rurik seizing the moment leapt upon the hog's back ripping its tusks toward Sabula's parapet. In a grunt it was over. Dangling like a clipped flower the boar's neck dropped to the saliva soaked earth.

Rurik righted himself on his good leg only to spy two more pigs slobbering and kicking the ground held on a length of chain. His work was not done. Iron cables of muscle flex under his crimson ribbon scar along his right arm.

A blood-curdling shriek was heard from above Rurik. A thin man leapt into the arena. He is fitted in royal plate armor save his muscular legs, which are covered in leather breaches.

“The slaughter must end *Mother*,” he cries at Sabula.

Her face is in frozen horror as her son stands between Rurik and her beasts. With a wave from the man and a guttural sound from his throat – the hogs heel to their hind legs. Like large hounds they obey the call of obedience.

Rurik watches all around for an attack or surprise trick from the wily queen and her minions. It seems that only her son holds a truce.

“Let this man be. He brings us no harm and has never hurt anyone in our fair land.” The man says while petting one of the hog-beasts.

“Our land interferes with no other and yet you imprison him, drag him into our arena, delay his journey and cause unnecessary

bloodshed. Mother, are you are as evil as the outlanders say?”

Empress Sabula is silent. She wipes her fat fingers in her silk wrappings. Her full lips take a sip from her ivory goblet her rings and bracelets glittering in the failing sun of the day. Rurik’s throat burns watching her gulp down nourishment in front of his sweating, bleeding and starving hide. Never before had he held such disgust for another being of this world. Not even Yglar was such the wicked.

After a quick cleaning of food grease from her lips and cheeks and another sip from her goblet she speaks, “My son speaks when not asked. It is my lot from spoiling the only thing I’ve ever loved in this miserable land. Go highlander, Northman or whatever you are. And do not make pause for I will set far worse than these pigs if not met with the speeding path of your departure. Go.” She waves her hand and four giants raise her upon golden rods. Behind the silken curtains she is carried. A shriek of anger is heard from behind as her servants and acolytes follow nervously.

Rurik unlashes his armor leaving it in the blood soaked dust. His personal items are at his feet as he free himself of his last bits of pit-fighter garb. Sabula’s son is at his side while he readies his pack. The man is barely that – to Rurik he is just a boy up close.

“I am not sure whether or not to thank you. I will be convinced that I am free of treachery and tricks only when I am rid this realm and her reach.”

More cries of Sabula from above as the arena nears emptiness.

“She grows feeble and bored – two things not promising in a ruler

I'm afraid." Sabula's son adds. "I should tend to her wounded ego. Our stables will find proper mount for the rest of your journey."

Rurik nodded as he donned the rest of his wares.

On the open fields of the tall honey colored grass of Sabula's empire Rurik watched the sun take its last wink over the soft veldt. His pick of steed was a burnt colored stud that was a match for any from his land. Her son, whose name still remained unknown to Rurik, arranged it all and Rurik would forever be in his debt.

Glittering stars already pocked the night's canvas of evening. Gentle wind moved the grass like waves of the ocean. A slim silhouette sailing against the night sky toward new horrors...

THE END

Kilroy here again folks. Wow, that was some crazy shit, huh? Could you imagine if we had to pay that type of toll to get on the interstate today? I wonder what the Bronze Age equivalent to an I-Pass transponder would be? A stinking, rotten boar's head that's sniffed for potency by a municipal ogre at a gate? Maybe I shouldn't mention these concepts to Russ...

Russ Bopp splits his time between writing and photography. Since the 1980's he's been capturing the high energy of live music performances in the underground, and on the international stage. He's the founder of Room 111 Photography. Their mission is to enlist a band of misfits and build a body of work through shock and awe. If you'd like to learn more about Russ or see more of his work, you can visit him on the Facebook.

www.facebook.com/Room111photography

If you'd like to join Rurik on another adventure, be sure to look for his solo ePulp "Rurik of the Demonwatch". Coming Soon.

DEAD RECKONER

Our second story dumps us headlong in the muddy trenches of Belgium during World War I. There we'll witness a strange apparition haunting the Western Front.

Anaxander Jones enlisted in the British Imperial Army when he was 18. That was in 1876. While assigned to the colonial troops in darkest Africa he found himself embroiled in the Zulu Wars. Armed with superior firepower and roman pride, the British war machine outclassed the savages toting spears and superstitions, but something misfired. Anaxander was infected by a Zulu curse, resurrected as the Dead Reckoner and damned to atone for the sins of empire. Now he's yanked from battlefield to battlefield throughout history to witness the horrors of war, over and over again.

The Dead Reckoner first appeared in the imagination of Matthew J Davies. Its pulp inspiration arrives via "Weird Tales" and it's many descendants like Rod Serling and Stephen King. When you couple that lineage with a Degree in Philosophy we get an interesting amalgam of the macabre and the meaningful. We hope you enjoy it.

Ok we're shipping out to the front and to the shadows between life and death in this weird war encounter. Make sure your gaspirator is sealed up tight...

DEAD RECKONER



October 21, 1917

By Matthew J Davies

PROLOGUE

Anaxander Jones enlisted in the British Army the day after Christmas, 1876. He was eighteen years old. It was not his idea, but rather the encouragement of his father which prompted the decision. He considered Anaxander's professed desire to pursue poetry for his daily bread to be fanciful at best, and thought any young man's future was better informed by a stint of martial adventure abroad. Thus persuaded that serving the Empire from behind a rifle sight might be a Byronesque prelude to his eventual return to letters, if he still saw fit after his service to Queen and Country, it was with enthusiasm that Anaxander boarded HMS *Ulysses* bound for the Port of Durban, to fight the savages of the Zulu nation. Watching the lights of Cardiff disappear below the horizon, Anaxander marveled at the imagined glory of battle and the heady notions of domination and Christian destiny.

During a battle that saw a great many of his fellows die horribly of puncture wounds from Zulu spears, his unit overwhelmed and nearly out of ammunition, Anaxander volunteered to run a plea for reinforcements to a nearby garrison. As soon as night fell, he dashed away on his mission, heart in his throat, with fleeting thoughts of the valiant run of Phidippides.

Miles into his run, a full moon rose behind him. He chased his shadow along the winding trail, his thumping heart in his ears masking the strides of the Zulu sprinting silently behind him. With one deft blow, the warrior rendered Anaxander unconscious, then hoisted his rag-dolled form over his shoulder and began a less swift jog back to the appointed rendezvous to deliver the subject of a most bizarre ritual over to his fate.

Anaxander awakened to a vicious headache and the wizened visage of a black man in an alarming headpiece and decorated face chanting softly, grinding something deliberately with a crude pestle in a gourd. In the flickering glow of a nearby fire's light, the man seemed ancient beyond time with eyes that occasionally caught the light and twinkled as bright as the stars above. The moon was gone, and it was with a growing horror that Anaxander realized he was a bound prisoner of the Zulu.

The man stood before him, and poured a small amount of liquid into the gourd. His chanting grew louder and he began a stuttering little dance, raising the gourd periodically like a grail, then lowering it and resuming his gyrations. He gradually maneuvered his way to confront

Anaxander. He spoke some words in Zulu, and brought the gourd to just below his chin. He spit into the gourd, and stirred it with a long finger.

Hands grasped Anaxander's head from behind, and he was tipped backward while a powerful grip was put on his jaw, forcing his mouth open. An acrid liquid poured into his mouth, bitter like he had never tasted, yet oily and smooth at the same time, a bit like Castor oil. His jaw was forced shut and he was raised, and the concoction ran down his open throat like slop down a sluice. His stomach roiled and an overpowering nausea crippled his body in sick convolutions. He retched uncontrollably and violently without effect until his exhausted muscles could no longer contract, and he slumped over in his bonds, his spirit sapped by the effort of trying to rid his body of the foul elixir. Yet it remained in him, snaking hot through his body, gripping him in a full-body sickness so powerful he yearned for the poison to end him.

The black man's face appeared before him, speaking softly, in perfect English: “White son of a distant Father, you have come here, so far from your home, to bring war to us who have never wronged you. It is the way of things that the sins of the Father shall be visited upon the sons, and so shall you suffer for the blood-lust of your people. The sickness you feel is your killing spirit leaving your body. You have been cursed to a death reckoning. Your penance is powerlessness, and though you will wear the eyes of the mighty Lion, you will be at the mercy of all, toothless and without claws.”

He stepped back, pronounced some more words in his native tongue, and tapped Anaxander between the eyes. Instantly the black man disappeared and Anaxander felt himself speeding at an impossible

rate through a telescoping tunnel of streaming, pulsating light. The incredible sense of acceleration gave way to a perception that the distance required to accommodate the rate of his travel was vast beyond his imagination. He was lost somewhere outside of the world, outside understanding, ripped away from sanity. In his mind's eye, he saw the flesh being stripped from his body as he went even faster towards the swirling oblivion. Chunks of muscle and sinew flew away from his face until all that was left was a skull with yellow eyes in front of him, the jaw held open in a silent scream that would not end.

October 21-22, 1917

Battle of Passchendaele, Ypres, Belgium, Western Front.

It is the third year of the Great War, and the Allies have again amassed at Ypres, Belgium. Their objective is a railway junction a scant five miles distant, at Roulers, a vital supply line for the German Fourth Army. The trenches dug three years earlier have been re-fortified, and re-occupied, and the same stretch of wasted land between them is soaked in the unusually wet weather.

The German Fourth Army is stretched and growing increasingly desperate. Despite their almost impregnable defenses of heaps of barbed wire and underground bunkers to which they retire to escape Allied shelling, they are outnumbered. They have begun to employ poison gas in addition to their murderous machine gun fire to demoralize the Allies, and the call of "GAS!" down the trench lines sends men scrambling for their gas-masks, rendering the combatants as unrecognizable as the body-strewn and pockmarked landscape, haunted by the skeletal remains of blackened trees in what was once a

forested refuge. Over 200,000 men will lay down their lives in this small sector of this Great War.

A battalion of British soldiers weathers a gas attack and prepares to advance on the German line, a partial diversion for a larger attack to take place by Canadian reinforcements further down the line. They are the bait, and to be effective must endure a bite.

The light flashed yellow, then faded. He was aware he was motionless. Then, a smell. Acrid and burning, it was too thick to breathe, like drinking sand. As quickly as it struck it was gone, replaced by a familiar blend of aromas comforting in their familiarity, horrifying in their reality. A sting of cordite punctuated a dull base of churned earth, which was in turn accentuated by the sweetly metallic twinge of blood.

Sight and sound assaulted him together, a slurred whining cacophony belied by earth tones and washed out gray. He was in a hole of some kind, and his feet were wet. The grey above his head offered no reliable indication as to time of day, and seemed dangerously alive with the flash, hum, zip, and murderous whine he recognized as enemy fire. It was war, he was sure.

Suddenly, a whistle blew three times somewhere to his right. Turning, he could see a corridor carved out of the earth stretching away into the distance. Dead men lay half-submerged in the muck, while the living rose cautiously from their protective crouches at the summoning, clutching rifles of a make he didn't recognize, in uniforms as drab as the walls of the trench, wearing shaving basins on their heads.

“Jerries through the wire! Jerries through the wire!!” a distinctively Scottish brogue boomed frantically somewhere down the line.

“Prepare to repel!”

He frantically searched the trench immediately around him, but could discover no weapons. What kind of soldier was he? What kind of war was this? Who was Jerry?

The soldiers to his right jumped to action, leveling their rifles over the lip of the trench and fired repeatedly. What marvelous weapons!, he wondered. Surely no advancing enemy could withstand such firepower, and from so few men.

A loud metallic “CLAK” followed by some heavy swearing from the young soldier in closest to him broke the mechanistic rhythm of rifle fire down the line. The soldier took a knee in the muck and fussed with his weapon. Their eyes met, the soldier freezing in his crouch. He smiled and winked, then stood to regain his firing position.

No sooner did his head rise above the parapet than it disappeared in a spray of pink mist. The headless body stood strangely upright for what seemed like an instant too long, then collapsed backward into the muck. His rifle landed feet away, a small tendril of smoke leaking out the barrel.

Anaxander reached for the weapon. A stinging vibration stopped his fingers short. He quickly grasped the barrel and pain again ripped his fingers from the warm steel. A wave of sickness overtook him, and he vomited into the murky filth at his feet. Silky tendrils of bile and semi-digested biscuit hung from his lips, trembling now from the slowly building rhythmic clattering in his chest. Animal fear. The

earth around him suddenly contracted, pulling all warmth into a spot immediately in front of the trench. A deafening shriek like a thousand damned souls burrowing into hell consumed the air. Silence, then malevolent pressure thrust him back into darkness.

The weight at first was comforting. Silence... until the need for breath shot red hot through his core and he thrashed and GASPED for air ... lifting his head through the shallow layer of freshly churned earth into the yellow-green-grey light of the chaos inches above his momentary reprieve.

Whistle blasts and frantic rifle fire interspersed with loud shouts of “GAS!!” overwhelmed the dull scuffle of the death struggle happening just meters away. Anaxander wriggled from beneath the semi-collapsed wall of the trench and peered in the direction of the sickly illumination of battle.

It was like nothing he'd ever seen. Uniforms which had once contained whole men lay shredded and given ghastly form by the partial skeletons of their former inhabitants. A head lay facing him, a mustache still nattily groomed amongst the mangled meaty shards of a face. The entire scene was shrouded in an unnatural twilight mist, neither night nor day, all gunfire, screams, and death.

The dull outline of a man running towards his trench appeared through the smoke and gas. The figure grew closer, and Anaxander saw he was carrying a rifle and wearing a different uniform and a distinctly different helmet. As the enemy soldier got closer still, his visage, or lack thereof, shocked Anaxander into a horrified panic. Was this figure even human? He had no recognizably human facial features, but did seem to have two large eyes and an extended snout,

rather like a two-legged boar, who was quite possibly coming to kill him.

Ducking beneath the lip of the trench, Anaxander crouched down and tried to make himself as small as possible, and began to whimper with fright and confusion. Down the line, a small can on a stick cluttered into the trench. It lay still for a half second, then exploded turning everything black.

As the dust from the bomb began to settle, Anaxander was aware of a rifle stuck into the trench wall above his head, wavering slightly. He looked up and the boar man appeared, looking down, then jumped into the trench and began desperately to dislodge the rifle, which must have been launched from his grasp from the explosion as he advanced. Anaxander stood frozen, unable to move.

The soldier put one boot against the trench wall and yanked furiously, and the rifle came loose suddenly, knocking him backward into the mucky slime. The bayonet that had secured the rifle to the wall lay inches from Anaxander. He grasped it, and it burned his hand. Startled, he shook his hand and lost his grip on the weapon, watching as it arced end over end to land almost equidistant between him and the enemy boar-man.

The boar-man raised his head, and frantically lunged to get the bayonet. Anaxander reacted, as all soldiers must, to beat his enemy to the kill. The soldier scrambled unabatedly towards the weapon, and it became apparent that his angle was a shorter one. He would get to the weapon before Anaxander. His only choice was to assault the body of his enemy in the hopes of impeding his deadly progress.

He got to his feet and managed to take two running strides towards the puddle where the bayonet stuck in the muck, its handle visible above the filthy pool. The soldier dove head first, arms outstretched to reach it first. Anaxander managed another stride, nearly closing the distance between them. The boar-man's dive through the slick propelled him past the object and into Anaxander's perfectly timed kick to the snout.

The boarish features vanished from the head of the soldier; his mask and helmet came off revealing a very young boy. Stunned from the blow to the head, the boy rolled onto his back and groaned. Anaxander lunged headlong to the pool where he had last seen the bayonet, no longer visible, and plunged his hands into the muddy slime. His fingers found the object, and he grasped his hand around the hilt. Pulling it out of the pool, he turned to face his young enemy. The soldier had gained his feet, and the boyish visage contorted into a mixed grimace of fear and rage. He rushed Anaxander, bellowing the guttural cry of a man about to fight for his life.

Anaxander braced himself for the soldier's tackle, and positioned the knife to use his attacker's momentum against him. He steeled himself to deliver the blow, then realized he held nothing in his hand. A searing pain shot up his arm, and he realized the damned thing had burned him again. The enemy struck, and Anaxander was launched backward against the wall of the trench. The soldier dived at the dropped weapon, and Anaxander jumped on top of him. The soldier rolled, and Anaxander could see the weapon in the soldier's hand. He quickly grabbed his wrist and used all his weight to leverage the soldier's own hand upwards, the tip of the blade centimeters from his throat.

“Nein, nein!” The soldier whimpered, his youth revealing itself in his wide eyes and terror. Anaxander pressed forward, then felt all his strength drain from his body. There was death near to them both, in all its futility and finality. To push this steel into this boy's neck seemed so much effort, and so great a crime, Anaxander rather wished it all to go black than to feel the hot lifeblood of this young boy pour over his hands as he watched the light dim from his eyes. He let go, and smiled briefly at the release.

Suddenly, he was grabbed from behind and thrown against the far wall of the trench. A huge man rushed past him and thrust his hand up against the throat of the young soldier. The large man pinned the bawling and squirming soldier to the trench floor and with his free hand rammed the barrel of a pistol up under the boy's chin. He fired, and the boy went limp and slunk into the muck. He turned, and Anaxander could see this man had a mask as well, similar to the boy's, but different. He looked more like a deranged elephant than a boar, with a slender trunk snaking down into a pouch worn across his chest.

“You damn fool!”, the man shouted, loud but muffled through the mask. “It's a gas attack! Put this on quick!” He threw the boy's mask at Anaxander. The alien looking contraption struck his chest and fell to the mud. Numb, Anaxander bent to pick it up, and noticed the large man was rifling through the pockets of the freshly dispatched boy-soldier. He discovered a bar of chocolate, and greedily stuffed it into his own pocket. He turned, and Anaxander could see rage flicker in the man's eyes through the little windows of his elephant mask. In two amazingly quick steps the large man was on him, and Anaxander was once again knocked flat, this time by a hard right hand to the mouth.

“Put in on, you bloody fop!” The large man again tossed the boar mask at Anaxander, who struggled to get the apparatus over his head and situated in the manner the boy had seemed to be wearing it. He could scarcely see through the fogged up goggles, and at first he thought this might be better than bearing witness to any more horrors.

“Up and over with you!” The large man had a powerful grip on his elbow and was yelling near his ear. “We're 'ere to fight, not lounge about in trenches, cozy as they are. Over the top!” Anaxander found himself being lifted/thrown up and out the hole, and the big man came up right behind him.

“Follow me, but not too close. I don't want to get shot with you wearing that bloody thing.”

Anaxander grabbed at the big man's jacket, but his hand was slapped away. He stumbled in the slick earth, and became disoriented as the heavy mask swung around his head, alternately obscuring his vision, then offering only two foggy peepholes to view the battlefield. He could hear the zip of bullets whizzing around him, but could discern no figures through the mask. The slicing of the bullets through the air became louder as the volume of fire intensified around him. He stumbled again, then felt the sting of earth kicked up by bullets striking the ground around him. The mask came off as he frantically slithered his way away from the direction he sensed the fire to be coming from. It was at once wonderful to be possessed of all his senses again without being incased in that horrid mask, but the air around him smelled of harsh chemicals and burned his throat and lungs. He grasped the mask and continued his harried crawl, his erstwhile companion nowhere to be seen.

He struggled to simultaneously keep as low as possible, and go as fast as possible, and the desire for each stultified proper execution of either. The volume of fire in his direction had greatly diminished, the angry buzz of leaden insects over his head replaced now by an eerie yellow mist, silent except for the “zzzzzpppppth” of random bullets. The mist worried him, it had a malevolent odor and weight to it, like a poisonous wave about to break. His insides began to burn and his eyes to water, and he put the mask back over his head.

After he had adjusted to the narrowed field of vision, and was relatively sure he was not going to suffocate in the damn thing, he resumed his struggle across the wasted land. Immediately the buzzing murderous hum animated the air around him, and he pressed his body against the earth to lay as flat as he could, but it was futile with the mask on. It locked out all sensory input except the horrid crack of rifle fire in his direction. He ripped off the mask, and lay as still as he could. The swarm diminished, and then left as they had before, but not without a few hits in the dirt around him, stinging reminders of their deadly intent. The sting and labored breathing returned, and Anaxander realized why the shooting stopped when he was sans mask. It was a waste of ammunition to fire at a man who would soon be dispatched by this horrid gas.

The hopelessness of his situation began to sink in. Without the mask, he was sure to drown slowly in this yellow chemical soup that had turned the breath of life into the atmosphere of hell, with the enemy mask he would undoubtedly be shot, as likely by his own side as by the enemy, whomever they might be. He cocked his head to the side, and resigned himself to his fate. Better to die exposed to God's creation, as demonic as it was here on this otherworldly nightmare of

a battlefield, than encased in that encephalitic sarcophagus of a mask. Each breath burned a little deeper, and Anaxander waited to die.

He began to pray, the prayers his father had taught him, and to dream of his home, and to wonder if it even existed anymore. The gas danced in front of him, swirling and twisting, and for a second was eerily beautiful, and Anaxander marveled that although God seemed to have completely abandoned this place, there was at least this. Then a figure burst through the gas and ran past him. Lifting his head ever so slightly, Anaxander peeked around him. There were shadowy breaks in the mist all around, men advancing (or retreating?), and Anaxander strained to make out the details of the figures.

The mist broke close to him, and a soldier wearing the elephantine mask of the fashion of the large man rushed past him, followed very closely by another soldier in the same garb. Anaxander felt a rush of relief in recognizing his own (whoever they were), and sprang up to follow them. The ground was rutted and gouged from the scars of battle, and he jittered around from left to right, stumbling as often as stepping, trying desperately to not lose sight of the man in front of him. His vision darted from the horizon to his feet, from little pinpricks of light he knew to be muzzle flashes, to the churned earth just in front of his flailing feet.

His lungs burned as he ran, and he became aware of a shortness of breath. His legs were on fire from the effort of running over the uneven ground, and trying to keep up with the other soldiers, who seemed impossibly fast. Fearing his legs might give out, he redoubled his efforts in the hope this mad dash would lead to safety soon. He went full speed for almost ten meters and had nearly caught up with the man he was following, when he heard a

“CRRUUMPPHH” ahead and to his right. He hit a wall of solid air and light and was knocked onto his back, and felt as if a giant had punched him in his chest. Clods of mud rained down around him, and his ears rang with the sound of a thousand church bells. Anaxander managed to pull himself to his knees, and noticed a man's severed leg not far off. Wispy tendrils of steam rose from the jagged meat.

Dazed, he stared into the distance, still dotted with the flashes of rifle fire. He could feel explosions around him as pressure in his chest, but there was no sound. It was raining mud. He attempted to get up, and staggered a few paces to his left before collapsing in a heap. Desperate to get out of this killing field, he crawled a few feet, collapsed, got to his feet, stumbled a few more, collapsed, crawled a few more.

“Grab that, mate!”, someone shouted into his ear. Drunkenly, Anaxander turned his head in the direction of the voice. “Grab it! Gas! C'mon, let's go, only dead men out here!” Anaxander looked around, and noticed the mask he had been dragging around resting near his feet. He grasped it, and the soldier ran off. A wave of panic shot through him, he did not want to be left alone again, and almost without noticing it, he was on his feet and running again.

As he ran, the green mist became thinner and thinner, until suddenly he could see clearly all around him. There were soldiers to his left and right, all running at break neck speed. Ahead, in the distance, he could make out the dark slit of a trench, and vaguely make out the cheers and waves of comrades urging them to safety. It was a retreat! Relief spread through him, and he sprinted even faster, his pain and tiredness forgotten.

There was a huge shell crater ahead to his right, and Anaxander saw a small figure struggling to climb out of it. As he ran closer, he could hear the soldier calling, “HELP! HELP! PLEASE ANYONE, HELP ME!”

It was the bleating cry of a panicked boy, one Anaxander recognized all too well from other battlefields. His heart seized and his legs began to slow; his relief turned to grim obligation as he watched soldier after soldier run past the desperately squirming boy. He had been an officer once, in another war, and an officer's duty was to his men. Whatever the hell was happening here, whatever the political grievance that gave rise to this horror, no man deserved to be alone and terrified so another might know temporary comfort.

He ran to within three meters of the giant hole which appeared to be swallowing the struggling soldier, dropped to his knees and crawled to the lip. The boy's eyes were wide as tea saucers, tears had wiped clean streaks in his face.

“Oh thank God, thank God, thank God...” the soldier repeated again and again, the panic slightly easing out of his face. He dropped his helmeted head to rest briefly on his rifle, which was dug into the muck just above the lip of the hole. He was clinging to it the way a drowning man might cling to a piece of driftwood.

Anaxander dropped to his stomach and held his hands out the boy.

“Grab hold!”, Anaxander commanded, in a voice he could not recognize as his own.

“I can't, I can't let go, or I'll slip back down.”, the boy whined.

“Blast it, man! Try!”, he commanded.

Whimpering, the boy took one arm off his rifle and reached out to grasp Anaxander's outstretched hand. Anaxander squirmed to close the gap between them, and got a weak grip on the soldier's quivering mitt.

“Get your feet under ya, I can't pull you out!”

The boy bleated in surprise, squirmed, then released his grip on Anaxander, his arm shooting back to hold fast to his rifle.

“I'm slipping, it's too slick. I think my leg's broke.”

“Dammit man, you bloody well try if you want to get out of there!” Anaxander thrust his hand out again.

The boy reached out again, and Anaxander lunged forward. Their hands met, and Anaxander tensed his body tight as steel, and with everything he had began to pull.

“C'mon, boy! I can't do it alone!”

The boy screamed in pain, and suddenly Anaxander felt the tension in his arm go slack. He quickly got to his knees and reached up to grab the sleeve of the soldier, and pulled some more.

“We got it! Keep coming, boy!” Anaxander saw the chest, then the waist of the soldier raise out of the shell hole. Pulling for all he was worth, Anaxander saw the boy suddenly appear whole. His right leg

was obviously broken, twisted just above the ankle. Relief and surprise manifested in a wide grin which accentuated his youthfulness. Anaxander grinned back, then the world exploded behind him.

The bottom of the massive bomb crater was water up to about knee level, with another several centimeters of sucking mud under that. It was also exceptionally cold, and quickly shook Anaxander from his stupor. The blast had blown them both into the crater from which the young soldier had been rescued. As Anaxander gathered himself and counted fingers and toes, he could hear the young soldier weeping nearby.

“Are you hit, boy?”

“My leg is broke.” , the boy sniveled.

“Well, my brain is broke.”, Anaxander retorted.

“Are you hit, then, is it bad? Your eyes look like a bloody cat! Have you been gassed?”

“Well, it's bad enough. Last time I was fighting a war it was in Africa shooting the bloody Zulus and there was none of this bombing or gassing or fancy rifles or crying about broken legs!”

“You ain't that old, but nice try mate” He wiped his nose on his sleeve and glared at Anaxander.

“Oh really? What year is this, then?”

“You really got a good knock to the ol' bean, eh? In case you ain't just pulling my broken leg, it's 1917.”

Anaxander felt a chill dampen his entire body, and a strange memory of a dream flitted through his mind. The witchdoctor's curse had worked. He began laughing uncontrollably at the absurdity of it. Those backward Zulus fought firearms and artillery with spears and carried shield of stretched hide to protect against bullets. They thought medicine was magic and were led by men who claimed to speak to the dead. They could bugger up buttering a biscuit, but one had sent him a' time traveling. He felt as if he were about to lose his mind.

“What's so funny, then”, the young soldier asked, a grin spreading slowly across his face.

“Have you ever been so sure that someone was wrong, and you were right, and then found out they were right all along?”

“Yeah, the day my old man says ‘Danny, time to grow up and joint the war. It'll build you up to do your part for King and Country. Make you a man.’ he says. I ain't going to make it out of here to be a man. Thanks, Dad!”

“Well, maybe he was hard-up for a lodger.” The two looked at each other and laughed. It was the same gallows humor that had entertained troops throughout the centuries.

“Yeah, maybe.” The boy quickly grew sullen, then sniffled a little,

muttering to himself, “So long Mum, Dad, sorry if I was bad...” he began to whimper.

“Hey, chin up. We ain't dead yet. “ Anaxander looked around the muck, and felt his own words to be hollow. Being dead made more sense than this madness.

They sat together in the highest part of the crater, which was just high enough to keep their legs mostly out of the water. Anaxander had tried briefly to find a way to climb out of the hole, but the walls were so slick he could get no purchase.

“How did you manage to get to the lip of it when I found you?” Anaxander asked.

“I didn't fall all the way in, I stepped in a hole, broke my leg, and kinda slipped and started down and caught myself with my rifle, before you showed up.”

“Where's that rifle then?” They both looked to the murky water, then Anaxander began shuffling through the muck.

After a minute or two of this, his feet hit an object.

“I've got something here.” He bent down and pulled up his mask.

“Damn Jerry mask. Think he's down there?” Danny nodded in the direction of the muddy water and spat.

“It's mine.” Anaxander bent over the mask and rinsed out the inside as best he could with the filthy water.

“Yours? Where's the one you's issued, mate?”

Anaxander offered no response, and continued his search. After a good ten minutes and numerous sweeps of the pit, it was apparent the rifle was lost. Anaxander returned to the semi-dry perch and sat for a long while, saying nothing. The light over their hole grew dimmer and dimmer, until it was dark. Distant flashes periodically cut the darkness, but for the most part it seemed their sector was quiet.

“So what got you here?” Danny's voice cut the silence.

“A Zulu witchdoctor put a curse on me.”, Anaxander half-heartedly offered. Surely part of the curse was the reality no one would ever believe him about it.

“Ha! Good one, mate. Is that why your eyes are yellow? I got cursed, too. I had the option of the whole shrunken-head thing, but a stint with His Majesty's finest seemed a better deal at the time. I'd a rather got my head shrunk now. Really, where you from?”

“Cardiff, a long time ago.”

“Oh yeah? My granddad was from Cardiff.”

“What's his name?” Anaxander asked.

“Oh, he died in Africa, a long time ago, fightin' bushmen and all that. Hey maybe you know 'im.” Danny gave Anaxander a playful elbow in the ribs.

“Maybe. What's his name?”

“George Blevins was his name.”

Anaxander smiled a bit to himself in the dark. He HAD known a George Blevins from Cardiff, had shipped out with the man. Quite a character, he wore his wife's underthings for “good luck”, he claimed. He caught sick on the ship, and died before they even made it ashore. A memorable fellow.

“He didn't die in Africa though, did he, he died before he got there?” Anaxander heard the boy suck air through his teeth in the dark.

“Well, no, no he didn't make it off the ship, Dad said. Funny thing is, he got a fever. Went mad and died in me Nan's britches.” Danny began to laugh at this, and Anaxander had to join in. The release eased the tension, but the noise made them a target. They quieted down as quickly as they started.

“How did you know that?” Danny asked when he'd composed himself.

“I knew the man.” Anaxander answered, tiredly.

“Yeah, right, and my Granddad wore knickers.” At this they both lost it, howling laughter and punching each other to stop, which made them laugh even harder. They were brought back to sobriety when a green star shell burst above their hole in the ground.

“Christ, here it comes.” Danny muttered.

“Here comes what?”

In the dim green illumination of the flare, Anaxander could see the boy looking at him, his gaze steady and matter-of-fact. He seemed to have aged thirty years in one look.

“The fun part, mate. Jerry's going to 'ave himself a little target practice.”

The flare went out and there was silence for an instant. Then the earth seemed to be alive with a violent sickness, vomiting fire with a deafening roar. The pair bounced around their hole, with Danny periodically crying out in pain as his leg was bounced about in the shuddering ground. Anaxander felt a horrifying revulsion to the magnitude of the violence, akin to the shock he registered witnessing the Maxim unleashed on the charging Zulus. This was a deeper horror, however. The Maxim fired for minutes. After the first hour of his first shelling, he yearned for a shell to re-trace the trajectory of one of his murderous brothers and fall into their hole. After the third hour, he began to weep uncontrollably. After the fifth, he laughed like the madman he was sure he'd become. At least in this new war, he'd have plenty of company.

Day broke, and Anaxander realized with a start the shelling had stopped. Danny, unbelievably, had fallen asleep. Anaxander nudged him awake, and they looked at each other and strained to listen for what might be happening above them. It was quiet, except for the rumblings of distant explosions, but once again it seemed their little neck of the war was taking a break. Sharpening its talons for another swoop, more like.

As the light grew brighter, it became apparent something was different. The light had a different color, a darkish yellow tint, and the air smelled of pungent horseradish.

“Gas! The bastards!” Danny grit his teeth and shook his head. He appeared to have aged during the night's shelling, although Anaxander couldn't quite tell what the difference was.

“What's all this about gas? I've dragged that damned thing around for a day now, seen blokes running around in them, but apart from a bit of a sting in my chest, and a funny smell in the air, I haven't seen anything so bad as wearing one.” He pointed to the gas mask he was apportioned by the brutish man.

“I dunno, I've not seen it so bad myself, but the boys who've been in the trenches a bit won't go over the top without 'em, and they say getting gassed is worse than the worst shelling.” Danny looked warily at the creeping yellow mist. “It doesn't work so good as it might, even a light breeze will break it up up top. But, there ain't no breeze in a trench. Or a shell crater.”

Little tendrils of yellow mist began billowing down the sides of the hole.

“Well, we've got to get out of here, then.” Anaxander stated.

“How? It's too slick to climb, and ain't nobody coming out in a gas attack to get us.”

“Stand on my shoulders, and try to reach the lip.” Anaxander

marveled at how he had not thought of this before.

“With my broke leg? I can't get on your shoulders, and you sure as hell can't stand on mine.”

“Try it, for God's sake! Be a man!” Anaxander shouted, trying to rally the boy's spirits.

“That's what got me in this mess in the first place. If this is being a man, I'll stay in short pants awhile longer, thanks.” Danny threw Anaxander a sidelong glance, sighed, and struggled to get up on his good leg.

After several contorted tries at clambering up Anaxander's back, each attempt resulting in a loss of balance and a jolt to his injured limb, Danny sat down, exhausted from the pain.

“I'm sorry, mate, I can't do it.” Danny began to whimper defeatedly, and the yellow mist grew denser in their hole. They both began to cough as the air grew increasingly acrid, and Danny's whimpering turned to crying.

“I don't want to die, I don't want to die, I don't want to die...”, he repeated over and over.

Anaxander found the mask and began fitting it over Danny's head.

“What about you? What're you going to do?” Danny blubbered through the contraption.

“Find out what's next, I reckon.” Anaxander hadn't thought much

about it, but he didn't want to live in this world where men hurled massive bombs at other men for hours on end, then for good measure, let loose poison gas to finish off the survivors.

He sat down next to Danny and began to cough. He couldn't get enough air into his lungs, and each breath was like fire searing his throat. He had the sensation of drowning in fire, slowly, one horrible searing meager gasp of air at a time. It reminded him of the time his Granddad's barn had caught fire, and Anaxander had charged into the inferno to save his favorite goat. The heat and smoke were overwhelming, and he had collapsed certain he would die from breathing fire, yet unafraid, His Granddad had pulled him out in the nick of time. Blackey had not been so lucky.

As his lungs began to be scorched to liquid by the chemicals, and he coughed up frothy red burning bits of his innards, he lay back and imagined the soothing sense of beyond he drifted through those many years before, and tried to recapture the calm he felt back then at the prospect of death in his child's mind. As he hazily descended away from conscious concerns, a jolt of horror brought his mind back fully to bear as the world around him extended to a conical sphere with a point of light inhumanly far in the distance. The impossible sense of speed overwhelmed him once more, and he tried to scream for it to stop but could hear no sound. The crippling nausea returned, and there was a sound like a thousand butchers cleaving a thousand carcasses, steel scraping bone to the marrow, with a dull pulling of meat away from vitals. An image appeared through the streaking light, and Anaxander saw an endless line of skinned human corpses hung upside down, eyes pleading unblinking without lids, teeth bared without lips to cover them.

Danny witnessed the Reckoning, wild eyed with horror as a brilliant yellow light, intense beyond any lighthouse beam, shot from Anaxander's eyes. The luminescence spread, bursting from his ears, mouth, hands, and glowing like mad embers from beneath his uniform. The light became more intense and the figure writhed as the light seemed to be even creeping out the top of its head, a skull on fire. The flaming death's head turned it's fire-eyes towards Danny, mouth opened in a scream engulfed in flame. There was a flash brighter than the brightest shell explosion, but blasting frozen air instead of heat. When Danny's eyes could focus again, the figure was gone. He could see the muck at the bottom of the shell hole was solid. His leg was numb from cold, and the sides of the crater had frozen hard enough for him to clamber out, holds perforated in the solidified muck like a ladder.

THE END

Kilroy here again. Whew, I didn't think we'd make it out of there lead-free. Wait! Let double-check for holes...Ok, I'm clean. How about you?

If Anaxander was so freaked by the “modern weaponry” of WWI, I wonder what he'd think of a flamethrower or a nuke? I'm sure the Dead Reckoner will appear again. Unfortunately there's no shortage of wars and he'll continue haunting the battles of history. I suspect his sanity will erode with each step as Matthew pushes him towards oblivion.

Matthew Davies was born January 18th, 1976, in Denver, Colorado. He first skied the Rockies at the age of three, beginning a love affair with the mountains and high places. The serenity of snow-covered peaks and the freedom and possibility of the alpine expanses filled him with a wonder he yearned to explore and express. In primary school, a curiosity and precociousness beyond his years was noticed by his teachers when he began smuggling classics from his father's library into the classroom, to read on the sly. Caught reading, but not really understanding “The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind” by Julian Jaynes, after being mesmerized by the title alone, he was encouraged to join the “Great Books” program, and participated throughout grade school in discussions about their selections. This fostered a realization of the possibility of the written word, and he began writing his own stories, and seized upon every academic opportunity to showcase his budding interest in the magic of language and personal expression.

If you'd like to learn more about Matthew, you can visit him on the Goodreads.

www.goodreads.com/author/show/670323.Matthew_Davies

If you like to explore more of Matthew's work be sure to check out "Beginner Mind" it's an eBook of short stories and poetry currently available for immediate download on Lulu.

WILD MARJORAM

Our third story skips time-tracks into an alternate history of the Machine Age. In this timeline WWI never ended, in fact, it expanded. Here Germany occupies the East Coast of the USA, and if that wasn't bad enough, mob factions fight over the remaining free-zones!

Wild Marjoram is a blonde haired blue eyed mechanic with a locket that holds the key to her past. This perfect Aryan specimen lives in hiding from the Nazi occupation. If they discover her, she'll be condemned to the fate of a broodmare. But she's not the type of girl to give up without a fight.

Wild Marjoram's explosive recipe appeared in the dreams of N.R. Grabe. Its pulp lineage arrives from the likes of "Astounding Stories", "Gangster Stories" and descendants like "The Handmaids Tale". N.R. has baked her if-it-had-happened-otherwise story with action, intrigue and a cavalcade of colorful characters. We hope you enjoy each bite.

Now, throw away your schoolbooks because this Alternate History is uncharted. Keep your eyes open and your head down. You'd better pack an extra drum for your Tommy gun, just in case...

WILD MARJORAM

The title 'WILD MARJORAM' is presented in a bold, black, sans-serif font. The word 'WILD' is positioned above 'MARJORAM'. The letter 'O' in 'MARJORAM' is replaced by a detailed illustration of a marjoram plant with its characteristic rounded, bushy top and a single stem with small leaves. The entire title is framed by a decorative border consisting of two horizontal lines with a central diamond-shaped cutout, and two diagonal lines extending from the top corners towards the center.

The Pill

By N.R. Grabe

The mechanic's ears tense with the vibrations of the Delahaye coming into the driveway of the shop. The sound pounds with intensity further rocketed by being constrained under the hold of a glossy-red Mercury. The creeper squeaks and rolls with the push of the mechanic's legs and hands pull at an oiled cloth to wipe the dirt of the last customer's car away. Must be at my best when the boss of the Killdeer comes, the mechanic thinks, trying to find soap. No honking comes from the car as it drives in. There doesn't have to be. Its presence in the garage makes all the employees' heads turn. The sight of it and its improvements make it almost worth owning a French car. Not that the French didn't fight for us, the mechanic thinks, finding the borax and trying to get grease off a well-marked forehead and fingers. New Paris would be the only thing to take down the Germans now.

A man with a grey fedora and cigarette sits in the front of the Delahaye, patient with each exhale and as serious as a headache. The mechanic's eyes lock with his. He follows the mechanic's movements like a laser beam. He smirks. Soon this stare down becomes fuzzy as the boss comes into the view of the mechanic.

“Do you like what you see?” The boss comments.

The mechanic puzzles over the boss' words, “She's a beauty.”

“Yeah, you are still stuck in the old times, aren't ya?”

“Where did you get her?”

“It was a gift for some favors I did for the Redcrowns. I need you to look it over. Take it out for a spin. Now.”

“I have got some other work.”

“No, you don't. Let's go.”

The mechanic signals to the desk clerk they are leaving. A nod is received as a clear sign they will be gone the rest of the day.

“It sounds fine to me.” The mechanic states, listening to the engine as they travel down a curved street out of town.

The boss says, “Are you sure? Listen to that there. The timing is the slightest bit off. You need to fix it.”

The mechanic hears nothing and pauses to look over the dash of the coupe, never seeing a set-up like the Delahaye has, dials and lights that have functions the mechanic can't figure out, even with years of study and training. It looks like a car from outer space. The words of the boss echo again.

“I can fix it if you bring it to the garage tomorrow.” The mechanic says with a little shake, not wanting to contradict the boss. The car runs like a dream. It is meant to go fast along the outskirts of town. Trees fly past and become green blurs.

The man in the fedora sits in the back, silent, watching the pair. The mechanic shifts the car and finds an area to turn around to go back to the city. A little sweat drips from the mechanic's hat out of nervousness and the water winds around dark driving glasses. A scenic view is in the distance, a tourist spot where people used to go to see the panorama of the city before they came and fenced part of it in. Two lunch wagons sit in the ditch by the once scenic outpost. One is a faded red and somewhat dilapidated, meant to be an automat most of the time. A moving automat, the mechanic muses, is that a contradiction? It says a faint *Carpenter's Box Luncheonette* on the side. Usually it parks in the city, but its presence here is odd, even though it seems to be finishing up a job feeding the field workers that hiked up the hill for a fix of sandwiches and baked beans. Its neighbor, the blue truck, fires up. *Millie's* is all it says as a name, along with the arched letters stating its wares: Cigarettes, newspapers, coffee. Coffee is crossed out with a line of black paint. A graphic of a cartoon dog begging is painted in bright colors under

the name. They are steam-powered trucks. The mechanic remembers working on one of them years ago. Souped-up vehicles with ovens that pumps steam into the engine. Invented by immigrants who cobbled the parts together from what they had, what they could find.

The Delahaye passes the trucks and the blue one cranks into life. Both of them rev and then pull onto the road behind the trio. The two trucks take over both lanes as the mechanic's pulse quickens.

“Do we have trouble here?” The man in the hat says. He reaches into his coat, his hand pausing.

“No, they are immigrants. We control them.” The boss remarks calmly, seeking out the radio.

The red truck pulls around to the front of the car. The blue one lurks at the side of the Delahaye. The boss motions them past, “Normally I would burn up at such antics. I would let them have it. They don't know the rules of the road. But today, I wanted you to meet someone special to me. You should have met this person long ago. I'll let it pass. Besides, I am a sucker for a cartoon mutt. I have this address on a piece of paper and want you to go there.”

The paper falls into the lap of the mechanic. The brakes press and the Delahaye finds itself behind the food trucks, the red one leading the way.

“I haven't seen one person inside either of these trucks. It is like they have a life of their own.” The man in the back observes, but it is too late. The eye of the dog under the Millie's graphic in the back of the truck swings open, revealing a small front site and rod.

The car is hit before they hear the pop. It cracks the glass, imprinting broken rings in the windshield. The boss has been hit. Blood pours out the side of a blasted left shoulder and down into the shifter. The mechanic instinctively stomps on the gas and spins around, flooring it. This coupe can take out some ancient steamsuckers, the mechanic thinks and soon the Delahaye is pulling away from the trucks. The man in the back pulls out his piece and fires out the window, destroying the tire of the blue truck. It careens off the road the down the hill. He pulls off his coat and holds it over the boss' wound, rushing between the front seats.

Speeding up, the red truck fires at the trunk of the coupe, smashing the back windshield. The fedora man ducks out of the way of the broken glass and fires three rounds into the red truck. It flips on its side and only then, do they see people come out of it. The mechanic struggles to see through the broken glass and debris.

“Anti-Slates.” The man says to the mechanic as the boss moans in pain. “We need fly the coop and get to Madame’s. Quickly!”

The sight of a damaged car in the city is not a big deal, unless it is a luxury car. A luxury car means gangsters are afoot. The mechanic parks the coupe haphazardly by a motorized hydrant as the man pulls out the boss as he opens the passenger side. The two tug the boss onto their shoulders, feeling the struggling breath, red stains all over the clothes and the coupe's seats. People scurry out of the way as the

trio head into a local hotel. Even the elevator operator turns a dead eye as he brings them up to the penthouse suite. Despite this, the man in the fedora still knocks and ushers forth a password.

“*Enthousiasmos.*” The man says with meaning, with the expectation each syllable has to be spoken in a careful way.

“Perfect.” A voice pours from the inside of the room. “Jerry?”

“Yes, Madame. Open up.” The man speaks.

The voice echoes into the hallway, “Boss with you?”

“Yes, we got shot at. Anti-Slates.”

The mechanic stays silent and helps hold the boss up.

“Why didn’t you say so?” The woman opens the door.

The door pushes back to expose a beautiful parlor, filled with scantily-clad women in fine lingerie. Velvet couches, felted wallpaper, a throwback to years prior. Some of the women gasp as they see the blood.

“Get the boss inside one of the bedrooms. Be careful not to get any blood in the front room. It’s our livelihood.” The madam says as she ushers the pair holding the boss into the backroom. The women sit in the room talking about what has transpired.

The madam lays the boss on the bed, removing clothing, going to the basin by the bed and dipping water in it to clean off the wound.

“What happened?” She asked the man.

“They shot at us through a hole in a food truck. A hole in the eye of a dog cartoon. Before we saw it, it was too late. You know, the boss wanted to see the girls and have a great birthday celebration, mind on other things.” The man said.

“And who are you?” The madam inquires of the mechanic. “What is your name?”

“Marjoram. People tend not to like it, so they call me Marj or Marjorie.” The mechanic stretched her blood-soaked hand out. She forgot her manners. Marj takes her mechanic’s hat off to uncover a torrent of long messy blonde hair.

“The boss’ mechanic. I personally think it’s pretty, like the herb, right? Wild Marjoram? You should never wear a hat, you’re hair is lovely.” The man says.

“Oh, the boss likes them young, what are you, like 19?” The madam questions.

“20.” The mechanic sighs.

“Get my tools.” The madam instructs a woman who is watching them from the hall. The woman goes to fetch them. “To be 20. I would probably be a doctor by now.”

The madam turns on a light in the room to examine the boss. It hits the eyes of the mechanic when she is removing her dark driving glasses.

“You have blue eyes? Where the hell did you find her?” She says to the boss and the man as she opens the case the woman brings her.

The mechanic puts her glasses back on. She forgets this is the land of the Slate-eyed and most people assume she is too. Most younger women are by their own hand.

“Please don’t tell anyone.” The mechanic pleads.

“I won’t. Your secret is safe with us. We have a few girls here that are. Not many. I wouldn’t have done it to myself in hindsight.”

The madam pulls out an instrument that will extract the bullet. It is an odd-looking twisting pair of metal clamps. “You might want to turn your head.” She tells the pair as she sharpens them.

A scream springs from the limp body of the boss as the madam plops a bullet into the basin. “You’ll be ok, Victoria. You’ll be ok. Just breathe. We have been through worse, right?”

Victoria smiles slightly and passes out, as the madam gets a spool out of her bag. She sews up the wound with a coarse black thread and a needle heated over a candle. She then applies ointment. Marjorie peaks at it a bit and then recoils, her stomach flipping and growling. The madam takes out some aspirin and slowly feeds them to Victoria. The medicine shakes Victoria’s body as she spasms with each sip as

she awakes, but finally she curls into a fetal position on the navy satin sheets and her eyes flicker close. She starts to snore.

“Are you hungry?” The madam asks.

“I am always hungry. We never get enough supplies at our stores. I tried growing a Victory Garden, but in the city...it doesn't work.” Marjorie said, putting her cap down and messing with her tangled hair. Jerry ganders at her longingly.

“Down, boy.” The madam laughs and takes Marjorie by the hand. “Nevermind this gungel. We call him Jerry The Stealth. He's always sneaking up on people. You know, we should clean you up first. You look crummy. I know one of the girls must have something for you to wear.”

They walk into a large bathroom. There is a large white ceramic bathtub with eagles' feet that claw into the black and white square tiles. The rest of the place is decorated in pinks and scarlet with gold accents. A cherub statue perches on a swing above the sink, woven with ivy and roses. The scent of jasmine lingers along with the odor of sandalwood soap. The mechanic reluctantly takes off her grimy taupe monkey suit and drapes it over a vanity chair. The vanity's sink glistens with glass bottles of perfume topped with tasseled bulbous sprayers. The chair is black wrought iron with a seat of crushed maroon velvet that is the same color as Victoria's dried blood.

Marjorie never knew Victoria's name. It had always been Boss of the Killdeer Gang, a gang that tied into the Mob. She would put it out of her mind, thinking it was easier not to know, to fix her cars and take

the generous tips she gave. But not now. She's in deep, she thinks. Victoria feels like more to her than this.

Water squishes from the curved tap that looks like a swans' head into the tub. She adds some scented bubbles and mixes it with her hand. She can't remember the last time she took a bath. She could enjoy it here, despite the boss almost dying a few doors down. Her toe dips in and she decides to ease into the waves until she is up to her neck.

The door opens a tiny fraction, adding a dazzle of glossiness to the room to offset the only gaslight. The mechanic wonders why such a well to do place has gaslights, where electricity is in most buildings like this. She sees a slight shadow and turns, only to find Jerry the Stealth close to her face from behind her.

Marjoram jumps and yells, "Get lost!"

"I am sorry, Dolly. It's my curse, being so quiet."

She blows bubbles at him and they stick to his suit coat.

"You know, I've seen naked women before." He starts with a smile. "But I've never met a woman that wasn't a Slate. Not even a young one."

"Go into the slums and I am sure they are all over, if they aren't being kidnapped." Marjorie aims her eyes at the pocket of her suit, to the outline of her knife.

"We are trying to solve that, Marjorie. I am not going to hurt you. I want to bask in your presence. You bring out something in me. I

know you can feel it too.” He brings the vanity chair up to the bath and sits on it.

“I try not to be around men, other than my relatives. Not that the flu hasn’t taken most of them out.” She stops and sighs, wetting her hair in the tub, but eyeing her knife, which has gotten closer with Jerry’s move.

“I was raised in captivity. Here in the Killdeer Gang. One of the few remaining non-Slates gave birth to me. I am sort of their pet. But from what I hear about the outside, the war that never ends, plagues, sieges, violence...the population is at 50% and has no sign of growing...maybe it is best to be kept.”

“So, you have never been with a woman?”

“Yeah, plenty. My bosses are women.”

“No, I mean, in a way that makes a baby.”

“Oh, no. Not in that way, but I am curious.”

“Curious how?”

“Well, you smell delightful, different than the Slates. I am drawn to your scent.”

The mechanic feels uncomfortable. He must mean he can sense her ovulation. The embarrassment makes her blush slightly, yet still seeing if she could go for the blade. She purrs, “I feel something from you. But I would never try anything or ask you to court me because

you are the boss'. I am true to her. If not for her, I wouldn't have gotten training, a job and my own business. She looks after me from afar."

"You own the garage?"

"Yes, I do. Does that surprise you?"

"Victoria tells me of a time when women weren't even citizens. They could technically own property but if they got married, it went to their husbands. They couldn't vote and didn't have rights. Men could beat them without a problem."

"See, I only know fragments of this story, being younger. All our schoolbooks had to be recycled for the war. The French Smack, the first battle on our lands. I only know how the war started and then grew to be chemical warfare. A flu unleashed to end all flus."

"No one knows how that virus came to be, but it killed more people than the war. It attacked pregnant women and healthy men, fed off of them. They said it was a weapon the Germans made to kill the Allies. The Nazi Influenza. It didn't stop until Shorter made a weapon to rub their fertile women out. An eye for an eye."

"But how did the woman here start to take it?"

"The war kept going. This Great War without end. It seemed with pure exhaustion, it might come to a treaty, but then more invasions. The Germans came here, took over part of the Big Apple. The French followed and were so mass in number that they made Toronto New Paris and started making luxury cars that were superior to anything

Detroit was creating. It created a great industry, oddly not affected by the want of the war for steel and other metals. It needed workers, so women applied to Emile Delahaye and Henry Ford. But the men, some came back and complained. Yet the women, they listened to suffragettes and to the poorer immigrants who came here for freedom. They didn't want to be at home having babies. That is when madam came in."

"I'm listening." Marj says letting the water and bubbles ease over her frame.

"She met Shorter at a car gala. She was young and ambitious, I have seen photos of her lovely eyes and lithe frame. He wanted to perform experiments with his sterility drug and what better place to do that than a whorehouse? Where the women would like not to get pregnant from Johns? It worked, very well. The only drawbacks were liver sickness since it was made from poisonous metals and the metal leached into the bones and irises, making the eyes dark grey like slate."

"I get it now, Slates. I never got the term other than the women who chose not to bear fruit as my uncles would say. They protected me when I was young, when the ravishing came."

"So you know of it? When women were kidnapped and forced to conceive?"

"Again, only a part of it. It sounds gruesome."

"From what I hear, it was. Locked in a cell and made a baby machine for the army. It was their duty. Newsreels and even children's games

were made to encourage this use of women. Card games saying it was ok to kidnap and ravish a woman in the name of honor. It is hard to believe laughing at crying, wounded women was normal. I am not from that time. I am barely 18. But my mother was one of these. She died in childbirth, in a dirty cell, alone. No one cared. I am sure people took the Pill just to not end up a victim. Of course, the women got into gangs and amused the Mob. The Mob provided protection since some upstanding men in the city would kill women for sport. The war had got the best of everyone.”

A knock came to the door. The madam was not pleased. “Get out, you cad!”

“Sorry madam. Just trying to keep Marjoram company.”

The madam’s deep grey eyes flash at him and he paces out of the room. “Here, put these clothes on.” She hands Marjorie a long pretty dress with a calico print. It is the first dress Marjorie has ever pulled around herself. With all the grime washed away, she looks different. “Come to the kitchen, Pet. I have some sandwiches and coffee.”

“How did you get coffee?” Marjorie inquires.

“It’s a secret. Maybe someday you will know it.” The madam teases.

As they walk to the kitchen, Marjorie confesses, “Jerry told me about the history of my city I don’t know. About the Pill. Lysistratrix, I believe it is called.”

“Did he now? I would think he would discourage you the way he looks at you like a plate of bacon.”

“Do people still take it?”

“Not as much as before. It’s hard to find. That name didn’t stick. People just call it The Pill, Hon.”

“Do you have any?”

“What when on during the shooting, Marjorie?”

“We got attacked by a food truck. Millie’s. I am not sure if it was some of the immigrants that run the place or a hired hand. It seems weird it would be someone Irish or Italian, since they have it as hard as anyone else, the Mob notwithstanding. Boss got hit, I dodged the truck and drove to give Jerry clean shots. It would have put my own body over hers because she has helped me so.”

“Our honor code says when you save someone, payment is due. We don’t have much here right now. Our supplies are low. But I do have one pill left. It’s worth a lot of money. But if you wouldn’t have driven so fast, Victoria would have died. She lost so much blood.”

They reach the kitchen and Marjorie sits at a small wooden table. A girl comes by and extends her skinny ringed hand. “My name is Babette.” She says in a French accent. She takes some toast and eggs and begins to down them like it is her last meal. Marjorie smells coffee, which is too expensive for her wages and can’t wait to sip on it.

“I hear the war is coming to an end. Finally.” Babette lets out a relieved hush and flips through the newspaper, another luxury too rich for Marjorie’s blood.

Marjorie dives into the print, but her education barely lets her string a sentence together, so she looks at the photos and admires Babette’s black updo.

“I can teach you how to read.” Babette says with almost a sixth sense. She starts to read it to Marjorie, pointing out letters.

“You always were a stubborn one, Marj. With the reading. I could have taught you. Victoria...I swear.” Sadie says.

“What do you mean?” Marjoram inquires.

“Never mind, you. People will be coming for Victoria. You should tell me everything you know about them so I can figure it out. Once Victoria comes to, I hope she can bring forth information. If it is the Anti-Slate men, we might be in trouble, if the Mob doesn’t come to our aid. The man in charge of that loves Victoria, so we might be in good shape. We have really changed the city, though I am sure it doesn’t look it. Women can walk around at night for the most part. Kidnappings are few. Most of the women I know own businesses and work in fields only men were in, making machines, putting together devices, welding...it is a new frontier. Hopefully, the men coming home will see this and the population can go up again, with men and women working together and not one oppressing the other.”

“So why still work as a madam?” Majorie suddenly spit out.

“Wow, you cut to the chase, my dear. I make a lot of money. My girls service the Mob and they protect us. I always wanted to be a scientist and they furnish me with a lab. I can produce the Pill again, if I had the right materials, some of these are very rare. I use my skill to heal.”

“To heal bad men.”

“With the war, everything is on its head. Ravishing women is ok. The Mob ends up being the good guys in the war of suffrage. Innocent immigrants work for the men who want women to be submissive or gone, even though them themselves were oppressed in foreign lands. The French and English hated each other but banded together to fight the Germans and try to win back the Big Apple. That might end up part of Canada, who knows?”

“The Germans don’t go for the fertile women?”

“Purity, America has none of that. They had to import and Shorter got to them first, in the water supply.”

“Where is Shorter now?”

“We think he died fighting the good fight. Never can be sure. Never found a body. But we say he’s dead.”

“Oh, I am sorry.”

“He was a good man. In any other circumstance, I would have married him. Did you want to stay here during the night? It would be the safest thing you can do. I have called some of the gangsters to

watch the place. We need to know who wanted Victoria dead, well, besides everyone.” The madam faked a slight smile. “Do you know how to fire a gun?”

“Only shotguns, m’am.” Marjorie confesses. “For protection.”

“You will learn to play a devil’s piano by nightfall. Don’t let it leave your side.”

Marjorie can’t sleep though the bed is remarkable. It’s soft and the springs aren’t hard. The satin sheets are silky and the robe she has on hugs her curves. She knows she’s a bit rounder than the working girls. A bit less attractive too. But she can protect them. She has the Tommy close to her, in case someone comes to retrieve Victoria. Her eyes gaze at the flaking white ceiling. She wants to fall asleep yet catnaps.

A creaking sound comes from the wall. Her gun cocks. She decides to face the threat and holds the gun up. A small door pushes forward. A face suddenly is beside hers, its light skin skimming the obscureness silently.

“I surrender!” Jerry yells, moving his face away from her ear.

“Nuts! I could have rubbed you out. Why are you so sneaky?” Marjorie says, pointing the gun at the floor. She pulls the covers up over her and the gun.

“My name is Jerry the Stealth, Kitten. I came here so the madam wouldn’t see. I wanted to spend some time with you. Ok, in truth, I want to kiss you. I have never kissed a woman. I wouldn’t dare with all the gangs here. But, I feel this pull to you and I don’t care. I am throwing it out there. What the heck.”

“I don’t think it is a good idea.”

“Just one kiss. What would that hurt? I see the way you look at me.”

“I do want to kiss you, but Victoria...”

“She will never know. It will be a secret behind us.”

“Only a kiss?”

“One kiss.”

“Fine, but I am keeping this Chicago typewriter on the bed. She puts the Tommy gun in the bed between them so only their lips can touch. Marjorie has never kissed a man either. Even her uncles would say men were evil since The Ravishing, as they called it. They liked the fact she owned the garage because they could look after her.

She feels Jerry’s lips against hers. Rough yet caressing. It becomes more than one kiss. After debating her choices, she puts the chopper on the ground along the edge of the bed and undulates to the body beside her. She thinks this can’t be the violent act that has imprisoned so many women. The act that people either laugh at or cry about. He starts to undo her robe and he kisses her naked flesh greedily. The night becomes a blur of experiences, all of which are hers. She tries

not to cry out in fear Victoria will know because Jerry is her property in the women's gang world. But she wants to feel free and let go, so she pulls on the bed and Jerry...while burying her head in the pillow.

“This feels good to you, right?” Jerry asks.

“I am amazed you have to ask!” Marjorie laughs. “Don't ruin the moment.”

“Do you know where in this process babies are made?”

“Good question. I know so much about it, but no. When you run into death early in the day and wait for it at night, nothing else seems to come into play.”

“I want to hold you for awhile and then I will go so you don't get in trouble with Victoria. Hopefully, she will wake up tomorrow.”

He wraps his arms around her. She has never felt safe like this. Not even with family. Everything is always up in the air. She feels a wave of positivity and it lulls her to sleep. It always seems to bathe her, this feeling of hope, of joy, even in distress.

She wakes up hours later alone, with the gun back in the bed. She doesn't know if this was a fantasy or that he came to her. What she does know is that she hears a commotion in the hallway. The gun is cocked again and she slowly inches out into the hall to see what is going on. Voices of men are out in the hall. They don't sound like gangsters. Weren't they coming here to help? In the back of her ears,

she hears a faint tap. The window. She backs up into the bedroom and turns, pulling her robe on. The blade is still in her pocket, banging up against the Tommy gun by her side.

He motions for her to pull the window up. “Are they in there?” The mysterious man says to her with a gun in his hand. She can only make out the shadow of it. Thank God these men aren’t the enemy, she reasons.

“Who?” She says.

“The Black Hands. They started this war and now they want our women too. Disrespectful. They give all the other immigrants who work hard a bad rap.”

“Do they have Madame and Victoria?”

“As far as we know they do. You are pretty young, do you know how to fire that doozy?”

“I can get by. Jerry’s a good shot too.”

“We got him working by the front door on our signal. This kid knows all the secret passageways in here.” The man smiles in a way when he sees Marjorie’s bed hair as she tries to cover the birthmark on her neck. “Now, you are going to follow my lead. We need to get Victoria to Canada. The Black Hands will kill her if she stays here and if she is dead, I am sure the whole women’s gang movement will suffer. This is the turnabout of the war, sweetness. Maybe you’ll be on a poster.” He lights up a cigar while they wait. He starts to talk to himself saying, “Ok, I will give the count of three shortly.”

Marjorie looks at him puzzled. She stressfully plays with her necklace.

“Walkie-talkie in the ear. We developed it. No heavy radios to lug. We get implants so it is like we are one all the time. The Mob is one. Get ready to go into the hall with the Tommy, kiddo. By the way, the name is Drago. My employees call me The Dragon. Nice necklace, what is the sketch on it?” He gazes at the herb on the necklace.

“Marjorie. The sketch is of the marjoram plant.”

“I have no idea what that is, Kitten. But now that we are over the familiars, let’s go...one...two...three!”

The two of them rush down the hall and into the kitchen. One of the men has a knife to the madam’s throat. The group stops when the guns come into the room. Drago counts six men, but maybe there are more outside and he signals to Jerry using his ear radio. All clear it seems. Would they be that stupid?

“We will kill her.” The Black Hand Man says in a thick Serbian accent. “We want a world of tradition and she spits in the face of us. Why do you support these call girls?”

“Don’t be hasty, Slim. I can make it worth your while. I have more money than you could dream of. You could make your own army.” Drago says.

“You are a fool. No money can win me over. And ha, did you bring your daughter to this gig? Honestly? We have weapons too and don’t have to rely on little girls. I will enjoy ravishing you as part of the spoils.” He starts to draw the blade close to the madam’s neck, cutting her. She caterwauls from the shallow stab.

There is a thick whipping sound in the air.

It swims past Drago’s ears.

The knife embeds itself into the brain of the Black Hand Man. His comrades look surprised. Marjorie smiles because she knew she needed the knife. She put it in her robe pocket in a transfer from her monkey suit. Blood starts to come out of the leader’s head as he crashes to the floor. The madam runs out of the way.

Drago and Marjorie begin to fire. The gat spits out a rain of bullets. The bodies of the men dance and fall to the floor, twitching. Marjorie feels a mix of justice and pain in this action. But soon, all falls into a dreadful silence.

“We need to move Victoria now. To Canada. New Paris. Let’s move. Are you coming, sharpshooter?” Drago says to Marjorie. Jerry comes into the suite checking the room for more of the Black Hand.

Marjorie looks at Jerry and they exchange a knowing look.

“Of course, I am coming with you.” She says.

A noise comes from the hallway. It is Victoria. She looks renewed and vigorous. She jokes to Drago, “Butt me, Abercrombie!”

He brings a cigarette into her vision and lights it. He hands it to her and she sucks the smoke into her lungs.

Marjorie looks over the shoulder where the bullet pierced Victoria. It is almost healed up. Jerry walks past Marjorie and says, “It’s the Pill, Marj. It does cause women not to create life anymore, but in its place, there is great strength.”

“I wondered how you could fight better than the Mob as times.” Marjorie exclaims. Jerry submissively scampers to his boss and stands by her. The mechanic wonders if she should go to New Canada.

Babette and a few of the girls beckon to Marjorie to come to the back room. The madam still shakes a bit from the attack, but pauses to give Marjorie a small wooden box. “You know what is in there. Make your choice.”

Marjorie asks, “You aren’t coming to New Canada?”

“No, I need to tend my girls here. We are planning to go to the Big Apple, the American bite of it, and perform for the troops.” The madam said. “Perhaps they will send us overseas as well. We have other skills. Babette is an actress. I can play the violin. A couple of the others dance, target shoot, the works.”

Marjorie smooths the wooden box with her hands and puts it in her dress pocket. She goes to the bedroom to collect her monkeysuit and

bends down to the dead Black Hand member to retrieve her knife. She can barely pull it out of his skull.

“Where did you learn to throw like that?” Drago asks.

“From my uncles. They didn’t want a man to attack me, so they showed me how to fight with a knife and use the element of surprise to my advantage.” She cleans the thick fragments of brain and plasma off the knife with the man’s shirt.

“My car is waiting in the alley.” Drago says. “Collect your items up and say your goodbyes. Let the ladies know we will have our men out here to watch them, just in case.”

Drago walks with a jumping step down the stairs, like a child enjoying a game. Marjorie and Jerry exchange a hidden glimpse before Victoria and him follow Drago.

Marjorie approaches the madam and inquires, “If the Pill gives you strength, why didn’t you fight back?”

“It only does for some time. Victoria has been taking it more than once. She doesn’t know I have this one left and I had to act more fragile than I am. We have been trying to wean off of it. It can be addictive.” The madam answers back, pinning her hair up while her girls watch her.

“What is your name?” Marjorie asks.

“Before or after the war?” The madam states.

“Can I call you by anything else?”

“Sadie. The name is Sadie. Sorry, everyone’s been calling me Madame for years. It is like I don’t have a name. Victoria is the only one who calls me that anymore. You should know my name.”

“Ok, Sadie, thanks for the gift.”

“Be well and take care of yourself. Again, choose wisely.”

Marjorie walks down to the car with a strong grip on the box. Climbing into the backseat, she beams at Jerry. They are close enough to touch, yet don’t dare.

“New Canada is a world away.” Drago laughs. “You are going to love it!”

Marjorie’s blue eyes flash seeing the world outside Chicagoland. The city looms desolate but becomes farming fields. It isn’t easy to travel down these roads in a rich mobster rubber, so Drago ditches his fancy car for a standard Dorris, a flivver that was made in St. Louis, a city being replaced by Montreal and Detroit for the new car barons and their fight. The age of the vehicle makes them fit in with the farmers, though Victoria wears her driving goggles so her slate eyes cannot be seen. The farmers are a conservative lot, not forceful like the men in the city, but there is a demand for their womenfolk to raise the children for farmhands and be wives and mothers. No one learns to read and education is reserved for cultivating crops and riding reaping machines. The idea of this land intrigues and scares her. It is

beautiful and she can breathe for once in her life. Yet, it has its own dark dangers. She wonders if there is any safe place for her in the world. She looks at Jerry and knows he could be that. She looks at the box and whispers out a sigh. Then she feels a sense of happiness, but she doesn't know why.

He connects with her eyes and brushes her hand almost accidentally. No one notices. Drago and Victoria are in the front, Jerry and Marj in the back, a goon trio of Drago's bracing themselves on the rumble seat, upset at their position with each rocky bump. They only stop to fill up on gas, telling the gasoline attendants they are married couples... Victoria and Jerry, then Drago and Marjorie. There is almost an acceptance at the age gap of Drago and Marjorie. Oddly enough, with goggles on, Victoria looks deceptively young. It must be The Pill, Marjorie thinks to herself, smoke and mirrors.

The Dorris motors down the streets and cut dirt paths. Endless amounts of evergreen and dusty brown fields. It's the summertime and the aubade beats down on the car, even with its ripped roof pulled over the heads of the riders.

Streaming colors make Marjorie sleep. Another catnap. She wakes when they are on the edge of the border of New Canada. Drago proudly shows off false paperwork with a smile and soon they are driving to New Paris.

"I regret not taking Babette along." Drago says, running his head across his well-groomed salt and pepper beard.

"What, for your boys?" Victoria puffs out, snuffing her cigarette against the window. Her anger is as loud as her bobbed red hair.

“No, because she knows French. It would have been good to have a guide here. Charm can only go so far.” Drago smiles wide, exposing his cigarette-stained teeth.

The city of New Paris looks strange to Marjorie. First off, it is clean for a city and its patrons seem friendly and not standoffish. It seems dreamlike. It looks like places in Europe she once saw on a newsreel. Everyone is speaking French as they pull into the mainstreet. Drago gets out of the wagon and walks into a hotel, reserving a room. He likes the fact he isn't the big cheese in this country. It's refreshing to have to work up again. Victoria spins with dizziness and Drago quickly gets her to the room. It's a nice suite, but not overly so, as to blow their cover.

“You'll have to stay here for a couple of months. I don't think those Black Hand boys will find you here. Even if they do, Canadian police know who they are. It isn't like America, where they let anyone in.” He kisses her on the forehead.

“They let you in!” She says with a lark.

“I am leaving my men with you. If I don't return, things will look weird. I am thinking I might throw out some rumors about your death, if you don't mind.”

“Wouldn't be the first time.”

“That's my girl.” Drago kisses her passionately on the lips, lingering.

“I hate it when you call me girl.” Victoria moans.

“I forget, Bearcat, you are all woman.” He snickers as she playfully smacks him.

He gets back into the Dorris and gallivants back to Chicagoland, humming as he goes. He takes his right hand man, Charley, with him but leaves Marco and Brisbane with Victoria. All five people finally relax in the hotel.

“I might call room service.” Victoria says as she lies on the bed. “It is hard to get here, but you’ll find treatment of women here is a bit better. Not much, but better.” She paws through a menu. “We need to get some well-needed shut eye. So glad it is like nighttime with the blinds closed.” The two left men are breaking down guns on the table, cleaning them. Despite this, Marjorie goes to the second bedroom of the suite and falls onto the comfy hotel bed.

She opens her eyes hours later and spies Jerry, sitting at the foot of her bed.

“You shouldn’t be here, Jerry.” Marjorie says.

“Call me Jeremiah.” Jerry smugly remarks as he leans in for a kiss.

“We can’t do this.”

“Victoria and her goons are out are this moment.”

“At 3am?”

“Slates work best at night. She is meeting up with some underground groups. Rallying the troops. She won’t be back until sunrise, like a vampire.”

“She trusts you that much?”

“She trusted me to guard you.”

Marjorie chuckles out loud. She leaps on Jerry and they fall on the bed, his hand following the curves of her legs. Their lips meet and swim around each other.

“Wait.” Marjorie warns.

“What?”

“We need to talk. This could end up being the end of us, if Victoria finds out. I got something from the madam, Sadie. She gave me this.”

Marjorie opens the wooden box and Jerry sees the Pill inside.

“Are you going to take that?” He asks.

“No. But we can sell it. We’d have to be sly about it.”

“Victoria left her contact book. I think I know a fence around here we could go to, someone she isn’t that connected to anymore. He’d keep quiet.”

“I would like to escape this, Jerry. As much as Drago laughs at my ability with a Tommy gun, I want to be able to run my own business again.”

“What has happened with your old one?”

She points to an electronic newspaper on the table. It read that there were several fires in Chicagoland. One at her shop. People dead. She fears the worst.

“Your uncles?” Jerry asked.

“Most likely dead. Since the Black Hand moved in, Chicagoland is becoming more and more theirs. Women will become second-class citizens again. I am not going back.”

“And I thought you would want to start a farm with me on the outskirts.”

“I love nature. Even my name given to me from my mother has a blend of herbs, flowers and animals.”

“What is it?”

“Marjoram Azalea Duiker. Herb, flower, animal. I have never tasted marjoram. I have never smelled an azalea. I’ve never seen a duiker, but my mother did, when she travelled. She died when I was very small, that is what they tell me, but she gave me these names. Duiker for herself. They liberated themselves by taking their own names and not names of their fathers or husbands. So, with this, how am I going to live amongst farmers and their backwards ways? Lie?”

“Not like we aren’t lying now.”

“True.” Marjorie slumps back into the bed.

“Victoria has one more thing for us to do for her. She will let me go after that, I am sure of it. She can’t be for woman’s rights while keeping me as a kept man, right?”

“I see how she looks at you. Even if she has an off and on thing with Drago. She wants it all.”

“I only want you.”

Marjorie looks at the Pill. Its grey gleam strikes her blue eyes. “So, where is the number for this fence?” She asks Jerry as she puts the charm of the necklace in her mouth, sucking on it. She lets it go and it flops back to her neck and sticks.

“It’s here. We can go tomorrow night, when Victoria meets up with her Canuck vampire crew.”

“Is there a place we can go that isn’t the farmlands?”

“Montreal, Detroit, even the Big Apple or across the sea.”

“The Big Apple?”

“We could enlist. Good luck with Victoria’s gang gunning down the army.”

“That isn’t half bad of an idea, Jer.”

“Jeremiah.”

“Ok, Jeremiah.”

“Ok, Miss Duiker, who won’t take my last name.”

“Of course. It’s a pointless exercise.”

The sounds of Victoria and her crew fill the hotel. They crash into the hotel room, ordering food as Marjorie puts the Pill back in its case. All the women Victoria brings in are Slates, their eyes are dark and though they have curves of a woman, they move like metal-boned machines.

“We need you on your guard.” Brisbane tells Jerry, pulling him away from the room.

“What are we doing?” He asks, lighting a cigarette.

“We are going to do some liberating.” Brisbane smiles.

Liberating only meant they were on the attack. But from what?

“Let’s say we are going to get some Night Owl grub tonight and we are going to bust up that chain. It’s the only Black Hand in the country right now. We have to crush it.” Marco adds. The three go out into the hallway, while Marjorie stays with the women.

“A young one with pretty blue eyes. You a virgin, dear?” One of the women says to her, touching Marjorie’s long blonde hair. Marj pulls it back to hide her gross birthmark. Way too close to her face for comfort.

“It’s not your business.” Marjorie says back.

“Hey, the future is here, Rose. You can’t judge girls by their bedside manner.” Victoria smiles. “You judge them by their loyalty. You are loyal to me, right, Hun?”

“Yes, Victoria.”

“I need you to keep an eye on Jerry. He’s a good-looking guy and I feel he is stepping out on me or did in the past. I swear no one pisses on my property.”

“You sound like them.”

“Who?”

“The Anti-Slates.”

“Listen little girl, you know nothing of what we have gone through. How many women have died and have been tortured for you to get to run your garage. You have no idea how it was. You’d be nothing without me. Your mother abandoned you. It was because of my kindness I gave money to your uncles for training. You have your business due to me. I shudder to think what Fate you would have had. Kidnapped for your blue eyes and blonde hair or worse. They kidnap

girls into the Big Apple, The Stem. They will want you for breeding because of the way you look.”

Marjorie starts to check off the idea of being in the service. What if she got caught by the Germans? Sure, the army said they were being pushed back home, but the newsreels always made the Allies look good. She thinks that the world was probably always this bad. It seems bad for women, for everyone. That there never was a world that was peaceful. “I am sorry I spoke out of turn, Victoria.”

“It’s boss to you, Marjorie.”

“Ok, boss. I’ll keep an eye on Jerry.”

“He’s the world to me, Marj. If I found out someone was claiming him, I would feed them some lead for breakfast.” Victoria’s eyes looked like iron on fire.

Marjorie fears her. She feels Victoria must know. Maybe she doesn’t.

“You really look like someone I used to know.” One of the women speaks up. “My name is Catherine.” She extends her hand cheerfully.

“She looks like her mom. Remember Beryl?” Victoria cuts in.

Catherine questions, “Beryl Duiker?”

“What do you know about Beryl Duiker?” Marjorie curiously asks.

“We know a lot. Your mother was quite the world traveller. Why she came back to Chicagoland...” Catherine says, looking at her nails. “I

had no idea you were hers. She seemed dark. Black hair and brown eyes. At least in memory. Did you ever find where she disappeared to after the birth?”

“Disappeared?” Marjoram cries out. “You told me she was dead.”

“Stick with us and we will tell you everything.” Victoria says. “Prove your loyalty. I have a journal your mother wrote. Some objects of hers to pass to you when you became an adult.”

“I am an adult now.” Marjorie argues.

“But the items are in Chicagoland. You will get them back once we are done. Just do as you are told, Miss, and everything will be fine.” Victoria taps Marjorie’s shoulder.

“They burned down my business. I don’t think my uncles are alive.” Marjorie confesses.

“It’s the Black Hand. Let The Dragon take care of them.” Victoria states.

“Because he was so good at getting to Sadie’s place before they held a knife to her throat?”

“Kids today.” Catherine shakes her head.

“We can always burn the journal too and your mother’s memory.” Victoria adds.

The thought of the book burning up the only touch of her mother she will have makes Marjorie's forehead wrinkle.

"I am not trying to be too tough on you." Victoria says. "We need you here tonight. We need you to fight. We have to meet in the Night Owl zone at 8pm."

"I am loyal to you, boss." Marjorie says, though she is more loyal to the book and feels trapped by Victoria's blackmail. What if there isn't even a book? Marjorie fondles the box in her pocket and sighs.

The women haul their Buick to a parking lot where two Night Owl trucks are sitting, producing food for the few souls working at night.

The owner of one of the trucks sees Victoria and recognizes her, pulling out a rifle as she pops out her own revolver.

"I am sure you guys don't want to play the dirty way." She tells them. Marjorie slinks out of the backseat and behind a small fence in the lot, pulling up the Tommy gun to fire if needed.

Another car pulls in with Drago's goons and Jerry. Marjorie wonders how this won't be a bloodbath. She is going to protect Jerry in either case.

"We need to put an end to this." Victoria says. "You need to join the Chicagoland gangs. If we all work together, we can make it what we want."

“And let women lead us, you must be crazy.” The vendor says, his rifle still on her.

“We aren’t leading anyone. We just exist now.” Victoria’s voice hints angrily. The other women come out behind her. “Don’t you want to win against the Germans?”

“Of course.” The man spits out. “They shouldn’t even be in the States.”

“We can join together to fight. As siblings. Stop the fires.”

“What is in it for us?”

“Parts of the city without having to fight. It will just be. And I have a gift in the car. Catherine, bring it out.”

Catherine brings a huge bag of money out. She sits it in-between Victoria and the man who has come out behind the wagon. His men have come out they fire up their steam guns with a rush as the ladies point their modern technology back at them.

“Didn’t you want to build your empire? Your kingdom?”

“Yes, I do.” He looks at the bag. “Maybe we can come to an agreement. I lost some family members last night. Money is beginning to sound better and better.”

“We lost people too. This money could make a truce. I even brought some Rakia to toast.” Victoria seduces, taking out a full bottle.

“Where did you get that? That isn’t produced right now because of the war.”

“It’s very rare and yours if you shake on it. I have a whole room of it.”

The man wipes dirt off his brow. “Maybe it is time for fighting to come to an end. We will drink with these ladies. But first, the salad, you rusty hen.”

Victoria commands, “First put your guns down and that includes that man on top of your truck my friend has her bead on.”

The man on the top of the truck is surprised and drops his gun on the ground. The other men follow suit. The women lower theirs. The bag is passed and the man counts the money. Victoria opens the Rakia and pours into several glasses Catherine brings her.

“Oh and first, I want someone with non-grey eyes to consume this, I know your tricks. I read about this all the time. You Slates can drink poison.”

“I’ll do it.” Jerry raises his hand, as he materializes behind Victoria. Victoria looks cautiously in his direction. He walks to the man and takes his glass, gulping a big swig of liquid.

The wagon man waits. Nothing happens. He toasts with the Rakia and smiles.

“This is perfect. A whole room of this...everyone drink up!”

Glasses are passed and the women toast. The Night Owl men clink their glasses. Victoria signals to her men. The A-Ok sign. They bring the glasses up to their lips to mock drink. A man from the Night Owl plays a guitar, another a drum and the festivities begin. The wagon man makes a statement to Victoria about how the Black Hand will be their friend from now on. He circles his hand over her reluctant shoulder.

The Black Hand Gang celebrates for a lusty ten minutes before the first man drops to the ground. The food truck men fall like dominos each singing and swaying with old world hymns. Jerry walks to Marjorie and keels over.

“Jerry!” She yells. His face is pink with a rash and he loses his footing.

“I need to go to the hospital.” He explains to her. “I have a tolerance but it might kill me.”

One of the men starts to fall but pulls up his gun and fires. He hits Brisbane in the neck. The ladies click their weapons and fire a mass of bullets into the trucks, making sure no one is moving. The Slaters stand for peace until they are attacked, then all calls are off. They retaliate without mercy at the first strike.

Marjorie pulls Jerry into the car and listens until the gunfire quits. “They like the thrill of it but they didn’t think to bring bullets to reload, they are all in here.” She floors it and speeds to the trucks. The ladies dive out of the way. Marjorie swings her door open and yanks the bag of folding green out of the dead Black Hand leader’s hands as Victoria grabs at her car door.

“Don’t make me fire, Victoria. I know you are all out of bullets.”
Marjorie says.

“Marco, shoot her!” She yells. Marco is busy attending Brisbane’s wounds but picks his gun off the ground. Marjorie hits the gas and Marco fires, but it barely hits the side of the car. He tries to fire up the trucks but the bullets have riddled the ovens, making steam billow out of the sides and windows.

“Do you know what you are doing?” Jerry coughs as he curls in pain in the seat.

“We are going to the Big Apple. We are going to win this war. The Fur Hat Invasion is no battle compared to this.” She says with a hearty laugh. “I just figured out how.” She produces a bottle of anti-poison from the back of the car. Victoria’s just-in-case remedy. Jerry chokes it down.

They blow out of New Canada and into the darkness, not knowing where the flowing highway will lead them. The Pill sits patiently on the dash in Marjoram’s view, as to taunt her into wanting that certain type of immortality only becoming a Slate can give her. She diverts her view and moves on.

THE END

Kilroy here again. I can still smell the sauerkraut in the distance. Can you imagine if we identified people from Long Island by their German accents? What do you suppose the Nazis would have re-named New York? Hit-tropolis? Das Bronx? Would they have changed the Statue of Liberty's torch to a sword? They might've even changed her quote to, "...tired, poor, huddled masses yearning to breathe free, un-welcome! No Soup For You!" Maybe N.R. can use that in the next story...or maybe not...

N.R. Grabe fights the good fight on many fronts. She's one part writer, one part video schismatic, one part perfume creatrix or Nez with a healthy dash of childlike whimsy. She lives in the intoxicating yet dilapidating land of broken dreams and palm trees with her hyperactive satyr and robotic kitten. The totality of her work offers a complete sensory experience. You can fill your mind, tummy, nose and imagination with her creations. Sniff, drink, read and escape.

Visit N.R.'s savory sundry shop, NyxWorks, on Etsy for a custom perfume or tea, for a loved one, yourself or persona from a different dimension.

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PANDORA DRIVER

Our fourth story takes us back to the days of noir to witness class warfare being waged in Citadel City. The avarice of the elite had plunged the country into a Great Depression and the era spawned a new type of hero. They were non-conformists who couldn't sit back and watch the world fall apart around them. They intervened when the justice system failed its citizens.

Pandora Driver was the relentless avenger of the common man. She sifts right from wrong in a realm where the villains were the local gentry and the heroes were outlaws. Pandora was a mistress of disguise who used sly audacity and an unstoppable Car-of-Tomorrow to unleash chaos into the halls of wealth and power.

Pandora Driver comes from the social conscience of John Picha, but she's also the progeny of the pulp heroes like Zorro, and the Shadow. John reminds us that the good old days we remember in monochrome were actually lived in color. In a time when good and evil was simply black and white, Pandora lived in the gray area.

Ready to ride with a superhero back to the thrilling days of yesternoir? Better buckle-up. Hey, wait a minute. I'm not sure if they had seat belts back then..!

PANDORA DRIVER

Blind Luck

By John Picha

INTRODUCTION

Can you imagine a time without computers, the Internet, or TV? Telephones were connected to walls by wires, and a “cell” was a place to put bad guys. The daily news was delivered by a paperboy,

not a cable. Laptops were where children sat to tell Santa Christmas wishes. Magazines were presented on pulp, not iPads. Entertainment in the airwaves was received by vacuum tubes in a wooden radio, the centerpiece of the family room. And no one left home without a hat.

In March of 1940 women wore stockings with lines that started at their heels, then traveled under flared skirts and into the unknown. Men cheered as wrestler Ray Steele pinned Bronko Nagurski in a reverse toehold to become wrestling's champion. And Ivy League students swallowed goldfish for sport while victims of the Great Depression struggled to feed their families.

The war in Europe was escalating. Finland traded 11% of its territory for a Soviet peace, while Hitler secretly ordered generals to plan an invasion of Norway. German U-Boats effectively controlled the cold, dark waters of the North Sea. They strangled supply routes and torpedoed without notice sending untold tons of steel, sailors, and cargo to the bottom. The British were forced to ration meat.

President Roosevelt publicly condemned the German aggression, but refused to send troops. Instead he advocated peace, but discretely offered Churchill defensive supplies as a sort of Good Neighbor Policy.

Back in the US middle-west the metaphoric lion of March was uncommonly cool as it stalked ever closer towards the Ides...

CITADEL CITY, MARCH 1940

3:00 AM

It appears that a somnambulist is shuffling down Hoodwink Street, or does it? A feminine figure staggers in and out of streetlight auras. Her raw bare feet fall heavily with each clumsy step into the hour of the wolf. The top of her yellow tea-length dress has been torn away and a halo of steam wafts from her exposed shoulders and bobbing head. Dark, sweat drenched hair dangles in her face as her lower lip quivers out visible breath and vacant whimpers. Brown mascara draws tear tracks from heavy lids and mixes with the blood trickling from a neck wound. The colors pool between her pale clavicles before running and staining her white brassiere. For the moment Evelyn Stuart has escaped her attacker but she knows he's still lurking in the shadows somewhere behind her.

8:00 PM

When Evelyn started the evening seven hours earlier, she looked radiant as she flittered throughout a dance-social with her classmates of the Duchess Academy. It's a finishing school that only accepts young ladies from families of breeding and inheritance who naturally wish their daughters be fitters for carrying on the highest social traditions. The Duchess Academy offers much more than an education. It offers intimacy with privileges and duties of social rank. It provides a high degree of protection from the less desirable associations. The Duchess Academy has been the unquestioned choice for first families since its founding more than fifty years ago.

Evelyn's mother is a Duchess alumna and had been planning for her daughter's enrollment since the day of Evey's birth. After all, the academy led her mother to her daddy and he was the perfect husband.

Most of the evening's music was devoted to foxtrots and waltzes, however, the academy chaperones fancied themselves progressives. Occasionally they allowed their girls to let their hair down, but not to fully unravel like a tribe of savages. The pre-screened orchestra was allowed to swing a few approved youth favorites of the day like "Pennsylvania 6-5000", "Take the 'A' Train" and "Sing Sing Sing". Even though they jitterbugged with restraint, those brassy moments were the highlights of the evening for both young duchesses and the medical students of Pinnacle University. Pinnacle men were of the wealthiest families in Citadel society. Anyone who knew the Duchess Academy charter knew these young men were the best prospective husbands a proper lady could hope to hook with cupid's arrow.

The academy has a reputation for a high rate of matrimonial placement and wished to maintain it. They weren't in the habit of sculpting spinsters. These ladies-in-progress were a graduation ceremony away from marrying age, so the academy organized the dance-social to help nudge nature's course in the preferred direction.

While spinning in a boy girl, boy girl, Big Apple Dance circle, Evelyn noticed a handsome young man across from her. He had wavy blonde hair shaped with Brylcreem and slicked back behind his ears. He wore the standard issue Pinnacle Uniform, a navy-blue blazer trimmed in red, and a striped tie. Above his crested breast the name on his nametag was crossed out and replaced with the word "Fozzie."

His eyes were deep set below a strong confident brow. Evelyn was lost in his visage for a moment before realizing he was looking back. Their eyes met and he smiled. Startled, her two-step became a three-step and she tripped up a few beats before re-synchronizing with the group. She smiled politely and looked down. Moments later a quick

recon-peak revealed his attention was elsewhere. Between songs she checked her pre-assigned dance card, but Fozzie wasn't listed.

Throughout the course of the event, Evelyn monitored Fozzie from a distance, sometimes even over the shoulder of a waltzing partner. She thought she spied a stolen glance or two from him but couldn't be sure. For the most part he focused his charm on other girls. He delighted in impressing them with slight-of-hand, card tricks and spent a considerable amount of time with Paige Whitley. It appeared that she snagged him. Evelyn remembered one of her instructors saying, "These girls are your classmates but they are also your competition. It's survival of the fittest."

Paige hung on Fozzie's every word and laughed at every witticism that rolled from his tongue. She was playing the socialite role they had been training for. From a distance, Evey thought her performance was a little ridiculous.

As the event drew near the end, Evelyn ladled the last of the punch from the crystal bowl. She was interrupted before taking a pinky-up sip from a cup.

"Pssst."

She turned to discover Fozzie hidden behind a curtain near to her. His disarming grin twinkled in the shadows as he asked, "You don't really want that kiddie punch do you? How about sharing something more adult with me?"

He raised a polished silver flask to punctuate the offer, and continued. "I've been watching you all night and hoping for an

opportunity to talk, but it appeared that your dance card was full. I can understand why. You are very lovely and I guess I was a little too polite to cut in. I can see that you are alone for the moment, so I thought, why not give it the ol' college try.”

Evelyn was stunned and realized she was frozen still holding a cup up to her open mouth. One of the many Duchess mantras replayed in her mind. “You don't want to be left without a chair, once the music stops.”

A mischievous grin exposed her dimples and she responded. “Ok. What should I do?”

He asked. “Is the coast clear?”

She scanned the proximity for witnesses but everyone was caught up in their own goings on. “Yes. It's clear.”

“Then come to me, sweetheart.” Fozzie waved her to him.

Evelyn discreetly sidestepped toward her suitor. Their manicured hands met and he whisked her through a backdoor and into the night. His hands were strong but soft. She remembered. “Calloused hands are the sign of the workingman. Soft hands are the proof of success.”

As the giggling couple scurried away, Fozzie asked, “Are you sure no one saw you sneak out?”

She sang giddily. “I'm positive.”

Fozzie laughed. “Ha ha, good girl. Don't worry I'll get you back to

your dorm before curfew.”

10:30 PM

As they talked and walked the city streets the young gentleman demonstrated his pedigree. He was polite and well mannered. He escorted her from the street side. At one point he protected her from a puddle. He spoke in perfect diction and was well versed in the art of conversation. Apparently his father was a senator and he could trace his lineage back to the Mayflower. He had a wonderful sense of humor, which he demonstrated, with a very unflattering impression of Groucho Marx.

When Evelyn realized she left her coat back at the hall, Fozzie sacrificed his own comfort by covering her in his crested blazer. It transferred the warmth of his strong lean body to hers. The brandy from the flask heated the rest of her. He was a good catch. There could be no doubt.

Eventually they arrived at a sporty looking 1940 Nash Ambassador Eight and he opened the passenger door for her. The all-purpose coupe was deep red that looked like blood in the dark of the night. Fozzie was the first man she'd met, near her age and from the city, who actually drove. She didn't understand why he parked so far from the hall, but she entered nonetheless. Fozzie quickly joined her inside. Her shapely calves made contact with the leather upholstery and she gasped. “Golly. These seats are cold.”

Fozzie replied as he adjusted the choke and hit the starter. “Don't worry, this fine machine has a Weather-Eye heater. It's the best money can buy. Soon it will be as warm as a holiday in Costa del Sol,

but for now...”

He patted the empty space on the bench-seat next to him then extended his arm to rest across its back. He punctuated his move with another inviting smile. She coyly slid over to join him. The sweet citrusy sent of his Acqua Di Parma, Colonia enveloped her. She closed her eyes and drew in a long intoxicating breath that made her mouth water.

11:00 PM

After a leisurely drive through the city they arrived at a wooded area bordering the Gold Coast neighborhood. He turned off the street, over the curb and into an area of dead, frost covered grass. He carefully maneuvered between leafless, coiled trees and along a rolling landscape until he arrived at a secluded pond enshrouded by fog. Evelyn asked, “Is this Gatsby Park?”

Fozzie chuckled. “You little fool. Gatsby Park is littered with Hooverville vermin. We certainly wouldn't want to mingle with them. The odor from their rat-stew would be enough to knock you for a loop. Besides this a better place to be alone. This is Pilcher Park.”

“Pilcher Park?” She gasped. “Didn't they find the mutilated body of a decapitated girl in here last Thanksgiving?”

He dismissed her concern. “I certainly doubt that. Don't let your imagination run away with you, you foolish little girl. I promise, you are safe. I'm very capable of protecting the things that are important to me.”

He cut the headlights, set the parking break and let the car idle with the heater running. He turned to his willing captive and said. “Now how about a little kiss.”

His handsome gaze soothed her. His deep blue magnetic eyes soon pulled her to him and their lips met. This initiated a kissing marathon that made her feel dreamy. She felt powerless against his hypnotic tongue as it teased her lips and beyond. It gently probed all the details of her mouth, almost like it was studying her in detail from the inside.

In time, all the Nash's windows fogged up. She wasn't sure if it was the Weather-Eye, the brandy or love, but she was boiling over. She had to remove Fozzie's blazer. Her body craved more parts of him inside her. Although he didn't pressure her, she could feel that he was also ready for more. Another simple Duchess mantra offered a last line of defense. “He won't buy the cow if he gets the milk for free.”

2:30 AM

CHA-GUNG CLUTTER SPUTTER

Suddenly, the car shook. Evelyn's heart jumped to her throat as she grappled her lover for protection. “What was that?”

Fozzie listened for a silent moment before realizing the engine was no longer running. He looked irritated as he shook his head. “Of all the rotten luck. I think we ran out of gas.”

“Now what do we do?” She asked.

He thought for another moment then checked his watch. “My

goodness it's a lot later than I expected. Well, we can't stay out here all night, and I'm not going to leave you alone. I have a gas-can in the trunk. We can walk to a filling station and ring the night bell. Then I can refuel and drive you back to your dormitory.”

Fozzie exited the vehicle and opened the trunk. Evelyn opened her door and stepped into the frosty grass and leaves. Her heels sunk into the mud and she stumbled out of her shoes and down to her knees. She was surprised to see Fozzie standing by her. Then she spied something shimmer over his head.

It was a “C” shaped blade and it was coming down on him fast. She pushed him out of the way and screamed, “LOOK OUT!”

The tip of the curved blade clipped her neck and she fell on all fours. She looked up to Fozzie waiting for him to do something, but he was just standing over her with a serene gaze. Her eyes darted around him looking for the attacker, but they were alone.

Then she realized her date wasn't carrying a gas-can, instead he clutched a razor sharp sickle. Their eyes met and he said. “I need to see what's inside of you.”

A cold bolt struck her stomach and the world slid out from under her. She froze as he grabbed her by the yellow dress, flipped her over on her back, and held her down in the frost. He straddled her and smiled knowing she was going to be featured in the next crime story about Pilcher Park.

As her betrayer drew the sickle high over his head for a second swipe, a surge of adrenaline roared through her body. At the same

time an odd memory returned. When Evelyn was a little girl her mother demanded she take ballet lessons. For the first time in her life Evelyn realized she could put something she'd garnered from the classes to use. Her legs had become considerably strong by the training. She heard her Austrian instructor command her to, "Kick higher, girls!"

She obeyed and kicked up so hard it sent Fozzie reeling down the bank, to the pond. As she scrambled back to her bare feet a chill rolled across her shoulders. She realized he'd taken a part of her yellow dress with him and discovered she was bleeding.

From the pond's slope a shadowy form emerged from the fog. Her flight instinct screamed, "RUN!"

She hiked up her skirt and ran wildly through the lifeless woods!

"HELP ME! SOMEONE PLEASE HELP ME!"

She was lost without a heading until detecting the hint of streetlights through the foggy tangled branches. She veered toward the glow and within seconds exploded through the parks parameter and onto the sidewalk. Slowing for a moment she scanned the vacant street for help but she was alone, except for her pursuer. From behind her, the sound of crunching leaves and cracking twigs grew louder. The maniac was racing toward her and closing the distance!

She ran into the street screaming. "SOMEBODY PLEASE HELP ME! HE'S TRYING TO KILL ME!"

Her words bounced off buildings replete with marble, onyx, and

intricate architectural ornamentation, then echoed through the neighborhood, but no one responded. In the distance she spotted a lone La Salle gliding through an intersection two blocks away and out of reach. She turned and raced to the sidewalk and up the stairs of an Italianate city-mansion with covered porch. She yanked on the brass handle of the heavy door. It's locked. She pounded and wailed for help. "FOR THE LOVE OF GOD, PLEASE OPEN THE DOOR! HE'S GOING TO KILL ME!"

Stepping down from the porch she scanned the second floor windows. An unseen hand drew a shade down. A shiver rattled her to the core as she backed away rubbing her arms for warmth.

Then, in the corner of her eye she spotted a figure standing on the sidewalk. He was dressed in a wool flat-cap and brown herringbone overcoat with a wide furry collar. Relieved she raced to him. "THANK GOD."

The figure opened his arms and coat to receive and warm her. Through her tears she noticed a shimmering "C" tucked inside. Fozzie had extra clothes in the trunk. He lunged and nearly trapped her but Evelyn dodged then fled down the middle of the street at full speed.

"HEEEEEELP!"

Fozzie tried to keep up with her but she was far faster. He tried to maintain a line-of-site from a distance as she weaved in and out of buildings. If that didn't work, she was leaking blood and thought he could track her. He knew she couldn't go like this forever and could outlast her. It was only a matter of time.

Luckily, the apathy of the Gold Coast residents gave it to him.

3:01 AM

Currently, she is out of steam and weak from her deadly ordeal. She's disoriented in the cold concrete maze of Citadel City neighborhoods. She thinks, "Keep moving Evey... Keep moving to safe ground..."

PLINK-CRACK

"EYAH!"

A loud hoarse squeak escapes from her as broken glass pierces her bare foot. Her cry echoes through buildings with weathered joints and old masonry in desperate need of tuck-pointing. It arrives like music to the ears of a predator and leads him right to his prey. She is closer than he realized.

As the wounded Evelyn fumbles to remove the shard he descends upon her. His weight forces her to the ground. She musters enough volume to plead to the city one last time, "PLEASE! HELP Mfff!" He muffles her voice in a headlock.

Fozzie giggles at her listless resistance, then drags her by the head down a dark alley. He dumps her and then drops a knee to her pelvis to hold her down. He covers her mouth with his soft successful hand then reveals his sickle from his thick overcoat. "Now we can finish our date properly."

He begins cutting.

“When I was a little boy, the greens keeper of our estate ran over a rabbit nest with the lawn mower. The results looked like a brown fur coin purse spilling out soft wet gems. It was the first time I’d seen internal organs. I realized there was something beautiful inside animals, inside all of us. Other onlookers were disgusted by the sight of the shredded kits and threw them away. But later I collected the body parts and hid them in my room. I removed all the organs and studied them intimately. The parts were so soft...twisted...delicate...and moist.

“They say beauty is only skin deep but they are dead wrong. Skin hides the true beauty within.”

Evelyn sobs uncontrollably under his palm.

“Tsk Tsk tsk. Why are you sad? The night isn't ruined. Just a short while ago you seemed willing to do anything to please me. You and all the sluts of the gold digger academy all want doctors, right? Well now you've got one and we are going to share something beautiful together. Something celestial. I am a Doctor and learning the secrets of life and death. I want to be inside you and see what makes you tick. It will be wonderful.”

His eyes roll as a warm shiver passes through him. Evelyn takes advantage of the moment to try and free her mouth from his grip but he maintains control. His tone mocks her. “Do you want to scream again? Ha ha. Didn't you learn anything from your little jaunt through the city? Do you know what makes it so easy for my kind to thrive in a place like this? They only care about themselves... It’s easy to discard people here.”

Over his herringbone shoulder Evelyn notices three sparking lights arching high over rooftops. She thinks she is blacking out...

For a moment ex-Private Dewey thought he was back on the Western Front of the Great War. For a moment he thought he heard the death gurgle of another fallen soldier who met the bullet with his name on it, but as he phases into consciousness he realizes it was just another dream of yesteryear. He remembers that shell shock drove him from the battlefield and now the living nightmares are behind him. Now he is safe and snug in a pile of trash.

On cold nights like tonight, the beds in the missions fill up quickly. Due to the Depression, thousands of people are living on the streets of Citadel City. Since the ex-Private doesn't have a wife or children to care for, he can't qualify for long-term shelter accommodations. However, he tries to see the bright side. They always have a warm meal waiting for him come dinnertime. So the resourceful vet makes do with what he can get to survive.

Others might be surprised just how warm and cozy a nest of garbage can be on a brisk night like tonight. Newspapers make pretty good insulators. The trick is to work in layers, anchor them tightly and try to sleep still. Insulation is about the only use they serve ex-Private Dewey now. He used to keep-up on current events, but he lost his glasses back in 34 and had no money to replace them. In the following years his eyesight degraded to the level of legal blindness. Sometimes he can discern shapes but tiny typeset text on newsprint is invisible to him. He's lost touch with the world at large. His only

current source of information is delivered by other street-sleepers and pink elephants holding court while tipping bottles around open fires. Those tales have a way of growing into rambling legends rather than news.

He scratches fleas from the furry white clumps of his rogue beard. It smells like the-hair-of-the-dog. Earlier this evening he'd split something claiming to be whisky with chums to keep them warm. After that things got a little foggy...

Stretching a cramp from his calf, he nestles back down for the less permanent type of dirt-nap. He lays his head onto his arm and sighs.

Then he hears the gurgling again.

This time it's flanked by the muffled cry of a mortally wounded animal and giggling. This time the ex-Private is awake. There is something in the alley with him!

His heart pounds and his remaining senses amplify. Every crinkle of paper sounds like a warning shot. Every wheezing breath threatens to reveal his position. Slowly he trains his head toward the sounds of murder then squints into infinity. He thinks. "There is an enemy lurking in the blackness, maybe close enough to reach, but I can't see him. The scent of fresh blood is stronger than the garbage."

He slowly draws his covers over his nose and thinks. "The bullet with my name on it has stalked me back to the US... It's finally tracked me down... The Brits used to call Germans "Alleymen". That can't be a coincidence, can it?"

The muffled sobbing continues.

A tear creates a clean line across his face as he thinks. “No. This isn't combat. It's a woman in trouble. She needs help... Damn it...No...I can't get involved... I'll just get myself killed...As long as the kraut doesn't realize he has a witness, I'll be safe...It will be over soon...Just stay quiet...I can't see. I can't see, God damn it. What can a I do except get myself killed too?”

Then he feels the flat flare gun in his coat. It was given to him by the other street-sleepers of the Hobo-Army. They said it was a gift from the mysterious driver of Citadel City. He'd never actually scene him but he'd heard some Driver tales a little too tall to believe.

Silently and slowly he slides the flare-gun from his coat. He remembers the instructions that came with it. “If you encounter a monster send up a signal for help.”

He grimaces as his thoughts advance. “But how long will that take? As soon as I fire this thing, it'll reveal my position.”

A weak “God help me” escapes from the victim.

VRROOOOMM!

Suddenly headlights expose the dark scene as a mysterious black car makes a wide turn into the alley. Its passenger side scrapes the brick wall throwing up a shower of sparks before centering itself in the space. Miraculously the car is unscratched.

KA-BASH! KA-KLANG-ANG!

The heavy streamlined body bashes into garbage cans sending trash, crates, and an ex-private flying, before the vehicle screeches to a halt.

A woman dressed in a tight black hood and goggles pops up out of a roof hatch like a jack-in-the-box holding an unusual gun. She aims and fires twice at the monster crawling over its prey.

Pfft! Pfft!

The Oberon-202d shoots a tiny case-less dart comprised of a powerful sedative. Typically the material is absorbed into the bloodstream and renders the target unconscious in seconds.

It's usually very effective but this time nothing happens. Upon closer scrutiny of the target in her headlights, Pandora Driver realizes he's wearing a thick brown herringbone overcoat with a wide fur collar. She shakes her head and thinks. "Sometimes the Oberon darts can't pierce heavy clothing. I guess we'll have to do this the hard way."

She holsters her gun, leaps out of the roof hatch, runs down the hood and hollers, "Get off of her now!"

Startled by the ruckus and headlight exposure, the assailant arises from his naked prey and flees.

The pale victim shakily reaches out to her approaching salvation. Pandora slides to a stop in the lost blood then takes the raised hand to check her pulse...it's not good. Through missing teeth Evelyn lisps. "He wantss to kill me. You've got to sstop him before he hurtss someone else."

Pandora scans her nude form and thinks. “So much blood.”

With teeth and fist clenched, she watches the monster slither down the alley. The beast is in front of her. The closest hospital is behind her. She’s forced to choose. Capture the monster or try and save the victim. In one of her other lives Pandora is an RN. She can see that Evelyn’s condition is critical and thinks. “She’s circling the drain.”

She pats her patient’s hand for assurance. “Your safety is my priority. I’ve got to get you to a hospital. Once you’re safe I’ll hunt down the monster. Don’t worry, I’m really good at it.”

Then she thinks. “I hope that sounded confident, but monsters have a talent for disappearing in the dark. I may never catch him.”

She grabs the victim gently under the shoulders and drags her to the mysterious car. Evey fades in and out of consciousness as Pandora feeds her into the passenger side then climbs in over her and slams the door. She pulls the roof hatch closed and says, “Hang on!”

She slams the car in reverse.

SKREEEEEEEEEECH!

Whitewalls spin into gray smoke as the big black car races backwards down the alley. Sparks fly as it wavers and bounces between the narrow brick walls.

Ex-Private Dewey rises from the trash heap on one knee. He heard everything. He thinks. “Who woulda thought the Driver is a girl?”

The headlights from the mysterious car provide enough contrast for the impaired vet to track a blurry white shape running away from the glare and into the blackness. But he only has seconds to act before the car, and light source, abandons the scene.

He draws the flare-gun and thinks. "I've got one shot so it has to make its mark."

He holds his breath, takes aim at the white hole in the middle of a black field. He thinks. "During the Trojan War, Apollo helped Paris kill Achilles with magic by guiding an arrow into the hero's only weak spot, his heel. If anyone up there is listening, please make this shot count."

He pulls the trigger.

PAOUF!

The flare strikes Fozzie in the left shoulder and the 4th of July explodes around him. He runs burning into the night.

AAAAAAAAAAHHHH!

Inside the big black car the speedometer bounces in the 70s. As Pandora races through empty intersections her attention is split between the road and her leaking passenger. She keeps one hand on the wheel while the other applies pressure to the worst looking of the wounds. There is a familiar pattern to the incisions covering the

victim's body. She'd seen them once in a morgue after an autopsy.

She interrupted a dissection in the alley.

Evelyn's lifelessly head bobs following the motion of the car. The driver screams. "STAY WITH ME!"

SKREEEEEECH!

The car makes a wide high-speed turn under elevated-train tracks and grazes one of the iron supports. This is the last turn on the emergency journey. The Hospital is in sight. She floors it to the finish.

3:30 AM

The white marble walls of the Deaconess Hospital emergency room made a modest space look grand. It's a quiet night and the waiting room is empty except for a sole sentry.

Doris Kilbourne has been a nurse for as long as anyone remembers. Tonight she helms the overnight admissions desk. Her starched uniform consists of a light-blue pinstriped blouse with a high collar, and pure white bib-dress. Her long graying hair is wound into a smart bun and pinned under a simple scrub-hat.

Doris is a permanent fixture of Deaconess Hospital. To her it felt like a home and she wanted everyone to feel welcome as soon as they walked through its door.

She's been grazing through the March issue of "Ladies Home Journal" and just completed an article titled "The Ham Belongs to

Daddy”. She chuckles as she leafs through pages before stopping at a poem titled “God's World” by Edna St. Vincent Millay. She whispers the words to a vacant room.

“O world, I cannot hold thee close enough!
Thy winds, thy wide grey skies!
Thy mists, that roll and rise!
Thy woods, this autumn day, that ache and sag
And all but cry with colour! That gaunt crag
To crush! To lift the lean of that black bluff!
World, World, I cannot get thee close enough!”

“Long have I known a glory in it all,
But never knew I this;
Here such a passion is
As stretcheth me apart,—Lord, I do fear
Thou’st made the world too beautiful this year;
My soul is all but out of me,—let fall
No burning leaf; prithee, let no bird call.”

Doris snuffles a bit before retrieving a handkerchief. As she wipes her nose she hears tires screech to a stop outside. She composes herself and calmly presses a buzzer on the desk to alert the rest of the four-person medical team on duty of an arrival. She folds the magazine closed and tucks it in a drawer then rises to her feet and clasps her hands looking poised. She stares at the entryway and waits, hoping for the best but ready for the worst.

KA-BANG!

Pandora Driver kicks open the door and enters the sanctuary hefting a

figure coated in blood. She yells. “I NEED HELP, NOW!”

Doris leaps into action. From a hallway two men in white descend upon the commotion wheeling a gurney. They merge with Doris and Pandora. Then together they lift the blood-coated body to the bleached white bed. As they wheel her back to exam-curtain-one, Pandora gives report. “She's lost a lot of blood. We need 2 units of O-NEG stat.”

They park the gurney inside the curtain and Doctor One inserts an IV as a second nurse appears with a clear glass of O-negative blood from a universal donor. She hangs it overhead as Doctor One plants his stethoscope between the patients pale wounded breasts. He closes his eyes for a moment and counts... “There is a pulse, but it's weak.”

Pandora grabs a cloth from a cart then dabs blood from deep cuts as she continues her report. “I think the damage is mostly surface lacerations, but I can't tell if there are any internal injuries.”

Doctor Two palpates the stomach and asks the odd looking stranger, “Do you have medical training?”

Caught up in the moment and thinking in the wrong identity, Pandora fumbles for the best answer. “Yes. Ah, no... I mean, some.”

Doctor One shouts. “I LOST HER PULSE! SHE'S NON-RESPONSIVE!”

An octopus of arms flies for supplies in drawers and carts. The emergency team weaves in and out of each other in expertly rehearsed maneuvers. As they struggle to resuscitate the patient,

Pandora listens for an order and looks for an opening to join in and help, but neither comes. She keeps a gauntleted grip on Evelyn's hand and stares at her lifeless face. She thinks. "I knew we were cutting it close, but I thought we'd make it."

Doctors bump and bend around the vigilant, black hooded woman. There is no place for a superhero at the table. This is a job for medical professionals.

Doris appears before her, breaking Pandora's trance. She speaks in a calm, comforting manner. "You did the right thing by bringing her to us, dear... You did your part. Now, let the doctors take it from here."

The experienced nurse gently tugs Pandora away from the patient. The heroine lets go and Evelyn's lifeless arm drops off the gurney and swings as if waving goodbye.

Doris asks. "What's your friend's name?"

Pandora shrugs somberly. "I don't know. I never saw her before tonight."

The old nurse nods knowingly. "Don't worry she's in good hands."

Pandora thinks. "I should have been faster. I should have driven faster."

Precious fleeting seconds feel like hours. Her eyes dart to a clock on the wall.

Tick.

Tick.
Tick.
Tick.
Tick.
Tick.

Then in the distance, Doctor One Yells, “I’VE GOT A PULSE!

Tears pool behind the expressionless lenses of Pandora Driver's goggles.

Doctor One takes a deep breath and says, “Great work people... Suture kit please... Doris, wake the surgeon on call. He'll need to do an exploratory.”

“Yes, doctor,” replies Doris. She guides Pandora through the double-doors of the examination area to re-enter the waiting room. She offers her guest a seat while she makes a call to a notoriously grumpy surgeon.

Pandora paces through the waiting area pensively. She can't calm down as her thoughts race. “I witnessed both faces of humanity tonight, pure sadism and compassion. That monster is still on the loose. I know I made the right decision by bringing her here first, but if anyone else suffers at its hands, I'm to blame. It's probably slithered back into his hole by now. Maybe the victim might know his identity, maybe not. Damn it. I can't allow him to strike again, but how am I going to catch him?”

Throughout Evelyn's surgery Doris offers Pandora periodic updates on her condition. She's been stabilized and there are no signs of internal bleeding. Pandora hoped to talk to Evelyn, but she'd been drifting in and out of consciousness with only brief moments of lucidity. All the anxious heroine could do was wait as time dragged on.

4:30 AM

WISSSHHH

A cold wind rolls through the waiting room as a policeman with a thick brown mustache pops in for a look. He's draped in a long steel-blue coat with parallel rows of brass buttons running down his chest. His matching hat is adorned with a single bright brass badge centered above the stout black bill. Officer Fitzmore asks Doris. "Got room for one more?"

"Of course we do, officer." Once again Doris presses a buzzer to alert the other members of the emergency team. As they arrive from a hallway with a gurney, two jackbooted policemen clomp around the hardwood floors struggling to carry a half-conscious man. He appears drunk and disoriented.

Pandora is lost in thought, and fails to notice the arrival.

The men in white descend upon the new patient. "There are burns to his neck, head and face."

Officer Fitzmore fills them in. "A colored doorman returned from the toilet to find this fellow collapsed in the doorway. He said he wasn't a

tenant and never saw the guy before, but you never know what's true with their kind. He didn't want to get blamed for any funny business, so he called us.

“In the car he was mumbling something about a hobo with a flame thrower or a flare-gun.”

Pandora's ears perk up and she spins to see the doctors peel the new patient from his clothing. Doctor One noted. “It looks like his coat took the brunt of whatever hit him.”

It was a brown herringbone overcoat with a wide furry collar. Pandora nearly leaps out of her seat. As her heart races she thinks, “I can't believe it. It's him! I want to hurdle the rows of chairs and choke that monster, but then I'd look like the bad-guy.”

Officer Fitzmore adds. “I'm pretty sure this guy is the Senators kid, so you might want to take extra care of him. So any special treatment...”

Doris cuts him off with a smile. “At Deaconess Hospital, we view all of God's children in the same light, officer.”

Pandora thinks. “He'll get special treatment, alright.”

The medical team whisks the loaded gurney through double doors and to exam-curtain-two. Officer Fitzmore shouts one more thing as he and his partner head for the exit. “It's coming up on the end of our shift, so someone will be back later to take his statement.”

Pandora sits silently and waits for the room to clear. The police are

about to exit when Officer Fitzmore notices the strangely garbed woman sitting in the dark of a broken light. He taps his partner then points at her with his thumb. They both look her up and down.

Her feet are on the chair. Her knees are to her chest. Her nose and mouth are buried in her arms. The constable isn't sure if she is awake or sleeping but her dead goggles are staring right back. He inquires with a chuckle. "Are you with the circus or something?"

Unimpressed, she responds. "No."

His tone becomes more authoritarian as he continues. "Is that your big black car parked out there illegally?"

"It's my car, but I didn't know it was illegally parked."

"Well, you know it now. How about you move it before I give you a ticket?"

"Ok." She unwinds her limbs, rises and strolls to the door. One cop holds the door for her while the other checks her ass as she exits into the cold air.

A moment later her car roars to life and the policemen watch it disappear into the dawn. "I'm telling you this town is full of nuts."

DAWN

Early risers begin to emerge and prepare Citadel City for a new day. Men loft newspaper bundles at waking newsstands from flat-bed trucks. Buses are inspected and refueled in Department of

Transportation garages. Streetcars roll from the roundhouse and lineup on designated rails.

The cooks of the Deaconess Hospital cafeteria arrive with the janitors. Eventually the entire medical staff fills the white marble halls with a brand new day of admitting, patient care, saving lives, and discharging.

The burn victim who arrived in the night has been assigned a bed in Ward Three. He's propped up by pillows and playing a game of solitaire. His head is wrapped in a puffy white dressing. A black and burnt nose and deep set blue eyes peak out from the asymmetric wrap. They peer at the pretty nurse walking between rows of beds toward him.

The raven-haired beauty in a white bib-dress removes the clipboard from the foot of his bed and in a girl-like voice asks, "Can I get you anything, sweetie?"

He snaps back. "When can I get out of here?"

She reviews his chart and says, "It looks like they want to keep you here for a couple of days to make sure you're healing properly. If nothing goes wrong you'll be released."

He gulps and asks. "How will I look when they take the bandages off?"

She cocks her head and scrunches her nose then says. "Mmm, I'm sure it hurts worse than it looks. The scarring should be minimal overtime. Skin is very sensitive. Once you peel back a few layers it

gets pretty painful.”

He sneers. “Yeah, I know.”

She retorts. “I’ll bet you do.”

He flashes a suspicious glare at the seemingly loaded comment. Then the nurse adds. “It might take a while for your hair to grow back though.”

He pouts as he returns to his card game. “Delightful.”

She points to the scorched brown herringbone coat folded over a chair with the rest of his things. “It looks like your coat took the brunt of the fire. I guess you should be thankful you were wearing that. I know I am.”

He dismisses her. “How kind of you?”

Before returning the chart, she makes sure to remember his name. It's Lucky. As she turns to leave she can't help but smile. The nurse is actually Pandora Driver in a black wig and disguise.

Later in the day, police independently interview Lucky and Evelyn about their attacks. The authorities have both the perpetrator and victim in the same hospital. Both are talking about overlapping events but the men in blue are unable to connect the dots. They are missing key information. Lucky's story is mostly composed of fiction where he is minding his own business and an insane vagrant attacks

him with fire. Evelyn doesn't know Lucky's real name.

While in disguise, Pandora Driver eavesdrops on both investigations and monitors each patient's recovery. After some external investigating of her own she discovers that Lucky had been in trouble before for other disturbing behaviors. Each time his pedigree protected him from accountability. Lucky is fortunate enough to have a father who pull the strings to keep his son free. Pandora knows the current legal system is a tool to suppress working people, not the elite. They are exempted protected by their own. To them the poor committed crimes and need to be incarcerated while the rich and privileged just have "bad days" and can learn their lessons at home.

Pandora Driver weighs her scales of justice and sentences the monster privately.

In the wee hours of the morning before Lucky was due to be released, he disappears from the hospital and is never heard from again.

Ten days have passed since the night of Evelyn's ordeal. The doctors promise her she has healed sufficiently to leave Deaconess Hospital and after reluctantly signing all the applicable discharge forms, a pleasant orderly escorts her to the main entrance. He hands over her leather trimmed Louis Vuitton hardside suitcase, with polished brasses. He offers a pat on the back, wishes her the best of luck, then turns away.

Evelyn exits the stone hospital on wobbly legs to what she wishes was a sunny new day, but it's not. Thick gloomy clouds pass swiftly

overhead and darken the afternoon sky. The pressure in the air feels like it could downpour at any second.

A single raindrop strikes her cheek. The impact startles her and she nearly jumps out of her tender skin. She struggles to retain her composure, but feels the eyes of people on the sidewalk staring at her. They look different than she remembered, so many strange faces, each with a set of hidden thoughts. She wonders what they are capable of as she stands before the massive city and all its hidden dangers. The buildings of the dark city loom overhead and the need to find safe ground tugs at her.

No one has come to collect Evelyn. Her parents are vacationing out of the country and unreachable. The dorm-mate who delivered some clothes during her convalescence is currently in class. The Duchess Academy opted not to send a driver for their estranged student. The administrators issued demerits due to Evelyn's behavior and blatant disregard of the rules. Something like this happened to another student last Thanksgiving, but they managed to keep the institution's name out of the news.

The finishing school has a reputation to maintain and a standard of excellence to uphold. That didn't include associations with wild girls breaking curfew and staying out till all hours of the night. They knew, "There is only one thing a girl can do after midnight. If she's out that late she's looking for trouble."

She could imagine the gossip about her infecting the student body. Evelyn is on her own.

Cars race up and down the street before her. An occasional yellow-

cab dots the traffic and she hails one. It maneuvers to the curb beside her. As she reaches for the chrome door-handle she makes eye contact with the beefy stranger glaring back from behind the wheel. She gulps and waves him off. This cycle repeats itself several times. Each angry male driver looks more suspicious than the last. Her mind races. Where would they take her? What would they do to her once they had her alone?

She flutters short of breath, grows dizzy and clings to a big blue mailbox. She hugs it for support and tries to stave off the spell of hysteria by closing her eyes and wishing it away.

When her eyes reopen she sees a familiar black vehicle parked at the curb before her. She shook in relief. It's the driver that chased away the monster. The passenger door swings opens and Evelyn eagerly climbs into the safest place in the world. She slams the door behind her and locks it as it merges back into traffic.

CLA-BONG CLA-BONG CLA-BONG

Around suppertime the church-bell acts like a dinner-bell, and the homeless and hungry of Citadel City come a running to the Park Street Mission. Ex-Private Dewey follows his nose to the food. When he veers off course, strangers guide him to the chow-line. A friend he's never seen before hands him an oval tray made of tin, then adds a dented metal mug and bowl, and an oversized spoon with a decade's worth of bite marks. As they shuffle through the dining procession, Dewey points his tray at any voice that offers food. His neighbor observes, "You know, it's probably better that you can't see this

stuff.”

Ex-Private Dewey Laughs. “Ha ha. It smells great to me.”

Another voice asks him. “Would you like bread?”

He responds with a smile. “I'll take whatever I can get.”

He feels the homemade roll drop on the tray then takes a nostril-flaring sniff. “Mmmmmm, It's still warm.”

At the end of the line, his friend guides him to an empty seat at a long wooden door made into a table with a pair of saw horses. Dewey sets the meal-tray down but before sitting he feels a gentle tap on his shoulder. He turns to see two fuzzy shapes before him. A man seated at the table with a mouth full of food blurts out, “It's the Driver and a pretty young lady.”

Pandora Driver makes an introduction. “Evelyn Stuart this is Private Dewey. I wasn't the one who stopped the monster, it was this guy.”

The Duchess Academy refers to these street dwellers as the creepy-crawlies because they teach girls to focus on superficial qualities. Now Evelyn sees the truth. She doesn't see the filthy clothes, greasy skin or a runaway beard with fleas. She sees a person. She sees a hero.

She hugs him tightly as a torrent of tears pour from her. “Thank you for helping me. Thank you for caring.”

He gently pats her back to comfort her and whispers. “It's ok. You're

safe now.”

Then he takes a big sniff and adds, “Lady, you sure smell good.”

Laughter erupts into applause for the onlookers of the crowded soup kitchen. A random voice adds, “It's like dinner theater.”

After the applause dies down, the trio shares a meal.

Evelyn asks Pandora, “How did you find him?”

She explains. “The members of this Hobo-Army all carry flare guns to signal for help. Once I knew a flare was involved, it didn't take much investigation with this groups highly effective grapevine.”

The ex-private nods knowingly as she continues. “I just had to identify who needed replacement flares. Originally 3 shots were fired in the air signaling me to the scene. The fourth shot the monster and belonged to a fourth person who was in the alley with us that night.”

She touches Private Dewey's shoulder and says. “The bullet had your name on it.”

He coughs on his food for a moment. She pats him on the back and adds, “It was like your signature.”

To his surprise, a long carried weight evaporated as her insight sunk in. He asks, “What happened to the bad-guy after I shot him? Did I kill him?”

Evelyn looked anxious in anticipation of the answer.

Pandora Driver said, “No, but I promise you he'll never hurt anyone again... Let's just say he's gone for good.”

Evelyn felt her own sense of relief as she realized there were people working together to make the city a better place for everyone.

After her initial introduction to the blind ex-private, Evelyn makes a few changes in her life. To her mother's chagrin, she abandons the Duchess Academy and begins making up her own mind about people. She investigates the complex world around her, and explores her place in it. She starts volunteering at the soup kitchen and makes time each and every day to read the newspaper to the grizzled old vet who saved her. She keeps their daily appointment till the day he dies.

He is never in the dark about the world again.

EPILOGUE

Lucky awakens on an uneven earthen floor of a dark room. As his eyes focus he discovers the 3 of spades staring him in the face. The rest of his cards are strewn around and appear floating in the blackness. He can feel the puffy bandage still wrapped around his head, but there is no pain. In fact, his damaged skin is numb. He can't tell if he is dreaming or awake, but decides to play along. He gathers up his only visible possessions, the cards. As he collects and counts, he remembers what the 3 of spades means.

It indicates a tough road ahead for those unwilling to struggle for spiritual enlightenment. If one opts out on the mission they run the risk of losing everything and submit to a life of drudgery.

“Where the hell am I?”

THE END

Kilroy here and back in one piece. I was on the edge of my seat (the backseat of course) the entire time. Where do you suppose Lucky ended up? I wonder what's in the other side of that door? If it's something dangerous, it's hard to imagine a deck of cards being an effective weapon? Would card tricks impress anyone in Hell? Maybe being forced to play solitaire for all eternity is hell, who knows? I'm sure John will reveal this mystery in a future adventure...

John Picha was born on St. Patrick's Day 1968. He was raised in Frankfort, a suburb of Chicago, but his mind always seemed to be elsewhere. The little Midwesterner was captivated by comic books, cartoons and animation, mythology and all things imagined. He made the world around him more exciting by pretending. A bicycle was a spacecraft, a bush became a dinosaur, and, of course, there was always a bath towel hidden away for a quick change into a super hero.

John is also the inventor of Thumbtraps, a joystick substitute for iPad and tablet gaming. If you'd like to learn more about John or to see more of his work, you can visit him on the web.

www.takejohn.com

www.youtube.com/johnpicha

www.thumbtraps.com

If you'd like to read more adventures of Pandora Driver, simply do a search for her in your favorite eBookstore or visit her on the web.

www.pandoradriver.com

SKYRACOS

Our final story takes us on a retro sci-fi adventure where we'll defy gravity with jet-packs and zip through space to freely explore strange realms. Imagine being a space-adventurer, paid to meet and greet alien cultures in the name of humanid-kind. You'd live to tell tales of glory and be the stuff of legends. Sounds like a dream job, right? Well, no job is perfect, and there is a high price for this fantasy. That's reality for a Skyraco.

Skyracos are winged warriors who struggle to keep their humanity while executing unsavory missions on alien worlds. Though they hail from the planet Centrus, their technology is based in WWII with a hint of alien super-science. They operate on the frontier of the known and unimagined where they are forced to interpret crises and dispense justice on their terms, or so they think.

The Skyracos arrived from the imagination of John Picha, but they are forged from the same mettle as Flash Gordon and the Rocketeer. Their pulp roots connect to 'Amazing Stories', 'Planet Stories' and 'Uncanny Tales.' From there John darkened things up and explored modern themes from a contemporary vantage point.

I don't know about you, but I'm ready to blast off in this retro sci-fi adventure! I hope you're not afraid of heights...

SKYRACCS

Set Adrift

By John Picha

MOON T02, CLAOUS.

The crimson depths of the Red Sea writhe and boil with strange aquatic life. However, the surface appears surprisingly calm as the gently oscillating plane of wavelets roll from horizon to horizon. The orange sky above is clear, except for the panoply of moons that dot the heavens and slowly coast along their orbits. Throughout the day, some cross the path of Zod, the sun, and cast a cycle of massive eclipse shadows over the land and inland sea. To the native life of Claous, the celestial phenomena largely goes unnoticed, but many of the humanid visitors from the planet Centrus find the stark toggle from light and dark unsettling.

As a gigantic moon-shadow crawls across the Red Sea, the penumbra discovers a tiny life-raft miles away from any sign of land. The inflatable material is a deep rust color that blends into the crimson waters. It's an unfortunate choice for any outworlder set adrift and hoping to be spotted for rescue. Typically this type of life-raft is stowed in a compartment on a LPB-29, and only deployed in an

emergency.

A matching tarp is draped over two humanoid figures seated across from one another in silence. They're currently hunched over a portable checkered board and preoccupied in a game of "Territory". They take turns planning then moving metal pieces toward one another in an evenly matched exercise. The game pieces are made of parts collected from the scraps of downed aircraft, mostly LPBs. It didn't take long to complete the set.

Suddenly, the tranquility is shattered by the powerful rumbling of two large bulky objects racing across the sky.

BBBBBBBBBZZZZZZZZZZ!

The sound becomes overwhelming as the alien vehicles pass in tandem with the power of a flying freight train.

On the life-raft, the passengers feel the vibrations in their chests and quickly pack up their unfinished game, but make no signal for help as they watch the vehicles pass overhead.

From the confines of the tarp, the two figures reveal themselves as armored Skyracos. Their mechanical wings pop open as they launch themselves over the water under the power of their zero-g flight-packs. They skim the wet surface hoping to avoid detection from the strange aircraft as they move into a parallel pursuit course. Behind them, the scuttled raft deflates and disappears into the depths of the Red Sea, leaving no evidence of their presence.

Skyracos are encased from head to toe in a bronze and brass armored

flight-suit. It's sleek with streamline stylings. Each of their chests has a number painted on it. Jet Coto wears a 03, as in seeing dimensionally, and Jay of Tanner wears a 13, daring danger to find him. They are best friends and have been split off from Unit 1768 and drafted for a special mission.

As the flying Skyracos close on their objective, Jet Coto thinks. "Two days ago, an alert radioman in a remote locale intercepted a secret transmission from the Byz. No single person really had a handle on the bug language. It's been described as patterned-noise that rolls back around into itself, and can't be duplicated by humanids. Interpreting their clicks, buzzing and droning chirps is virtually impossible for one person. Luckily, he recorded it.

"With the help of mathematicians and forensic linguists, the communications team, Echo, pieced together parts of the message. It appeared that an important military figure of the Byz was taking a trip. Apparently, it was headed to a hive-ship launch-site for a voyage back to Byzantium, their homeworld for a holiday feast. We didn't even know he was on Claous. It was a lucky break for us.

"From the recording, code-breakers sifted a flight plan for a trip across the hemispheres of Claous. It's takeoff and landing sites were well fortified, but the route between them was not.

"We know the Byz are punctual to a fault and Echo uncovered a departure time at a location A, and an arrival time at a location B. All we had to do was connect the dots. Using flight speed, compasses and clocks, and a little luck, Echo and company mapped out a flight path with possible intercept times along it. It might be possible to catch the Byz VIP in the open.

“Time always seemed to be against us, and it took a lot of it to piece the audio puzzle together. Once Echo-Team actually decrypted the takeoff time, the Byz was already in the air and en route. So the powers-that-be scrambled to assemble a mission to try and get him with the only resources within reach. That would be the two of us, Available and Expendable.

“No one was 100% sure the translation was correct, but they didn't want to miss out on an opportunity. Our unit's bomber, the Brown Winged Bandit, dropped us at an intercept point on the Red Sea with a hastily camouflaged life-raft. It was modified with a stabilizing motor to hold the coordinates. Then we planted ourselves beneath the flight path to wait for the B-VIP to arrive.

“The Byz name for our target meant something like ‘The Noble Claw’, but we codenamed him ‘Snowflake’ due to the unique marking on his deformed head. He could very well be his species' greatest military mind. In a way his presence has affected the lives of all of us Skyracos. Many were gone due to his ideas. There was no doubt he was a force to be reckoned with. Shattering this pillar of Byz culture would demoralize all of Byz-dom. Hopefully losing him will take some of the fight out of them. At the very least we could remove his skill from the game board. Now we had one shot at him...well, two actually.

“There were un-decoded details of the secret transmission that we'd have to fill them in on the job. We didn't know how many ships would be involved with him until we actually saw them. Luckily there are only two, although two Skyracos vs two Byz ships is not an even match.”

The flying men of mettle maintain their low altitude pursuit just out of the water's reach. They've closed in on their massive targets and slide into their shadow.

“From a distance, the bug-ships looked like almonds flying with the point to the rear, but the closer you get, the more its insect characteristics emerge. The body is obsidian blending into dark sienna with shocking flecks of red. When light hit it just right, an iridescent shimmer scatters across the chitin surface. The details have sharp corners and the overall presence is dangerous looking, like something poisonous that you shouldn't touch.

“These ominous aircrafts are actually made from the thorax and abdomen of giant insects that roam the bug hiveworld. When one dies, our opponents mark it and wait for millions of natural scavengers and parasites to clean the massive exoskeleton of all muscle and excretions.

“Once desiccated and calcified, crews of sentient bugs move in and begin the conversion process from corpse to aircraft. They detach the head and most of the limbs, then fill the empty shell with machinery to enable flight. The result is a giant organic insect body with large machined parts and jet engines plugged into it. Four segmented whip antennas curve back along the body. They sway with the ships movement. Two massive arms with pincers hang below the body. These act as landing struts, but also help in maneuvering, and can be used to attack. When you get close to them you feel how massive these ships really are, 170 feet long, that's nearly 5 times the size of our LPB-29s.

“The bug ship is a lethal machine made from a corpse and we don't really have anything comparable to defend against it. Now, Snowflake was inside of one of them.”

The earphones inside Jet Coto's helmet radio cues up his partner's voice. Jay asks. “Any thoughts on which one he could be on?”

From the protection of the helmet's eyelets, Jet's eyes dart back and forth between the choices. He replies, “Your guess is as good as mine.”

“If we attack the trailing ship, it might buy us time before the other ship notices.”

Jet nods. “Sounds good. Ready?”

“Yep.”

“3, 2, 1, UP!”

They turn in an ascending arc and increase speed. As they climb and close in, they feel the vibrations from the engine sounds enveloping them even through their flight-suits. The Byz Ships detect the Skyracos' proximity and initiate evasive maneuvers.

Jet thinks, “For as loud as those things are, they sure can hear good. They have some kind of advanced listening device that's far superior to our radar. But we have no idea how it works.”

Skyracos are far more maneuverable than the large ships, but they don't make it easy to grab hold. Byz Ship 2 sways, bucks, weaves and

rolls to ditch or damage its pursuers. The flying men anticipate and overcompensate while trying to align the 3 degrees of freedom of the objects flying very fast in all directions. The two determined Skyracos trail in the overlapping action of its movement.

The monster ship corkscrews, sending the antennas whipping and spinning around the body like blades. Jet and Jay dodge them as they maneuver closer to the optimum contact spot behind the cockpit dome.

They catch a break as the ship turns into them and they make sudden contact. Jay grabs and clamps down on the textured husk with his power-glove. Jet bounces off.

Jay's wings snap shut so they won't catch the wind like a sail and peel him off. Then he reaches out to his partner. They shake hands. Jet's wings snap shut as Jay pulls him down to make contact too. His metal covered fingers dig deep in the husk.

Jet offers, "Always work as a team, right?"

Jay replies. "Yep. When riding this beast, once you have a hold of it, don't let go."

As both men cling on and clamp-crawl their way to the edge of the clear pilot's dome, Jet thinks, "The exoskeleton-turned-ship is relatively light, but unbelievably strong. It's nearly impossible to penetrate the shell. The vulnerable parts are on the inside."

The insect pilot watches helplessly through his clear dome as they approach.

Jet thinks, “The trick to bringing these things down is not attacking the ships, but what's controlling them, the crew. Three spotters in the front domes and the pilot call out commands to the stick operations to maneuver the ship. You would think with that many players involved there would be a lot of miscommunication, but they aren't like humans in that way. With more of them involved, the better their communication gets.”

The pair arrives at the cockpit dome edge as Jet thinks, “Trying to break this glass is a waste of time. Whatever it's made of it's as hard as the ship's body.”

Jay ejects his Cyril blade from the flat scabbard built into his thigh armor. It's as wide as his palm and a little less than the length of his forearm. It's forged from an alien metal which is incredibly sharp. Depending on availability, they are issued to some lucky Skyraco wingmen.

Jet says. “The pilot is yelling something, but I don't think it's directed at us...”

Byz ship 2 swings back into formation and levels off to follow the leader. The four pivoting jets fitted into the leg sockets allow for very flexible maneuverability. The lead ship spins, flying backwards to face the clinging wingmen.

Jet monitors its activity while Jay continues carving his way around the seal. Jet activates his mic and yells to be heard over the engines. “YOU KNOW WHAT'S COMING, RIGHT?”

Jay replies with out looking. “YEP. JUST GRAB ME AND TAKE OFF IF YOU NEED TO. DON’T WORRY, I’LL LET GO.”

A port on the lead ship opens and begins to glow. Jet is staring into the mouth of a strange alien cannon. Luckily, it fires a relatively slow round.

KA-SPLAPP!

The cannon spits a large wet wad of bright green liquid that splatters on impact. It strikes ship 2 to the left and front of the cockpit. The wind catches the thick wet fallout sending it rapidly washing back over ships 2’s body.

The light green acid can't damage the husk of the bug ship, but it can melt a Skyraco to the bone. At the very least, it will destroy a zero-g flight pack by clogging the intake.

KA-SPLAPP!

Jet watches as the second shot strikes to the font and right of them. The wind catches the material sending it back. Reflexively, Jet ducks to avoid the spatter. He activates his helmet mic and warns, “HE’S CORRECTED HIS AIM.”

Jet stares back into the barrel. He sees the glow and yells, “HERE IT COMES”, then starts counting.

KA-SPLAPP!

“4”

Jay yells, “I GOT IT.” As the canopy opens, catches the wind, breaks free and disappears.

“3”

Jet reaches in for the alien pilot as he tries to duck away, but peels him from his perch then yells for Jay to, “LET GO!”

“2”

His partner complies.

“1”

With a blast of Jet's zero-g flight-pack the trio hop into the air and watch the glob strike the position they clung to and pass underneath them.

Jet releases the alien to the wind, then dives through the newly created entrance toting his partner.

For as loud as the engines sound on the outside, the interior of the bug ship is surprisingly quiet, except for the wind buffeting the open cockpit above. The interior space feels cavernous and has a warm glow. The sweeping curves of the anatomy feed into one another with no indication of right angles or straight edges. There are only 3 habitable spaces on the Byz ship, the flight crew tubes in front, the rowing-room in the center, and a cargo compartment in the rear.

The Skyraco team stands back-to-back in the rounded rowing-room, a

space like a gymnasium with an 80 foot circumference and 12 foot dome ceiling. It's traced by a large gold ring supported by a series of flexible mechanical arms that reach into wall slots. This was the group control ring that steered the ship. It's manned by 14 Byz stationed evenly around it.

Jet says, "If Snowflake is on board, he is in the aft compartment." He points to the only door in the room.

The 8 foot tall crew of creatures were all that stood between the Skyracos and the door to the other habitable space on the ship. The sharp edges of their 6 limbed, obsidian bodies caught the light as they close in closer to the invaders.

From behind the Skyracos, a single Byz scurries from the navigation tunnels and up to the vacated pilot's perch. This seems to signal for a fight to begin.

SSSSKRREEEEEEE!

The Byz scream in unison and they swarm claws first at the invaders.

Jet says, "Up and over, now!"

As the creatures rush in, the two Skyracos launch up and over the wall of claws, catching them by surprise. The wingmen land where the insect crew is not, at the second chamber door and rip it open.

Except for some food stores, which are too small to smuggle an 8 foot bug inside, the room is empty.

The armored pair speaks in unison, “This ship is the decoy.”

The Byz crew has turned to face them again. Some scurry up the curved walls and ceiling, effectively closing the open space they came through.

Jet thinks, “The barricade of bugs before them has 84 limbs with 168 claws that could rip a man of flesh and bone in half. Luckily, none of ours was exposed. Fighting in tight spaces wasn't the emphasis at Skyraco flight-school, but we'll make due.”

Over a private mic, Jet says, “They aren't going to fall for that trick again.”

Jay responds, “Nope.”

“Half and half?”

“Deal.”

“Go Hermetic.”

“Got ya.”

Jet Coto fires his flight-pack and skates into the web of insects shoulder first, trying to batter his way through. The tension from his impact pulls at the interlocking web of bugs and breaks the grip of two wall clingers, before they snap him back. Jay sees the opening and blasts through, ricochets off the wall, then lands behind their opponents. With his Cyril blade he begins hacking and slashing at the monster's flanks and fighting his way back to his best friend.

The Byz spit at the Skyraco's armored face plates. It creates an acidic vapor that, if breathed, will eat away lungs.

Their clawed feet dig into the deck and the scrum snaps Jet back. He shuts his engines down and throws powered mechanically augmented punches in the swarm. They reciprocate with a frenzy of claw strikes that spark across his metal flight-suit.

Jet thinks, "It's like fighting your way through metal coils."

One creature grabs Jet by the helmet and tries to twist his head off, but the motion limiters inherent to the suits armored neck design prevent his spine from snapping. Jet reaches around the Byz' thorax and locks his gloved hands behind him. He squeezes. Then applies double the pressure as he squeezes again. The mighty hug cracks the Byz shell. The Byz gasps, staggers back and hits the floor, legs up.

Another claw strikes his face, scratching the clear lens of his eyelet. Reflexively, he grabs the limb and snaps it over his knee. Before it can strike with another limb, Jet rips his attacker from the swarm, hurling it against a wall. He thinks, "For as big and strong as they are, they are lighter than you'd think."

The melee intensifies. From opposite sides, the Skyracos whittle down their adversary's odds. On the other side of the living wall, Jay's eyelets run with gore and black blood from chopping and mowing limbs. If a Byz sticks a claw, he cuts it off at the flexible membrane at the elbow then adds it to the stack behind him.

A large Byz emerges and looms over him. Jay attempts to stab it in

the face. To his surprise, the creature catches his dagger in the finger-like mandibles of his mouth and breaks the weapon from his armored grip.

The creature hooks Jay's wrists and clamps down. It laughs as it pulls them apart trying to start its own stack of limbs.

Jay fires his flight-pack and flies into the behemoth's face, hitting the hilt of his knife with his helmet. The impact drives it through the creature's narrow neck decapitating it. The momentum sends the armored figure up through the headless space. He lands on the other side to retrieve his weapon of choice from the black blood-coated floor.

The two best friends stand side-by-side as the last Byz falls. The hollow shell of this giant biz ship is filled with blood and guts again.

As they catch their breath, Jet says playfully, "Ok, I concede that you got more than your half."

Jay chuckles as he wipes his blade clean on the wall.

Jet notices the pilot's perch is empty. Apparently, the replacement pilot joined the fight at some point. Luckily the default position of the control ring is level. Jet takes one last look and says, "Let's get out of here."

They fly to the opening single file. Jay drags his dagger through the pilot's controls on their way out. It sparks and explodes as they leap out the same hole they came in. Once in the open sky, their wings pop open again.

Smoke streams from the open cockpit as the ship sputters and lists down toward the water.

Realizing they are alone in the airspace, Jet asks, “What happened to the lead ship?”

The pair scans the sky for the missing vehicle. Then Jay points to the horizon in an unexpected direction. “There it is! Shit, I can't believe they pulled that far away that quick.”

Jet responds, “The second ship must have changed course to amplify the distance between us and Snowflake while we were distracted. Sneaky bugs. They made good use of their diversion. Let's go!”

They kick acceleration controls in their metal boots and flight-packs roar as they race against time to their next target.

ZZZZOOOOOMMMMM!

As the two flying figures streak across the sky, it becomes clear they aren't going to catch the lead ship anytime soon. Not wanting to admit defeat, Jay reluctantly warns, “At this rate the Byz ship will be in range of a hive before we catch it. I wouldn't trust my luck against that size of swarm.”

Jet agrees, “You're right. I've got an idea. Swing around behind me and clamp down on my feet. Then make your armor rigid.”

Jay does the maneuver and adds, “I think I see where you're idea is going.”

Jet continues, “Now make as low a profile as you can to reduce as much drag as possible. Fold down your wings and ease your throttle to the max.”

“You got it. Hang on!”

The pair’s wings snap shut and the two man team joins to become one twin engine brass and bronze javelin rocketing across the sky. The wind buffets the pair of Skyracos as they close the gap. Their zero-g flight packs scream. Jet watches the speed gauge in his visor flirt with the redline. He yells, “GO INTO THE RED!”

ZZZZOOOOOMMMMM!

Jay complies, “You got it!”

The combined engine’s might hurtles them at the target.

ZZZZOOOOOMMMMM!

The engines scream nearing burnout temperature.

ZZZZOOOOOMMMMM!

KA-BOOM!

An explosion erupts from Jet Coto's flight-pack. Small metal parts fly in Jay’s face and clink over his helmet. Jet’s flight-pack, goes dead with a puff of black smoke, then a thin line tracing their path in the

sky.

Jay yells, “Shit! Your flight-pack blew.”

“It's ok, the zero-g coil is still active. I just lost propulsion. We're almost there. We're gonna' over shoot. Slow up, slow up.”

Jay pops his metal wings open and both men drop their knees into the wind for drag to slow them down as they quickly close on the ship.

Jet says, “Ok breakaway, we're just about there.”

Jay moves along side of his disable friend, never letting go. He acts like a parachute to slow them and guide them in as best as he can.

In anticipation, each yells to the other, “GET READY!”

THUMP THUMP

The metal men separate, slam into the body, then grapple onto it behind the cockpit dome.

Relieved, Jet says, “That worked better than I thought. Ha ha.”

Jay agrees, “Fuck, the flight manual. That was awesome!”

Both Skyracos retrieve their Cyril blades from the sheath hatch in their legs, and begin digging. The Byz pilot ducks back into the craft just before the canopy breaks away with the wind.

Both heroes dive in and experience a sense of deja-vu as they enter

the ship.

Over their private mic, Jet asks, “Same trick? It worked the first time.”

Jay replies, “Yep.”

The wingmen rocket over a barricade of flailing claws, and land at the sealed entrance. Using their armor amplified strength, they pry open the locked pocket-door. They swing inside then slam it shut behind them. Jet stabs his dagger into the wall, blocking the door from being reopened from the other side.

WRENCH- KA-SLAM!

A single glowing orb hovering below the ceiling lights the dim cavernous space. The 4 Byz occupying the space hardly acknowledge the metallic interlopers presence. The insects are dressed in iridescent ceremonial robes and shimmering headdresses that look like crowns. To the observers, the Skyracos appear silent as they speak over their helmets private channel. Jay says, “I've never seen Byz in clothes before.”

Jet replies, “I didn't even know they had them.”

A melancholy drone permeates the cavernous chamber. The subtly scaling pitches emanate from the insect occupants. The sound's vibration is felt by all present and they stand in attendance of an ornate dais displaying the body of a fallen hero. The Skyracos' target is already dead.

Jet thinks, “They sent us on a political assassination but we invaded a funeral procession instead. The mistranslation about the feast just clicked in place too. They were bringing him home so his people could eat him.

“When the Byz use the word 'one' they don't mean it like we do. To them one means 'all'. When a hive member dies, the survivors eat their dead. It's a way to keep their beloved alive within the living body of the Byz race. It's a way to mitigate the pain of loss and it keeps them connected as one. To them, we are all connected in ways. I think I see it now too.”

Jet stares at the legendary being, “I'd never seen old Snowflake in person before, but from all the photos, it's him. He looks peaceful. His body is in tact. Apparently, he died of natural causes. Based on the fade of his shell, maybe a week ago. A closer inspection of the snowflake-esque symbol on his deformed head reveals it's not actually a birthmark; it's some kind of Byz equivalent to a tattoo. It's probably as old as him by the look of it. This symbol was a chosen statement, not by chance.”

The Skyracos, still black bloodstained from their first fight, are out of place in the solemn scene. However the Byz mostly ignore them. Jay, number 13, stands ready for a trap to be sprung. Over their private channel he cautions Jet, “How do we know this isn't fake?”

With Cyril blade drawn, Jay approaches the fallen creature. Jet, 03, says, “Just look at the mourners. Look at the pain in their eyes. I didn't realize the Byz even had a range of facial expressions. I've only ever seen them mad. This loss is a deep wound.”

As Jay cautiously steps toward the dais, he suggests, “It could all be an act.”

The Byz appear to have nothing to hide as Jay circles the display waiting for something to strike.

Jet says, “Think about it. You're walking around his body with an unsheathed Cyril blade but they don't consider you a threat.”

Jay scrutinizes every detail of the alleged corpse waiting for any sign of life, no matter how small. Jet knows his partner well enough to know he was pushing for a fight. He decides to offer some words of wisdom from the past. “Remember the Skyracos Dicta says, ‘We represent Centrus. We are in a unique position of power, vested with the authority to make life and death decisions. We are ambassadors of our homeworld and we must respect that responsibility.’”

“The original intent of this mission was to try and demoralize the Byz and take the will to fight out of them. Fate beat us to the punch.

Jet continues, “If you desecrate Snowflake’s body, it's going to be worse than having killed him. Right now, there is no one to blame.

“What do you think would happened if we desecrate their icon’s body? What if the situation was reversed and that was Ozgood Price lying there? He was the first Skyraco, and if they fucked with his body during his funeral, how far would we go to avenge him?”

Jay looks at the living Byz as he continues stalking around Snowflake.

Jet continues, “We have a chance to make history, right here and now. How do you want this moment to be remembered?”

“This mission was over before it began. The target is dead. Let them have their hero.”

With Cyril blade in hand, Jay completes his circular path next to his partner.

Jet says, “We paid our respects, now it's time to leave.”

They back up to the exit where Jet retrieves his own Cyril blade from the wall. They prepare themselves to fight their way out. The sounds of the melancholy drone subsides and becomes patterned-clicks that roll back around into itself as the 4 Byz in robes talk.

CREEEEK

Suddenly, the broken door slides open to reveal the rowing-room again. Now, the silent Byz crew is lined up on either side of the doorway. They offer them an unobstructed path back to the light from the hole they came in through.

As they walk through their enemy’s ranks, Jet thinks, “Neither the humanids nor the Byz are indigenous to Claous, but we've been fighting over this moon for years. For the current generation of Skyracos, the necessity for the conflict has become shrouded in history and propaganda, but one thing's for sure. Neither side wants the other to have it. I wonder which of us learned that from the other?”

The Skyracos leap into the light. Since Jet's flight-pack is damaged, Jay tows him.

As he watches the Byz ship cruise to the horizon, Jet thinks, "The fallen warrior is headed home while the rest of us are left, set adrift in space. That can't be the only way out of this fight, can it?"

Jet activates his helmet's long-range transceiver. "Jet to Brown Winged Bandit. You there, Gears? We are headed your way and looking for a pick up. We're activating our locators now. Over."

A moment later Gears' voice breaks through the crackle of static. "I see you guys on the scope. Was the mission a success? Over."

Jet responds. "The objective was achieved. Over"

"Sounds like there's a story behind that tone. You can tell us all about it once you're home. I'm sure you don't want to have the wrong kind of talk on an open channel, right?"

"Right."

"Thought so. We'll see you shortly, Brown Wing Bandit, over and out."

Sometime later, Jet discovered what the Snowflake symbol actually meant; Finding the similarities in differences.

THE END

Kilroy here again. I don't think I'd like to encounter those Byz at a picnic or BBQ. Do you remember those bug zappers that were so popular, a while back? I wonder how big one of those would need to be to catch a 170 foot long Byz ship. Maybe the Skyracos R&D teams could work up a concept in to a bigger flying ship. They could call it an Air-Raid to kill Byz dead. I'll see if I can get John to build a 3d model of it...

John Picha was born on St. Patrick's Day 1968. He was raised in Frankfort, a suburb of Chicago, but his mind always seemed to be elsewhere. The little Midwesterner was captivated by comic books, cartoons and animation, mythology and all things imagined. He made the world around him more exciting by pretending. A bicycle was a spacecraft, a bush became a dinosaur, and, of course, there was always a bath towel hidden away for a quick change into a super hero.

John is also the inventor of Thumbtraps, a joystick substitute for iPad and tablet gaming. If you'd like to learn more about John or to see more of his work, you can visit him on the web.

www.takejohn.com

www.youtube.com/johnpicha

www.thumbtraps.com

If you'd like to read more adventures of the Skyracos, simply do a search for them in your favorite eBookstore or visit them on the web.

www.skyracos.com

LOOKING FORWARD AT THE PAST

Ok, my friend, our time-and-space-journey has ended for now. Better check your surroundings to make sure we returned you to the same, time, space and place you started from. I'd hate to think I dumped you in a universe where you didn't exist. I know that would unsettle me.

Thanks for downloading the ePulp Sampler. We hope you enjoyed the smorgasbord of retro adventure stories we served up on this e-platter some call an e-reader. If you did, please take a second to rate us on your favorite eBookstore, and be sure to tell your friends. As long as we have your continued support we can keep our independent publishing expedition going.

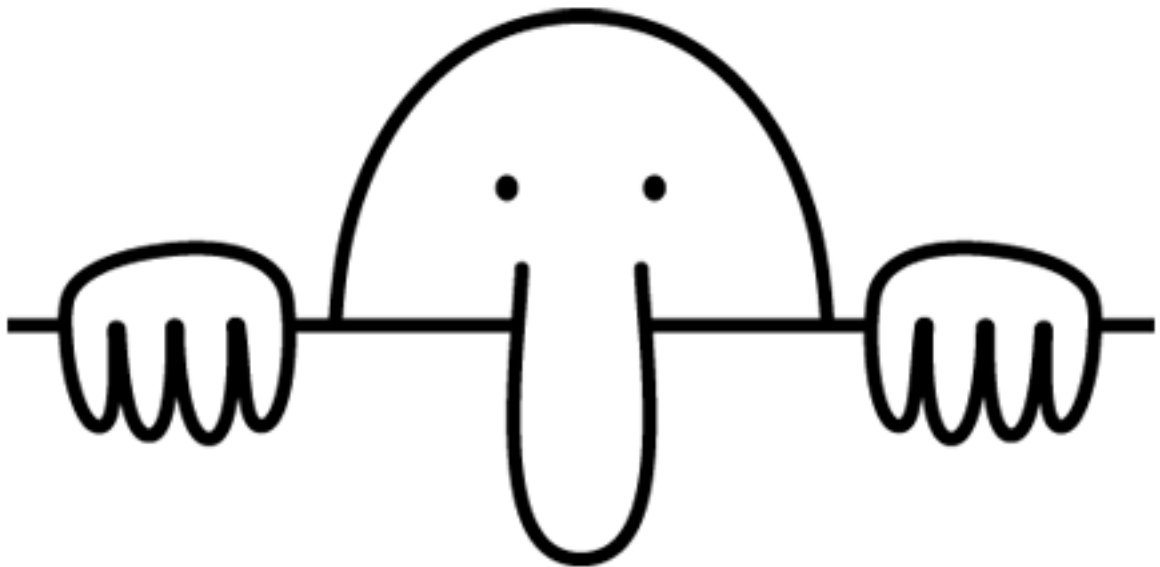
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Speaking of cycles, I've been monitoring a growing interest in the things of the past, and pulps are a part of the trend. Your interest appears to an example too. Maybe it's the age we live in? The rapid-pace, constant-connectivity, and perpetual plugged-in-ness of the 21st century might make us nostalgic for a time we never knew.

Information overload and the current political climate could make us long for a time when the world seemed simpler and Good and Evil were clearly delineated. But in a way the past has never left us. I think they felt the same way back then.

The farther we look back, the more clearly we see ourselves. And if you look closely at the lineage of modern science-fiction and fantasy you may be surprised to discover that all roads lead to back pulp.



KILROY WAS HERE

MORE ePULP

Be sure to look for more of our adventures in your favorite eBookstores. **They ain't Shakespeare. They're pure Pulp!**

Pandora Driver: The Origin

1939. Young Betty McDougal discovered how hard life could be when her family was evicted from their farm and forced to live in a Citadel City shelter. They struggled to survive. It was a time of desperation, sin, mistakes and lessons Betty didn't want to learn. Her life felt pointless until a mysterious stranger delivered her an ominous black car. It transformed her. This retro-hero tale is for mature readers.

Pandora Driver: Who are the People in your Neighborhood

1940. Pandora Driver and her Car-of-Tomorrow deliver rough justice to the elite and a douche named the Gooch. It's Daisy vs Goliath in a fight for the streets. This tale is all action from start to finish!
(Featured in the Dieselpunk ePulp Showcase)

Rurik of the Demonwatch

(Coming Soon)

Skyracos: The Mining Mess

In "Skyracos: The Mining Mess" recent recruit, Chip Daniels wants to be a hero, but gets more than he bargained for once incased in his streamlined flight suit. Chip and the rest of Unit 9901 are ordered to investigate a mysterious plague outbreak in an isolated mining colony. What starts out as a game quickly unravels into a life or death

crisis. Notions of good and evil spin into nightmare of moral ambiguity, which challenges Chip's definition of heroics...Welcome to a Skyraco's uncomfortable world.

Skyracos Dicta

This genuine sci-fi artifact comes from another world and is a companion piece to the Skyraco ePulps. It was compiled from the notes of Ozgood Price, the first and most famous Skyraco. He meant for it to act as an operational code of conduct and philosophical survival guide. Now, long after his untimely demise, the Dicta is a part of every recruit's training manual. Ozgood's words continue to inspire generations of Skyracos.

Wild Marjoram: The Vote

New York City is now the Broken Apple. Marjoram has a hefty plan to take out the Germans from within. But before she can infiltrate the lair of the Nazis, she meets a long-lost ally from her past that ushers her and Jerry The Stealth into a place that tests their mental and physical strength to the limit.

Wild Marjoram: The Detour

Wild Marjoram heads into New Canada to bond with the woman who raised her, leading her into the romantic and bohemian world of Montreal, a city that now rivals Old Paris as the hub for freedom and intellectual pursuits. In this gritty yet artistic underbelly, she renews her confidence to seek out the Germans for a final confrontation and gets more than what she bargained for. (Coming soon.)

PULP ALLIES

DIESELPUNKS.ORG

Dieselpunks.org is the largest news outlet and social network dedicated to a style of art called "Dieselpunk" which blends the spirit of the 1920s - 1950s with today's technology and attitudes.

Dieselpunk is a style primarily inspired by movement, for example: the high action pulp novels of the '30s & '40s, jazz & swing music, Art Deco & Streamline Moderne, the influence of the world wars, scientific leaps accessible to the common man, and the revolutionary steps that separated the Jazz age from the Victorian era.

We are a worldwide community of like-minded people driven to create lasting works inspired by the dieselpunk style. Won't you join us at www.Dieselpunks.org?

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