

SECRET FILES  
OF  
**THE 19XX**  
VOLUME TWO





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## INTRODUCTION

Welcome aboard. This is the Second Volume of the Secret Files of the 19XX. This book is designed to give you better insight into the motives and histories of the characters appearing in the pages of Montezuma: 1934. You will also find two short stories, both involving different characters from The Rise of the Black Faun and Montezuma: 1934. Enjoy!



## TEMPLE OF THE SUN

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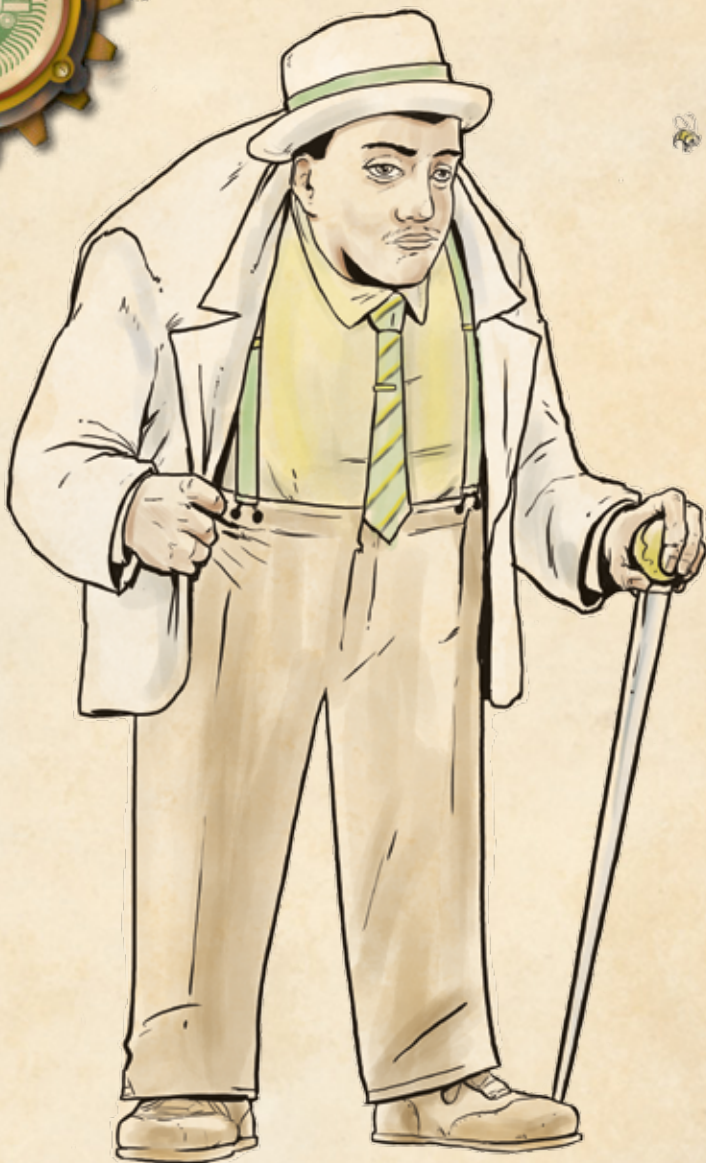
After translating and deciphering panels in the recently uncovered ancient Aztec pyramid, the Temple of the Sun easily found followers who would devote their entire lives to the cause of bringing about the Final Sun. Luitl and Modomnoc, with the help of a newly recruited high priest, gathered weak willed individuals from the countryside and convinced them to donate all of their worldly possessions to the Temple of the Sun. Luitl and Modomnoc were especially skilled at finding wealthy donors who quickly gave their family fortunes to the cause. These funds helped pay for an exhaustive search to locate a vessel that would contain Montezuma's soul, and they financed custom additions to the Hotel Azteca that would enable the Temple of the Sun to perform their macabre rituals.

# THE 19XX

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The year is 1934, and the 19XX continues to operate outside of the public eye. From their headquarters in the Empire State Building, the group is dispatched to every corner of the globe whenever evil appears. They have fought several battles with organizations small and large and obtained many powerful relics and machines they hope will prevent the next Great War. The 19XX operate as goodwill ambassadors, without any official sanction from any government. They are endowed with the secret support of those who hope to prevent a new World War. Members may come and go—some operatives will never meet each other—but their goal is the same: protect the world from evil in all forms and prevent the next Great War.



MODOMNOC



CLASSIFIED

name Modomnoc

case no. 443710

As a young orphan boy, Modomnoc was taken in by the church and given an education. He had no name, only a sister who, as a girl, was not allowed to help in mass. His favorite tasks included transcribing church documents and tending to the fathers' bees. All of the knowledge he received was passed to his younger sister, who stayed with him in a small wooden shack near the church. At 14, he chose the name Modomnoc, after the 6th century monk who brought bees to Ireland when a swarm followed him from his monastery in Wales.

At 15, he discovered the writings of the first monks' encounters with the Aztecs, and his life was changed forever. He poured through legends and descriptions of cities and customs and became infatuated with the descriptions of a lost civilization that was buried beneath the city. The Temple of the Sun began as a group that met to discuss the lost people, but it quickly became much more.





LUITL

CLASSIFIED

name Luitl

case no. 443709

As a small girl, Luitl's place in the church was very limited. She struggled to find ways to help her brother and herself survive. Her early years were sustained by crumbs of food and knowledge that her brother could smuggle to her. When she was old enough to understand, his stories of the ancient people filled her every thought and became her one obsession. She took for herself the Aztec name Luitl and pushed her brother, Modomnoc, to find more and more information about the ancient kingdom.

Luitl became an expert in antiquities and used her knowledge to gain access to people with money and power. She also studied the spells and magic of the Ancients, and she became adept at using charms and rituals to gain influence over those who could help the Temple of the Sun. After reading stories and discovering carvings in hidden ruins, Luitl decided it was time to bring Montezuma back into the world of the living.





MONTEZUMA

CLASSIFIED

name Montezuma

case no. 443711

Motecuuhzoma Xocoyotzin, The Furious Lord, 9th ruler of Tenochtitlan, brought the Aztec Empire to its apex before it crumbled to dust. As deciphered by Luitl and Modomnoc, the Aztecs believed time was separated into ages. Each age was governed by a different God who ruled as the Sun, giving nourishment to those he favored and consuming in fiery wrath those he considered enemies.

Each new Sun rising to power was marked by death and destruction on the field of battle. According to prophecies in the late 1920s and early 1930s, 1939 was to mark the beginning of the next epic struggle between good and evil. It was the perfect time for Montezuma to make his return, conquer his enemies, and claim his throne as the Sun God.

After searching the Earth to find a vessel that could take his soul, Luitl and Modomnoc strove to bring Montezuma back to life and usher in the age of the fifth and Final Sun.





**DOYLE FLANNIGAN**

CLASSIFIED

name Doyle Flannigan

case no. 704242

Flannigan is a hard-boiled, paranormal investigator who has a penchant for travelling solo. He was working as a police detective when his life took a turn into the world of the occult. After a case involving the supernatural, Flannigan quit the police force and devoted his life to tracking down crimes the police weren't equipped to handle. He studied ancient tomes and learned about exorcisms and rituals that would help tame the demon world. He carries two colt 45 automatics blessed by the priest that baptized him and a broken rosary given to him by his mother that has always brought him luck. On his body are tattoos and symbols that help protect him on his path to fight true evil wherever it lurks.



45  
NOT RA  
WINGTON ARMS CO., INC.



**MUCHO MARIA**



CLASSIFIED

name Mucho Maria

case no. 910456

As the only member of her family to survive the upheaval of the Mexican Revolution, Maria was forced to learn how to subsist on her own in turbulent times. Sometimes this meant doing horrible things for horrible people. On better days, it meant learning about aviation and machine repair. With the skills she learned in her youth, Maria earned the respect of both her fellow pilots and the thugs who inhabited the Gulf Coast. Maria turned these thugs into friends and soon became the leader of a small group called the Devil Wings. They are mercenaries and air pirates to some--raiding shipping planes and working for the highest bidder--and heroes to others--protecting small villages from rogue generals and rich landowners. Mucho Maria is both feared and loved, and she would have it no other way.





**BOSTON & MAZZUCHI**

CLASSIFIED

name Boston & Mazzuchi

case no. 678234

Boston: When Boston heard there was an opening on an experimental airship controlled by an organization with a dubious past, he jumped at the chance to serve. Most of his career found Boston stationed at a naval base in the Florida Keys. Being part of the 19XX and a crew member on her flagship, the Carpathian, would give him a chance to see the world and sing epic songs of his travels.

Mazzuchi: Growing up as a poor kid in the south side of Little Italy gave Mazzuchi a lot of opportunities to learn how to use his fists. His skills earned him respect in all five boroughs; they said he would grow up to be the champ someday. At 14, he was taking on guys two or three years older. But at 16, he stopped growing, and his boxing career ended. Mazzuchi could never shake the scrapper in him, and he was bounced around from judge to judge until he had only two options: jail or the Carpathian. By 1934, he held one of the lowest naval ranks of Seaman First Class.





# KNOW YOUR AIRSHIPS

A  
BRIEF PRIMER ON  
LIGHTER THAN AIR  
CRAFT



## AEROSTAT

An aerostat is a structure that remains aloft using lighter than air gases such as hydrogen or helium. Early aerostats were used to survey the countryside and had no forward motion or steering. During the civil war, aerostats were used to scout approaching enemy troops.



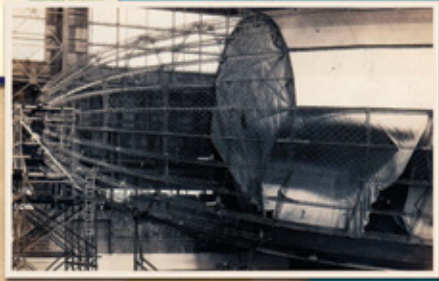
## DIRIGIBLE

A dirigible is an aerostat that can be steered. A dirigible can be rigid or non-rigid. The most common gas used to achieve lift was hydrogen because of the scarcity of helium, although helium is a much safer, non-combustible gas.



# RIGID

A rigid airship is an aerostat that is steerable and uses an internal framework and a series of gas envelopes to retain its shape. The use of a rigid framework allows for very large ship sizes.



# NON-RIGID

A non-rigid or semi-rigid airship relies on the higher air pressure of the lifting gas to maintain its shape. A non-rigid, un-motored airship is also known as a blimp.



# THERMAL

A thermal airship relies on the difference in density between heated air inside the envelope and the atmosphere. While cheaper than helium or hydrogen, the amount of lift created is much less.



# ZEPPELIN

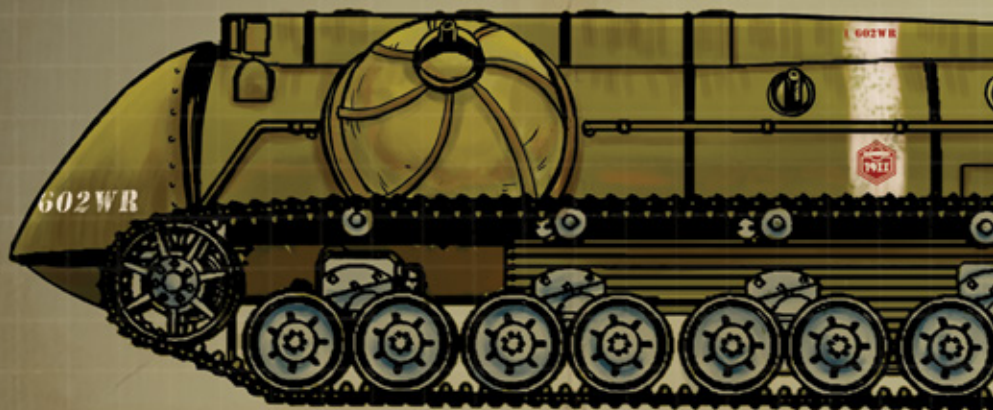
Zeppelin was a company founded by Count Ferdinand von Zeppelin. The Zeppelin company pioneered and perfected the rigid dirigible. The Graf Zeppelin was one of the most successful airships, logging more than a million miles and 590 flights.





# THE BOAR ★ ★

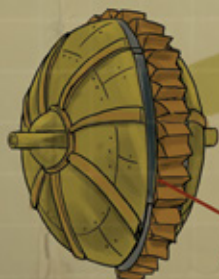
HEAVILY ARMORED TRACKED FIGHTING



The Boar was designed and built by the engineering team of Penn Clement, Vera Brecht, Howard Hughes, and the ghost of Isambard Kingdom Brunel. With limited resources and time, the Boar was constructed using pieces of VM walking tanks and metal from nearby sheds at the Nahauhtla dam. The Boar was built to be large, strong, and fast. With two detachable wheel tanks, it would be very difficult to outrun this beast.



balance gear

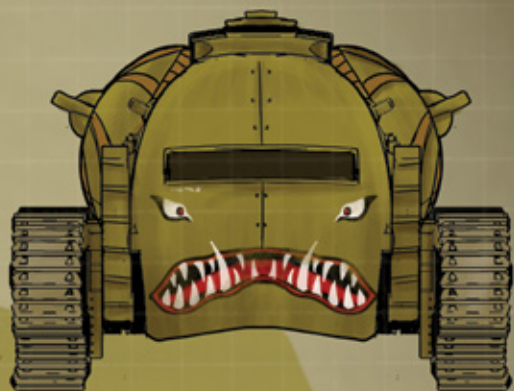


viewports





VEHICLE



x4



1 602WR



## SPECIFICATIONS

Designed 1934

### Weapons

Four 75mm howitzer  
Two 95mm howitzer

### Speed

Top speed of 35mph

### Range

90 miles

### Rate of fire

12 rounds per minute

### 8 person crew

### Vehicles

Carries two wheel tanks,  
with 1 crew each.

# The New Agent's Primer on Esoteric Items.

Version 1-A 1934

1

Items that always seemed to bring the user an intangible amount of luck fall into the first category. These items are very weak and easily countered or cancelled by other level one items.

LUCKY ITEMS



MOJO BAGS/TALISMANS



2

Depending on the mix or the contents, this level of relic can be very powerful for how little knowledge it takes to wield one. These are often found at roadside shops or ordered from the backs of magazines that cater to esoteric shoppers.

5

The highest level of relic was touched by the Gods. In the correct hands, these can be harnessed for astonishing power. In the wrong hands, they have the ability to create and destroy worlds.

SPEAR OF DESTINY



ENGINEER'S KNIFE



3

Level three relics are highly sought after because they are both powerful and plentiful. These items often boast unique origins and are created by extraordinary situations and people.

THE SKULL OF THE ELDER



3

Hard to find and even harder to quantify, level 4 relics can be incredibly powerful because the true limits of their power are often hard to ascertain. Anything not from this planet or from the "Older Worlds" should be avoided by all except the most foolhardy or experienced relic user.

4

Some objects in this world contain large amounts of energy that can be harnessed by those with the knowledge and skill to do so. This chart is meant as a primer for our newest agents. This will give you a brief understanding of the kinds of relics and esoteric items you will encounter in your travels with The 19XX. With proper patience and understanding of the esoteric world, you will be able to contribute to the struggle and to stay alive.

-Vera Hounon  
Head Botanist



# PENN'S FIELD GUIDE TO WEAPON TYPES

In your career as a 19XX agent, whether serving aboard the Airship Carpathian or doing legwork in the field, you will be called upon to use a variety of weapons. Below is a simple chart to help classify the types of weapons you might come across. From small weapons to heavy machines, you will be expected to master them all. And always remember, trust your machine.

Penn Clement, Weapons and Heavy Machinery Expert



1

## HAND HELD ARMS

Non-firearms such as baseball bats, brass knuckles, and trench knives belong to this category. These weapons are easy to conceal and can be used to dispose of enemies quietly.



2

## SMALL ARMS

Pistols, gun canes, and even grenades belong to this category. These items can be concealed easily but pack a big bang.



3

## HEAVY GUNS

When a little extra firepower is needed and concealment is no longer an option, look for rifles, machine guns, and mortars to help claim victory.



4

## HEAVY MACHINES

You don't know love until you've built a machine with your bare hands and ridden it into battle. There's nothing like trusting your machine to carry you home. Walking tanks, bombers, and military airships belong to this category.



5

## EXPERIMENTAL TECHNOLOGY

When the machine doesn't exist to do the job you want, invent it! Of course, when things go wrong, you're on your own. There is no limit to the power you can harness and no limit to how badly it might explode if inadequately built.

15¢

A DOYLE FLANNIGAN FICTION

# FLANNIGAN'S

## LAST CASE



BY PAUL ROMAN MARTINEZ

# FLANNIGAN'S LAST CASE

STORY AND ART BY  
PAUL ROMAN MARTINEZ

## Part I October Heat Wave

This time of year had no business being as hot as it was. Leaves were changing color outside the city, and there I was, with an electric fan blowing moisture from my face and causing it to run down my neck. If I had half a mind, I would've left town for a week and gone up North where the weather was doing what it was supposed to. Leaning forward, I loosened my tie, letting the cool air hit my chest.

"Flannigan!"

A loud voice woke me from my heat-induced cat nap, causing me to fall out of the creaky wooden office chair and land solidly on the dusty floor of the Lower Precinct.

"Heh heh heh, you should at least be pretending to work. The next one yelling might be the Chief."

Having known O'Boyle since the Academy, you'd think I'd know his voice from the Chief's. But O'Boyle was a large man with wide shoulders and a voice to match. He could break up a riot with a stern stare. He didn't have to pretend to be the Chief to knock me out of my seat.

**I stood up and brushed some of the dust from my trousers.  
"Real funny O'Boyle. You should take that act on the road."**

"Oh don't be a sour puss. I woke you up, didn't I? You looked like you needed some excitement around here."

"I was having a great dream. You were in it, and you were a million miles from here. Yeah, now that's a dream I wouldn't mind getting back to. So if you'll excuse me."

I leaned back in my chair, and the second my shoes touched the desk, the office door swung open so fast I felt a breeze pass through the room. I didn't get a chance to enjoy the change in the weather since it actually was the Chief that time. I threw my feet to the floor, and both O'Boyle and I stood up and gave a loud, "Chief!"

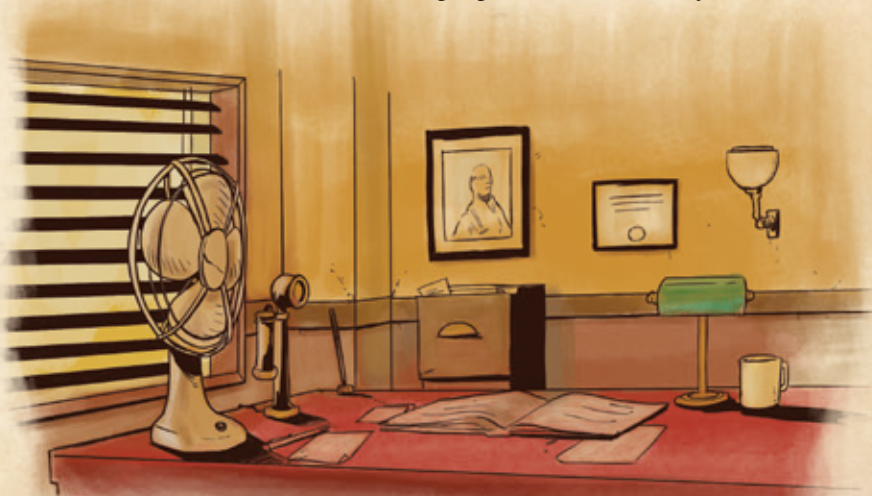
It was Captain Benniker, a man with the face of a retired pugilist. He always had a big, fat cigar hanging from his lower lip, and he liked to blow smoke in your face as the period to any big speech.

"Listen up," the Chief spoke slowly, letting the words fall out of his mouth. "I'm sending you to the South side. There's been another disappearance." He shoved some papers in O'Boyle's chest. "A fishmonger down at the docks has gone missing. His wife called it in this morning."

Great, another kidnapping, I thought. Another week of chasing our tails with no leads until we end up back here behind our desks. One of the big differences between O'Boyle and me is I kept that complaint to myself.

"Chief c'mon, you know that case is a dog. We ain't gonna hear word one from whoever is taking these people until they want us to hear something." O'Boyle took a step back as he said it and looked down at the case file, hoping to escape the Chief's gaze.

Taking a step toward him, the Chief looked him right in the eye. "Every case is a loser these days, O'Boyle. Shut down one bootlegger, three more spring up to replace him. Shut down a speakeasy and you find out it was where the mayor used to keep a love nest with his favorite dame. You can't win in this town. Meanwhile, we still get paid, which means you bums still



got a job to do! So hit the bricks you two, or tomorrow you can report to St. Mary's soup kitchen."

A thin cloud of grey smoke filled the room, which had already developed an orange glow from the evening sun. The Chief was gone before his smoke cleared. O'Boyle threw the case file down on his desk and walked toward the door, staring back at me from under the brim of his hat.

"Well, what are you waiting for? You want me to carry you down there?"

I grabbed my hat and slung my jacket over my shoulder as I followed him. "Actually, how 'bout I head home and take a cold bath, and you go down and talk to the fishmonger's wife, eh?"

**"Brother, if you weren't the brains of this operation, I'd slug you."**

We walked passed the clacking typewriters, took the stairs down two flights, and ended up on the hot concrete. There were people outside, but hardly anyone was moving. Anytime a rare breeze came through, everyone perked up for a second and then faded back into heat-weakened slumps. At least the sun would go down soon, I thought. It was bound to cool off a few degrees then.

## **Part II On the Docks**

We pulled up next to a grey and red bricked building that faced the docks. About half of the windows were boarded up. A light was on in a window on the third floor, and a dim bulb burned just past the open front door. This building was dying but didn't want to admit it. The bulb in the hallway flickered like an old man wheezing for life. O'Boyle killed the engine of the modified Model A, and it rumbled a few more times before finally going quiet.

"Flannigan, I ain't goin' in there! That's the kind of black hole cops don't come out of!"

"So what? You want I should go in and when they've used up their ammo you can come in and clean house?" We both stood in the street staring up at the building, waiting for it to welcome us in.

A voice came out of the darkness as if the run down brickwork had heard us. "You fellas lookin' fer me?"

Just to the left of the front door, below the window with the light on, a voice came from a slender, underfed woman with shabby, reddish-brown hair. Her once light-blue dress was so old and dirty that she blended in with the architecture.

**A saggy cigarette protruded from her face, which she removed with a pair of bony fingers each time she talked.**

She spoke again, holding in her last breath of smoke while she rushed through the sentence. "You wanna ask me about my husband, right?" She exhaled a cloud of smoke that was lost quickly in the night air and let out a string of coughs in time with the flickering hallway light.

"This must be the place then. And here I thought we pulled up to the Ritz on accident." O'Boyle walked around the car and started getting the details of her husband's disappearance.

She didn't know anything. O'Boyle even implied that maybe she wasn't so sad he was gone and maybe some insurance money was comforting her now. But there was no insurance policy. All she had were some old clothes to remember her husband by; the bank took everything else. Her only useful piece of information was that he had last been seen at the docks.

We got back into the car and headed for the docks. Driving past empty warehouses, I wished we could have promised the fishmonger's wife that we would find her husband. But I knew we wouldn't. It was a fatalistic dance we were all doing, but we still danced, because that's what civilized people do. Your neighbor starves to death, your nephew gets killed in some mob crossfire, your husband disappears, and you smoke a cigarette on your front steps pretending it's business as usual.

"Where's everybody at? Usually we'd see some people standing around trying to look innocent by now," I called out. I had been hoping the heat was keeping criminals off the streets, but part of me knew that wasn't true.

"There's an innocent looking fella. Let's ask him!" O'Boyle pointed to a man walking away from us with his coat collar pulled up and his brim

pulled down. O’Boyle turned the wheel and smashed down on the gas. The engine roared at the man. By the time the man spun around to see us, O’Boyle had already slammed on the breaks, and the both of us jumped out of the car with our guns drawn.

“Who are you and what are you doing here!” O’Boyle shouted quickly before the man could get his bearings. His eyes flew wide open—they were dark brown with a rim of bright red around the edge—and a toothpick he was chewing on fell from his unshaven face and landed on the ground. He stumbled back against the metal door of a warehouse and surprised himself when he heard the loud clang.

“I . . . I just came in.” The man was definitely caught out of sorts by O’Boyle’s driving.

“Spit it out man. What the hell are you doing here?” I tried to help him finish his thought.

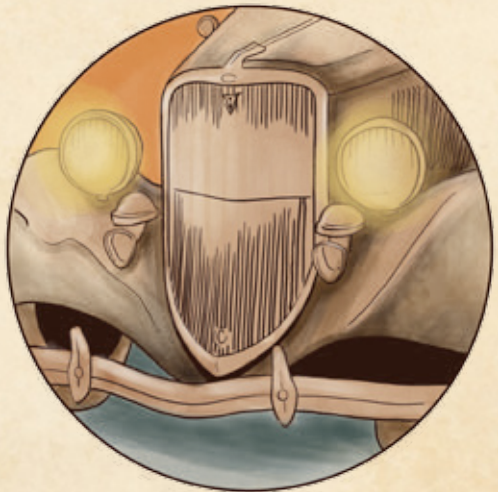
“I just came in from out of town. I heard there was work here on account of all the missin’ dock workers.”

“What missing dock workers?” O’Boyle obviously believed the man, because he began to holster his pistol.

“Look, I don’t know nuthin.” The man held his arm over his head to block the headlights; he must have seen that we were cops because all of a sudden he wasn’t quite so scared. “Alls I was told was they needed hands out here.”

“Why?” I barked at him. “Where’s everyone gone off to?!”

“I haven’t got a clue pal. They say they must be movin’ on to greener pastures. Ships come at night and take freight, but they never drop off. The old slobs must be leavin’ on those ships right? How do I know?!”



“How do you like that, Flannigan? This mop knew more than he knew, eh?” O’Boyle laughed and started to get back into the car.

“So can I get out of here or what?” The man asked, finally calmed down from his perceived brush with the hereafter.

“I don’t care what you do, just keep your nose clean or next time my brakes might not work so good.” O’Boyle casually threw out the threat without even looking back at the man as the car started again.

We kept driving down the docks, watching the out-of-towner scurry down a dark alley between two warehouses. O’Boyle looked out toward the sea. There were a few lights on the horizon, but no one was coming into shore.

“Ships loading up at night—must be Rum Row.” O’Boyle drove past a few more warehouses and empty slips before turning back onto the main road that ran along the docks.

“Picking up but never dropping off? And leaving with crew every time? That doesn’t sound like rum running to me. No one’s been gettin’ their booze lately. This town is going dry, and not by choice.”

“But that does explain the mystery of the disappearing salary.” O’Boyle opened the top couple buttons of his shirt and took a bright silver flask out of a secret pocket in his undershirt. “This stuff gets more expensive everyday.” He took a swig and shook his head wildly, then put it back carefully where he found it. “And with this bathtub stuff, there’s a fifty-fifty chance I’ll go blind!”

As we drove back to the office along the waterfront, I wondered where the fishmonger’s husband had gone off to. I held my head out of the window and closed my eyes, letting the warm ocean air wipe the sweat from my face. Had he and the other men just up and left their families to fend for themselves? Were they looking for better jobs someplace else? How were we supposed to find out? And why was it so damn hot?



## Part III

### Jimmy “No-Neck”

It was a few days later and a few degrees hotter when O’Boyle walked into the office and woke me up for the second time that week.

“Flannigan, they brought in some seriously connected guy. I’m going down to watch the fireworks. You comin’?”

“Huh, oh yeah, never let it be said that Doyle Flannigan missed a good gangster work-over.” I pulled myself together and followed him to the observation room.

We walked in and the show had already collected a few spectators. The detectives all had sweat-covered shirts in various stages of unbuttoned and

loosened ties. When I looked through the glass, I saw the suspect handcuffed to a table, taking deep breathes like a goldfish gasping for air.

“O’Boyle! That’s Jimmy ‘No-Neck.’ What’s he doing here?” I couldn’t believe they landed a fish that size, and had enough to question him on.

My partner looked back at me with a satisfied grin. “See, I told you it was worth wakin’ up for.”

“Yeah, yeah, but what’s the point? Jimmy’s no slouch. He’s got friends at the top.”

Detective Aikins looked back from his spot at the window. “Hey this is serious. The hooch has dried up and some foremen from the docks have gone missing. I don’t care who you know, someone’s got to start talking.”

O’Boyle put a hand over the spot where he kept his secret stash. “Totally dry?”

Aikins nodded back. "Totally dry."

"What about Mulligan's place?"

"Dry."

"And Pete's? Pete's always got somethin' tucked away for special occasions."

"Dry as a bone. There's more liquor at St. Michaels." Aikins and a couple other detectives chuckled at O'Boyle's desperation.

"I might have to start going to mass." O'Boyle was only half-joking.

"Alright, so it's a big deal. But why Jimmy? What makes him so special?" I put out my hand to quiet down O'Boyle.

**"Well, anytime you unload a full drum from a Thompson into the air in public in the middle of the day, you get special real quick."**

"Yeah, he should've waited 'till New Year's Eve!" One of the other detectives muttered, and the rest laughed and coughed through their lucky strikes.

"Why the hell would that crazy bastard do that?" I asked Aikins. But the way things were going, I wasn't actually that surprised. Missing people with no hint of a clue, no motive, no reason at all. July weather in October; no booze to make it all go down nice and smooth. It was a wonder O'Boyle wasn't on the other side of that glass.

"I don't know. He's gone nutso, or he's real sore at the docks for some reason."

"The docks?" O'Boyle finally finished his fantasy where he stole the communion wine from the Monsignor in the middle of church and drank the whole thing down.

"Yeah, they found him down there screamin' about who knows what with his finger on the trigger and an empty clip. They had to pry that thing from

his hands.”

Jimmy “No-Neck” sat down in his chair with two eyes staring about a mile in front of him. The chief walked in and held out a photograph not five inches from his head. His eyes took a few seconds to focus, and in that instant, his mouth slowly opened in time with his widening eyes. When they reached their limit, Jimmy began screaming at the top of his lungs while trying to pull himself out of the handcuffs attached to the table.

The Chief dropped the photograph on the table, and we could all see building #9 at the docks. Nothing else was in the picture, just a storage warehouse covered in dirt and grime like any other building down there. But there was Jimmy “No-Neck,” about to rip his arms off just to get away from the photo. Two uniformed officers ran in and slammed him to the table, trying to calm him down. Another two had to be called in before he finally slowed.

His scream turned into words as he mumbled through tears. “Don’t make me go back there. Don’t make me go back there.” He sobbed and covered his face in his bloody hands with four uniforms leaning on him.

**“Please don’t make me go back there.”**

I wasn’t afraid of whatever made Jimmy crumble; I was in shock. I couldn’t comprehend something so terrifying. Jimmy must have gotten ahold of some bad bathtub gin or spent too much time chasing the dragon in Chinatown. No part of me thought that there was actually something in that building we should fear.

The door to the observation room flew open as the Chief kicked it in.

“All of you, get armed and get down to that building.”

O’Boyle was his usual agreeable self. “Aww Chief, c’mon. This guy is not the most reliable witness. Ten bucks says we get down there--” The Chief hadn’t blinked since he opened the door, and O’Boyle realized he was probably pushing his luck.

“Don’t screw this up.” The chief walked out and lit a fresh cigar as he walked down the hallway, ignoring anyone in his way. Two people had to jump to keep from being stuck to the bottom of his shoe.

O'Boyle turned around to face us with a big smile on his face. "Alright boys, let's go get the big guns!"

## **Part IV**

### **Warehouse #9**

The symphony of the road told me we had arrived at the docks as the light buzz of gravel turned into the methodical thinking of wooden planks. I stared down at my Colt automatics—one in each hand. I had no idea what was in that warehouse, but I knew I needed my Colts with me.

Tires screeched as our solemn motorcade came to a halt. Men poured out of open doors—6 detectives and a few uniforms. There were plenty of shotguns, Thompsons, and angry, focused faces to go around. It was some party we had there. O'Boyle yelled out to start the proceedings. The warehouse had a large loading door that looked rusted shut. To the left was a smaller, reddish door flanked by two windows so filthy we could barely make out the faint orange light flickering inside.

**"You guys take the back, we'll blast through the front, and by the time they start scrambling for an exit, you mokes will have 'em cornered. Got it?"**

Detective Aikin nodded and half the group headed around the building with him on the waterside past half open crates and piles of well worn rope. There were very few lights left shining on the docks. The men running around back quickly turned into shadows before my eyes. This close to the water, we should have felt a cool, Fall breeze, but the air was humid and smelled of dead fish. I could taste warm saltwater on my lips.

"Let's go!" O'Boyle primed his shotgun and ran toward the front entry. He threw his body up against the wall near the small, reddish door. Our group followed, and the biggest uniform in the group kicked the door in with one strong kick. He ran in like he was an All-American in college, and I followed. Inside, the faint orange light didn't get much brighter. The smell of dead fish punched me in the face. I heard the men cough and gag as they scrambled to get used to the stench. Between silhouettes of large crates and chains hanging from the ceiling, I could make out the direction the light was coming from.

We pushed through the smell and made our way to the strange orange glow at the center of the room. Along with the glow and the smell came a faint hum. Getting closer to the source, I could make out figures running back and forth, and the hum sounded slightly louder. Their movements caused the glow to dim and then brighten again. It now pulsated like a heart, keeping the warehouse alive. I steadied my pistols and aimed at head level, hoping to hit anyone passing by. The hum, the smell, the heat, and the darkness all combined to make me feel like I had just chugged four fingers of bourbon. I was still trying to comprehend the scene in front of me when the All-American with the shotgun let a round fly into the ceiling.



O’Boyle stood to the side of him and yelled into the mass of moving bodies. “Everybody get down on the ground or the lead starts flying!”

The shapes kept their mad dance moving, circling around a figure in the center that was standing over the source of the orange glow. The hum changed; it grew louder and it’s cadence reminded me of an ancient religious chant. It was then that I noticed figures in the rafters of the warehouse. The other men must have noticed at the same time, because all heads turned upward, gazing wide-mouthed at bodies jumping from beam to beam.

**“What in God’s name are they doing?” O’Boyle yelled to the group, knowing we didn’t have a damn clue.**

The All-American struggled to find his words. “What do we do sir? What do we do?”

“Hold it together, kid! Keep your gun steady!” I tried to listen to my own words as my pistols began to shake.

The musical din grew louder and louder.

“What the hell is this?” A detective called out.

A scream started high in the atmosphere of the warehouse and began descending toward us. The hum of the figures in the shadows grew louder and their terrifying song came at us from all directions.

The All-American raised his shotgun and aimed at the sound.

“Nooooooooo!”

The scream swooped down and ignored the shotgun blast. The ancient song was reaching it’s crescendo. I looked to my right and saw the headless body of the uniformed officer. His body crumbled to the ground at the knees and fell forward. His shotgun slid across the warehouse floor. The song now fell apart. There was no rhythm, no more beat, only bullets exploding randomly, hitting nothing, and screams coming from the shadows.

“What are they--”

“NO, get away fro--”

“Heeeelllllll--”

Men’s cries for help were cut off mid-syllable. I didn’t fire a single shot—you can’t hit a shadow with a bullet, and you can’t shoot a sound, so I had no target. Backing up with bodies falling around me, a door opened across the warehouse.

“No, the other men! No, stay back! Aikin, get out of here!” I called out, but my voice was smothered by blood-gurgling death screams.

The other officers’ arrival was my gift. The shapes next to me flew into the air and descended again on the other side. I don’t know if my eyes were now adjusted to the light or my mind had become adjusted to the horrors in the warehouse. I could clearly make out the creatures. As they passed over the orange light, the veins of winged membranes glowed like roadmaps. The clarity unglued my feet, and I turned to run.

I didn’t call out because there was no one left to hear; I didn’t try to save my fellow officers because there were none left alive. I was sure of it. I stumbled toward the front door, holstering my pistols. Bullets had no effect

on the creatures, and they would have only slowed me down. A hand or some other appendage grazed my back as I slid through the door, closing it behind me. The once unseasonably warm sea air now washed over my sweat covered face like a glass of cold water. My eyes flew open, and my mind became clear as the effects of that terrifying, ancient chant wore off.

The car nearest to me would have to work. I opened the door and turned the wheel toward the warehouse, pushing the car forward. The soles of my shoes slipped on the gravel and wood of the dock, but somehow the car arrived at its final resting place. With one hand I removed my tie and with the other I removed the gas cap. My eyes never left the front door, but nothing came out. I reached for my lighter and heard a few scattered faint screams. With one end of the tie in flames and the other end deep in the gasoline tank, I made my retreat. I walked backwards toward one of the other sedans across from the hellish building.

I aimed my Colts at the front door and took my place behind the car, watching the door for any movement. To the right, my old tie slowly burned, and I waited for the finale. I didn't hear anymore screams. The car wrenched with a sound signifying its dying breath, and then exploded in a burst of flames. I still didn't blink.

**The flames climbed up the side of the building. The group of crates at the corner burst, sending shattered splinters of flaming wood through the air. Heat from the fire began to warm my guns, and sweat trickled off my eyebrow, landing on my cheek. But I didn't blink.**

My eyes were married to that door as the roof burst into flames. It only took a couple of minutes for the center to fall through, sending a pillar of flames and embers five stories into the warm Autumn air. Pieces of metal and glass landed on the ground like a hot rain. Small pieces landed on me, burning through my clothes and leaving small burn marks on my skin. I didn't blink.

I stared between my pistols, watching the door. The fire began to subside. I was about to give my eyes a rest when the door flew open, pouring grey smoke out onto the docks. All I could see inside were glowing dots; they could have been eyes or burning embers; I couldn't tell. Then a flaming shape parted the smoke, running with arms wide open out into the night and screaming in terror. The flaming creature ran in a straight line, uniting with the bullets of my burning hot pistols, and fell to the ground in a twitching

heap.

The building crumbled in on itself, and that section of the dock started to sink into the bay, dragging a couple of flaming police sedans down with it. I walked around the car with both guns aimed at the charred body. I blinked. When I opened my eyes, I could see what used to be O'Boyle staring up at me. His eyes were wide open.

*"O'Boyle, I think I got 'em pal. I think I got 'em all." He couldn't hear me.*

I closed O'Boyle's eyes and knelt next to him. His face was blackened and scarred, but I could still tell it was him. I looked down at his body and could see that his hands were no longer strictly human. I picked one up and held it in my hand. It was the claw of some monster. They were changing him! Police sirens whined in the distance, coming closer with every breath. I couldn't let them see O'Boyle that way; they wouldn't understand or believe. O'Boyle wouldn't have wanted to be remembered like that. His mother would have died of shock upon hearing the news.

I picked up his charred, half-human body and carried him to the edge of the flaming dock. I slipped him into the boiling black water, watching his lifeless body mix with the flaming debris. Police sedans screeched to a halt at my back, and I began to wonder how I would explain what had just happened. I looked at my hands—they were bright pink from holding hot metal guns. I closed my eyes and felt a cool breeze coming in from the sea. It was a few weeks late, but I think Fall had finally arrived.

\* \* \*

I told one person the truth about warehouse #9—the Chief. He said if I told anyone else the story, he would personally escort me to the West wing of the asylum where they keep the most disturbed patients. So, I never told anyone ever again. But I couldn't go back. The official story involved some muscle from New York trying to take over the local hootch business. The public seemed to buy it, because everything soon went back to normal.

But I couldn't go back. I couldn't go back to the murders and the heroin addicts, not after what I had seen. That was my last case as a police detective. I would never wear the badge again. I was done. I had real investigating to do. What were those things in the warehouse; where did



they come from; and where did they go? They were crimes against nature, against humanity, against human existence. I had seen true evil. I had stood in hell with demons around me and survived. I knew I had to make it up to O'Boyle by hunting down evil in whatever dark corner it was hiding. Now that I knew the real dangers lurking in the world, I would never be the same. With my Colt automatics at my side, my rosary, and a few occult tricks I picked up on the way, **I would make them all pay.**



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# THE ARRESTS ARE EXPECTED IN KIDNAP CASE

(Continued from Page One)

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**NEW ANGLE INJECTED  
IN MYSTERIOUS DEATH  
OF BIRMINGHAM GIRL**  
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Against Princ

# BAD DAY AT RED ROCK

*STARRING*

MAJOR VERA BRECHT – 19XX ARMORED DIVISION

*STORY AND ART BY*  
PAUL ROMAN MARTINEZ

“Ok boss, I’m cutting the cord!” Vera called out on the radio while pulling a lever near the side of her command position. On the other end, her voice was booming. She was so used to yelling over the roar of engines that Penn probably could have heard her without the aid of the short range radio.

The sound of latches opening was immediately followed by whistling air and the feeling of being trapped in an out-of-control elevator. After pulling a cord buried in a series of controls above her head, Vera’s body was jerked around, and the descent instantly slowed. Above the rocky desert, miles from civilization, the VM-10 slowly fell to earth with the aid of three large, red parachutes. It was stocked with plenty of water and fuel but only the small amount of ammunition required to test the 45 mm cannon and the 75 mm howitzer in the desert heat.

Penn Clement’s voice came through the radio of the olive green colored VM-10. “We’ll be taking off now. Don’t worry, this isn’t a race. We just want to see how the VM likes the weather. If you make it through Red Rock, drinks are on me!”

Vera reached forward and pressed a button on the speaker in front of her to talk back to the airship Carpathian. “Don’t worry, Penn. I’m hitting the ground in tank mode so I can get a rolling start. I’ll be waiting for you on the other side!”

Penn’s voice came back mixed with a small bit of static. “Ha ha, I’d pay to see that, Major. We’re crossing over the mountains and we’ll be out of radio range in a few seconds. It’s your last chance to ask for some company!”

Vera laughed, “Penn, if I wanted company, I would have brought Togo. Besides, this is as much an endurance test for the VM as it is for me! I can handle my business. Two guys in here with me would just stink up the joint.”

A stream of static returned on the speaker. Vera looked through the viewport at the front of the tank and could make out the airship disappearing over the horizon with all engines buzzing.

“Alright baby, let’s see how you handle with a crew of one!” Vera turned several switches at the base of her chair, and the engine roared to life.

**“I hear all cylinders firing, girl. You’re playing my song!”**

Vera grabbed a shaft to the left of her chair and put the tank into gear. Tank treads began to spin, causing the falling vehicle to sway in the air. The breeze whistling into the tank from the small horizontal view port was deceiving, since the temperature on the valley floor was north of a hundred degrees.

“Wooo! I’m ready, girl. Let’s do it!” Vera yelled above the sound of the engine firing. The tank met with the ground instantly, tearing off Eastward out of the canyon. Dust and rocks flew through the air, and the parachutes broke free and floated softly to the desert floor.



From the outside, the landing looked perfect and peaceful in the empty canyon. Inside, Vera struggled to keep the machine on course. Her seat wanted to throw her out of the tank. Every knob, dial, and switch vibrated and shook until a few glass coverings cracked and a couple rivets were sent flying through the cabin, clanging off the walls.

“Whoa girl, keep it together! If we can’t handle this landing, how are we going to get dropped behind enemy lines?!”

Vera’s hands flew through a series of dials and gauges, adjusting pressures and speeds until finally the experimental armored vehicle began to hum with more predictable clanks and a manageable vibration.

“That’s more like it. Just get me to the other side and we’ll be fine. You’re the first one to make it to desert testing. I know it’s hot, but if you make it out in one piece, the army will order me a whole brigade full of VMs! Then the 19XX will have the most versatile armored division in the world!” Vera

was picturing the possibilities when a loud boom destroyed the warm desert peace.

“Hey, what was that? A backfire? I thought we had an understanding, girl!” Vera lifted up her goggles and squinted to get a better look at the gauges that surrounded her. She sat up and peered through the main viewport, seeing only cracked desert floor and walls of red rock on either side for miles.

A second boom sounded with a corresponding explosion that sent her tank off course and threw her back against the driver’s seat.

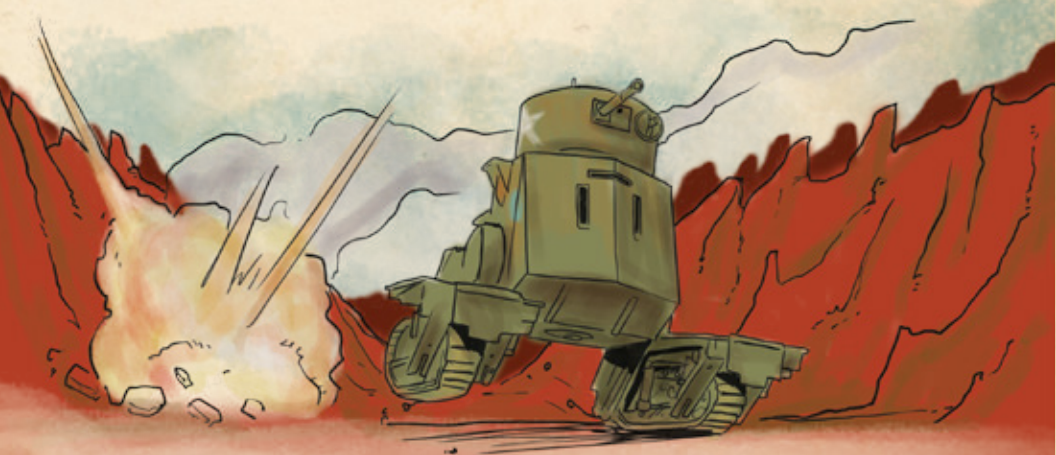
“Hey, what the heck is going on here?! This ain’t a live fire drill!” Vera righted the tank and reached for the periscope as her speed decreased.

Scanning the desert floor, she saw nothing but cracked earth. Keeping the tank moving became more difficult as she began to search the canyon walls. If it wasn’t for the small plume of smoke rising from a diesel engine, Vera would have missed it. Standing, hidden in the red rock of the canyon walls, was a mirror image of her own experimental tank, but this one was painted reddish-brown.

“What the?!” Vera felt like she had just seen a ghost. Her reflexes took over, and she steered her tank to the opposite canyon wall.

“There’s no cover here! I’m a sitting duck!” Vera reached for the radio, knowing no one would hear her, but her instincts and training told her she needed to try.

“This is VM-10 to the Airship Carpathian. Come in! Penn, if you can hear me, I’ve got myself in a pickle over here!”



Another boom echoed in the canyon, sending tremors through the VM-10.

“I know this is going to sound crazy, but there’s another VM here, and it’s firing at me! If you guys were planning some kind of surprise, now’s the time to tell me! Whoa, here we go. Bingo!”

At the base of the canyon wall, an outcropping of fallen red boulders formed a small hiding place—the perfect temporary cover. Vera decided to kill the engine in an attempt to regain the element of surprise. Throwing the radio down, she reached for the periscope and searched for her mysterious assailant.

“Let’s see, you look just like me, but with a different coat of paint.” The reddish-brown VM was walking down the slope of the opposite canyon wall. “Walking mode down such a steep incline—your driver must know how to handle himself.”

Vera analyzed every movement of the vehicle making its way to the canyon floor. “Wait, I recognize those struts! VM-5! But that prototype was scrapped after the expedition to the South Pole. When we built the VM-6, the lower struts were internalized in the legs. Where did you come from little buddy? You were supposed to be busted down for parts. Someone has been a bad boy, haven’t they?”

**The VM-5 touched down on the valley floor, and Vera noticed a symbol painted on the side of the turret. A white skull with two trench knives stared back at her before the turret began to rotate.**

“Black Faun,” Vera whispered to herself. She bit her lower lip and dove for the radio. “Penn, this is big! This tank has Black Faun markings! Penn!” She ran her left hand through her greasy blonde hair and tried to decide what to do next.

A shot rang out, making contact with Vera’s hiding place. From inside the VM-10, it sounded as if an entire mountain had exploded and was now pouring rubble over her vehicle. Jumping back into the driver’s seat, Vera complained to herself: “You had to come out alone, didn’t you! Dad, you were right. I don’t know when to ask for help. If I had a crew, I could lay down some parting shots on the way to a better hiding spot. But no, I thought it would be fun to run the Red Rock gap by myself!”

Vera started the engine and opened the throttle wide. It was becoming clear

that the driver of the VM-5 was also alone. “Why are you taking so long to fire, little buddy? You have the secondary howitzer and two Brownings in your belly, but you’re only using the big gun. Very interesting.”

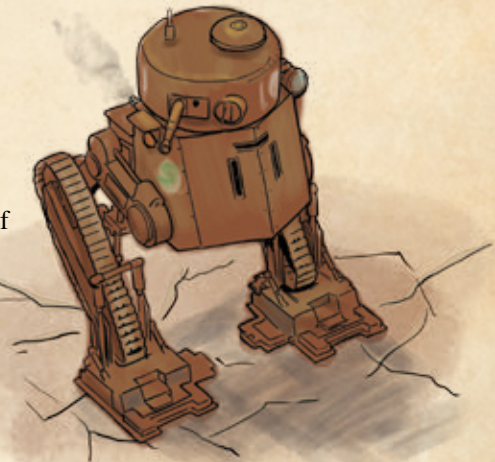
Vera and the VM-10 drove diagonally across the valley floor. Another shell exploded 40 yards in front of her. The VM-10 immediately turned right and headed straight down the middle of the valley. From the timing between the previous shots, Vera knew she had a few seconds to respond. Grabbing a small tool bag, she positioned it to hold the throttle to the floor. Ripping off her belt, Vera kept one eye out for large rocks while she tied the steering down.

“Alright, time to play a little offensive defense. Knute Rockne would be proud!”

Jumping over the driver’s seat, Vera climbed up into the main turret and spun it 180 degrees. “Don’t let me down, girl!” Vera loaded a shell in the main gun, took a quick guess at her speed, and fired. With no one at the controls, the force of the blast caused her belt to break loose from the steering levers, and the tank began to zig and zag wildly. Vera jumped back into the lower cabin, fighting to regain control. Turning the tank back toward the canyon wall, Vera scanned the canyon sides for someplace to find cover. “Alright, let’s hope that bought me a few seconds, and let’s hope I brought enough ammo.”

Vera’s shell had exploded well in front of the VM-5, but the dust it kicked up caused the reddish tank to pause. The hull of the VM-5 walking tank lowered itself and began to convert to rolling mode. At the same time, Vera did the opposite. Upon reaching the steep canyon walls, Vera began the process of converting to walking mode.

She maneuvered her tank up the slope through red pillars of rock, looking for a place to safely return fire. The VM-10 walked in between tall red rocks, crushing pebbles under its feet and belching small puffs of grey smoke with each step. A burst of static interrupted the rhythmic sound of the legs that moved the tank slowly up the canyon wall.



“Penn is that you?! Hold on pal, I’ll get back to you as soon as I can.”

Unable to reach the radio, Vera continued to blaze a trail through the red gravel.

The VM-10 walked into a space partially shaded by red columns of stone. The tank's olive green coat was not a perfect camouflage, but it provided just enough cover in the dusty valley to allow Vera time to aim at her target. Vera climbed back into the turret and sighted the VM-5 through the view port. She threw off her goggles and welcomed the slight drop in temperature the shade brought.

“Ok little buddy, let's see if we can't slow you down.” The reddish-brown tank was almost fully in tank mode. Vera loaded another shell into the main gun and heard more static on the radio. Vera hung down from the turret and reached for the radio, pulling on the mouthpiece. Drops of sweat fell from her face and landed on her chest; she reached for a canteen to get a quick drink, not knowing when she would have another chance. Her tank top was already soaking wet, and she longed to drive the tank at full speed just to feel the breeze on her shoulders and neck.

“Penn, is that you?! Penn?” Vera spoke into the radio, never removing her eyes from the enemy.

Static came back, and then the radio went quiet. She could hear the hum of an engine matching hers on the other side of the canyon.

“Penn?”

After a moment of silence, an unexpected voice returned her call.

“Vera.”

“Who is this? This isn't Penn!”

“Vera Brecht.” The voice spoke calmly and slowly in a Germanic accent. “Vera, I'm sorry I disturbed your walkabout, but I convinced the council that this was the best way to test our little stolen machine.”

“Stolen?” Vera was momentarily surprised by the voice on the other side of the radio and brushed against the main gun, which was already blazing hot. The searing heat on her arm caused her to jump backward, making her take her eyes off the VM-5. “Obviously, the Black Faun couldn't have figured out this design on their own!”

The sound of the stolen engine roared louder as the man spoke again. It was the sound of the tank driving forward. Vera dropped the radio and scrambled back to her main gun while listening to the voice from the other tank.

“Don’t be a sore loser, Vera. I am here now with my own Versatile Mechanized Tank, and that’s all that matters.”

Looking through the viewport, Vera saw the desert sun reflecting off the VM-5, which was already driving toward her across the valley floor. Vera fired the main gun, causing her standing tank to shake violently. The boom was amplified by the rocks she was using for cover, and the sound made her ears ring. The shell landed harmlessly behind the reddish-brown tank, which was now moving at full speed. Vera grabbed another shell to load up the howitzer. A quick glance at the ammunition reminded her that she wasn’t traveling with a full load—she would have to make each shot count.

“We’ve never met, but my name is Benno Fiala.”

“Benno Fiala? Where have I heard that name?” Vera tried to remember as she aimed, making sure to take a large lead on the speeding tank. “If I can’t hit it, at least I can kick up some dirt and slow it down.”

“Yes, that’s right. Benno Fiala, Austria-Hungarian ace. Hero of the Lands of the Crown of Saint Stephen. Owner of over 70 aerial victories.”

The howitzer blasted angrily from the turret of the olive green VM-10. Its shell exploded in front of the target, close enough to send the tank on a wavy path, running over large boulders it normally would have avoided. The driver was obviously trying to regain control.



Vera used her momentary advantage to reload both guns while Benno talked. “I conquered the skies, Vera. But when the war ended, I lost my country. I became a Ronin looking for a master.”

Vera grabbed for her radio as Benno reached the foot of the slope parallel to her position. “For piston’s sake, Benno, I’ve never heard of you, and no one cares that you don’t have a



place to hang your hat!”

“But that’s just it. I am here to make a name for myself on the ground. I was a king in the sky! I am here to become the king of mechanized armor. It is the next frontier. And the Order of the Black Faun has given me that chance.” Benno’s tank rotated and moved up the slope just enough for him to angle his next shot. Vera jumped back into the driver’s seat to race for better cover.

“Ok, did he load up his gun before he rolled, or is he loading it now?” Vera rushed her tank to bigger rocks and waited for the sound of cannon fire. She braced herself for the impact. After counting off four seconds, she heard the boom.

The shot landed above her on the canyon slope and sent debris sliding down around the feet of her walking tank. The gravel falling on the tank’s hull sounded like hot metal rain.

“You missed, Benno! No wonder Austria-Hungary lost the war!”

Vera threw the radio down and climbed back into the turret. In the VM-5, Benno was loading both his guns. Neither tank had the crew they required or else all their guns would be firing in sequence to maintain a constant barrage. The two drivers raced to load their guns first. With his tank sitting still, no air was coming through the cabin, and Benno found himself wiping sweat out of his eyes while trying to load his guns. The heat from the engine and the guns was causing him to soak through his white shirt. Benno rolled up his sleeves and threw off his suspenders to alleviate the feeling of constriction that is so common in tanks.

**Vera rotated her turret to Benno’s position as he finished loading. She wiped her own sweat from her brow with a forearm and fired her main gun.**

A direct hit—it destroyed the VM-5’s right tank tread, sending pieces of metal flying. The shrapnel from the shattered tread scattered in all directions, lodging a few pieces into the cabin of the VM-5. Benno was thrown against the back of his turret, hitting his head on the hot metal hull. He quickly jumped to his main gun and aimed it directly at the legs of the VM-10.

Vera moved to the howitzer, which was still loaded, and prepared to fire. As she engaged, Benno fired from his main gun. The debris around Vera’s legs turned into rocky marbles and threw the VM-10 backwards under the

force of her own howitzer blast. Her shot completely missed its mark, but the jerking motion may have saved her life. Instead of landing directly in the weak spot where the turret connects to the body, Benno Fiala's shot had landed behind Vera on the slope and sent more rocky debris tumbling down.

Vera landed hard on the unused ammunition at the back of the turret as the VM-10 slammed to Earth. She could still hear Benno over the radio. "Destroying the great Vera Brecht in one-on-one combat in the field of battle? Everyone in the sky and on land will know the name of Benno Fiala! Last son of the Austria-Hungarian Empire!"

Vera could hear the sounds of gears and hydraulics. Benno was moving back into walking mode. There was no time to maneuver into a standing or rolling position; Vera had to decide what to do, and fast. She looked around the tank and pushed on the top hatch. It wouldn't budge—a pile of rock had built up on the other side. The VM-10 was now a hot, metal coffin. She knew she couldn't get a shot off from this angle. Her eyes scanned the inside of her tank, looking for anything she could use to her advantage.

Benno sat in the driver's seat, walking up the hill toward Vera. Sweat mixed with blood from a small, fresh cut on the side of his head and dripped onto his already soaked shirt. He had undone his top three buttons to allow air in. A large tattoo of the crest of the Austria-Hungary Empire filled his upper-chest. He smiled, knowing his victory was imminent. A single gold tooth sparkled in his mouth. "Vera, I know you are still alive in there. I want you to know I am going to launch the next shot directly into your face. The only thing more rewarding would be looking into your eyes and driving a knife into your gut."

The control panel for the turret electronics came off easily. Too easily, Vera thought. She would have to fix that if she ever got back to base. Vera built every prototype with her own bare hands, from VM-01 to VM-10. She knew exactly what to look for. She reached into the box and pulled out some wires. Vera talked to herself while ripping through the guts of the VM-10. "I don't know what gets me most, that I'm going to die, or that some angry ace I've never heard of is going to be the one to punch my ticket."

**She heard Benno over the radio again. "I suppose I can get my can opener and pry your lifeless body from the wreckage to see the final look on your face when you are killed by your own creation."**

Within minutes, a broken fuel line was filling the lower cockpit with gas, almost covering the pile of leftover ammunition Vera had stacked at the



bottom. From the cockpit, she could see Benno stomping slowly toward her as she held a severed electrified cable above the fluid. Sweat dripped into her eyes and burned, but she couldn't blink. She had to wait until he was at the perfect distance to ignite the gas.

Vera thought of her famous father, the engineer. She had learned everything about engines by watching him in his shop, but she had never asked for help. She knew, as a girl, she would always have to work twice as hard as any man, and so she had always been determined to figure things out for herself.

"I know you said being so stubborn would be the death of me, Dad, but I promise, if I make it out of here, I won't get myself in a spot like this again. I promise, Dad." Tears mixed with the sweat in her eyes and they no longer burned. She wasn't crying because of the cannon approaching her, she cried because her father was right, and she hated when he was right. And then she laughed, because she knew it was a promise she couldn't keep.

Vera shook the tears away and refocused, noticing that Benno was only a few steps away. "Just a little closer, Benno. Just a little closer."

Benno took his last step and stopped at the feet of the olive green walking tank. "Vera, when I stole pieces of this tank from the scrap heap, I could

only dream that someday I would be standing here over you, ready to deliver you to the hereafter. Your exploits in armor are well documented, and now you will be a footnote in my biography.”

“Come on Vera, just do it!” She pleaded with herself, summoning the courage to blow up her tank. Her hand lowered the live wire closer to the gas filled cabin below. She gritted her teeth, and her hand shook as she prepared to plunge the wire into the fuel, blowing up all the unused ammunition, both tanks, and a small part of Red Rock in the process. “Come on Vera, come on!” Vera looked up and through the viewport of the VM-5. She could make out Benno’s gold tooth shining in the darkness.

“Goodbye, Vera Brecht. Benno Fiala is the new armored king.” Benno moved to the main gun and stared down at the VM-10 through the view port.

“It’s a shame I won’t be able to rebuild your new model,” Benno spoke to himself, “but completely destroying you will sound better when I tell this story.”

Benno moved to fire, but the sound of engines gave him pause. Large aircraft engines, at least six of them, grew increasingly louder. “No, not yet!” Benno cried out, knowing exactly what was approaching.

Vera heard the sound too. It was coming in much too fast to be the Carpathian. She peered through the view port near the main gun, trying to make out the noise. She saw a giant grey blur block out the sun and pass out of sight; a long metal cord dangled behind, catching the VM-5’s loading hooks.

**Benno jumped from his gun to the radio. “Don’t do this! Don’t ruin this moment for me!”**

No sound came from the other side. “Do you hear me?! Let me finish this!”

With a zip, the cable tightened, and the VM-5 was pulled into the sky.

“No, what are you doing?! I almost had my trophy! My white whale!”

A voice came over the radio. “Benno, the council doesn’t care about your trophy. Your orders were to test the VM-5 under battle conditions and engage the enemy. You’ve done that. You’ve earned your battalion.”

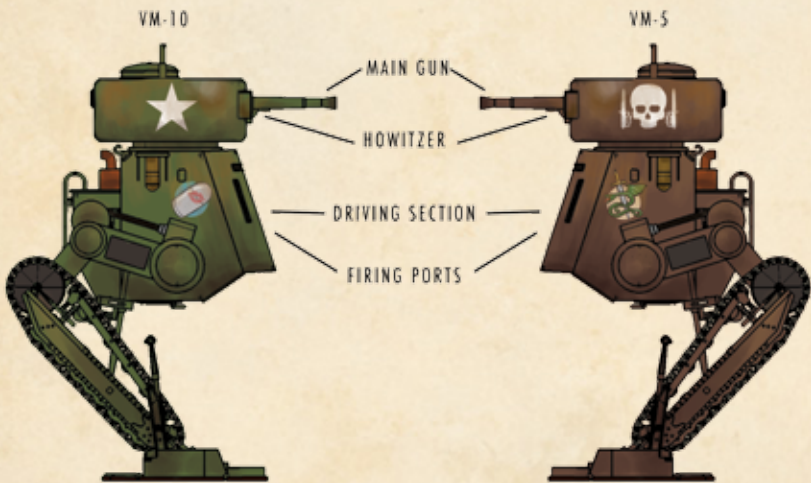
Vera couldn’t believe it. As quickly as the fight had started, it was over.

Benno cried out through the radio in frustration. As the airplane carried him over the mountains, his screams turned to static. The giant, six-engine craft looked to Vera like a steel angel passing over the red cliffs of the valley.

“Did you hear that, Dad?! I’m going to live!” Vera yelled through the tears and sweat, laughing at her good fortune. “As long as I don’t let this cable touch that fuel. I’d better find a safe place for this wire.”

Vera realized that she had made a new enemy, and that the next time she saw him, Benno Fiala would have a battalion of walking tanks or some other armor behind him. But she would make sure she did as well, and that she would have the help of her crew to keep all her guns firing.

“Penn, it looks like drinks are on me. Now come back and pick me up!” Vera laid back and laughed, smelling of fuel, grease, and sweat, waiting for the Carpathian to return for her.



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THE END?

THE ADVENTURES OF THE 19XX

-BOOK TWO-

MONTEZUMA 1934

