

SECRET FILES

OF
THE 19XX
VOLUME THREE



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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the third installment of the Secret Files. In these pages are the stories behind the stories. It should now be apparent to anyone reading the Adventures of the 19XX that the scope of our world is too large to fit into any graphic novel. To handle the secrets, the legends, the details that are begging to be told, I've created this series: The Secret Files of the 19XX. So set your calendar to 1936, and get prepared to take a diesel powered, high octane ride filled with machines, magic, and the larger than life heroes of the 19XX.

Paul Roman Martinez
Creator

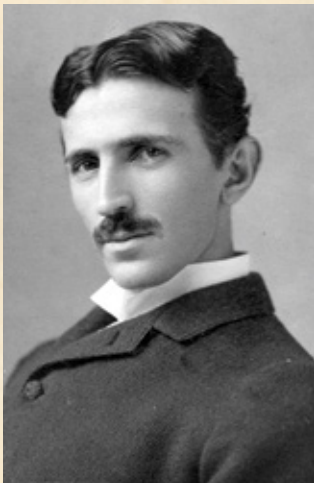


STEAM VS. DIESEL

The Adventures of the 19XX takes place in an alternate history version of the 1930s very much rooted in real inventions and people of the time. Sometimes this genre is called Dieselpunk. Just like the much more well known Steampunk genre, Dieselpunk writers seek to bring out some lesser-known, interesting ideas from the period and turn

them into something greater than the sum of their parts. But what are some of those parts? What is the difference between Steampunk and Dieselpunk? The Dieselpunk era runs from the early 1900s to the end of the second World War and the Steampunk era is roughly the second half of the 1800s. Here I lay out just a few more small differences. There are, of course, many more, but if you're new to both time periods, you can consider this a cheat sheet of sorts!

STEAM



Defining Historical Figures

Queen Victoria is an important figure in Victorian-age science fiction, but probably the single most important person in Steampunk is Nikola Tesla. He had several inventions that literally changed the world, and the schematics and ideas he left unfinished could have revolutionized the world even further. His work with alternating currents became the foundation for our modern system of delivering electricity. It is the real world work of Tesla that helps drive a lot of the speculative technology in Steampunk fiction. In the age of steam, electricity was the future, and Tesla was electricity.

Nikola Tesla, 1856-1943

Milestones: AC Electric Generator, Wireless Electricity, X-Rays, Radio Control Systems, Wardencliff Tower

Literature

Some of the best Steampunk literature was being written in the steam era by authors who were looking to the future and outside of the accepted reality and constraints of technology. Writers like Jules Verne and Arthur Conan Doyle were creating stories about hidden lands with long-extinct animals or voyages

to distant, unreachable corners of the world, or even outside of our world into outer space. These creators set the foundation for genre fiction set in the Victorian era that still captures the imagination today.

Jules Verne, 1828-1905

Milestones: Journey to the Center of the Earth, Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea, From Earth to the Moon

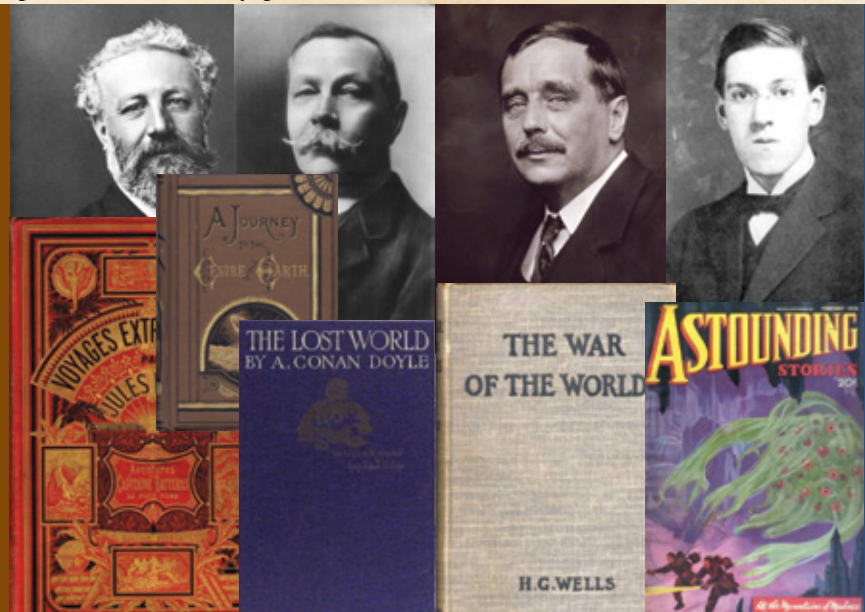
Arthur Conan Doyle, 1859-1930

Milestones: Sherlock Holmes, The Lost World

Film & Radio

The beginnings of film and radio sprouted during the steam era. Inspired by the work of Jules Verne and other writers, "A Trip to the Moon" was one of the earliest films to be produced. Even during the primitive days of mass media, Steampunk was captivating audiences with visions of what was possible on the outer edge of available technology.

Milestones: 1902—A Trip to the Moon, Directed by Georges Méliès



DIESEL

Defining Historical Figures

The diesel age took place during an explosion of technology and innovation that stretched across two world wars, and world-changing figures were not hard to come by. But one man exemplifies the "Anything is Possible" attitude of Dieselpunk more than anyone else, and that is Howard R. Hughes. Using his fortune in oil money, Hughes pushed the limits as a Hollywood director, record breaking aviator, innovative airplane designer, and much more. His exploits are legendary, and his influence in the 1930s and 40s is unbelievable. Howard Hughes is Dieselpunk.

Howard Hughes, 1905-1970

Milestones: Hell's Angels (film), H-1 Racer, H-4 Hercules, RKO pictures, Airspeed Record Breaker for Transcontinental and Transworld Flights

Literature

Science fiction visions of an advanced future became more plentiful in the diesel era. Magazines like Popular Mechanics featured wild concepts for inventions that would never exist, except in literature. H.G. Wells used some of these inventions to craft amazing stories

involving technology. H.P. Lovecraft pushed the world of supernatural fiction forward with mobsters firing Tommy guns on mutated hill people or arctic expeditions gone terrifyingly wrong. These stories reflect the real world expeditions going on at the time, thanks to advancement of air travel leading to exploration to further and further undiscovered parts of the globe.

H.G. Wells, 1866-1946

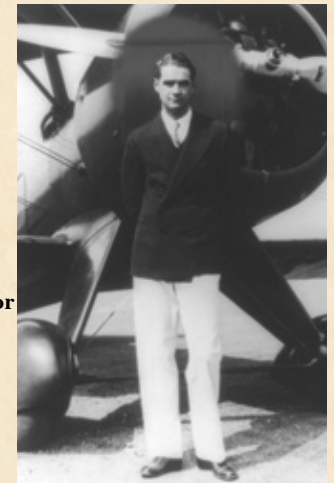
Milestones: War of the Worlds, The Time Machine, The Invisible Man

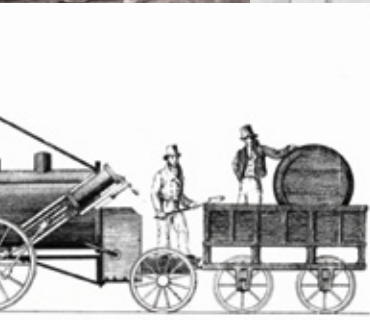
H.P. Lovecraft: 1890-1937

Milestones: The Call of Cthulhu, Mountains of Madness, Herbert West—Reanimator

Film & Radio

Orson Welles made America believe a Martian invasion was happening when his radio broadcast of War of the Worlds went out to millions of homes in the style of a news broadcast. Later he would go on to redefine film in a way that would not be appreciated until decades after his classic film, Citizen Kane, was released. In Germany, experimental films like Fritz Lang's Metropolis





Women's Fashion

The style of women's clothing changed drastically over the course of the hundred years that was the 19th century, but for those of us used to clothing styles changing every ten years, the differences might be imperceptible. It is safe to say that dresses in the steam age were long, augmented by many layers of undergarments, including tightly-bound shaping corsets, and often homemade using patterns imported from Europe. The biggest change was the shift away from bell-shaped dresses to the flat front and full back look using an undergarment support system called a bustle. Along with the bustle, leg of mutton sleeves with large, puffy shoulders and upper arms that tapered significantly at the forearm were popular in the late 1890s.

Men's Fashion

For both men and women, clothing became sleeker and more active. Men's clothing in the late 1900s featured collars turned over neckties, tall top hats, bowler hats, and floppy bow ties. Collars on shirts were very stiff and came separately from the shirt so they could be laundered differently. Collars were worn high and tight, meaning they would become soiled quickly. Men's overcoats were long and worn almost to the knee. Pointed beards and moustaches were also very popular accessories, along with pocket watches, which were almost mandatory for anyone who could afford them. These are all just general style cues in the late Victorian period, and a thorough study would reveal many more changes in Western styles that reflected every socioeconomic change of the period.

Technology & Science

Steam trains, rudimentary flying vehicles, and the first internal combustion engines all existed in the 1890s. These vehicles would eventually change the world. They would help mankind produce more with less effort, travel between the continents and across continents faster, and stoke the imagination for what innovations might be around the corner.

Milestones:

- 1835—Great Western Railway, Designed by Isambard Kingdom Brunnel
- 1872—First Internal Combustion Engine, Flown by Paul Haelein
- Inter-Continental Telegraph Communication

combined Art Deco aesthetics with moving pictures.

- Milestones: Metropolis, Citizen Kane, War of the Worlds, Max Fleisher's Superman

Women's Fashion

The diesel age was marked by two world wars, the Great Depression, and the global spanish flu epidemic. Constant upheaval defined the early 1900s. Fashion reacted to these changes quickly. During the boom times, clothing was fun, adventurous, and forward thinking. When times were tough, clothing became utilitarian and conservative. Clothing moved from manmade fabrics and manufactured clothing back to natural fibers and simple homemade outfits. Wide shoulders were popular from the late twenties until after the second world war for both men and women. Dresses became shorter and waistlines moved down. But by the late 1920s, they moved up again and dresses returned to their previous lengths. In the early thirties, clothing had a very modern look with angles and cuts that were at times futuristic compared to the styles just 20 years earlier. With the growth of Hollywood's influence in the diesel age, actors became fashion trendsetters for those who could follow them.

Men's Fashion

In the 1930s, men's suits moved toward a more padded and exaggerated look that today seem almost cartoonish. The culmination of this style can be seen in the zoot suit movement, with large shoulderpads, a tapered waist in the suit jacket, and large hats. Dress shirts came with attached collars which allowed for a more casual look and no necktie. During the war years, rationing of materials created the victory suit. Using less fabric and thread, the design was simple and would influence suit designs to come. Casual clothing grew in popularity, and even women started wearing slacks for the first time in large numbers.

Technology & Science

FM radio, the expansion of electricity across the country, advances in flight, and the height of airship technology all contributed to the rapid development of technology and science in the diesel age. Internal combustion engines were driving people faster and further than ever before.

Milestones:

- 1928-1937 Graf Zeppelin: The Most Successful Passenger Airship
- Queen Mary: The Perfect Representation of the Art Deco Luxury Ocean Liner
- High Octane Fuel and the First Blood Bank





THE BLACK FAUN

In the aftermath of World War I, countries were either eager to get revenge or terrified of another war. In this atmosphere, paramilitary groups thrived where the seeds of revenge were nourished. Some of these groups had their roots in older, esoteric organizations which had existed for generations but never earned the chance to truly seize power. After the publishing of Darwin's theories, the deaths of millions during the war, and the outbreaks of many diseases, humanity was experiencing a crisis of faith. Answers were sought in the dark arts. The Order of the Black Faun can trace its origins to the death of Otto the Great, the first ruler of the Holy Roman Empire. But here in the dark valley that is the 1930s, they finally have a chance to truly influence the course of history.

In 1936, the newly resurrected Shining Skull was given his own army by the Order of the Black Faun and sent to march deep into Tibet in search of a legendary ancient knowledge that would bring power and glory to the Order.





SHINING SKULL

CLASSIFIED

name Shining Skull case no. 378982

The Shining Skull was destroyed at the battle of Ultima Thule, but his metal-shell body and the esoteric magneto that powered it remained salvageable. With the help of some monks, the Shining Skull was brought back to strength, and he reassembled his metal body. The Shining Skull was formerly a highly decorated Prussian general. After the dissolution of Prussia following World War I, the General stole the esoteric magneto from Nikola Tesla and joined the Order of the Black Faun in his new body. The Shining Skull has devoted himself to perpetual war, which makes him uniquely suited for Aleister's current plan to spread civil war in Tibet. The Shining Skull has become a war spirit who uses a suit of metal for mobility. He can use the same skill to pilot his Red Horse Mech. Because he can control the vehicle without need for standard controls, the machine cannot be piloted by anyone but him.





BENNO FIALA

CLASSIFIED

name Benno Fiala case no. 321142

Benno Fiala entered the cockpit of his first airplane in 1917 and immediately began to conquer the sky. In the air, he had no equal. He could be outnumbered and outgunned, but somehow, Benno Fiala always emerged the victor. There was only one pilot as skilled as him: Manfred von Richthofen, the Red Baron. Benno was in constant competition with the Baron, but he was always a few air combat victories behind. No matter how many enemies he shot down, the Baron always came back with a few more.

In 1918, when the Baron was felled near Amiens, Benno walked away from the air and never looked back. He said there was no one to compete with; the challenge was gone. After the end of the Great War when the Austrian-Hungary Empire was dissolved, Benno Fiala was left with no family titles and no country. He was hopelessly despondent until he discovered armored warfare.

The Order of the Black Faun gave him access to the technology he needed, and when he learned of the brilliant motorized-vehicle commander Vera Brecht, he had the challenge he craved. Benno Fiala's only goal in life from then on was to become the king of armored warfare and to destroy Vera Brecht in the process.





ZEYNEP

CLASSIFIED

name Zeynep case no. 122829

Zeynep bin Ibrahim Gaddar, which translates to Zeynep son of Ibrahim the Cruel, is the descendant of the infamous Ottoman architect Ibrahim, whose specialty was prison building and torture devices. Ibrahim the Cruel experimented on his prisoners, perfecting his methods of torture through his advanced knowledge of anatomy. Zeynep has followed in his ancestor's footsteps, devoting his life to the research of anatomy, science, and the occult. Like a great artist mixing mediums, Zeynep throws himself into his creations, relishing every cut of flesh, every chemical compound, and finding every opportunity he can to bring the dark arts into the world of science. He is responsible for giving birth to the new soldiers of the Order of the Black Faun. As head scientist for the Order, his job is to find a combination of science and dark magic that will lead to unstoppable power. Zeynep is a great scientist, but sometimes he cannot control the beings he creates.





SOUL EATER

CLASSIFIED

name Soul Eater case no. 443412

The Soul Eater has wandered the Earth for generations, no longer able to remember why she was exiled here. Like Phaëton being thrown from the chariot of Helios, she was cast out, falling to the Earth with only a fraction of her powers. Her curse is to live among humans, her wings clipped, unable to die, unable to ascend or descend. The firmament has been her prison. She began her time living alone, far from human eyes, but soon she grew bored and became more and more entangled in mortal problems. At different times she has fought alongside kings, queens, peasants, animals—whomever she felt like fighting with. A soldier never stops fighting, and that is the only life she's known. Today, she fights alongside the Order of the Black Faun, finding their cause the most interesting. Her penchant for harvesting the souls of the newly deceased to fuel her powers has earned her the name Soul Eater. She will help the Black Faun as long as it entertains her.





MARK III TROOPS

CLASSIFIED

name Mark III Troops case no. 889587

Zeynep's biggest accomplishment has been the cloned troopers. While they are not very intelligent and only live a few years at best, the Black Faun laboratory created troops are cheaper to produce than the cost of training soldiers. With every generation of cultivated soldiers, Zeynep improves their performance and life expectancy. Some weaknesses, such as ocular sensitivity to sunlight and weak respiratory systems, seem to become aggravated with every new generation of soldiers. Combined with the genetic engineering, an assortment of ancient runes are tattooed into the skin of each trooper. The runes help the soldiers by providing an unnatural strength and a sense of obedience to their masters. In some cases, like No. X, the runes also help keep a trooper alive when it has mutated to the point where cells and tissues would normally be tearing themselves apart.





THE 19XX

The organization, designated nineteen hundred or 19XX, has its heritage in many earlier groups, like the Burnside Brotherhood, that came before it. These groups have always been behind the scenes, fighting evil wherever it raises its head. This new organization was created to save the 1900s from the fate which had been foretold. With the fatalistic attitude of the world during the 1930s, this horrible destiny was accepted as inevitable. But there was a chance that a group working secretly, without the official sanction of any single country, could fight against it. They would have to battle without angering other nations and without prematurely bringing on the next great war. The 19XX goes where it is needed, with members all over the world fighting any force that is too big or too unknown for normal authorities to handle. The 19XX has operatives everywhere, but the airship known as the Carpathian is the closest thing it has to a home.



THE KID

CLASSIFIED

name The Kid (16 yrs old) case no. 101920

Since the first day the Kid joined the crew of the Carpathian and the 19XX organization, he has been constantly under the tutelage of the Captain and the rest of the 19XX. After the death of his father, the Kid's mother sent him to study with the group and find his own way in the world. One day, the Kid hopes to be as great an adventurer and hero as his father was. As is the custom among the 19XX, the Kid has to earn the right to be called by his given name. Someday he hopes to fly as fast as Fay Wells, build machines with as much style as Penn Clement's, fight with the strength of Frank Diabo, lead others with the steady hand of the Captain, and change the world for the better, like his father. Togo, the genetically engineered rabbit created by Dr. Huevelman, has become a constant companion to the Kid. With the help of a radio Togo carries on his back, the Kid can communicate with Togo and give him simple commands to follow.





MARJORIE

CLASSIFIED

name Marjorie (15 yrs old) case no. 901629

Marjorie has always enjoyed action and adventure. As a child, her mother would put her to sleep with tales of her father's acts of heroism from his days in the Burnside Brotherhood. When her mother passed away, Marjorie, or Jorie as she's usually called, fit in on the ship immediately. She was never scared to speak her mind or jump into the action. All the time spent on the Carpathian has brought her closer to her father, but she still refers to him as "Captain." Along the way, Jorie has become skilled in using a device designed by Tesla Industries called the Tuner. This device allows certain individuals to reach past the barrier that separates the world of the living and the dead. Jorie uses the tuner to bring souls back from the other side to temporarily help guide her and assist in 19XX missions. Someday Jorie hopes to communicate with her mother, but for now, reaching back for someone that close is too painful.





BERT COLTON

CLASSIFIED

name Bert Colton case no. 847239

The Seal of Solomon, The Book of Thoth, The Caduceus--Bert grew up dreaming of finding these relics and more. His youth was spent in libraries searching for the last known resting places of mystical items, tombs of ancient kings, and the locations of mystical cities. Bert is always calm under pressure and good with a weapon, but he prefers dusting off fossils to fending off grave robbers, crypt creepers, and tomb raiders. His proudest moment was holding timbers from the Lost Ark in his hands. His saddest moment came seconds later when those timbers crumbled into dust. His knowledge is invaluable to the 19XX. As a former member of the Burnside Brotherhood, Bert and the Captain are very good friends. When called in to do field work for the 19XX, Professor Colton, as his students call him, always brings his true cross shotgun and the Webley revolver given to him by the Captain of the Carpathian years ago.





RAMSAI SIAL

CLASSIFIED

name Ramsai Sial

case no. 225669

You might know Ramsai Sial as the beautiful star of several Bombay talkies from 1934 to 1939. But what is usually not known to the general public is her years of covert work for the Indian and British governments. Her intelligence, charm, and quick thinking made her an important asset on any mission. It was her other unique ability that made her invaluable. When she was a child, Ramsai began speaking at an early age and could reach very high notes that would shatter glass and send animals running. Her parents sought the skills of a Buddhist monk to help teach her how to focus her abilities. Her parents dreamed of Ramsai singing in the most famous opera houses in the world, but the monk taught her to focus her voice with so much power that it became a weapon. Under the right circumstances, Ramsai could literally bring down the house.






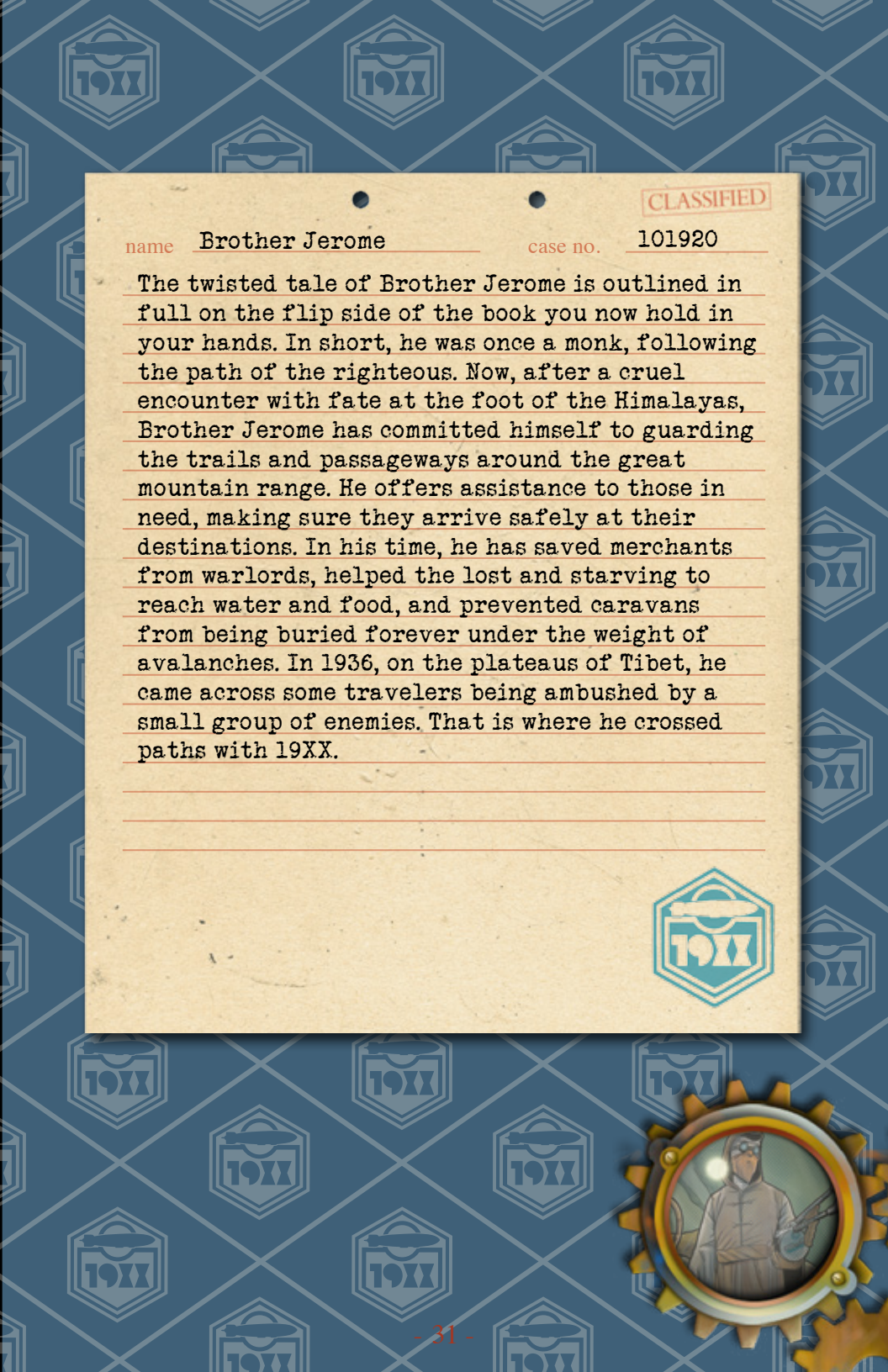
BROTHER JEROME

CLASSIFIED

name Brother Jerome case no. 101920

The twisted tale of Brother Jerome is outlined in full on the flip side of the book you now hold in your hands. In short, he was once a monk, following the path of the righteous. Now, after a cruel encounter with fate at the foot of the Himalayas, Brother Jerome has committed himself to guarding the trails and passageways around the great mountain range. He offers assistance to those in need, making sure they arrive safely at their destinations. In his time, he has saved merchants from warlords, helped the lost and starving to reach water and food, and prevented caravans from being buried forever under the weight of avalanches. In 1936, on the plateaus of Tibet, he came across some travelers being ambushed by a small group of enemies. That is where he crossed paths with 19XX.







VERA BRECHT

CLASSIFIED

name Vera case no. 726788

Vera Brecht, daughter of famed engineer Emil Brecht, grew up in a garage with a wrench in her hand. Vera left Germany and traveled to America to focus on new frontiers in engineering after the untimely death of her father. It was in America that Vera built upon the work of her father and quickly surpassed him in every way.

Vera first made a name for herself in the states by designing a one-manned submersible that could patrol short distances around a larger craft. The vehicle had its limitations but was ground breaking in its size and speed. With her new-found fame, it wasn't long before Vera caught the attention of the military. Unfortunately, she wanted to build larger and more experimental craft, but no branch would give her funding; her work and her attitude were deemed too risky.

When all seemed lost, The 19XX moved in and gave her the space and the crew to take her work to the next level. With her newly acquired freedom and funding, Vera began pushing the boundaries of engineering. Her first major breakthrough came with the VM series of walking tanks. Designed to take on any terrain and still pack plenty of firepower, the VM became the centerpiece of The 19XX Armored Division.



WHAT THEY CARRY

WHAT'S IN BERT'S BAG?

Bert Colton was once an unassuming college student who was pulled into the esoteric fight between good and evil. He now teaches the power of symbolism at Miskatonic University and helps the 19XX as an adjunct member.



WHAT'S IN PENN'S BAG?

Penn Clement once roamed the open range as an explosive expert for the railroads. Now he brings his explosives and small arms inventiveness to the 19XX.



Bert's Bag is simple but capable of carrying a lot of gear!



A trusty Webley revolver with auto-extracting action and consecrated ammunition! Can't go wrong there!



The Bowl of St. Sebastian which once held holy water used to anoint the sick. It now brings blessings on the holder!



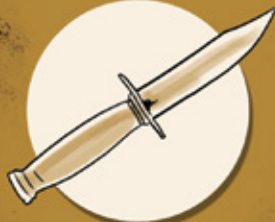
Belt Harness that has bags for everything! It's custom made of course, so don't try getting one yourself!



A light pistol, which carries a good amount of ammunition and hardly ever blows up!



The standard-issue, small two way radio. You could drive a truck over this little guy and it would still work! But don't drive over it twice, it will break.



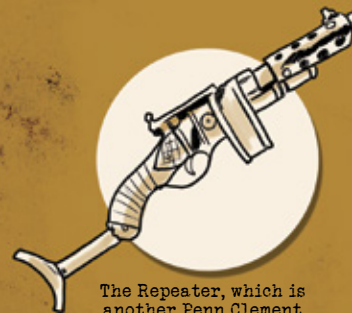
Small dagger, perfect for scratching grime off relics or opening a can of beans!



St. Florian's mirror which can see curses like no human eye can. Don't use it to fix your hair!



A ball of string. These can come in handy; you never know!



The Repeater, which is another Penn Clement original. Penn is always the first one to test out his weapons, because no one else is brave enough to.



A wristwatch with a built-in compass and extendable saw wire!



Buddy, Penn's old dog. If you want to see a grown man cry like a baby, ask him about the day Buddy was born.



Short barreled shotgun inlaid with pieces of the true cross. When combined with Penn's Consecrated Ammunition, it packs quite a punch!



A few sticks of dynamite, like every good archeologist should have on hand. You never know when you'll have to blow your way out of a collapsed tomb!



Old membership card from the Burnside Brotherhood. It might not be as useful as it once was, but it can still open some doors!



I know what you're thinking-- Penn is this big fancy weapons designer. Well, sometimes all it takes is a big hunk of wood to knock some sense into a fellow.



Grenades that go boom.



A lock of an amazing pilot's hair. She gave it to him for good luck, and so he carries it. Who is he to question her?

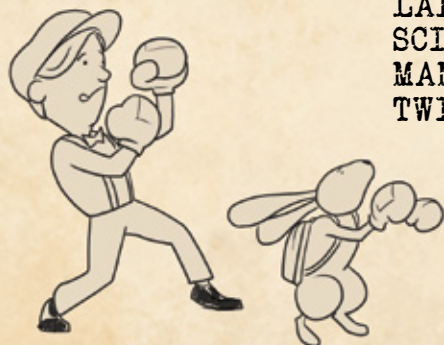
ZEYNEP'S LABORATORY

HOW SMART IS TOGO?!

Dr. Zeynep wants to determine how smart the world's most intelligent rabbit is by placing him in a cage that requires solving a puzzle to escape. Togo is a very smart critter, but of course, he can't read! Help Togo escape his cage and the lab by solving Zeynep's word jumble!

| | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| C | E | D | A | O | C | S | A | F | T | S |
| L | A | B | O | R | A | T | O | R | Y | C |
| W | E | S | C | A | P | E | M | I | T | I |
| E | C | D | S | C | I | E | A | G | W | E |
| A | C | A | R | R | O | T | M | H | I | N |
| P | L | N | A | S | T | R | R | T | S | T |
| O | A | G | T | L | W | A | E | E | T | I |
| N | B | E | O | A | I | P | A | N | E | S |
| L | O | R | R | Y | E | A | P | D | D | T |
| M | A | M | M | A | L | O | I | N | G | R |

| | |
|------------|----------|
| LABORATORY | DANGER |
| SCIENTIST | FRIGHTEN |
| MAMMAL | CARROT |
| TWISTED | ESCAPE |
| | WEAPON |
| | SLAY |
| | TRAP |
| | REAP |



THE HISTORY LESSON

1934

The Airship Carpathian hugged the clouds as its monolithic frame cast a shadow onto the earth below.

The Carpathian became my home and school in the sky,



and the secret group known as the 19XX was my family.

I did my best to keep up with the rigorous training and study sessions, but sometimes I needed to be reminded of how important it all was.



KID, ZORA HAS BEEN LOOKING FOR YOU.

SHE SAYS YOU MISSED YESTERDAY'S HISTORY LESSON.

CAPTAIN! YEAH, WELL, YA SEE,

SOME OTHER THINGS CAME UP AND BEFORE I KNEW IT--



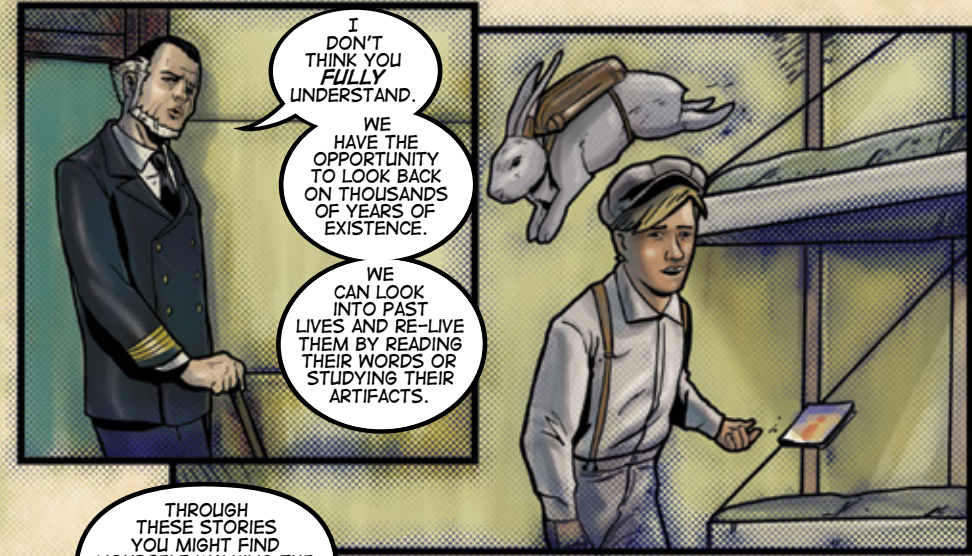
I KNOW YOU ARE EXCITED ABOUT YOUR SCIENCE LESSONS,

COMBAT TRAINING, AND FLIGHT SCHOOL, BUT YOU NEED TO CULTIVATE THAT SAME EXCITEMENT

FOR THE STUDY OF HUMANITY'S PAST.



YES SIR, I UNDERSTAND. IT WON'T HAPPEN AGAIN. SORRY! HE HE HE!



I DON'T THINK YOU FULLY UNDERSTAND.

WE HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO LOOK BACK ON THOUSANDS OF YEARS OF EXISTENCE.

WE CAN LOOK INTO PAST LIVES AND RE-LIVE THEM BY READING THEIR WORDS OR STUDYING THEIR ARTIFACTS.

THROUGH THESE STORIES YOU MIGHT FIND YOURSELF WALKING THE STREETS OF FLORENCE IN THE 1400S LIVING THE EARLY YEARS OF THE GREAT ARTIST,

MICHELANGELO, UNDER THE GUIDANCE OF THE MEDICIS.

YOU CAN KNOW HIS LIFE AND SEE THE WORLD THROUGH HIS EYES.



OPEN ANOTHER BOOK AND YOU'LL KNOW WHAT IT FELT TO BE AN ANCIENT GREEK HOPLITE SOLDIER IN 480 BC, ALMOST 2,000 YEARS EARLIER.

YOU'LL FEEL THE WOODEN SPEAR IN YOUR HANDS AND THE LEATHER SANDALS STRAPPED TO YOUR FEET.

THE POUNDING OF A THOUSAND SOLDIERS MARCHING IN FORMATION WILL VIBRATE THROUGH YOUR CHEST.





IN THIS WAY, THROUGH THESE BOOKS, YOU CAN BE ANYONE.

YOU CAN LIVE HUNDREDS OF LIVES WHERE MOST ONLY GET TO LIVE ONCE.

YOU WILL FIGHT PIRATES ALONG THE GOLD COAST;

YOU WILL CROSS THE ALPS WITH HANNIBAL AND HIS ELEPHANTS;

YOU WILL LIVE THROUGH THE DISCOVERY OF THE SEVEN SEAS RIGHT ALONGSIDE THOSE WHO WERE THERE.

AND WHEN YOU TRULY MASTER YOUR PAST...



YOUR FUTURE WILL BECOME CLEARER. IN THIS WAY, YOU WILL BE A TIME TRAVELER.

YOU WILL BE A CHILD OF EVERY GENERATION.

YOU WILL KNOW THE CULMINATION OF EVERYONE WHO EVER LIVED. YOU WILL NOT BELONG TO ONE TIME,

BUT TO ALL TIMES.

I WAS ON MY WAY TO GO SEE ZORA RIGHT NOW.

I DON'T SUPPOSE YOU'D LIKE TO ACCOMPANY ME?



SURE WHY NOT?! I GUESS MY COMICS CAN WAIT.

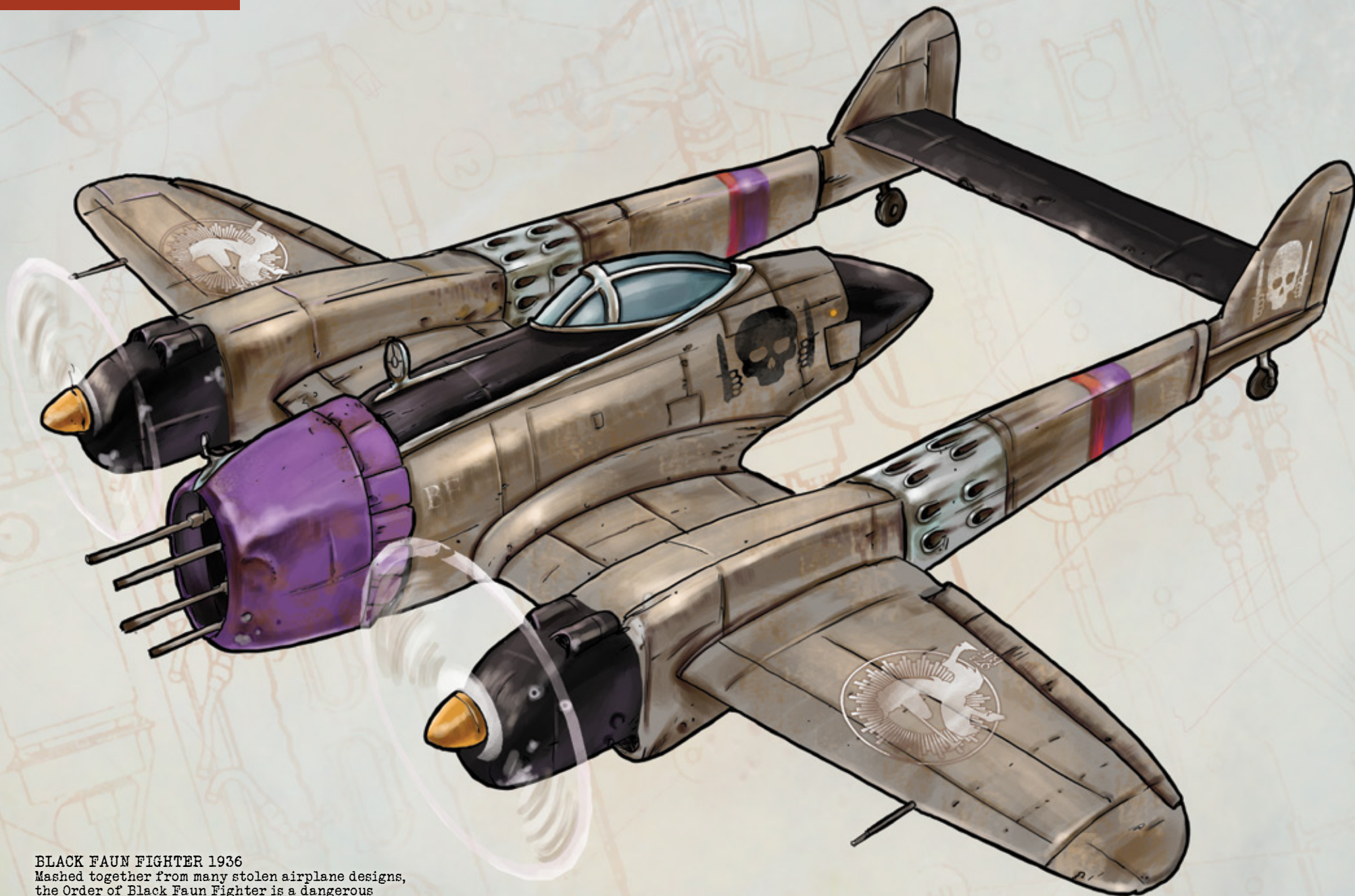
SAY, DO YOU THINK ZORA HAS ANY BOOKS ON THE HOPPLITES? THEY SOUND PRETTY INTERESTING.

AND WHAT ABOUT THE PIRATES ON THE GOLD COAST? DO YOU THINK THEY LEFT ANY GOLD THERE?



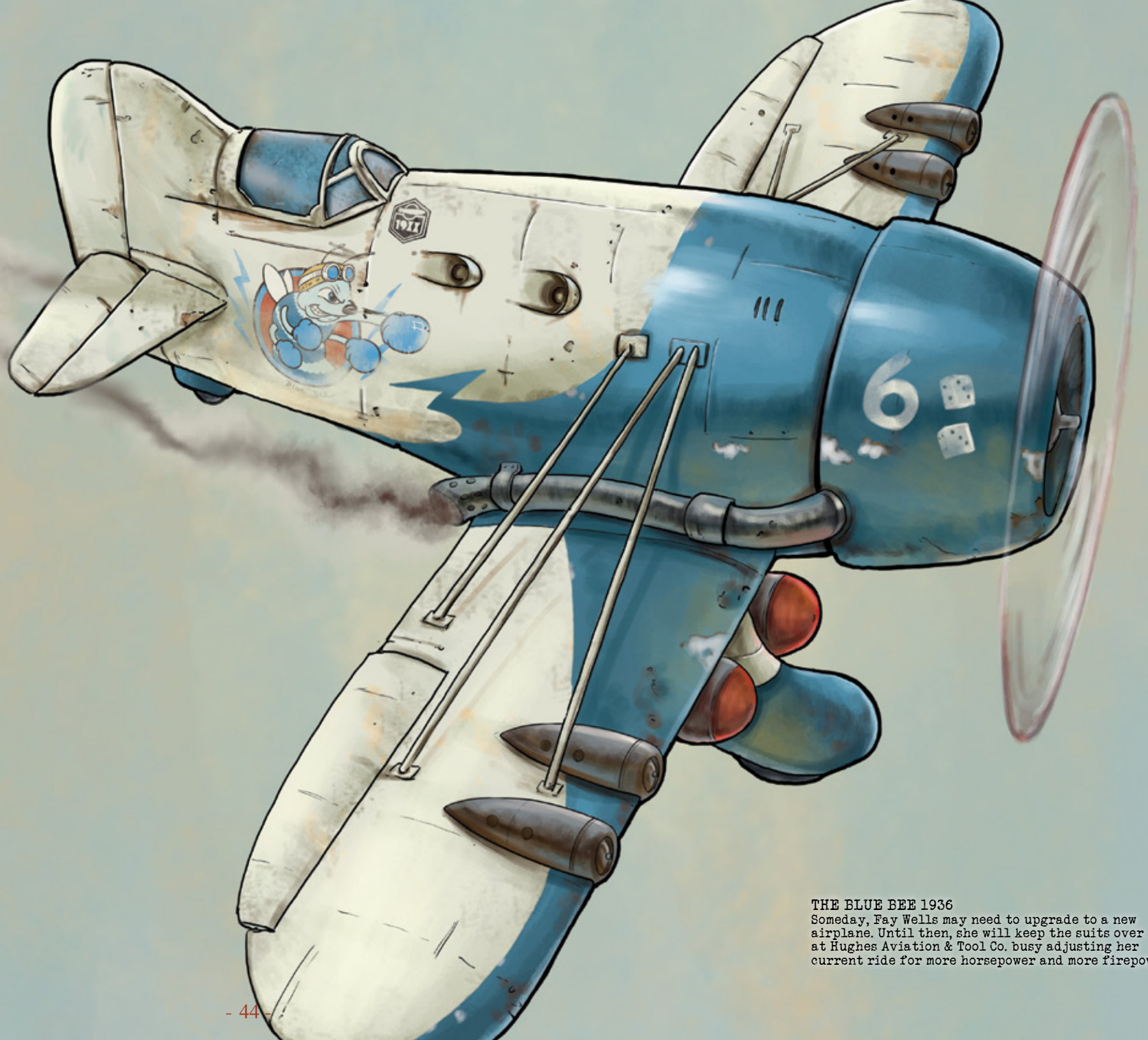
END.

VEHICLES



BLACK FAUN FIGHTER 1936

Mashed together from many stolen airplane designs, the Order of Black Faun Fighter is a dangerous machine capable of being launched from the back of specially designed trucks.



THE BLUE BEE 1936

Someday, Fay Wells may need to upgrade to a new airplane. Until then, she will keep the suits over at Hughes Aviation & Tool Co. busy adjusting her current ride for more horsepower and more firepower.

MC-1

Designed by Major Vera and her engineering team, the MC-1 is capable of combat on virtually any terrain. The MC-1 is the height of armored combat.



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PRESENTS

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TALES OF THE 19XX

JUNE
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INSIDE BURNSIDE BROTHERHOOD

THE FURTHER ADVENTURES OF CROFT & JAMESON
BROTHER JEROME

AND THE MONASTERY OF THE THREE BELLS
Plus,
CHARACTER BIOS,
THE STEAM AGE VS. THE DIESEL AGE,
THE KID MINI COMIC,
AND MORE DIESELPUNK
ADVENTURE!

BOOK 3



BATTLE IN THE MUSEUM!
THE ORIGIN OF
THE BROTHER OF
JEROME!

TALES OF THE 19XX

THE BURNSIDE BROTHERHOOD THE PHOTOGRAPH

STORY AND ART BY
PAUL ROMAN MARTINEZ



Agent Croft



Agent Jameson

STARRING



Morton Rose



Melba Rose

THE FLYING
ROSES!

Turn the page, dear reader,
for an excitingly death-defying
tale from early in the 19XX
timeline!

1925



The Captain of the Carpathian, the main airship of the 19XX organization, sits in his Empire State building office. His desk is at an angle in a corner of the room opposite a metal tube that takes passengers directly to the airship mooring dock on the roof. From here, he can survey his entire room easily—see the view out of the windows and watch the door for anyone coming in. Recently, he was talking with someone here about the fate of the world and his role in it. But today, he just sits, remembering a better time. A time when he was a simple agent of the Burnside Brotherhood, fighting criminals who stole small relics and sometimes used them to commit petty crimes. The Captain looks around his office at all the new bobbles he has acquired during his travels and all the old gifts friends have given him. He is supposed to be writing a letter to President Roosevelt about various relic recoveries and fund disbursements, but his mind keeps wandering and his pen doesn't move easily. Back then, he had no idea a war loomed on the horizon or that he would lose so many of his friends. He didn't have so many people counting on every decision he made. He just fought, and won. Today, the setting sun casts an orange glow on the express tube, the chess set his wife got for him, the globe that used to sit in the Burnside Brotherhood headquarters, and a picture frame. At the edge of his desk a picture sits in a frame—a moment in time frozen forever like so many other moments. The orange light reminded the Captain of that day, and in some ways he longed to be back there, fighting the same old fights, forever.

PART I

It was the fall of 1925 when that picture was taken—the first time the Burnside agents really came together as a group, and one of the last times, too. Had the Captain known, he probably would have taken more

photographs that night.

There were still some orange and red leaves on the trees. The wind blew softly and smelled like autumn. It smelled calm. Closing time had already passed at the back steps of the Museum of Natural History, and the peacefulness felt refreshing. The University was on break, and many shops closed early. The sun had set and streetlamps were popping on down the avenue. Croft, as he was known before he became the Captain of the Carpathian and leader of the 19XX, was leaning on one side of the side door with his Webley revolver drawn. He wore his heavy brown coat, and his dark grey hat was pulled down, almost covering his eyes. Underneath the brim, the edge of his thin, greying beard moved visibly when he talked.

“I don't know how much longer we can wait.” Croft looked up, causing an orange light to fall on the long, deep scar traveling down his forehead across his left eye and ending at his chin. The Prussian general had given him that scar and several more during their first fight. Even before he became the Shining Skull, the general had been a dangerous individual.

“I'm ready when you are. I've really been wanting to get a look at this exhibit anyway, and the lines are just ridiculous when they're open. Who knew that many people wanted to see a bunch of dead guys?!”

Jameson stood on the other side of the door, smiling wide from behind the high collar of his grey overcoat. He wore a greyish-brown, eight panel cap over his straight blonde hair and held his Colt .45 automatic in the air. Both men carried paper cards labeling them as Burnside Brotherhood agents. Of course, time would see the Brotherhood and other small groups folded into the 19XX organization, and even that eight panel cap would get passed onto Jameson's son. But in 1925, the Brotherhood held some real sway in the right circles, and that piece of paper had gotten the boys out of many a pickle.

“When the Brotherhood sends backup, they'll know where to find us.”

“Ok, on three. Ready?”

Croft counted, and both men nodded with each number, ready to break down the back door simultaneously.

“One, Two, Three!”

They slammed their bodies into the heavy wooden door, splintering the wood at the hinges to pieces. Jameson threw himself low to the ground and aimed across the room; Croft stood tall and swept his revolver across his eyeline.

It was only after a few seconds that they realized they had broken into the side mudroom and there was still another door to go. Both men froze, staring at the small, dark, empty room, waiting for the other to speak.

Finally, Jameson broke the silence. “Ok, on three. Ready?”

The second entry was a set of double wooden doors attached by a simple metal latch in the center. The latch broke easily, and the doors flew open. The agents took their stances and scanned the room. Above them hung a banner painted in painstaking detail that read “The Mysteries of the Pharaoh’s Tomb.” Two feet were sticking out from behind a storage crate. Jameson rushed over to see who they belonged to while Croft scanned the room for any danger. On the far side of the room, an entryway led to a much larger space from which emitted a yellow pulsating light. The whistling of wind matched in volume the intensity of the glowing light.

“Over here, Croft. We got a couple live ones!” Jameson motioned for Croft to come near.

On the floor, two men were bound and gagged. One man’s eyes were wide open in fear, and the other wore a scowling look on his face as if he was upset at being put out by the whole experience.

Jameson reached around and untied the cloth that was keeping the men from speaking. “Someone took the time to tie you two up. There must be a pretty special show going on in there! C’mon, you can tell me. Is the exhibit worth the price of admission?”

The young man with the heavy figure and sandy blonde hair spoke up first. “I’m Bert, and this is Aleister. Our professor is in the Exhibit Room, and I’m afraid he’s gone completely mad!”

Aleister, the slender pale one with greasy, black hair made a grumbling sound. “Humph, power mad! He’s trying to steal all the glory of discovery for himself.”

Bert interrupted, “Listen, you won’t believe me, but he’s harnessing some kind of Ancient Egyptian power. He’s ruthless—he will use it to kill! He already killed poor Maury, the security guard.”

Across the room, a man lay face-down, and the butt of a shotgun was barely visible, covered by his lifeless body.

Jameson and Croft glanced over and then Croft spoke to Bert and Aleister. “You’re not going to believe this, but we believe you. That’s why we’re here”

Jameson began to untie Bert. “Here’s what’s going to happen. We’ve handled this



sort of thing before, so you guys just shuffle on out the side door there and head to the library or whatever it is you book worm types do. Just leave this to—”

Jameson didn’t get a chance to finish his thought. A large pulse of light accompanied by a deep buzzing boom sent books, picture frames, Egyptian-themed souvenirs, and other random museum debris flying through the air. The four men threw themselves to the ground to avoid being hit when a horde of chattering scarabs exploded from the doorway to the glowing yellow exhibit area and filled the top two feet of both rooms. They poured out like a raging flood after a damn break and lingered, circling around the ceiling like smoke from a fire.

Croft pointed his pistol upward. “I don’t think I brought enough bullets for such tiny targets!”

The wall separating the main exhibit from the side entry room vibrated with the sound of two impacts. A second sound erupted, and the wall blew apart in two spots, filling the side room with a shower of broken brick and splintered wood panels. Two menacing, silhouetted forms stood in the two large holes now connecting the rooms. The rest of the wall groaned and crumbled to the ground. Now there was no separation between the four men and the main Exhibit Room—just a large, glowing yellow rectangle with two mysterious forms lumbering toward them.

“Well, you wanted bigger targets!” Jameson yelled at Croft as both men ran toward the room firing all their ammunition at the two forms. The two creatures fell back and then were tackled by Agents Croft and Jameson.

“Wait! Aren’t you going to untie us?” Bert yelled out, but only the other student, Aleister, heard him.

“They don’t care about us. Obviously they are also just here for glory! You can’t trust anyone, Bert.”

But Croft and Jameson didn’t answer because they were overwhelmed at the magnitude of the sight before them. In the main Exhibit Room, sarcophagi, statues, and ancient weapons lined the outer walls. Each sarcophagi had a lid that was vibrating and being shaken loose, releasing dust particles into the air. Behind the lid of each sarcophagus were the forces removing the lids. After thousands of years of sleep, the mummies encased in their beds were being awoken. They threw down their lids and stepped into the world, looking around and trying to gain their bearings. Muscles and bones popped into place audibly after being stretched and moved for the first time in ages.

Professor Menkin stood at the far end of the room. At his sides were two spears topped with glass lenses plunged into the ground and two enormous Egyptian cat statues made of dark black graywacke stone. The professor’s eyes were white in a mystified glaze, and behind him was an even stranger sight. An ancient Egyptian gate of that same dark graywacke stone stood as the centerpiece of this exhibit-gone-mad. The stone doorway had no doubt spent years gathering dirt and now held the mysterious patina that all artifacts from lost civilizations held. But the gate was no longer dormant. Through the opening, the men saw a black and purple sky over an Egyptian pyramid. A million stars contrasted starkly with the



museum room that was bathed in yellow and orange light.

“Look! The professor’s head!” Jameson elbowed Croft and pointed to Professor Menkin. “The crown he’s wearing!”

From inside the gate, far away on the top of the pyramid, a small string of orange light connected to the two crystals in the spears and met at the eyes of a serpent on the small crown Professor Menkin wore. The light bristled at points with lighter and darker spots, and the spots flowed from the pyramid in the direction of Professor Menkin’s Crown.

“I’m going to bet a week’s wages that all our problems start with that little piece of metal on Menkin’s head.”

Agent Croft responded, “You already owe me a week’s wages from the last bet.”

Jameson quickly replied, “That world series was fixed and you know it!”

“NAME THYSELF!”

A voice boomed through the room from somewhere, sending the two Burnside agents stepping back as they almost tripped on rubble. Jameson and Croft were stopped in their instinctive retreat by two mummified soldiers.

The voiced tore through the room again, sending vibrations through the bones of every living and non-living creature there.

“NAME THYSELF!!”

Croft and Jameson swung around with guns drawn and fired several rounds into the dusty soldiers at their backs. The two bandaged masses shuffled backward and fell over some broken piles of brick and wood, crashing to the ground and sending a flume of ancient particles into the air.

Croft coughed loudly and called out to Jameson while turning to face the macabre spectacle again. “He wants to know who we are!”

“Croft! He’s speaking through these dead men!”

The orange and yellow light reflecting off dust in the air made it hard enough to see, while the occasional scarab buzzing by caused the two men to duck and shoot at empty air.

Croft tried to reach past the noise. “Professor Menkin, we are from the Burnside

Brotherhood! We only seek the truth and to protect ancient relics! Lay down your crown and speak to us!”

The mass of mummies in the room shifted and turned to face the agents while they spoke again with one voice. The words of the professor were coming from them. “THE BROTHERHOOD? MY MORTAL FORM KNEW THEM WELL! MY ARMY IS BUILDING ON THE SHORES OF THE RIVER STYX. THE PRIVATE COLLECTION OF THE BROTHERHOOD WILL BE A TROPHY OF CONQUEST WHEN MY CELESTIAL ARMY MARCHES ON THIS WORLD!”

The gathering wind from the gate behind Professor Menkin seemed to be blowing in full force while the weather outside in the mortal realm calmly swirled autumn leaves to the ground. Jameson had to yell over the sound. “Great job Croft; that did the trick. Let’s all go home now!”

The mummies once again spoke with one voice while the physical form of Professor Menkin stood dazed. The channel of light flowed through the focusing lenses and into him, centering on the silver snake he wore on his crown.

“THE WISDOM OF THE ANCIENTS’ FILLS MY CUP. I WILL CREATE A NEW DYNASTY. I WILL BECOME THE NEXT AND FINAL PHARAOH!”

The mummies around the room lurched toward the Burnside agents. Bullets flew as the dusty soldiers fell into heaps of bones and tattered rags. At the sound of the last mummified warrior falling, the first one killed slowly began to rise and reconstitute himself, picking up a spear from the collection and readying himself to fight again.

“Croft! At this rate we’re going to run out of ammunition!” Jameson pulled a handful of bullets from his coat and frantically refilled his pistol.

Croft clicked his also freshly-loaded pistol back into aiming position and set his sights on Professor Menkin. “Make all your shots count, Jameson! Aim for the professor!”

“Gladly! I don’t think we need a pyramid in Central Park, and I can’t stand cats!!”

The two men were grabbed firmly from behind by two previously destroyed mummified warriors. Their shots let loose harmlessly into the ceiling, and they both looked at each other, desperately hoping the other had a plan. But neither one could break free from the grips of the mummified warriors.

Part II

In the entry room, Bert Colton was busy untying fellow student Aleister Gurdjieff.

“Get to your feet, man! We must lend assistance!”

“Have you gone insane?!” Aleister rose to his feet and rubbed his arms where the ropes had bound him. “We have to escape—that’s what we have to do!”

“Are you some kind of coward? Those men are laying down their lives for us in there! I’m going to help, and if you were any kind of human being, you would help too!” Bert Colton was shocked at Aleister’s lack of courage.

“I don’t take commands from you, Colton. I traveled a great distance to study under Professor Menkin, whatever he’s planning, and I have no reason to think we can stop him!” Aleister was unhurt by Bert’s lack of respect.

“He tied you up and left you for dead! Where’s your backbone? Where’s your sense of revenge?” Bert tried to talk some sense into Aleister, but then he thought better of it. “Fine, you do what you please. I’m going to help.”

Bert walked toward the glowing room in front of them, grabbing the security guard’s unused shotgun along the way. Turning back once more, he looked Aleister in the eyes while cocking his shotgun. “Make yourself useful. Grab something heavy and come in swinging. I’m going to get some justice for poor old Maury, here.”

As Aleister slowly stepped toward the room, he heard loud yelling, the buzz of scarabs, the moan of mummies, and the occasional firing of a short-barrel shotgun. With each blast of the gun he cringed and paused before stepping forward again.



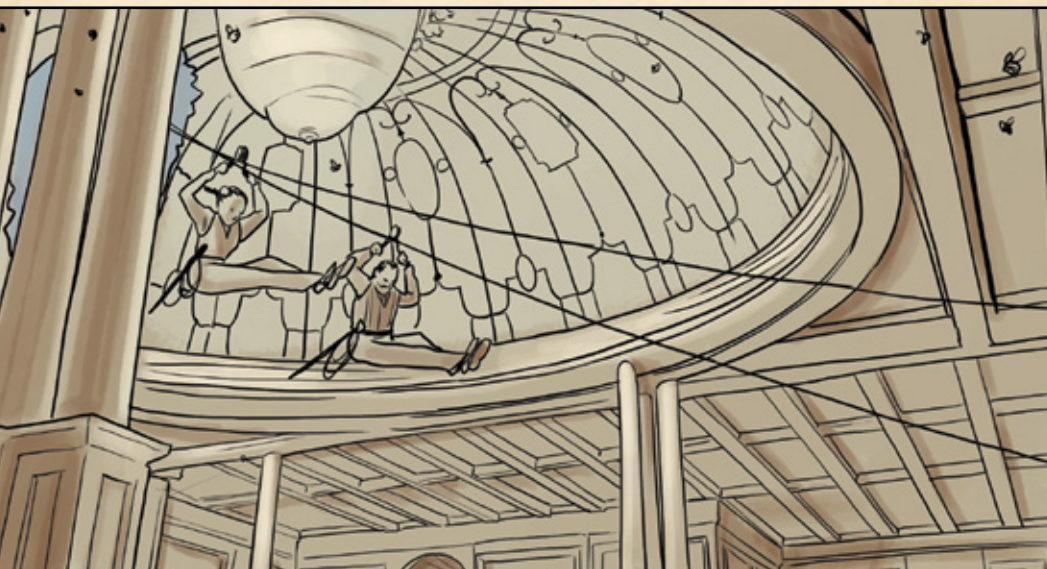
When Aleister finally reached the newly-created entry to the Exhibit Room, his eyes had to adjust to the brightness. Croft and Jameson had broken free and were shooting down mummies as fast as they could stand up. Bert was using what little ammunition he had to provide additional protection, but the torrent being unleashed by the gate at Professor Menkin's back looked insurmountable. Aleister took in the whole scene, and his mouth slowly fell open.

He whispered to himself in awe. "He did it. He actually did it...."

As soon as Aleister finished his thought, his hands flew to his ears in a desperate attempt to dampen the sound of Professor Menkin's booming voice. The professor gave a cry in an ancient dialect of the old kings that was louder than anything Aleister had heard before. His call shook more dust from the ceiling, and the building rocked under the weight of his command. Seated at his left and right hands, the two slender graywacke cats shook to life. They measured at least six feet from the ground to each shoulder. Both cats looked at each other and then growled in unison before jumping into the fray of mummified soldiers.

Aleister calmly let his hands fall from his ears and smiled while speaking to no one in particular. "Won't be long now."

A second sound grabbed the attention of the entire room, save for Professor Menkin, who was still deep in a trance absorbing the power and knowledge of a hundred dynasties. A row of stained glass windows in the ceiling shattered, sending broken glass raining down on the combatants below. Two ropes trailing hook arrows shot into the room and landed in the wood floor near Aleister. Splintered wood flew toward him, and he ducked out of the way.



On the ropes, two acrobats slid into the room with skill and bravery that betrayed their decade of high wire circus work and showed them to be Burnside Brotherhood agents. They were the husband and wife team formally known as The Flying Roses. They still wore matching red shirts in remembrance of their old trapeze days.

Morton Rose called out from behind his handlebar moustache as he released from his line. He snapped a long bullwhip and pulled a 12-inch blade from his belt. "Croft and Jameson! The Brotherhood sent us to lend a hand!" His 6' 4" frame was always welcome assistance.

Melba Rose slid into the room and released from her line in a full somersault. A single red rose in her hair seemed to stay perfectly still as she moved through the air. In the midst of the rotting skin and moldy fabric, Jameson could swear he smelled the scent of the sweet flower. Melba came to a full stop with both feet firmly planted in the head of one of the stone cats. Her long brown braid came to rest on one of her shoulders. With the force of her fall, the front half of the fearsome beast lay shattered into pieces, and Melba threw her hands up in celebration, snapping her own whip and sending her perfectly polished 12-inch blade into the air. The group of attacking mummies was thrown back briefly by the commotion of broken glass and shattering stone.

Jameson looked up from the ground, ready to break into applause. "Melba! I'm glad you showed up for the finale!"

Melba smiled as she began cracking her whip at the remaining black stone cat. "Mr. Jameson, the Roses always close the show!"

Morton snapped his whip at the remaining slender black stone cat. The Roses drove it back into a far corner, away from the fight that was trapped between large stone statues and crates of exhibit supplies. In between swipes at the cat, his whip flew to the floor, finding Croft's revolver and sending it flying back into Croft's hand. "On your feet Croft! You'll rest when you're dead!"

The two men once again stood back to back and faced the mob of dark-eyed, mindless mummies. And once again the mummies yelled with one voice, speaking for Professor Menkin.

"SUBMIT! SUBMIT AND YOU WILL BE DESTROYED WITH HASTE."

Croft kept his gun aimed at the approaching mummies but spared what little bullets he had left. "I don't think I like that offer."

Jameson swung his pistol around, trying to decide which monstrous former man

would reach him first. “I don’t think I like mummy breath! Do you have any blackjack on you?”

“No, I don’t have any gum. I have about 8 bullets left, a lighter that my wife gave me, and my Burnside Brotherhood card.”

“That’s it!” Jameson frantically held his hand out to Croft. “Hand me your lighter, quickly! And your jacket. Yes, your jacket should burn nicely!”

Croft let loose a round into the closest mummy while handing Jameson the lighter. “Here, but use your own coat. I’ll cover you.”

“Fine, I’ll use my coat, but I’m buying a new one with the money I owe you!” Jameson tossed his pistol to Croft, and he kept both men covered, firing each pistol alternately to keep the monsters off of them.

Across the room, Bert Colton, a senior at Miskatonic University, was making his way through the dense mass of dust and scarabs toward Professor Menkin, stepping over broken tables, stained glass, and priceless antiquities as he went. He fired the shotgun a mere two feet away from the man who was now glowing with the astral power of the ancients, but his buckshot merely passed through the professor harmlessly.

Bert looked down helplessly at his empty gun. “Damn, I was hoping it would be that easy!”

Jameson swung his flaming jacket around toward the mummies, easily keeping them at bay with the fire. “Who on Earth is that?” One of the mummies tried to brave the flames, and his bandages were quickly consumed in fire while he fell to the ground with a gruesome moan.

Croft squinted to see through the dust and smoke. “I do believe it’s the portly university student!”

“You’ll make just as good of a club!” Croft ran wildly toward Professor Menkin while dust coated his small, round spectacles. The wooden butt of the gun came crashing down on the head of the entranced professor and shattered into a thousand pieces.

Croft held it out in his hands, momentarily shocked by its destruction. In the opposite corner of the room, the Roses had cornered the graywacke stone cat. It occasionally swung out a claw and then pulled back as the Roses took turns whacking at its stone form with their blades. Chips of graywacke fell to the floor, but the damage was only superficial. Morton Rose pointed to a large, 10-foot



statue of Horus behind the cat and Melba nodded. They could have simply spoken to each other since the cat obviously spoke no English, but the two had worked together so long that they needed no words.

Melba and Morton jumped straight into the air and swung both their bullwhips toward the massive stone and metal statue. They came down and pulled their whips back with all their might. The stone cat spun around only to see the shadow of the large sculpture falling toward it. The two stone forces met each other and exploded into a pile of jagged rock and polished metal. The Roses smiled at each other and swung around to the sound of Bert Colton crying out in pain.

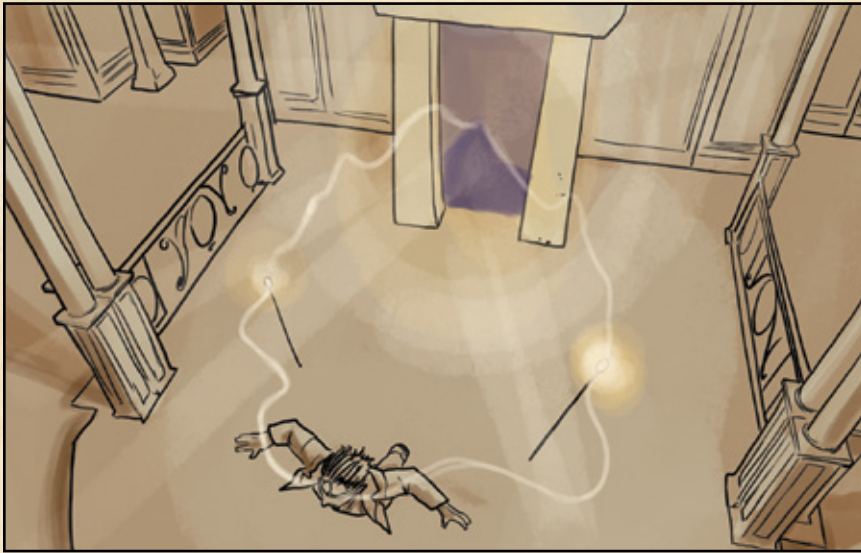
Professor Menkin was no longer in a trance. He now turned his head slowly to look at his assailant. Menkin held a firm grip on Bert’s forearm and raised it as he carried Bert into the air by his limb.

“Professor Menkin! Close this gate! This is not right! You’re going to hurt so many innocent lives!” Bert was desperate and hoped to somehow reach his former teacher.

PHARAOH MENKIN, THE FIRST KNOWS NO INNOCENTS. ONLY SUBJECTS!!!

The 5’ 8” frame of Professor Menkin then hurled Bert Colton across the room and into a wall with a force completely unnatural for a man of his size.

Professor Menkin turned back to face Croft and Jameson in the center of the room. The two of them were surrounded by the smoldering forms of mummies and held their guns straight at the professor.



Behind the professor, through the gate, an army could be seen marching toward them. Lancers on horseback, infantry in armor, and archers on chariots raced from the distance with dark, shadowy forms and purple glowing eyes. Their numbers were in the thousands and they headed straight for the gate with all the determination and fury of a conquering army.

Professor Menkin stepped forward and the two trails of light feeding him followed from the crystals in the spears at his right and left. Their light was growing brighter and brighter with every pulse.

Melba and Morton ran up to Croft and Jameson. They yelled in unison and pointed frantically, “The lenses, shoot the lenses before he finishes the absorption process!”

Croft finally noticed that the color and strength of the light was growing brighter. “Jameson, shoot the lenses!”

Both men unloaded their guns, and the crystals in the staffs shattered, each one sending a burst of light into the room. Everyone was forced to cover their eyes to protect themselves from the blinding strength of the glow. With his left arm over his face, Morton reached out and snapped his whip forward.

Menkin threw open his mouth to call out, but no sound came. Even with his eyes closed, Morton’s bullwhip found its mark and pulled at the crown, ripping it from his head. The crown went flying through the air and landed well into the darkened entry room where Menkin could not reach it.

“I got it!” Morton yelled in celebration. All four opened their eyes to see Menkin clawing at the air in terror, trying in vain to reach the lost crown. The torrent of wind no longer blew from the gate behind the professor but instead was being pulled in like a vortex. Dust and scarabs spiraled around the room, flowing back into the gate. Menkin hit the ground and clawed at it desperately, but his frame was being pulled backwards into the opening from another plane of existence. The army of dark warriors was not advancing toward the opening any longer and instead stood and watched the winds pull the room toward them with the same force that once poured out.

Corpses of mummies flew into the opening along with small pieces of stone and the wreckage of the once carefully curated displays. The four Burnside agents also began to feel the pull. Melba and Morton threw their whips around wood columns, and Croft and Jameson held onto them at the waist.

“That breeze will never take me!” Melba screamed out.

Croft looked back at the wind and could see it narrowing its focus. “No” he yelled, “it only wants Menkin!”

Menkin clawed at the ground, never letting his eyes drift from the distant crown in the other room. His teeth clenched, and he made one last effort to stand. The wood floor cracked under the weight of his steps, but in the end, he could not stand against the sucking force of the gate. He slid backwards, slowly at first, and then his body flew toward the gate. His hands landed on the edge, and he made one last effort to speak. This time his eyes looked sad and repentant. But it was too late. He slipped completely into the gate and flew toward the dark army along with all the rubble from the room.

The wind began to calm. The light started to die down, and the gate began to close. In the distance, in the final seconds the gate remained open, the dark army could be seen turning toward Menkin with wrathful intent. The gate closed and the wall behind it replaced the otherworldly sight. The room went quiet.

Aleister watched on from the safety of the dark entry area. He saw the Burnside Agents gather themselves up, and he looked down at the silver serpent crown that had fallen mere footsteps away from him.

“Professor Menkin, you were so close. So close.”

Part III

At 9AM a few days after the incident at the museum, Bert Colton shuffled down a small side street near the university. His right leg was bandaged heavily, and he walked with the help of a temporary wooden crutch. He paused at a small door in

front of an unassuming brick building with no windows that faced the street. Bert took a small piece of paper from his pocket and adjusted his glasses, confirming what was written on the paper. The last few days had been hard on Bert. His former professor and mentor had gone mad with power and then disappeared from this world. His left leg had been broken during the final battle, and his mind now seemed completely lost in the world of esoteric knowledge that was all new to him. Bert could no longer focus on his studies or even find time to shave. His face was covered with the blondish brown beginnings of a full beard.



“This must be the place.” Bert held his piece of paper out and knocked on the door, using a large brass knocker that was crafted in the shape of a demon’s face.

The door swung open, and a doorman wearing a black suit welcomed Bert into the room.

“Please, come in sir,” he said, motioning with one arm toward the house.

Bert stepped in and looked around, handing the slip of paper to the doorman. “Here you go. I think you’ll find it’s all in order.”

“Oh, I don’t need your invitation, sir. We’ve been expecting you. They’re waiting for you now in the red room.” The doorman motioned toward a hallway, and Bert hobbled toward it.

“Ok, thank you very much then.” Bert eventually covered the distance to the red room. He went down a long hallway with wooden panels and turquoise wall paper that was filled with framed portraits of rugged-looking individuals. He leaned over to take a peek into the red room before walking in, thinking the name sounded a bit sinister. But he quickly realized the room was named so for the red floral wallpaper covering the walls.

“Bert, please, get in here, you dog!” Jameson was the first to spot Bert and waved him into the room while talking to an older man with a small white beard.

“This is the fellow I was chatting you up about. He is quite the devil with a shotgun, let me tell you,” Jameson said as he scooped Bert into the room, pushing him a little faster than his broken leg would allow.

“Well, I don’t know about all that.” Bert said sheepishly while adjusting his glasses.

Croft turned around and saw the two men join the group gathering in the red room. Most had a drink in their hands and looked like non-descript business men, scholars, and their wives, except that many of them had visible scars, limps, or were even missing limbs.

“Bert, you’re too modest. I’d say, if it wasn’t for you, we might not be here today!” Croft said as pushed a drink into Bert’s free hand.

“I don’t think I can take all the credit. The Roses sure lent a hand as well” Bert replied, analyzing his bubbling glass of what looked like champagne.

Morton and Melba Rose stepped forward from the crowd, each holding glasses. “My friend, we were ordered to be there, sent by the Brotherhood. You? Why you just--”

“You just jumped right in, didn’t you? From the frying pan into the fire!” Melba interrupted Morton, and they both laughed.

The older man with the white beard took Bert by the arm and slowly led him to one side of the room.

Between the gold cloth couch and the standing globe, the man spoke slowly and directly.

“Mr. Colton, I have to personally thank you for your assistance at the museum.”

“Like I said before, sir, it was nothing. Really.” Bert was a little taken aback by the celebratory atmosphere in the room.

“Son, there is a difference between false modesty and modesty. What you did was not something anyone could or would do. The fact that you did it is the reason you are here today.”

“I’m still not sure about this. I can’t stop thinking about what happened at the

museum. Where's Aleister? And what happened to the professor's body and the Serpent Crown? What place did we see on the other side of that gate?" Bert raised a hand to his head as he tried to gather his thoughts.

"Mr. Colton, I'm sure you have a lot of questions. Aleister has most likely taken leave back to his home estate after an incident that must have seemed unexplainable to him. And the professor was swept from this plane of existence along with dozens of other artifacts and the Serpent Crown, no doubt. We won't be seeing them again."

"But sir, there is doubt. There is so much doubt. What happened there; what does it all mean? What did I see? I can't sleep; I can't think straight. I don't know what to do!"

Bert seemed to plead with the old man for answers.

The man placed his hand on Bert's arm and looked up into his eyes. Bert Colton was not a tall man, but the older gentlemen was even shorter. It was then that Bert noticed one of his eyes was false and didn't completely match the gaze of his natural eye. Bert assumed he had lost it in some struggle ages ago.

"Son, the bad dreams, the doubts about your sanity, all these questions—you want to run away and hide, don't you? You want to forget everything you've seen?"

Bert stared at the man and smiled, like the mother of a sick child begging a doctor for good news. "No sir." Bert fixed his gaze, "I want to know more."

"Ha ha ha ha!" The man let out a hearty laugh and slapped Bert on the back. "Well then you will make a great addition to the Burnside Brotherhood. Come, come, we have to take your initiation photograph, and then we will regale you with stories of our past conquests, I assure you!"

Croft was standing near Jameson and the Roses when he motioned for Bert to join them. "Come on now, get over here, Bert!"

"Bert, you've earned a spot here. Come and claim it!" Melba smiled and moved over a step to make room.

"Bert, I see you didn't shave! It works, it works, don't worry." Jameson moved over in the other direction and held his arm out so Bert could join the group.

"Mr. Colton, Let me be the first to officially welcome you to the Brotherhood!" Morton flashed a perfect smile from behind his moustache, and Bert joined the group.

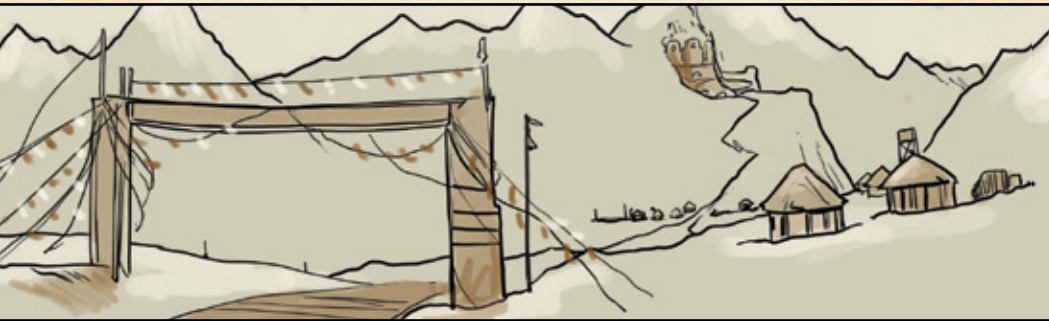
A photographer facing them tried to wrangle everyone closer. "Step in over there, yes, and you with the spectacles, could you just step forward a bit? Yes, that's perfect!"

The camera flashed and the photograph was taken. A moment in time was frozen forever. A moment before everything changed.



BROTHER JEROME & THE MONASTERY OF THE THREE BELLS

STORY AND ART BY
PAUL ROMAN MARTINEZ



Dearest Friend,

I am writing to you now in hopes that the details contained herein will explain my most recent actions in full. Since our earliest school days, you and I have been close. Almost brothers. I know you would see through any thinly veiled excuses, and your inquisitions would not relent until you knew the full truth. So here is that truth, in all its unimaginable horror. I still sometimes awaken from sleep and have to remind myself that it wasn't all a terrible dream.

Arrival

The nightmare began soon after claiming my transfer to the Monastery of the Three Bells. While in the seminary, my free time was spent studying ancient farming techniques in hopes of becoming the next Gregor Mendel. I longed for a place where I could revolutionize the local agricultural practices and feed the many with only a handful of seeds.

My search for a chance to make a real difference in the world took me to a small traveler's refuge resting at the feet of the great Himalayan Mountains. In my youthful exuberance and hubris, I felt there were no challenges for

THE MONASTERY OF THE THREE BELLS

me in the Americas or in Europe. I purposefully sought the most remote monastery I could find with the desire to bring the hope that a bountiful harvest from the Lord can provide to the tired and starving. Of course, the Buddhists would say that the root of all suffering is desire.

There is nothing that can prepare you for the imposing nature of these mountains.

If you took the tallest peak visible from my childhood homestead and stood it on itself four times over, you still would not reach halfway to the tallest summit of the grand Himalayas. Covering most of Nepal, they held back the Mongol horde, and their mass and height are large enough to affect the weather. A small village consisting of a few shops, homes, and some scattered pens for animals hid in the cracks and shadows at the base of the mountains. In all directions, a grey mist permanently hung in the air. It seemed that the mountain range went on forever in all directions. No matter how far you walked, the mist never ended. The small village was an island lost in a sea of stone.

A few hundred feet above the town, the Monastery of the Three Bells had been carved partially from the existing rock by earlier missionaries. The monastery towers looked down disapprovingly at the local architecture. I was sure that God himself had taken a small Gothic German church and forced it into the face of the mountains until it could be buried no further. It was an amusing thought to picture angry villagers in Northern Germany waking up one day to find their place of worship missing.

The monastery and the town only existed because of a small trail that, at times, was barely wide enough for a single person to walk through and was generously known to the locals as the traveler's road. This road was one of the few places for a hundred miles in either direction that allowed safe passage through the wall of rock and dirt to reach the Tibetan plateaus on the other side. It was no more noticeable than a mouse hole behind the altar at St. Peter's basilica, but if not for that small hole, the town and the monastery would not exist.

From a distance through the mist, the Monastery of the Three Bells looked imposing and strong, holding up the grey mountains on its light-orangish brown shoulders. When I reached the gates, the mirage was less convincing. A thick layer of dirt covered the long dormant brass bells. Most townspeople lived their whole lives and had children themselves without ever hearing them chime. Barely containing all of the monastery grounds was a dirty, hand-forged, rod iron fence with a tall, richly appointed gate.

The hand-pounded ironwork contained the only visual reminder of the Lord's presence, aside from the shape of the church itself. In the middle of both gate

doors, among detailed, twisted bars forming vines and leaves, the shape of two crosses was left empty. At first, I reasoned that the builders wanted to be subversive in their proselytization and reach their flock through words and good works. But in time, I would realize another truth about why this monastery was so devoid of religious iconography.

Even the construction of the church was a bit of an illusion. It was as if the rudimentary shape of a church already existed here, and someone took the bare minimum amount of time necessary to emphasize the details. Lines were carved into the face of the monastery to emulate blocks of stone. The front entrance had flowers and the heads of serious looking animals carved in relief. These all framed a solid, heavy, timber door. Around the monastery were smaller buildings that had been crafted in the local style. Past these, minimal structures stood, relegated to animal pens or areas reserved for growing small amounts of food.

The monks of the Three Bells lived a quiet life of solitary prayer and reflection.

In their small gardens and pens, enough food was cultivated to keep their interaction with the locals at a minimum. Their charge was to pray for travelers along the road. In serious cases, those passing through the mountains could receive nourishment and a good night's rest before returning to their pilgrimage. The trek through the mountain pass was a dangerous one. The Monastery of the Three Bells provided a very important service to travelers, and if the crop yields could be increased, I had hoped they could also help feed the small town that sat in its shadow.

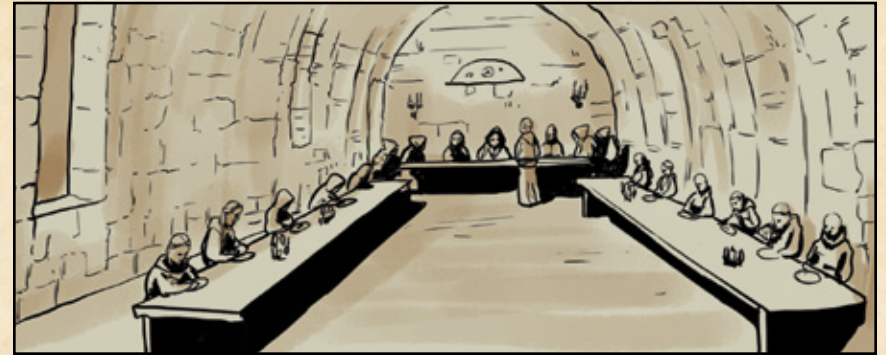
The senior monks were most devout and spent almost every waking hour locked in deep prayer. Upon my arrival, I was welcomed unceremoniously by a few brothers who showed me to my quarters and gave me a very vague description of the daily schedule. It was only on the third night after the evening mass that I finally made the acquaintance of the Senior Abbott.

I was told that the monastery elders attended mass from behind a partition. I was always keenly aware that they could be watching, but it wasn't until supper that I actually saw them. As I first approached the table where the seven elders sat, I noticed none of them had any food in their bowls. They appeared very advanced in age, and I assumed the need for sustenance waned along with most other earthly desires in the twilight years.

"It's a pleasure to be here, and I humbly look forward to--" I began to introduce myself to the Senior Abbot seated in the center of the seven men. He had no hair on his head, and his bushy, white eyebrows almost met in the center of his face.

Interrupting me with a slow, crawling tone, the abbot spoke. "You . . . are here for a reason. As . . . are we all. I have no doubt . . . you will find . . . your place . . . here."

Then the abbot looked down at the crucifix that hung from my belt with a slight wince and spoke again. "The Brothers....here....keep no....personal....effects."



My eyes went to the crucifix at my side, and I was about to respond to the abbot when he leaned over and began whispering a conversation to the elder monk next to him. His speech wasn't labored or tired like that of an old man. It was steady, even, and unhurried, like someone to whom time had no meaning. In such an isolated place, I could see how the ticks of a clock could become meaningless. Excusing myself, I returned to my table. Finishing my meal quietly, I could hear the other monks sipping their soup and eating their bread. The diners were synchronized, and when one dipped a piece of bread in their soup, the others followed within a second. If one took a drink of wine, a dozen other glasses were lifted casually soon after. It wasn't frightening at all. In fact, it was comforting. I soon unknowingly fell into a pattern very close to theirs. It was a freeing experience.

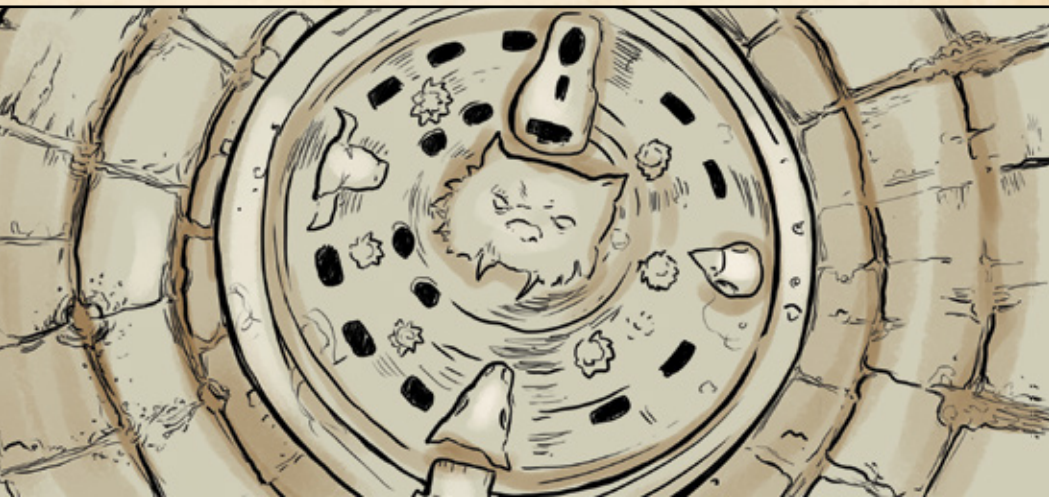
Discovery

Only a few days later, the uniformity of the monks no longer felt freeing; it felt confining. The entire hermitage seemed foreign to me still. It was then that I decided to more thoroughly explore the grounds. I'd hoped a detailed accounting of my surroundings might make me finally feel at home. At all times, there were brothers in prayer somewhere on the monastery grounds. Their chants filled the latest and earliest hours with prayers that sounded like the distant buzzing of bees. It was both hypnotic and dizzying. My sleep was always restless.

In my explorations, I located many empty and unused store rooms, empty rooms for travelers, a dusty library that was severely under used, and the opening to the catacombs beneath the main transept of the church. The entrance to these underground tunnels was covered by a heavy iron hatch with etchings that were similar to those on the front gate of the monastery grounds. The weight of the iron hatch was almost more than I could bear. I lifted it only part way to look down into the tunnels below. Before letting the hatch slam down to its original resting place, which sent an echo vibrating off every wall, I noted that the catacombs looked to be cool, spacious, and unused. Their climate seemed perfect for growing mushrooms. Above ground, the pens and gardens outside barely had enough animals to feed the brothers. It didn't make sense how there could be any extra to offer to hungry travelers. You know my inquisitive nature well; for me, this was a puzzle that needed solving.

Assuming the elders would want to hear about ways to increase their yield, I made meticulous notes on expansion plans and prepared them for presentation. But the elders were not to be found. They never roamed the grounds during the day and only occasionally appeared at the evening meal. The other monks seemed to know little of their comings and goings. Every brother was completely enraptured by their daily prayers and their responsibilities in maintaining the hermitage. There was absolutely no idle conversation or even humor. Until that day, I had never met a man of the cloth who did not appreciate an uplifting anecdote about wayward souls in some amusing situation or another.

The opportunity to give my research to the abbot finally came, but I had the misfortune of timing my delivery with the late arrival of several weary travelers. There was a fuss about getting them fed and settled, and my notes were forgotten in the excitement. I must admit, it was exciting for me as well. The lack of conversation among the brothers was beginning to take a toll on



my sanity. It was common at monasteries to take a vow of silence or speak only when spoken to, but things were different here. Even when I initiated conversation, the brothers could only offer short responses.

It was good to hear some rugged tales of the mountain road from the visiting travelers.

That night was my best night's sleep since my arrival at the Three Bells. The haze of the monastery was temporarily shaken, and I began to think clearly again. All humility aside, I knew I was the best at my particular skill, and I recommitted myself to making the necessary changes to the fields and animal pens in order to insure a proper supply of food.

But my resolve the following morning quickly returned to a state of dazed confusion when I was informed that the travelers had departed very early before I awoke. When I rose, the sun had still not even come over the mountains. The travelers must have only slept four or five hours at most. Stranger still, a pack animal complete with gear was left in one of our pens alongside our meager and sickly selection of beasts. When pressed, a brother told me the travelers didn't want the extra encumbrance of another animal on the narrow mountain passages. Even more odd was that this seemed to be a regular occurrence.

We rarely received visitors, but every time a traveler came through the hermitage gates, they left something behind. Often it was a pack animal or two; sometimes it was a few bags of supplies, weapons, or even food. And always I was given the same story of overburdened souls freeing themselves from a few of their earthly possessions for the trek ahead. There was a growing sense of unease about this arrangement, but no part of me could think of a reasonable or even unreasonable explanation for the situation.

The unease was heightened by the constant nightly and daily prayers being chanted in some distant part of the monastery. Of course a copious amount of prayer is common at all hermitages, but the hours they kept at the Three Bells were unnatural. At times, their prayers kept me from getting a good night's rest, which left my mind dull and clouded. It was all I could do to tend to the existing crops properly. Because of the strange atmosphere, I struggled to remember my skills. I had almost completely lost my passion for transforming the monastery. I never saw the monks praying in seclusion, and their chants were too far away and muffled for me to decipher.

I might have lost myself completely in this monotone routine of subsistence if it weren't for a unique pair of travelers that arrived one day.

Sometime in the spring, a mother and her young daughter sought sanctuary at our doorstep before joining a group making their way through the pass. So often were the travelers gruff angry men that the sound of a child's laughter felt as refreshing as taking my first breath of air in the morning. I showed both of them around the parts of the monastery that were open to outsiders and told them my most humorous anecdotes along the way. The mother smiled politely, and the young girl laughed with abandonment at my impersonations of various farm animals. She held onto her mother with one hand and clung to a small cloth doll that wore a red wrap with the other. The doll's head was adorned with dark hair, and its face wore no expression. The blankness reminded me of my fellow brothers as they walked passed us in the halls and ignored the visitors. How could they not be moved by this mother's journey and her daughter's innocence?

I thought to myself, was this not the reason for everything? Were we not put on this earth and set up against this mountain to guide and protect these two very people who now graced our halls? I could not tell you what I suspected, but I only knew that something inside me or a voice from above told me to watch over these two and see them off safely. Providence found me in the latest hours of the evening outside the mother and daughter's chamber, trying to stay awake. I was determined to make sure I saw them off. I tried to think of anything to keep me awake, but the buzz of the nightly prayers made it difficult.

I pictured one of my greatest accomplishments in Southern Germany. I'd arrived at a run down farm a fresh faced young man eager to make a difference and prove myself. Within one harvest, I had increased the yield of that land tenfold. To thank me, the brothers held a feast in my honor and invited locals from the countryside. I've never been one for earthly comforts, but sitting in that hallway staring at that large wooden door, I longed for the green hills of Europe. A flicker from a candle inside the room sent an orange light dancing under the door. My eyes followed it back and forth.

A gust of wind passed through the monastery, and the candle was extinguished. My only company was gone. Then, in the distance, a clock began to chime midnight. I knew that clock well. When I arrived, it had barely been working. I had cleaned off the dust and properly weighted the arms. I was now confident it rang true. I may be amiss, but somewhere around the third chime I blinked. When my eyes reopened, the clock chimed twice more then stopped. I had briefly fallen asleep! I had been dead asleep for seven chimes from the old clock.

Even then I couldn't tell you why, but I felt panicked. The terror of having fallen asleep between the tones of the clock sent me flying to my feet. I threw the wooden door open, and it creaked and slammed against the stone walls. The small window was shut tightly, but the moonlight filled the room,

revealing every stick of furniture and every crevice of stone brick. My eyes followed its path across the room, searching everywhere for signs of life.

The mother and daughter were gone.



I relit the candle and placed it in a lantern hanging on the wall. After checking under the bed and making sure the window hadn't been disturbed, I began to frantically search the monastery for the mother and daughter. My search widened to the grounds and storage buildings. When my candle burned small and melted over, I replaced it with a fresh one. My panic began to subside when I realized I had no idea why I was panicking. But my resolve grew. I had to find out what happened to that little girl. And in doing so, I would discover the fate of all the missing travelers.

I searched from room to room in the hermitage. Every storage room and every closet was ransacked during my search. All I found were a few grumbling and dazed monks. Nowhere did I see the elders or their quarters. The catacombs I had discovered earlier beneath the main church were my last hope for answers. I once again pulled open the heavy iron hatch, this time letting it fall open backwards on the stone floor. The hatch sent hairline cracks rippling outward through the reddish stone. The sound of the crash was still ringing between my ears when I realized the distant sound of prayer was currently quiet. The cool, moist passageway beneath the main abbey quickly released a clue. At the base of the dusty stone steps leading to a network of tunnels, there sat the small, faceless doll with black hair. Toys are rare in the hardest places where children need them most. I knew there was no chance the girl had left it here on accident, and there was no reason for the mother and daughter to be in the catacombs.

Swallowing hard, I pressed further into the tunnels, deeper than I'd dared to venture in my previous explorations.

Empty chamber followed empty chamber. The passageways between tomb chambers were just shorter than my full height, causing me to crouch as I explored. Each chamber was older and more decomposed than the last. I carried with me a single candle that, by this point, was close to extinguished. Finally I reached the end of the twisted, broken passageways. At the last doorway, I entered a room that was well kept and not destroyed like the others. There were new candles in holders all around the edges, and a few oil lamps stood on brass stands. Lighting each one, I made my way around the room, and a library mausoleum was revealed to me. In this circular room, the walls were lined with shelves stuffed with dusty books and papers. Only one row stood out. It was in the middle of the walls crossing the sections of books. This row was marked by seven ornately covered tombs that matched the entrance to the catacombs. The amount of dust on them was lighter than the layer of dirt and age covering the ancient tomes. I presumed them to be newer than the rest of the decor.

The only other area not covered in a layer of amber colored dust was a brass altar that stood toward one side of the circular room. On this shiny, polished altar sat two large candle holders that each contained a half-melted candle. I lit both of them and, in between the two, I noticed three large volumes with leather covers and strange symbols. There were books in small piles and on carved out shelves all around the room, but these three were placed very carefully on the altar and were free from the dust that covered the others. They reminded me of a text I'd read long ago in Eastern Europe that had been filled with an archaic alphabet describing many pagan rituals and folk tales.

It was not uncommon for orders in isolated lands to research customs based on local myths and legends. For a moment, I hoped that's all I was looking at there in the strange room under the candlelight, until I opened the cover of the center book with its wrinkled leather cover. I could not make out most of what was written inside. The nature of the illustrations, however, spoke volumes. I remember this clearly, for it was the very moment I lost all hope of finding a reasonable explanation for the strangeness at the hermitage. I looked up and slammed the book shut. With as much haste as I could muster, I gathered up the three books on the altar. Pulling a slightly fresher candle to guide my way back out, I ran to the safety of my room. The halls were filled with a pre-dawn calm. Despite the terror floating in the atmosphere, I made it to my room unharmed. My door slammed and echoed through the halls. The morning light was coming in through my window. I blew out the candle in my hand, and the knocks began.

Quiet at first, I could hear the murmur of my brothers outside my door. I peered through a gap in the boards and saw my fellow brothers wandering back and forth in front of my room. They seemed to have no purpose and had an absent look in their eyes. Occasionally one would knock or pound on my door and then wander back to the group. They circled like cowardly buzzards,

never attacking. They looked agonized and worried but appeared harmless. Still, I pulled my solid wooden bed in front of the door as a precaution before working on a solution to the riddle I found in the catacombs.

Laying out all three books, I went about translating whatever I could to try and make sense of the situation. When the sun was at its peak, the murmur became almost unbearable. With the din in the background, the passages became clearer, and an answer began to form. There were illustrations of sigils in one of the books that had much in common with the runes of ancient Germanic texts I had translated in my youth. Using notes from my own small, personal library, I formed a theory about the dark mental fog that surrounded the monastery grounds. It was a theory that could drive an ordinary man mad, and not one I came to lightly.

Confrontation

This was when everything began to come together. The fellow monks were not brothers of mine. They were familiars, mortals who could travel by day to keep the monastery running while their dark masters slept. And the travelers? I never saw them in the mornings because they never left. Those unlucky enough to walk into the Monastery of the Three Bells almost never walked out. The books even explained why I never saw the masters of the monastery. Their affliction had many side effects. First, they could never walk out into the sunlight or they would perish. They were destined to live forever, undying and cursed to a life of darkness. In exchange for an everlasting life in the shadows, the Elder Monks could only feed on the life blood of others. They were a vampyric order whose creation traced back hundreds if not thousands of years. The orange book showed the eldest of the elders had been vampyres long before the monastery was built, before any travelers made their way through the Himalayas. They were living in darkness before the



monastic order itself was formed. The pages of the books referenced several civilizations that had risen and fallen long before our known history was even starting to be written.

I knew then that if I was going to affect any kind of change in the monastery, I had until nightfall to put something into play or I would become the next victim. The elders in their daily sleep had no doubt already noticed my intrusion into their sanctuary and had somehow worked the other monks into a frenzy using whatever mental bond they maintained. I had heard legends of vampyres in my youth, but the orangish book of unnatural leather held the first real clues to defeating them. Despite the moaning throng of brother monks outside my door, I just had to make it to the storage area where the lost travelers' things were kept.

I pushed through my fellow brothers to get to there. They were barely human now.

Eyes stared through me blankly and mouths hung open, moaning and pawing at my robes. Sometimes I could make out a fragment of a word—like “stop” or “don’t,” but for the most part their primal anger at my intrusion into their masters' sanctuary turned them into animals. Human animals. Withstanding much pushing and scratching, I finally made it to the storage shed and barricaded myself in using some carefully placed wooden benches at the door of the small building. Boxes and assorted items left here over the years lined walls that should have been filled with pots, seeds, or other growing materials. Every hour of daylight was precious. The elders would soon emerge from their crypts and hunt me down, dragging me deep into the catacombs with them to whatever fate the girl and her mother had met. I immediately began assembling a small arsenal based on my newfound knowledge. To drown out the noise of the moaning monks, I recited prayers to myself and tried to focus



on the work at hand. Their cries sounded painful, like a dog whose paw is caught in some bit of wire.

After carving pieces of wood into sharp shards, I hardened them with fire and then dipped them in sacramental oils. Amongst the metal working tools and items that could double as weapons, I found bundles belonging to the travelers of the past years. It was here that I found actual weapons, and my mission was imbued with a new sense of bravado. I modified the small cache of ammunition with carvings my research from the elder's books told me would cause great pain to the vampyre race. Then I dipped each bullet in the sacramental oils and carefully loaded them into the round drum that clipped into the weapon. At my side was a large crucifix I had been given on my 16th birthday by my uncle when I left home to pursue a life of devotion. It hung from my belt, and I sharpened the bottom end of the cross to a point. It felt sacrilegious to carve such a holy item in that way, but I knew the sight of the thing would contribute to a panic I was hoping to instill in the elders, and I recalled the abbot looking at it disdainfully when first we met.

Pushing the doors of the shed open, I made my way to the entrance of the catacombs. The brothers moaned and dropped to their knees, pleading with me in indecipherable sounds not to complete my mission. On my back, I carried the automatic weapon, and two leather straps filled with sharpened and blessed shards of wood hung across my chest. In a cloth satchel under my arm, I carried the large orange tome that I had removed from the crypt earlier. Moving through the crowd of mad monks, I found myself wondering what other creatures might be real now that the vampyre had proven to be more than a myth. And then, for a second, the hum of the brothers' moans filled my head and I began to lose footing.

I spoke to myself in a voice unfamiliar to me. “Wait, what am I doing? Surely the monks can’t be agents of the damned. Surely there is some other explanation.”

My hands flew to the top of my head, and I crumbled at the doors to the church. Only one set of doors and a small hatch kept me from entering the catacombs, but I fell to the ground and clutched my head as an indescribable madness set in. There was a sound in my head—a voice that wasn't mine. It was mumbling something in a calm, monotone fashion that I couldn't quite make out. My brothers descended on me. They did not hurt me but instead seemed to want to get as close as possible so I couldn't move. They piled around me, climbing over each other to get closer, and their moans grew more powerful as the voice in my head reached a terrifying crescendo. I scratched at the skin on my cheeks, and the pain shook the voice from the back of my mind. I pulled the large gun from my back and fired a stream of bullets into the air. The monks flew away from me and, in the momentary reprise, I took my chance to run through the doors of the church. The sound

of the gunfire shook the second voice from my mind and refocused my thoughts. I barricaded the church doors with some nearby candle holders and, within seconds, I was climbing down the small passageway that lead to the catacombs.

The Final Cadenza

In the room with the altar surrounded by fresh tombs, I lit several candles and oil lamps. I began drawing symbols from the books on the floor in white chalk. With the book open in front of me, I carefully copied the signs and sigils, making sure each line was in its proper place. As the floor became filled with these symbols, I could hear movements and the sounds of suffering from behind the iron lids that covered each tomb. My brow filled with sweat, and I could barely see, but I knew something was already happening. Fumbling through the ancient and worn book, I sought a page that I had discovered earlier. I readied my gun and wiped the sweat from my eyes with my sleeve.

A rustic form of Latin poured from my mouth. The words seemed twisted by the centuries of silence, but I could still understand the meaning of the incantation I recited.

Behind me, stone was cracking, iron was bending, and I heard screams from within the tombs. I began to repeat the chant once more when one of the tombs burst open, hurling stone and dust in my direction. I unleashed a hail of consecrated bullets into the shadows, and a mass of blackened, twisted flesh fell at my feet. It was one of the elder monks still in his robes. His body was filled with bullet holes that oozed black blood, and his skin was charred black and smoldering. The reality of the situation was shocking, but I pushed forward and kept reading. The incantation was working; it was weakening the elder vampyres enough for me to strike the final blow. Two more tombs burst open, sending bits of stone hurtling into the dimly lit room as the iron lids fell to the floor. Once again I pulled the trigger, and two more masses of smoldering flesh lay near my feet.

I kept reading.

“Brother Jerome.” A muffled voice called from one of the darkened corners of the room.

I kept my gun ready, but I did not deviate from the incantation.

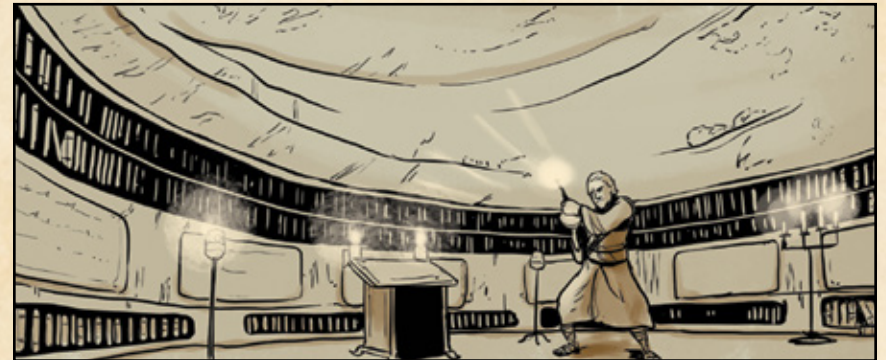
“Brother Jerome!” The voice grew louder, as if scolding me.

A shape emerged from a tomb to my left, and I unleashed another flood of bullets, then two at once on my right. A tomb cracked and exploded behind me. I spun around, sending a wave of bullets throughout the room, all the while trying to keep the incantation going from memory. The candles

flickered, and I knocked down one of the tall candle holders. This sent my large shadow climbing up the opposite wall. Between the dust, the sweat, and the cries of dying vampyres, I mistook my shadow for one of the elders and unleashed the last of my bullets into the stone wall. Then there came a brief pause. I kept my chant alive, but in my mind, I imagined the surviving elders allowing me a moment to contemplate what was coming next.

The last tombs finally exploded. I kept reciting the incantation, and my hands searched my robes desperately for another weapon. But before I could reach a tool that would save my mortal soul, I felt a pair of arms around my shoulders holding me tightly. I could barely breath when a voice that smelled like tainted meat spoke into my ear. Every part of my body was equally disgusted and terrified.

“Brother Jerome, you have sinned against this monastery!”



The next sensation I had was the feeling of teeth sinking into my neck. My life’s blood was being very literally sucked out of me. I was thrown with great fury to the stone floor. From the loss of blood, I became dizzy and weak. I had trouble collecting my thoughts. I could barely move my limbs, but my mouth still worked. I continued uttering the chant as best as I could, but the words were few and far between. In the haze of my barely conscious state, I could see the unmistakable figure of the abbot moving toward me. Behind him, two more elder monks released themselves from their tombs. Far from the elders’ tombs, I could hear the acolytes of the monastery who had pushed their way into the church and were now banging on the passage to the catacombs. I turned my head to look toward the direction of the doorway, fully expecting the flood of fellow monks to explode into the room and try to save their masters. I mumbled a few more words from the incantation when the head abbot grabbed my head and turned me to face him.

His skin was black from the spell I was casting. Parts of it were crumbling away like ash. He squeezed my mouth open so I could no longer speak, and

THE MONASTERY OF THE THREE BELLS

then he sunk his teeth into his forearm and held it over my mouth, allowing the black liquid to drip freely.

“It’s time for you to be silent, Brother Jerome! Be silent!”

I gurgled on his black blood. Out of a reflexive instinct not to drown, my throat swallowed. I felt the liquid trickling into my body. It coated my mouth; it dribbled down my chin. It enveloped my stomach. I was going to be sick. My body rejected this substance. It was less like blood and more like warm tar. It was coming back up, and the abbot capped his hand over my mouth.

“Now,” he whispered with his nose almost touching mine, “we will replenish the ranks. Starting with you.”

Inside, my belly burned; my lungs burned; my body felt like it was on fire. The abbot motioned for the other two monks to carry me to an empty tomb. I scratched at my own skin like a cloak I could remove. The two monks forced my writhing body into an unbroken tomb and began to close the lid. In the folds of my cloak, I found the last of my arsenal. The abbot was bending downward to pick up the tome from which I had read the spell.

“You disrespect us and our ways. You will learn respect. You have a thousand years to learn.”



The abbot’s blood had an immediate transformative effect on me. The burning sensation deep in my soul was maddening and confusing from within the darkness of the tomb. I could see the lid being raised into place over me. In the madness, I became acutely aware of what every part of my body was doing. My hands clenched into fists, and I reached into my robes for two wooden spikes. I pushed forward, out of the tomb, flying at him like a predator. Leaping out, my feet never touched the ground. With one hand, I speared the vampyre monk to my right in the center of his chest, and with the other, I buried another wooden stake into the heart of the elder on my left. In

any other time, these elder monks would have destroyed me easily with the strength they had amassed during hundreds of years of unholy feeding. But they were weak; their skin still looked black and red, turning to ash from my incantation. My spell had taken away their strength, and now my body was growing stronger every second with the blood of the eldest vampyre monk entering the deepest parts of my body. Dust and chalk went flying outward as I finally landed on the cold stone floor across the room. My hand touched one of the sigils I had drawn before. It sent a terrible sensation vibrating through me, and I was forced to quickly lift my palm. These sigils, which had helped to weaken the elders so thoroughly, now affected me greatly.

The abbot turned to me and held the orange book high. “You must be taught respect!” His eyes were red with fury, and when he spoke, the walls shook loose more layers of ancient dust.

I tried to run forward, but when my first foot left the ground, the second did not touch down again until I had cleared the space of the entire room and was standing directly in front of him. These new powers meant the ground had lost its grip on me. The sharpened wooden crucifix felt hot in my hand as I plunged it into his heart. The abbot let out a brief scream that transformed into laughter. I jumped back, clearing the distance again in one leap, and shot him with the remaining consecrated bullets from the small pistol I carried. He moaned once more in pain and then laughed at my futile attempt.

“One day...you may be ... as powerful...as I am. Until then...your place... will be... beneath my thumb.” His words still trickled out with no rush, no sense of time.

The abbot waved his hands over me, mumbling some ancient words, and I began to once again feel disoriented. My body was strong, but my mind was frail and brittle. Because of the dark blood that we now shared, the elder monk had a strange influence over me. My heart beat slowed, and I fell to my knees. In the distance, the sound of falling stone and metal meant the entrance to the catacombs had finally given way, and the sound of footsteps from the monks coming to save their master grew louder.

There was a passage in the literature that had prepared me for this, but in the haze, I could not recover it. I could see clearly that there was an answer, but that answer was elusive. The abbot laughed and scolded me further, and then I remembered.

To this point, I feel compelled to remind you I had already come out of myself so much that I was no longer someone I recognized. The human part of me felt small and distant.

Having gone through the eye of the needle, I was now on the other side, and there was no going back. My eyes shot upward as my body hunched over in pain. The abbot still spoke, and I forced my arm to weakly reach out for the nearest oil lantern. It took all the mental fortitude I could muster and an inner strength I was unaware of possessing to pull it toward him. The oils spilled out over his feet, and the flames grew, consuming his old, dry robes. The burst of flames caused him to lose his concentration for just a moment. With his spell over me temporarily weakened, I reached for the large, black metal base of the oil lamp. I knew what had to be done, and my constitution was not one for grave or macabre work. Nevertheless, I began. With the first blow, the heavy iron candle holder sent the abbot flying across the room.

His flaming robes died out and began to smolder. Before he could recover, I was back on him, swinging the pole wildly. I whirled the candle holder into the black and ashy flesh at his throat. With every swing, I thought of the travelers who never left. I swung for the days and months I had wasted falling under the abbot's spell. And I swung for the young girl, who I knew would never see the sunrise again. Then I swung one last time when I realized that, because of the abbot's blood in me, I had also seen my last sunrise.

It took more strokes than the average person could probably bear, but the head of the abbot had been separated from his body. The horde finally arrived at the entrance to the elders' sacred room, but they just stared at me, dumbfounded, as if someone had ripped the thoughts from their heads and replaced them with utter emptiness.

Reaching for another oil lamp, I poured it on the abbot's body and head. I gathered all the books in the room together and threw them onto him. Then I said a prayer in the rustic, broken Latin from the book. The abbot's remains glowed and then turned to a crumbling pile of black ash. The horde of hypnotized monks began to slowly wake up and realize where they were,



but they were still filled with much confusion. It would take time for them to reacclimate to having a will of their own again. My eyes searched the room and found none of the elders moving. Their presence had been ended. Aside from the mass of mindless brothers, I was completely alone.

Then another prayer came to me. An oath. In that moment, in that room, I promised the creator, the hand behind all that is seen and unseen, that I would spend the rest of my days protecting others on the traveler's route from demons like the abbot and his elders. And even though I was now a demon who hungered for blood, like them, I promised I would never take the blood of a human, and if necessary I would even protect the travelers from myself. This I promised the Lord.

I can't tell you how long ago that was because time has very little meaning here. I can tell you that after a while, the other monks left. Most could not comprehend what had gone on at the monastery and wanted to be far away from the madness; some had only planned on staying a few years and longed to return home. I now run the monastery alone. I keep a small flock of beasts to feed on, and I still try to help weary travelers as they pass by. The hope that keeps me going is that one day I may finally make up for the years of evil the elder monks unleashed on the travelers here at the Monastery of the Three Bells. As a monk, I am ashamed for what they did here, and it has fallen on me to pay their penance.

I hope you can see now why I won't ever be visiting again. In my current condition, travel during the daylight hours is extremely difficult, and my hungers require quite a bit of attention. Please give my love to the family. May God bless you, and may he see fit to someday release me from this curse.

Your Friend in Eternal Hunger,
Abbot of the Monastery of the Three Bells,
Brother Jerome