



TERRA NOVA

Prologue:

The Testing Site. A Sacrifice
is Made. The Light.

The men shivered in the cramped quickstone building. The generators were not putting off enough heat to keep the freezing wind out. The wireman's teeth chattered as he looked at his partner. The coldest months in northern Vinlandia were terrible, but here, less than a week's travel from the Unknown Region, it felt as if all the cold in the world had been scraped up and packed under his snow-clothes.

The atomcrafter fumbled for something in his coat pocket, and despite the thick mittens managed to pull out his eye-shield. The wireman remembered the printed manuals they had been given. He picked up his own eye-shield and fixed the heavy black glass to his face. The freezing leadglass burned his temples and cheeks.

The wireman watched as the other man pulled up the connection and turned on the signal-light. Two miles away, at the heart of the experimental area, another generator began to run. The wireman tried to look out at the bleak windswept plain, but he found his gaze drawn back to the atomcrafter's hand. It was still on the light-switch. The wireman could not turn his eye. He thought perhaps he could go out and wave down the Skraeling who was assigned the duty of starting the generator. Wave him down and tell him to shut it off.



Skraeling children

The atomcrafter's face remained still and fixed on the narrow window.

It was almost time.

Suddenly, the tundra was engulfed in an indescribable light. *Empyrean*, he quickly thought. *This is what the light of God looks like.* He watched the silent light grow larger and larger, and became aware of a sound at the back of his consciousness. The low quickstone building was being pelted with ice and dirt. It sounded like rain.

"Oh," he said. It came out like a cough. "Oh. Oh." He looked at the atomcrafter. "Do you know what we have done?"

The atomcrafter turned to him. "Yes," he said. "We have unlocked the last of God's secrets."

1



ANGLICA

The Men Plan. Business Expenses. Sand Hill.

“Well, the back country is pretty well gone. Too much dead wood. We mightn’t be worrying if the town could scrape together the coin for a gas-winch to yank ‘um out.”

The two men stood on the back porch looking down to the expanse of floodplain. As Woodern had said, the trees carried here by the flood had turned the field into an impassable no-man’s land. When the land had been underwater, the uprooted trees had sunk halfway into the liquid dirt. Now that the ground had dried, the dead trees stuck out like rotten teeth.

“Or we could get a moben. They have one over in Pinefall-”

“Hmph.” The old man’s distaste was evident. “And have it fall apart under a log? No, a gas-winch is just the thing we need to take ‘um out.”

Woodern laughed to himself at the idea of what His Lord Garret would be doing right now. Probably sitting back in his high-chair and sending one of his slaves into town to wire Sand Hill for a half-dozen shiny new gas-winch. *Aye, he thought. If we wait a month for his slaves to clear out his land, he might sell us one or two.*

At the price he paid for them, Woodern added.



The Engine-Monitor. The Damaged Card. An Unexpected Trip.

Darton hated going to the bank. Mr. Climmett, the Engine-Monitor, always looked at him like he was some Bayoun come to make off with all the hard coin. Even though Darton had all the right punch cards from his master and came into the bank at least once a month, they still acted like he was doing something wrong by being there.

And every visit was the same. He presented his master's identity card and the notarised proof-of-bearing to the clerk, who squinted at the proof and fed the identity card into the bank's Patron Engine. That engine was in turn wired to the much larger Accounting Engine housed in the barred and gated building next door. The Engine-Monitor would invariably come over and find some flaw, real or imagined, with the punch cards Darton carried.

Today the problem was a slight tear in one of the transaction cards. Mr. Climmett waved the damaged card in front of Darton's face. "Won't put it in. The Engine will jam." The Engine-Monitor glared at him. "You can't put a torn card in an Engine." The man continued to scowl. Darton, to his credit, refrained from pointing out that the transaction cards were stamped by the bank and it was their obligation to replace them. He looked around the room for support. His eyes met those of the guard who stood next to the Patron Engine, musket held to the shoulder. The guard's face remained impassive.

The Engine-Monitor began to demand that Darton pay to have the card replaced when he suddenly stopped in mid-harangue. Darton turned to follow the man's gaze and found himself face-to-face with his master.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Climmett. Is there a problem with the Engine?"

"Not with the engine, my lord. Just with this card." He waved the damaged card again.

"Well, it should be a problem no longer," Darton's master intoned as he plucked the punch card from the Engine-Monitor's hand. Mr. Climmett, unaccustomed to such behaviour, actually held on to the card when Darton's master tugged on it. Realisation sprang to the Engine-Monitor's face and he quickly let go.

Darton's master inspected the card and handed it to him. "Burn this." He turned back to the clerk behind the counter. "I am afraid that there has been a change of schedule. I have just received a wire from Adamstown. I will be leaving today. Please wire this to the Archer Bank there." He pushed a slip of paper across the counter. The clerk read it carefully.

"Ah, three thousand then, sir? Very good. Uh, right away, sir." The clerk turned to Mr. Climmett. In theory, an Engine-Monitor was nothing more than a specialised janitor. Here, however, where trained Enginemen were rare, Mr. Climmett dominated the bank. The clerk could feed a punch card into the Engine's hopper easily enough, but without expert oversight one risked upsetting the delicate machines. A single mistake could alter or erase a patron's financial records.

Darton wondered if they were all as foul-tempered as Mr. Climmett. His thought was interrupted by the Engine-Monitor's flustered mumbling. The man clearly wanted to continue lecturing him, but knew well enough not to delay such a distinguished customer. He hurried over to the Patron Engine where the clerk was waiting nervously.

Cormorants. The Stranger. The Bad News.

A distant noise startled Gery from his half-
nap. He looked up to see a black speck on
the horizon. He squinted harder, and could
barely make out the shape of a Bayoun
trade-boat. His heart leapt at the prospect
that his friend Sart was on board.

He bolted up and ran along the shore for
almost fifty feet before remembering the
fish and line behind him. He looked back at
the approaching boat, and decided he could
wait a few seconds longer before meeting
the boat.

Besides, he thought, *they wouldn't think
well'a me for leaving 'em*. Gery knew the
Bayouns' views on fishing and wastefulness.

By the time he got back to his fish and
turned around, the boat was already
making its way around the bend. Gery
unwound the line from the tree he had
been dozing against and sprinted back up
the sandline. As they approached, he could
hear the soft cawing of the cormorants that
wafted around the boat. The noise they
made reminded him of the great flocks
of pigeons that sometimes roosted on his
family's land.

Once he could see the faces of the men
moving about the boat he came to a stop.
Even a kid like Gery knew that one didn't
simply run towards a Bayoun vessel. You
could get shot that way. The proper thing
to do was stand there and let the passing
nomads size him up.

As the boat drew closer he heard a man's
voice from the far side of the boat. Gery
could tell it had been meant for the
cormorants, because the circling birds all
swooped down out of sight behind the cabin.

The boat glided up the river, its gas engine
puttering softly. Gery thought it was the
boat Sart's family owned, but he didn't
recognise the man at the bow of the ship.

As the boat passed, the man looked down at
him. He didn't look like a Bayoun to Gery.

More of the boat went by, and Gery saw one
of his friend's brothers rolling up a spool
of rope. The young man looked at him and
smiled in recognition, and suddenly Sart
was leaning over the railing and waving.
Gery grinned and waved back.

Sart's father appeared at the railing and
smiled down at where Gery stood in the
sand. "Hello, boy. What of the port today?"

Gery didn't know what the port was like
today, but he had gone with his father to sell
beans at the market two days ago. "There
are soldiers, sir. And men from Vinlandia."

At this, the man's face darkened. "Vinlandia,
boy? Are you sure? Don't lie to me."

"I ain't- I mean, I'm not lying, sir. My dad
and I saw them. They had long hair. And
some'a them had axes. And swords."

The Artist. Lessons On Economics. The Viking.

“It is called a *brace*, Arvin. Now say it properly.”

The boy frowned and held his book between his face and the adjunct. He began to read, deliberately pronouncing each word.

“*A brace of mobens makes money for the banker, and work for the rust-sander.*”

“Very good. Your father is concerned with your reading progress. He says you spend too much time looking out the window and too little time with your books.”

What Arvin’s father really said was that his eldest son was proving his worthlessness, and any hope for greatness would probably come from the baby David. Arvin knew this, having eavesdropped on that very conversation (among many others).

Later, after the lessons were over and the adjunct had left, his sister Mirah came into the room with David in her arms. The two were only a year apart, but Mirah was just as tall as her brother. Arvin did not notice his siblings enter— he had given up on the assigned reading hours ago and was currently engrossed in drawing a schematic for a new type of steam-router conceived earlier in the day.

David made a babble-noise, startling his brother out of a trance. Arvin looked up with bleary eyes. “Oh, hey.” He looked around and noticed for the first time the dimming light. “Is it time for dinner?”

His sister nodded. “We came to get you. Didn’t we, David?” She smiled down at the baby and looked back up. “And Father wants you to tell him about the book you were assigned.”

Arvin looked at her, confused. She pushed aside the ink-covered papers, tapping the book underneath. *Theories of Economics for Young Tradesmen*. Arvin looked up in surprise.

“You didn’t read it, did you?” Her brother shook his head and looked about the desk nervously. “Well, you’re in luck. I’ve already read that book.” Arvin looked at his sister in surprise. “What?” she asked. “A girl can’t be interested in the way our society works? You know, the women of Conoscenza are *organising*,” she said with a pointedly sideways glance.

By the time the three children arrived downstairs, Arvin had been given the basic facts of Anglican economic policy. As they passed by the main hallway, however, any grasp of trade theories flew from the boy’s mind. Standing at the far end of the hall, conversing with his father, was the largest man Arvin had ever seen.

The man wore an odd kind of hat that almost reached above the top of the door-frame. His dress was strange and somehow bulky, and lined with fur. Most striking was the long shiny metal rod hanging at the man’s hip. The boy realised it was some kind of long, thin dagger.

His sister was two steps in front of him before she noticed that he was gone. She stepped back and pulled on his sleeve, then caught sight of the man herself. The two men suddenly felt the presence of so many eyes- they stopped conversing and turned their heads toward the children.

It was Mirah that first regained her composure at being caught watching. She issued a brief curtsy and stepped out of view, hissing at her brother to follow. Arvin's eyes turned to her, then back at the Viking. He gave a nod and followed his sister. The children retreated to the dining hall, Mirah handing off the baby to their nanny along the way. A short time later they heard the reverberation of the front door closing.

Their father appeared in the doorway. The slave who had been standing by the wall rushed to attend him. He allowed the man to remove his greatcoat and pull out his chair. As he sat down, another slave hurried over with a dish of the first course.

Their father seemed to be at a loss for words. He did not ask Arvin about his reading, did not even comment on their earlier impropriety at staring. And the two slaves hovering at the edge of the room looked nervously at the food that remained untouched. Finally he spoke.

"I am leaving for Vinlandia tonight. As soon as I finish this meal, actually. Your mother will be arriving no later than the day after next. Your governess will be in charge until then."

Neither of the children spoke. One of the slaves shifted nervously. The man at the head of the table spoke again.

"Well." He looked at the children, then back at the plate in front of him. He began to spear bits of the dish and put them in his mouth. No one said anything.

From another room, they heard David give a short cry.



2



VINLANDIA

Canter Engines. Arming the Skraelings. Tierra del Oro.

“Get those canters latched on tight. The last thing I want to see today is one of those flying off and catching the shell on fire.”

Candice sneered at him and continued struggling with the rabbit-latch. The metal clasp was caked with ice and wouldn't fit properly. She had to take off her mittens to pick it off. It finally snapped closed, catching the tip of her finger. She quickly stuck it into her mouth, tasting blood and engine-oil. Now that all the canters were mounted, they stuck out from the gas-engine like fins on some strange fish of the Peaceful Ocean.

Walsford walked to the prow and leaned over the edge. The Skraelings were finishing up coating the hull with their long pole-brushes. The chemical gave off an unpleasant smell, but it would disappear once they were airborne. And without it, ice would form and weigh the aeroship down. And that was something Walsford didn't want. *It's worth carrying a few barrels of this stuff, he thought. I make my runs in half the time.*

He looked up and out at the empty tundra. The Vikings did not enjoy anyone selling guns to their Skraelings.

Sinnak came up the ramp as Candice was walking to the back, still nursing her finger. He waved at Walsford as the two passed. The Skraeling chief looked troubled.

“I thought you should know. People are saying that there was a big light and a cloud that came out of the ground. They saw it miles away. Near one of the army posts north of here.” Walsford didn't know what to say. He hoped the Vikings didn't have too many of those.

Candice came back to the front. “It's packed. Time to go.” She glanced at Sinnak. He gave her a toothy grin back. She turned back to Walsford. “We need to leave.”

“Yeah, yeah, right. Listen, Sinnak, we've got to leave. Good luck. Good hunting.”

They patted each other's shoulder and the Skraeling clambered down the ramp. Walsford's apprentice took up the greased pole-brushes the other men were handing up to her. They meant to take all evidence of their coming with them. It wouldn't do for Sinnak to have to explain why an aeroship had been here.

“You could be a little nicer to Sinnak,” Walsford said, once they were in the air. “Not all Skraelings are as rough as you think.”

Candice glared into the cold drifting wind and pulled up her scarf. She didn’t want to talk about Skraelings or Vinlandia or the ice-choked sea that was somewhere below the clouds. The sooner they got back to Anglica, the sooner they could move on southwest. First Conoscenza, then-

“What was the name of the place in Cortezica? Where your friend is the mayor?”

Walsford snorted. “He’s not the mayor. And the name of the place is Tierra del Oro.”

“That’s what it’s called in Spanish. What’s its English name?”

“It’s the same in any language. But it means ‘Land of Gold’. You can stick your hat in a river and pull out nuggets the size of coins.”



The Peasant Villages. Cartography. Fatherly Advice

Silf was jolted in his seat as the train's front plow hit another drift of snow. His drink sloshed onto his good bearskin wrap. He cursed his father for calling him all the way to shitting Størreharm. Silf preferred the family's warm coastal retreat.

The cabin door opened, and one of the coachmen bowed in, keeping his eyes on the floor. "Ah, your highness? We're about twenty miles from Størreharm. The, ah, snow is quite deep here." The young man glared at him with sullen red eyes. The coachman bowed and ducked back out, closing the door behind him.

Ahead, at the front of the train, the engineer could see the lights of the capital city. The snow had stopped hours ago and the train's passengers were treated to a clear view of the night sky. The engine's great front-lamp flickered over the houses of the peasant farmers, illuminating the wooden shacks one after another.

The tracks here had been cleared of snow in anticipation of their coming. The engine sped along the icy rails, dragging its unhappy passenger behind.

In the Great Hall of Størreharm, the gas-lamps sputtered as the men raked their hands across broad leather maps. Train routes. Main carriage-roads. The Mihsoorita. Even the small river that wound between the Ivory Tower and the Great Foundry of Conoscenza. *Especially* that map.

One of the men muttered. "It would be foolish to attempt an over-land here. The country is too rough." He pushed a small piece with a thin stick, but as the door to the room banged open, the noise startled him, sending the legion skidding off the map.

"Father!" The voice sounded too boisterous, even for a native of Størreharm. The men turned to see young Lord Silf, son of Prince Stefan. The man who had been advancing a piece across the map watched as the young highborn swayed into the room and embraced his father. Stefan spoke to his son in a low voice that didn't carry.

“Oh, the trip was fine, Father!” the young man slurred, his eyes darting around the room. They settled on the man hunched over the maps. “Størreharm is far too cold, Father! You should hold these meetings on the coast! Why, there are some Anglican girls I know that love-”

“Yes, some of us belong on the coast, and some of us belong here.” Everyone who had been paying attention to the drunken newcomer turned to look at Silf’s brother Thorvid, the Prince’s firstborn son.

The younger brother held out his hands in mock apology, then looked back to the man with the stick. “Anders!” he bellowed jovially. The old man flinched at the recognition.

Stefan darted forward and took his son’s arm. “Come,” the Prince said, “We can get you a hot drink and something to eat.” He led the young man out of the room, feeling the gaze of his eldest son at his back.

“I can’t understand why Father told him to come here. Does he really think my brother can keep any of this-” he said, waving his arm across the spread of maps, “-a secret? He’ll be bragging about this by sun-up!”

The old man turned to him and placed a hand on his shoulder. “The Prince cares for your brother’s safety, my Lord. He has only brought him here to keep safe, not to plan.” Thorvid seemed to consider this.



A Pleasant View. The Signal-Catcher. Natives.

Hants flexed his cold fingers and wiggled the last bit of wire into place. He held on tightly with his legs and let go long enough to re-adjust his hat. The wooded countryside, though pastoral and beautiful in the new-fallen snow, was still the middle of Vinlandia.

Once everything was in order, all Hants had to do was wait. He had given himself plenty of time to shimmy up the signal-pole and assemble the device. *An expertly-chosen location for surreptitiousness*, he thought to himself.

He expected the signal to come through in the next hour. Until then, he sat, hunched-up in his precarious wind-blown stand, ready with a gloved hand on the crank to start reeling the paper.

The idea of such technology had been devised not long after the first public displays of the signal-wire. As the flares of electricity passed along the wire, the small machine recorded them on a spool of paper for later translation.

The current was too low, however, to send a message *and* power the eavesdropping machine. Early saboteurs had discovered this problem when authorities traced the source of the increasingly garbled messages.

He had dismissed the idea of bringing a canter-powered machine- too heavy to carry up a pole, and too noisy as well. Such a device might be hidden in a city for a time, but out here sounds carried for miles.

As he sat, his eye caught movement. A wolf. No, a pack of wolves. They approached cautiously- Hants had left nothing at the base of the pole, but he knew they could smell where he had been nonetheless. Even the fierce Vinlandic wolves had some fear of men.

He hoped they would leave before he began eavesdropping. They hadn't noticed him yet.

3



THE INLAND EMPIRE

Field Trials. A Commotion at Work. A Bold Decision.

Another day, another half-eagle.

Junie pushed her identity card into the Identity Engine's hopper; the machine reeled it in and clattered away. The guard behind the desk looked to his side- the College of Foundation had been testing out a new automatic-sorting device for the past two weeks. It looked a bit like a moben that had been flattened by a tractor- a heap of metal with a stick-arm dangling from a sliding chainbelt. As the machine read Junie's card, the arm slid up and grasped a paper with an Engine-stippled image of the woman's face, along with her Ministry of Signal clearances.

Juna Garradson

Grade 2 Card Inspection

The guard glanced at the hanging paper, then flipped a switch. The arm dropped the paper and diligently slid back into place. Junie took her card from the Engine and secured it back in its leather wrap. She looked down the hall and saw that her friend Maribeth from Relay was already at work.

Once the guard waved her through, Junie rushed her walk to catch up to Maribeth before she reached the cacophonous Relay Room. They were both plenty early, and Junie wanted to know what the other woman's plans for the weekend were.

She was too late- her friend disappeared into a stairwell. Junie glanced back at the entrance and caught sight of her supervisor talking to the guard. *Too late*, she thought. *Time to go to work, I suppose.*

Three hours later, Junie's stomach began to protest. As she held up the card she was inspecting her gaze wandered, and she wondered what the other women were doing for lunch. She gasped and quickly shoved it back in the rack as the door to their workroom burst open. Her supervisor, two soldiers, and three Ministry men from Downstairs all swarmed in. The sound of empty hoppers rattling soon filled the room.

"Shut your machines off!" her supervisor bellowed. At once, thirty women clicked off thirty Engines. The men looked out at the pool of card inspectors, then one of them mumbled something.

"Hannah Andrewson."

The girl startled as her name was called. "Y-yes, sir?"

"Please come with us. The rest of you, remain here. No one is allowed to leave the room."

"What about the privvy," Sally Vienne asked. "Eh, sir?"

"No privvy. You-" he pointed at Hannah. "-Come with us."

Two hours later it was Junie's name he called. She was escorted from the room by the men and one of the guards. One had remained behind after Hannah had been taken away, and he had ignored the protests of the women who hadn't eaten lunch yet.

Now her stomach was paining her, and she felt weak from hunger and fear. What was the purpose of all this?

They took her to another room on the main floor- one she had never been in before. There were no chairs. She stood in front of the group of men.

"When did you arrive here this morning?" one of the Ministry men asked.

She answered.

"Did you go strai'tright to the pool?"

She thought about her supervisor coming in. "Of course."

"Did you see anyone enter or leave the pool room that does not work there?"

They all looked at her, unblinking. She thought about it- wait! The room Maribeth had come out of- it had been the pool room!

She looked her supervisor in the eye. "No, sir. I went straight to my Engine. You can look at the first card I pulled today."



The Artificer. News-papers and Kinetoscopes. An Unwelcome Guest.

Richard devoured stories of such finds. Gavin did not care for anything found underground, especially not some mouldy old bones.

“Look at this, Gav,” his brother went on. “They’re calling it a terranosaur. Look at the size of that thing! And those teeth! I wonder, do you think they’ll find more?”

Gavin did not realise Richard was speaking to him. “Oh, yeah. That’s pretty interesting. Say, brother, I had better get going. I’m taking the Trenfilt sisters to a kino show.” He flicked his hand at the news-paper his brother had purchased outside their building. “Don’t get any ideas about building one of those.”

Gavin pulled on his cloak and went out the door, leaving Richard alone in the cavernous warehouse. The two young men had both spent their entire halves of the family estate left by their parents’ deaths. Unlike his brother, who had turned his share into a modest business, Richard’s entire fortune was invested in the rough-looking aeroship that filled the bulk of the room.

He sucked in air and smiled as he glanced at it. He always smiled when he looked at the ship. It didn’t matter that there was rough metal at regular intervals- he could afford a professional shell once the investors saw what it could do.

The door at the far end of the makeshift hangar squeaked open. At first Richard thought his brother had forgotten something, but the person in the doorway was a stranger.

“Sorry! We’re closed for the night!” Richard shouted across the cluttered floor.

The stranger stepped inside and shut the door. “Hey, we’re closed! If you’re here to look at the zep, it’ll have to be tomorrow!” The stranger walked toward him. Richard tilted his chair back down and stood up.

“Hey! I said we-” He stopped as the stranger held up a gun.

Richard moved without thinking, grabbing his sketchbook and hurling it toward the man. The next instant he was over the desk clinging to the stranger’s arms. His assailant wore a heavy handlebar moustache. Sweat formed on his brow as they struggled. The man struck Richard with a well-placed knee and rammed the handle of the gun into his temple.

Richard fell to the ground in a crumple. The man’s outline blotted out the hanging lights. Richard heard a wet crack.

He opened his eyes. He was lying on the floor of the warehouse, but there was something furry under him. A dog? Richard turned his head and felt it. It was a fur coat.

He sat up. Gavin was hunched over a man sprawled on the ground.

“Wha doin’?”

His brother turned at the sound of Richard's slurred voice. "Forgot the tickets. Say, you know that big wrench you like to wave around at investors?"

Richard nodded dully.

"Well, I think it's now an accessory to murder. Or at least an item involved in the killing of an assailant."

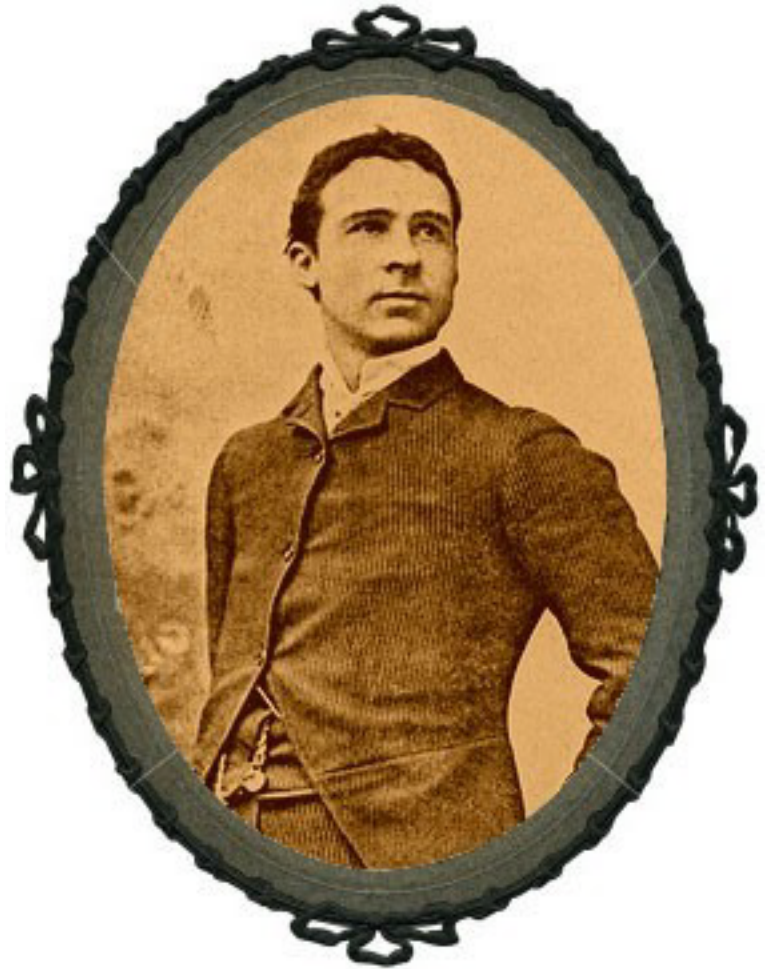
Richard drifted back under. His brother kept a tense vigil, waiting for more men to burst in. They never came. Across town, the Trenfil girls waited outside the kino house for ten minutes, then decided to see what else Mirth-Town had to offer.

The next morning, Richard awoke with a pounding headache. He felt the side of his head- a good-sized lump greeted his fingers painfully. He sat up and focused his eyes. The warehouse was full of people.

Thinking the investors had arrived, Richard struggled to his feet and almost crashed back onto an open tool kit. A strange man caught him. "Easy then, lad. Don't get yourself worked up. You've had a rough night, then. S' alright, we'll find out who did this."

Richard realised the stranger was wearing a uniform. "The man- he's dead."

"Right you are, lad. Anglican, by the looks of him, or maybe Texan. From the swamp country, most like. We've got you now, though. You and this ship are under the direct protection of the Empire. Ah, here we are, then." A pair of nurses had arrived with a wheeled chair.



"No, I'm fine, really I am," Richard protested, waving away the chair. "Just, is- is that man from one of the zep companies? Is this some kind of... trade warfare?"

The man shook his head and leaned in to Richard, close to his ear. "This is no company matter, son. Your ship is desired by foreign powers. Now watch yourself," the uniformed man said as he leaned back away. "We'll keep an eye on you, but the ship has to be moved to a safer location. Don't get rankled-" the man cut off Richard's emerging protest. "You'll be free to work on it. In fact, we're hoping you will. Do you think you might finish it quicker with a staffed hangar?"

The Ivory Tower. The Aurochs. The Engine Key.

Michael settled in and wiped the dusting of snow off his leather-wrapped musket. From his perch underneath a tarped-over vent, he could see the landing line quite clearly. The roof of the building he had chosen was higher than the surrounding manufactories.

Overhead, he could hear a cargo zeppelin pass by. He peered through the musket's scope again and saw what he had been waiting for. Another aeroship was approaching from the east. His friend in the Ministry of Signal had paid off.

Once the gun-runner finished his business, he and Michael were going to talk about the aurochs and the poachers that were being armed in the Empire's south. It was bad enough that no country cared enough about the giants to do anything. *Skraelings used to worship them*, he thought. *Some still do.*

Six hours later, as early dark settled over the city, Michael began to wonder if his quarry was ever coming back to the zep. Sneaking aboard had been easy enough—there were no guards in the air to see down on him, and once at the aeroship there were plenty of sheltered places to wait.

He shifted his legs again and froze as the door to the building opened, pushing a collection of snow out in front of it. Two men emerged, dressed in fur caps and the olive-coloured cover-alls of city workers. As they approached he saw the dim light reflect off the metal punch card one of them carried. *Damn! They're going to move the ship!*



Plains auroch

The Cold Hallway. Voices. A Secret.

Willa fastened the delivery cylinder into place and closed the latch. The rubber hissed and tightened as the cylinder began to rise up the flute. It disappeared through the ceiling on its way to the Crown.

She shivered as she rolled the cart forward down the empty hall. This part of the Ivory Tower, on the other side from the foundry, was always the coldest place in the winter. The high windows were rimed with frost.

As she silently wheeled the mail-cart forward, she heard voices coming from an open door. *Odd*, Willa thought. *Now why would anyone be here at this hour?* She stopped three paces from the door.

"We know you've been to Vinlandia."

"Viking country? Why would I go there? I just ship from the Magnolia to River Pass. Happened to know some Bayouns were going to be in the north country, so I headed up toward the quickstone towns."

Willa heard a chair creak.

"Please don't make us wait, Mister Scott. We pulled your files. You both have records here. We've had our eye on you since you crossed the Magnolia. You were in Kaldrskarpt and you might have seen something. Or heard about something. Perhaps you noticed strange readings from your flight instruments?"

A chair creaked again.

"I thought so. You're not in trouble for anything in your ship, you know. We'd just like to know what they're up to over there."

There was silence. Willa began to think that eavesdropping had been a very bad idea. She wished she was still in the flute room.

"OK. I think I know what you're after. But you have to let Candie go. She's just a kid, for hell'sake!"

Willa didn't like the idea of kids being involved in this. Whatever it was.

"I might have heard something about a bomb."

Willa held her breath.

"Go on."

"They said it was a light and a cloud. But it was also like a bomb. Around some army station. I didn't even know the Vikings had a post up there."

"Thank you, Mister Scott. You've been most helpful. I'm afraid we can't set you loose until after this is sorted out, but the young lady says she's your—"

"Apprentice."

"Yes, apprentice. We'll keep the two of you in a comfortable room for the time."

Suddenly, Willa thought that it wouldn't do for the men to know what she had heard. She didn't want to be kept away for a while, no matter how nice the room they put her in. She stepped back and slowly pulled the cart away from the door.

Once she was back in the flute room, she realised how far behind schedule she was. And she didn't think she should go by that door for a while.

The Country Lad. A
Wrong Turn. The Man
From Texas.

Down here, where rich men came to throw their money away, the walls were covered in reams of paper depicting all manner of products such a person might buy.

He drifted past the giant paper-hawkers lit up by the tall Tesla lamps:

WATERFORD QUICKSTONE- THE ORIGINAL

FOR YOUR HEALTH- SECRET OF CORTEZÍ BISHOPS

A stippled picture of a pretty girl, advertising a type of carriage. He stopped in front of the last one. *That's Deidra!*

A man in a short hat saw him looking at the paper. "She's a right beauty, eh, lad? I should know, I'm her agent."

The young man looked at him. "Really? You see, I've come from Chartertown, which is where Deidra is from, and I came here to find her, and now I've found you!"

The man put his arm around Petor and smiled. "Well, it is lucky you found me, boy! Would you like to come see her now, then?"

Petor's face lit up. "Really? Now, sir?"

"Of course!" The man linked arms and guided him to the left. "Down this street, then we'll catch a ride on Ministry Row." They turned onto the empty lane.

The man suddenly turned and threw his fist into Petor's stomach. The young man retched and gasped for air. He was struck again, and kicked, and a knife cut his palm when he made to grab for the man's leg. He felt his coat opened, and heard the other man running off. He coughed again.

Some men passed by. Petor heard one of them speaking about him. They thought he was drunk. He tried to call out, but couldn't speak. Somewhere a steam-valve hissed open.

"Say, boy! You all right?"

Petor rolled on his side and looked up. A man in a wide-brimmed hat was approaching. Petor dug his bleeding hand into the ground and pushed back to the wall. The man in the hat raised his hands. "Easy, boy! Don't look like I can rough you up any more'n y'already been!"

The man squatted down and Petor got a good look at his face in the glow of the distant lamps. Dark features under his range hat, the kind of man whose people had come from the land south of Egyptia, or so he had heard. A thick moustache and well-made clothes.

“You a local kid?”

Petor thought it wise not to respond. The man took his silence as a cue and introduced himself.

“Name’s Lorren Stone of Dales. Just up here with some friends of mine, havin’ a good time.” He noticed for the first time the condition of Petor’s hand. “Say, that’s a deep cut. You let me help ya out. Hold your hand out. Palm up, that’s right.”

Lorren Stone pulled out a flask and unscrewed it. He took Petor’s wrist in one hand and dumped the contents into the wound. Petor gasped and tore his hand away, but Lorren held on firmly. “I know it hurts, boy, but ya have ta do it. Don’t want yer hand fallin’ off.”

He let go and pulled a handkerchief out, snapped it open, and tightly wrapped it around Petor’s hand.

“How’s that feel?”

Petor tried to flex his fingers. He found he couldn’t, but the cut didn’t hurt as much. “It feels a bit better.”

“Tell you what, kid,” Lorren said. “Come on inside the casino with me. I’ll introduce you to my friends and get you cleaned up a bit. How about it?”

Petor thought for a moment. It seemed unlikely that the stranger would take time to bandage his hand before assaulting him. He stood up.

“My name is Petor. I’m from Chartertown.”

“No kiddin’? I got a girl in Sendoff Point.”

Three hours later, having been introduced to the man’s traveling companions and the liquour they were drinking, Petor felt quite a bit better.

