

# TESLA & EDISON US THE BLACK HAND!



BY BRIAN THOMAS & RAYMOND WITTE

# **TESLA & EDISON Vs THE BLACK HAND !**

by Brian D. Thomas and Raymond J. Witte

## **Chapter 1**

The self-proclaimed genius looked around his precious laboratory. The long converted warehouse was utterly immaculate, as usual. Every tool and item was in its proscribed place. A bank of massive generators rumbled along the back wall filling the air with a barely audible hum and the subtle smell of ozone.

Running the entire length of the workspace were massive wooden paired tables, each laden with an array of glass vessels, meters, dials, gauges, copper pipes, spiraling protrusions, electrographs, transistors, Bunsen burners, and filament. There were instruments that fewer than a dozen people on Earth could identify and a few that had no name, as the only version existed in this room. Each item rested within a chalked outlined square on the table and no chalk line was disturbed or broached. Almost everything was as it should be, which should have made the genius feel at peace.

But in one spot, there were marbles.

The genius felt deeply unsettled. Somehow compelled to investigate the extent of this insult, this violation, he followed the marbles. Wringing his hands as he advanced, and making certain he remained precisely three feet away from the hideous, unnatural spheres, he paced the outside of the line.

The arrangement was precise. Each marble touched a neighbor on each side and there was a geometric precision to the perfect circle they formed around the one thing in the room that truly interested the genius. The glass spheres, the hated, horrid, terrible glass spheres, formed a ring around a brass cylinder topped with a toroid of the same material. Perched upon the shiny yet now soiled device was a cheap, scraggly, and obviously dirty, blond wig. The whole coil had been draped with cheap costume jewelry as an added measure of insurance and insult. The genius stalked the room, pacing back and forth glaring at the abomination despoiling his lab.

In the observation suite, his minder watched the genius spend a quarter of an hour pacing and wringing his hands, trying, and failing, to work up the nerve to do something about the abominable affronts to his sense of rightness. Really, his minder felt pretty badly about the

marbles and the wig. He really didn't like doing this to the genius. Despite the man's quirks, they were friends. However, he needed the genius focused on the work they were paid to do, not on one of his innumerable side projects. Asking nicely had failed, as it usually did, so the minder had to resort to desperate measures.

*That's enough. He needs to get to work.*

The minder bent forward, crumbs tumbling from his stained, rumpled shirt. He brushed aside some notepaper marked with gravy spots to uncover the knife switch that would activate the intercom system.

“I know you're very upset about all of this, and I'm sorry, but we can't have you working on your teleforce project today. Morgan wired earlier asking for updates and I can't stall him any longer.”

The genius stopped his fretting momentarily and looked like he was about to object. He straightened from his cringing hunch to his full height, lifted his head, and stared down his nose at the viewing window. His glassy, bulging eyes drew down into unpleasant slits.

“I know you don't want to talk to him, and you won't have to. In fact, you can spend the entire evening in the aviary. I'll even join you for some billiards when I return. I have bread crumbs!”

The genius looked up at the speaker, his eyes widening back to their usual bug-eyed bulging, now apparently interested.

“All you need to do is look for a way to introduce iodine to our tungsten filaments. The main lab can't do it without bursting the bulbs. We've lost five technicians to glass shrapnel just this month. You can do this, we worked through the theory together, but we need you to make it work. You're the only one smart enough, Nikola. No one else is clever enough to finish the work. That's all you need to do, Nikola. Just make it work. And take notes. In English this time. I'll take it from there. I've left my lab journal in an envelope on the first workstation. You can take it from there. When you're finished, just ring the bell, I'll come collect those notes, then I promise we'll get someone to clean off your coil.”

The genius did not answer. Instead, he stormed out the laboratory door in a furious huff. His minder rolled his chair to a window and he watched as the genius circled the building.

Once.

Twice.

Thrice.

Then he was back in. He wiped each eye with a handkerchief, precisely fifteen times each. His minder had left a pot of coffee out for him while he was walking. Nikola Tesla wiped down the ceramic mug, and spoon, poured himself a cup, added three sugar cubes and three pours of milk. Folding the handkerchief neatly, he placed it back in his pocket, then began to work.

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On his upper floor office, Thomas Edison smiled as he watched his partner get to work. The tall Serb just needed the right incentive, and as long his partner could keep producing, Edison was more than happy to provide it. Edison watched with professional admiration as his pet genius now fully focused on the task buzzed along the workbenches, gathering items and jotting notes...hopefully in English...in a journal. As he observed, Thomas smiled and sipped a cup of brandy-laced coffee, spilling as much as he drank down his already stained shirt and crumb-covered waistcoat. Now that he was engaged with the project, the Serb seemed to be happily working, and it made Edison glad. It warmed his heart to see his friend not just happy, but happy and working on something that would keep the wolves at bay for a bit longer. The pudgy Yerseyman took a moment to be truly satisfied with himself.

Unfortunately, it was only a moment he could afford to spend. He had work to do as well before this evening and he cursed Morgan for having the temerity to want to check up on his investment. It was an annoying waste of time, but money talked, and unlike his partner, friend, and sometimes ward, Edison grasped that concept quite firmly. Still, it was very annoying. It meant Edison would need to wash up, brush his teeth and comb his unruly hair. He looked down at his shirt and vest, recognizing traces of lunch, breakfast and even a hint of last night's dinner, or at least what he thought was last night's. Apparently even a change of clothes was now required. It was all very annoying.

He didn't exactly mind keeping up with those things, but he had better things to do with his time, other than follow the vagaries of convention. As he turned from the viewing window, he caught a glimpse of a technical sketch peeking out from under a bunch of newspaper clippings. He tugged out the drawing. Unlike the neat and ordered lines of a Tesla diagram, this one was a series of scribbles, notes and calculations offsetting a surprisingly detailed technical sketch. Edison held up the piece of his own handiwork and gave a wistful sigh. He studied it for a moment then placed it carefully back on the cluttered table. J.P. Morgan was not only their prime investor, he was also a very influential, powerful man and so his concerns had to come before any personal ones. Edison hurried out of the office and slammed the door behind him

creating a brief gust of wind. A colorful flier, emblazoned with P. T. Barnum's distinct banner and a photograph of a large, angry looking elephant, and signed, "Couldn't have done it without you, P.T." blew off the table and floated gently to the floor.

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Tesla worked quietly, only occasionally casting glances at his personal experiment. He also cast furtive glances at the stairs...the stairs leading up. He knew Edison would insist that he suppress his desire to check on the ladies, but it had been hours since he had spent time in their lovely company.

The current problem was not particularly challenging, but the Serb had to admit that it was at least a bit more interesting than the usual elementary equations Edison came to him with. Tesla sometimes wondered if Edison was actually just testing him with these trivial matters rather than being so stupid as to NOT know the answers to such elementary questions. Surely, his friend could not be so utterly ignorant?

This problem required a re-working of the filament's shape. The solution came quickly, and Tesla announced it out loud to no one at all. He smiled, satisfied with a job well done, and moved down the massive table to begin work on his latent masterpiece teleforce.

Only when he turned to the far more important workstation, there was that wretched wig. The horrid wig with its creeping, horrid hair looked back at him, stopping him in his tracks. He could feel the filth of it. It made his skin crawl, and he hurried over to the massive steel sink and washed his hands six times.

Regretfully Tesla returned to the filament experiment, studiously avoiding glancing at the disgusting, hair-covered object.

Carefully, over the next four hours, Tesla worked the filament's thin metal into the proper shape, curling it and re-curling it around delicate metal probes. He was able to make his first model work, but he refined the crucial element even further. He was convinced that Edison or, even worse, Morgan's sub-human production workers would be doltish enough to manage to destroy his new filament, so he rebuilt it so that even their ape-like fingers could handle it. Finally, heaping one more insult on the day's pile, he even deigned to write his notes down in English.

*Thomas is a nice man, but he can be quite stupid. He would be nothing without my brilliance.*

Tesla smiled at his work. It needed one more test. Tesla blotted some denatured alcohol

on to a cloth, three, precise, equally measured blots, then cleaned each contact on the circuit three times. He inspected his work. He each contact got three more rubbings with the cloth. After careful consideration he circled the machinery three times, and touched the desk thrice with his left hand. The contacts received a third cleaning, and finally the genius was happy.

Next, he carefully wound the wires around the contacts and, making three more checks to ensure the circuit was sound, threw the knife switch to complete it.

The hum of the big generators became an angry whirl, and the stench of ozone grew heavy in the air. Tesla could feel the static tugging at his hair. Had he turned around, he would have noticed that each hair on the hated wig was also standing up on end. Since the sight would likely have sent the genius into hysterical fits of terror, his concentration on the task at hand was a godsend. The bulb buzzed then lit, shining brightly, then every lamp in the building glowed with the current now coursing in the air.

Out on the street, an unfortunate mule stepped into a puddle and received a powerful electrical jolt, sending the beast galloping down the street braying in terror and dragging its poor, mustachioed owner bouncing behind it.

The self-proclaimed genius admired his work for a moment. While it wasn't related to teleforce, the design had been something of a challenge, even if it was only an elementary one. And now he COULD return to his experiments with the wireless transmission of energy. Better yet—and this made the Serb do an excited, arm-flapping dance—he could now visit his ladies!

He hurried through writing down the notes, remembering to write mostly in English, before frantically stuffing them in the envelope and wildly ringing the bell, not stopping until a lab assistant entered the room and retrieved the notes.

Then, Telsa rushed up the stairs and found bliss.

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Edison looked at himself in the mirror and nodded. He looked appropriately prim and proper, even having gone through the trouble of procuring a new, unstained bow-tie. The rest of his suit was a bit old. The strain of holding in his expanding middle now pulled at the buttons on the vest, and waistline of the pants was tattered in spots, but Edison judged these to be small things, after all, the suit smelled fine and had no visible stains. He splashed a liberal amount of hair oil onto his hand and used it to flatten his hair down in the sideways manner, which he had been assured was the fashion of the day. Tugging the ends of his bow-tie to ensure they were even, he headed down to the foyer to wait for a cab. While he waited by the front door, he monitored the mirror and signal board that his partner had installed.

When Edison had asked Tesla about the need for the device, he would only answer “Sailors,” then mutter darkly in Serbian.

He did not have to wait long. He watched through a mirror as the hansom cab pulled up and the driver rang a bell from his high seat, having learned through painful experience that bringing a horse into close proximity with the workshop was a recipe for disaster. Edison hurried out and climbed aboard.

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Edison stepped out of the taxi and onto the Yersey train platform. The noise and smoke actually made him feel a little better, a little bolder and more in charge again. Edison hated being summoned like a peasant by his fief lord. Even if the simile was appropriate, Edison did not like being reminded that he was held in financial thralldom. And he had not just one master either. He was being summoned to report his progress to the entire “Illustrious Council,” a thought that rekindled his unease.

J.P. Morgan was bad enough. The man was as rigid and cold as the steel that had made him a fortune. By himself he was intimidating, combining economic and political power with sheer physical size and a bombastic, demanding attitude. Add Rothschild, Vanderbilt, Westinghouse, and Carnegie, and you had a consortium that could intimidate entire nations, something that the so-called “Illustrious Council” did not hesitate to do, nor did they waste an opportunity to remind the ‘help’ that they wielded that kind of might.

Edison couldn’t decide which was worse: one of J.P.’s red-nosed, mottle-faced screaming tantrums or Carnegie’s preacher-like sermonizing and anti-imperialist tirades.

*It was a wonder the man hadn’t been locked up by the Empire by now,* thought Edison, though he supposed that such extreme wealth and influence bought a certain measure of Imperial tolerance.

Whatever the ‘filthy five,’ as he and his partner Nikola liked to call them, actually wanted, it was Edison who always answered the call. The last time Tesla had attended a meeting of the pair’s benefactors, the high-strung Serb had run screaming from the room after setting fire to a tray of alcohol soaked melon balls and hurling them at old man Vanderbilt, Westinghouse, and their “insidious, grasping facial hair.” It had taken days to calm Tesla down, and only the threat of a complete work shutdown at the Menlo Park laboratory had quieted the insulted millionaires.

Edison sighed as he moved down the coach’s aisle and found his seat. Despite his

numerous foibles, Nikola Tesla was Thomas Edison's friend and he didn't like to see him upset. Not to mention he was completely useless and unproductive when he was upset. No, in his more lucid moments even Nikola admitted that Edison was "the business person" when it came to dealing with investors, finance representatives and inquisitive investigators and officers of the law. The run-in with Imperial Inspectors after that little episode at the Colorado Springs site had taught Tesla to rely on Edison to deal with the authorities. It also taught him that you really could send artificial lightning through the ground as a conductor and electrocute horses and townsfolk fifteen miles away, but that doing so did not impress the local farmers, as much as it made them load their shotguns and look for a scapegoat.

Edison chuckled to himself. His partner was a genius.

As Edison settled into his seat he became anxious again as he considered the potential reasons for his summons. There really could only be one. Deadlines. It was always about deadlines. Trying to take his mind off the coming meeting. Edison put on his hat.

Thomas Edison was hard of hearing ever since an unfortunate meeting as a boy with an airship conductor and the conductor's wrench. Edison's hat, or rather his 'audio-enhancing directional amplifying head adornment' was one of his personal pride and joys, not for least that he was the actual inventor of the thing. The black top hat was rather nondescript if you ignored the earmuff-like flaps that hung down on either side. Thomas had spent years perfecting it and it was only the fact that his hearing loss was somewhat of an embarrassment that kept him from marketing it. He raised a casual hand to the ear covering and dialed up the sound, then began turning his head so that the directional carbon microphones could pick up the conversations around him.

"Oh, I bet she paid too much for those. Just look at the way they hang."

"...so I says to him, why don'cha just use butter till it heals?"

"...and where are we supposed to get Penginopod tongs at this hour?"

By turning his head and adjusting the earpieces, Edison could pick up conversations from anywhere in the train car, but after a few minutes of eavesdropping he grew bored and his focus swung back to the coming meeting. He reached up and flipped a switch on his hat, changing the incoming conversations to a soft whispering murmur. 'Murmur noise' was what he called it and Edison found the toneless formless sound could often lull him to sleep. The inventor-businessman closed his eyes and let the sound wash over him as the train carried him from his beloved Yersey to the bustling Iron City of Neur York.

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Edison's nap was interrupted by a firm but gentle hand shaking him awake.

"Excuse me, Mr. Edison, sir, but this is your stop. I believe."

Edison opened his eyes to see a smiling bronze-skinned face peering down at him. The train conductor touched his cap as he straightened. "I recognize you from the papers sir. I'm sure you have some great, important business here in the capitol and we wouldn't want you to run late, now would we sir?"

Edison smiled and thanked the rather imposing conductor. The uniformed trainman had the high cheekbones and scarlet tinted skin of a full-blooded Skrealing and his build and fencing scar hinted at a former military career. Edison had a sudden flash back of the airman and his wrench and hurriedly excused himself. He followed the other passengers off the train and onto the platform of the glorious Grand Central Depot.

Edison was glad he had tuned his hat to the lower setting.. Between the hissing steam engines, the shouting porters, and the yelling crowds the noise of the station was deafening. He moved toward one of the belt-driven moving sidewalks that would take him up to the street level. He had just settled his balance and was enjoying being whisked along when a hand grabbed him by the collar and plucked him off the walkway.

"Unhand me you ruffian or I shall call for the law!" Edison's not insubstantial frame was being held aloft by a pair of hands from behind, and he was swung around to face...

"You are Thomas A. Edison," The man's voice was hard to hear over the crowded station noise. The fact that his face was covered in goggles and some kind of mask did not help. In any event his tone did not sound like a question. Edison was dropped, and the hands that had held him quickly and efficiently patted him down from behind.

"He's clean," said another muffled voice from behind as a second man stepped forward.

"We are Pinkertons. Mr. Morgan asked us to collect you. To make sure you didn't get lost in the big city."

The brute beside him grabbed Edison by the shoulder in a vise-like grip and the second private thug plowed a path through the crowd. People danced aside from the infamous masked agents and their hapless charge, and Edison saw more than a few glances of pity thrown his way. No one actually liked Pinkerton men, but no one tried to stop them either.

The three exited out onto the street, and the lead hired thug put a small device to a hole in his mask and emitted a sharp piercing whistle. A dark steam cab swung out from the curb and cut off a pair of horse carriages to pull up in front of the waiting party. The first agent barely got the cab door open before the second bundled Edison inside, where he landed against a mountain of a man waiting on the bench seat. The second agent followed Edison into the cab and put an arm around the inventor's shoulders like an old friend, wedging the inventor between the two masked hulks.

“Wanna’ make sure you don’t fall out, accidentally like.”

The other Pinkerton gave a chuckle as he slid in next to the driver, another masked and goggled agent.

“Where are we going?” asked Edison as he tried to regain his dignity.

“Only one place to go when you visit The Iron Lady boy-o. You’re going to the Metropolitan Club, and the first drink is on Mr. Morgan.”

The Metropolitan Club was the crown jewel of the Imperial capital. New York also known as the Iron Lady, was the first true city built by Amerika's Norse founders and her evolution from a log walled circle of thatched roof huts to the steel towered heart of a three-world-spanning empire was the envy of the world. Or at least that what Americans, particularly New Yorkers, told themselves. If the Iron Lady looked down her nose at the rest of the world then the Metropolitan Club looked down its nose at the rest of the sprawling city. The Metropolitan Club was the epitome of Imperial Citizen snobbery and was built for one purpose—to let those on the outside know that they were not welcome on the inside.

Edison had a moment to take in the massive facade of the most exclusive club in the Empire, with its huge, carved dragon headed A-frame entrance meant to remind visitors of their Viking forefathers. The Norse influence was broken by its Mohegan tribal art, beaded hangings and intricately painted hides, and other Skrealing tribal decorations meant to remind common Europeans that they were most certainly NOT Americans. Escorted by a pair of the Pinkertons, Edison climbed the ironwood steps to the imposing steel-banded main door. The first hired thug pulled on the bell chain and then turned and faced the door. A shutter slid sideways and Edison could see a set of dark eyes peering out. The Pinkerton flashed a tin badge at the eye slit and a moment later, the heavy door swung open.

The Yersey inventor paused as he took in the doorman. She was six feet of smoothly curvy smoke-skinned beauty wrapped in a black formal tailed jacket, thigh high boots and little

else. She smiled slightly at the gaping little inventor and then made a low bow stepping to one side. Edison stepped inside, and the Pinkertons noticeably did not follow. Triggered by some hidden mechanism the heavy door swung shut.

Without a word the doorman turned and walked down a long hall, leaving Edison to follow or stay. Having been through this little ritual before, Edison hurried to catch up. Because he had not been “formally” invited by word nor “formally” invited to follow, the members of the Metropolitan Club were not required to offer him the hospitality of the club. They were free to engage or ignore, insult or compliment him as they wished without violating their “code of Imperial hospitality”. Edison could have waited outside until he received a formal invitation to enter, and many visitors often did, sometimes for days. Another of the Pinkerton’s duties was to keep the steps clear of unwanted riff-raff.

Edison knew all these little games and found them pretentious and boring, particularly since he was never invited to play, so he fell in step behind the shapely...behind... until they reached another set of carved doors. The gorgeous doorman opened the doors and stepped aside, but feeling a sudden sense of pique Edison stayed rooted to the spot. The doorman lifted one perfect eyebrow, and gave him a slight nod. Edison could see a flickering fire in the hearth, and a circle of high-backed leather chairs arrayed in front of it cushioning some of the most powerful backsides in the Empire, but he simply folded his arms and waited.

“You know, I could have Miss Still Waters break your legs and then drag you in here,” growled a voice from the circle of chairs. Edison glanced over at the waiting doorman who returned his gaze with a blown kiss and a smile. He didn’t budge.

“Oh for God’s grace, get in here man!” This second voice had less growl and was more reasonable, so Edison stepped into the boardroom and closed the doors behind him, blowing a kiss to the doorman as he did so.

Sitting to either side of the fireplace were Edison and Tesla’s five supporters, backers, and employers, “The Illustrious Council.” J.P. Morgan dominated the room with his size, though Westinghouse and Carnegie both gave off their own auras of power, while Vanderbilt and Rothchild had the body language and posture of men who were never, ever dominated by anyone.

“Thank you for coming on such short notice, Thomas,” offered Cornelius Vanderbilt III, the one member of the council who could even come close to understanding much of what their pet inventors were doing. “Your teleticker has been a huge success with the Swiss, and the Prussians are banging on the door and insisting that they get units in time to run wires through the Alps before the winter snows set in.”

Edison smiled with pride, since the alphanumeric stock ticker chattering away in the corner was HIS baby. Thanks to the nature of international commerce, and the constantly fluctuating ‘business relationships’ between nations, his stock ticker had become a necessity for the world’s merchants, pirates, robber barons, and commerce lords. The Zulu warrior-bankers of South Africa alone had purchased hundreds of the units, and their good will had been a boon to Edison’s backers.

“Yes, well that’s yesterday’s news,” snapped J.P Morgan, “I want to talk about today’s news, as in where are my damned light-bulbs!” Morgan shot out of his chair and Carnegie followed a moment later.

“It’s not the bulbs man, it’s the whole system,” added Carnegie. “Your... man... Tesla, promised a working alternating current system that could light up a city from one central generator.” Carnegie disliked Tesla enough that he rarely spoke the man’s name if he could avoid it. He seemed ready to continue, but was quickly interrupted.

“I told you we should have gone with the individual DC sets,” barked Morgan, “We could have sold hundreds...”

“No!” Westinghouse was now on his feet shouting, “We agreed that was a short term and short sighted...”

“WHO ARE YOU CALLING SHORT SIGHTED?”

“DON’T BARK AT ME, RED NOSE!”

“Ladies please,” drawled Rothchild. “Not in front of the help.”

“You!” Now it was Westinghouse’s term to yell at Edison, “What about my induction motors? Where are my motors? Where. Are. My. Motors!” Every time George Westinghouse said “m” his huge mustache reminded Edison of a walrus chewing fish.

“And the kinetiscopes!” added Rothchild, “We have orders for them from all across Asia and Europe and you haven’t fixed the lantern problem yet.”

“Well,” replied Edison, “once we solve the bulb filament issue, we can adapt that to the kinetiscope lantern, and...”

“And WHEN are you going to solve the BULB ISSUE?” Morgan was yelling again.

“Actually,” supplied Edison, trying to calm the group, “We’ve had some surprising success with bamboo filaments...”

Vanderbilt leaned forward in anticipation of a scientific explanation but Morgan cut off any further comment. “We have invested a sizable amount of money on various, **VARIOUS** projects. It’s time we saw some results **ON SOMETHING! BEEKS! IN HERE! NOW!**”

At Vanderbilt’s bark, a man stepped into the room from a side door. Edison’s eyes squinted and his chest tightened as it always did when an *auditor* was in the room. He hated their type, officious little men who thought their grasp of purse strings gave them even a remote grasp of scientific theory or application. Beeks was typical of his kind. He was tall and thin with a pinched face that always looked like he just smelled an old woman eating pickled eggs. His suit was immaculately clean and his eyes scanned Edison’s and narrowed as he saw Edison’s was not. Beeks sneered in quiet derision.

“Our man Beeks will be calling upon your laboratory in one week to review your accounts and report on your progresses. We will send along a few Pinkertons to help motivate your staff and encourage them to work at a quicker pace. They will also be on hand should Mr. Beeks have any financial concerns once he has reviewed your books.”

Morgan stepped closer to Edison looking down his blotchy nose at the smaller inventor. “Understand me Edison. I don’t want any of your techno-babble nor any scientific excuses from that, that...genius...of yours. I want, no, I **INSIST** on results. We all have invested a large amount of money in **RESULTS** from you and your partner, and I had better see some! Otherwise we will be looking for a few new geniuses for our investments and you will be looking for a way to walk on your hands.”

Edison frowned in confusion at this last phrase.

“...because if I don’t start seeing some marketable results I **WILL HAVE BOTH OF YOUR LEGS BROKEN AND I WILL THROW YOU IN THE RIVER MYSELF!** Let’s see if your genius partner can think of a way to breathe like a fish!”

J.P. Morgan and The Illustrious Council turned their backs to Thomas Edison and the stunned inventor felt a light touch on his sleeve. He turned and saw the lovely doorman had returned as she gestured for him to follow her out. Edison’s investor meeting was over.

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When Edison got back to the laboratory, it took him the better part of an hour, plus two bottles of wine, a ham sandwich, and half of a loaf of cornbread—liberally smeared with butter and honey—to calm down.

When he was finally settled, it took him a quarter of an hour to find Tesla's expense reports. The portly inventor was very concerned with the money as it flowed into and out of the company coffers. He had never really concerned himself with precisely what the laboratory's operating budget was spent on, so long as Nicola stayed in budget and there was enough to buy the supplies that Edison needed for his own experiments. He might have been a miser in most instances, but there was a spot of idealism in his soul for experimentation and he typically did not demand an accounting of every penny, and besides that, he mostly trusted his partner's financial priorities. Mostly.

The meeting with "The Illustrious Council" had forced him to reconsider that position. So now Edison was elbows deep in his desk drawer looking for that report. He had seen it here somewhere. He shoved aside a collection of patents that he was holding on to 'just in case,' disposed of three stale, half-eaten donuts, pausing to take a bite of a chocolate one that looked somewhat fresh. Finally he found it, crumpled and stained with something that was probably coffee but possibly iodine. He wiped his hands on his vest just to be safe before licking the rest of the stale chocolate from his fingers.

The report was, of course, written partly in Serbian and that meant Edison needed to spend another quarter of an hour rooting through the drawer until he found his translation dictionary. After that, it took him another half hour to render enough translations to make the document readable.

Most of the report, once translated, was as expected. Money went to buy rare chemicals, to replace lab equipment that was worn down, melted or atomized by ambient static electricity, and to pay for coal to keep the generators humming. Edison saw the entry for the half ton of lead he had purchased in order to line his office as protection against X-rays, several hundred pounds of bird seed, brass and copper, screws, rivets, nails, wire and...

...ninety pounds of platinum?

Edison read the line again.

Ninety pounds. Nine Zero. Consuming a good fifty five percent of the lab's operating budget for the next two years.

*Alright Thomas, don't panic, Edison chided himself, It's platinum, and platinum is always*

*worth something, even if just by weight. I just need to find out what that crazy Serb bastard used it for, and then get it to the jewelers to sell it.*

Gathering up the ledger, Edison hurried down to the lab floor. Tesla was fixated on something, bent over a work table and cursing in Serbian as he tried to wire a tiny electric motor into what looked like a metal cigar with a propeller on one end.

Edison couldn't help himself and, despite the pressures of the moment, indulged his curiosity. New ideas and inventions always excited him, and of course, this might be something he could sell.

“Say, Nicola, what's that you're working on?”

“Submersible.”

“Interesting, interesting. But it's too small for a man. Do you plan on training a monkey to drive it? Have you considered a midget? You know P.T. hires both and he owes me favor or two.”

Tesla straightened and scoffed, his expression shifting into a look of annoyed disdain that would have done any Hapsburg prince proud.

“Is not for driving by monkey or midget. I shall drive tiny boat with teleforce!”

Tesla looked annoyed that he had even been asked the question, as if the mess of wires and mechanisms in front of him had a purpose that was entirely self-evident. He returned to his work.

“Nicola, I know you're busy, but we need to talk about the expenses...”

Tesla narrowed his eyes and glared up at his partner. “Perhaps you suddenly think you know better than Nikola what is best resistor, eh? You think pinching penny will cause electric current? Or you think maybe Nikola's babies should...”

“Calm down, this isn't about the pigeons, Nicola. It's about all that platinum. What did you need ninety pounds of it for?”

“Conductor. Low resistance. Was not bad, but needed bolstering.”

“So it's for experiments?”

“Yes.”

Some of the tension eased from Edison’s face. “What were the results?”

“Is Finished.”

“So where is the platinum?”

“In experiment. Ah, Nikola forget Thomas’s hearing...IN EXPERIMENT!”

The tension returned to Edison’s face. “We need that platinum back. We need those funds back. If the experiment is finished give me the platinum back...please.” Edison flashed his best partner smile.

“Thomas cannot have platinum back. Is mixed with the iridium and copper now, and besides we cannot dismantle experiment.”

Edison’s face was now practically all tension. “Why can’t we dismantle the experiment Nikola, and what do you mean you *mixed* the platinum?”

“Important work. The ladies must remain safe. There are many dangers here.”

Edison was getting very, very worried. And furious. Coldly, rationally, calculatingly furious.

“Show me. Show me right now.”

“Not right now,” dismissed Tesla turning back to the work bench. Teleforce remote relocation is more important, and you made me lose count of wires.” With a sigh, Tesla began loudly counting the various wires hanging from the end of apparatus on the table.

Edison, however, was done playing nice. He reached into his jacket pocket and produced a small sack. Without another word, he emptied the bag of marbles into the body of the miniature submersible.

Tesla went white and shrieked, flapping his hands wildly and bouncing in place like a spring. Edison grabbed him by the shoulders and gave the Serb a firm shake. That stopped the screaming for a moment, though Tesla still looked liable to resume his tantrum as soon as Edison let go.

“Listen to me good, you skinny fruitcake! Show me what you did with my platinum or I’m getting the wig!”

Tesla’s eyes grew even wider.

“The Aviary. It is in the aviary.”

Interrupted by the occasional twitch and worrying his fingers constantly, Tesla led the way to the Aviary, muttering to himself about the “cursed and evil spheres.” The spindly man quickly climbed the three flights of stairs that lead to the laboratory’s roof and Edison had to rush to keep pace. He was sweating and huffing when they reached the door.

“If you insist on coming up here, you must stay on the walkway. Is only safe path.”

Tesla squared himself on the door, taking a moment to tidy himself and straighten his already neat clothing. It was important that he look his best for the ladies. Gingerly, he opened the hatch to the roof.

“HELLO MY DARLINGS! Father is home!”

Tesla was transformed. The anxiety was gone amidst the flapping of hundreds of sets of wings. The genius was grinning ear to ear as he advanced along the wood-planked walkway, arms extended to provide perches for his beloved pigeons. Hovering over the fine mesh net that covered most of the roof they flocked to him, nuzzling and gently pecking their ‘daddy.’

Edison muttered as he stumbled out of the hatchway, slightly disgusted by the presence of Tesla’s flock of winged rats. The entire roof smelt of bird droppings. He was preparing to harangue the Serb again, when another smell caught his attention. And why did his roof smell like burnt fur?

Suddenly, with a bounding leap, a tom alley cat bounded from a neighboring building on to the roof. That feline was big and eyed the plump, well-fed birds greedily. It advanced quick and low, slinking across the wire mesh ground. Edison saw its intended prey, a grey and white mottled bird sleeping obliviously on a low perch. The cat gathered itself up for the pounce. Edison was about to call out to scare it away. If the thing took one of the birds, Tesla would be distraught for days, but before he could, the cat took one more step.

There was a high-pitched whine, a bright blue flash, then a tremendous CRACK that

left Edison's ears ringing—something that surprised him, given his near deafness—and left him with brilliant cyan after-images in his eye lids. Behind the burning blue flashes, he could still see the cat as it exploded into a burning bloody meat cloud. He staggered around, blinking wildly. Tesla noticed his distress and went to steady his friend.

“Careful Thomas. If you were to fall off the walk, the targeting grid will think you are big nasty bird thief. There is eighty-two percent probability that, even with the currently reduced amperage, you would at least lose a limb.

Edison's head swam and his eyes slowly cleared. As he blinked and tried to regain his equilibrium, he noticed something about the surface of the roof. It was dotted with charred patches, and most of those patches were marked by scorched pieces of fur and little heaps that looked like...

*No, those can't be. There have to be forty of them.*

Tesla followed Edison's eyes.

“Can't have those cursed felines eating the babies. That last one makes forty-three! Forty-three furry, filthy demons that will never terrify my darling ladies again!”

“Was that an electric arc?” asked Edison in a small voice.

“Thomas is now being ridiculous,” replied Tesla with a conspiratorial smile. “Was tightly focused hyper accelerated beam of tungsten particles projected through...”

“You used the platinum to MAKE A DEATH RAY?”

“No,” replied Tesla smugly. “I fabricated defensive teleforce focused emitter to protect my pigeons. And, of course, charged containment field and automatic targeting grid. I cannot stay up on roof all day to defend my babies because we have WORK to do.” Tesla added this last with a fairly accusatory glare at Edison, as if to imply that the threat to his winged babies was partly Edison's fault.

“You made a death ray to kill cats. It's a death ray. To kill cats. You made ...a death ray ...to kill cats!” Edison's head was starting to swim.

“Well, technically it will kill anything if it has enough power,” replied Tesla curtly. “And please, call it by its proper name.”

“Nicola, it’s a death ray.”

“I suppose, if you insist on being so simple, it is a ‘death ray’,” Tesla’s contempt was dripping from his words, “Honestly Thomas, I’m not sure why you call yourself a scientist at all. You always insist on making things so simple. You completely ignore the beauty and function of the details.” Tesla waved his hand in the air like a conductor directing a symphony.

“Death ray tells nothing of the functioning of the machine! Ha! As if even a child does not understand Van de Graaff mechanics and tungsten acceleration through a charged field! Now if you were to name it a *chromatic projecting accelerator*...do you know how long it took to get kinetic beam to be that shade of blue?”

Edison just looked at Tesla and shook his head. “Nikola, where...is ...the platinum?”

Tesla wave grandly at the device sitting in the middle of the rooftop. Edison followed the wooden pathway to a squat four-foot tall metallic pillar. Set atop the pillar was metal globe, and sticking out from the globe was a wand-like nozzle with a ball end. The wand was slowly waving back and forth as if it were scanning the rooftop.

“So where is my platinum?”

“There,” replied Tesla as if he were talking to child. “Entire device made from platinum alloy. I added iridium, copper, and some other secrets.” Tesla smiled, winked and touched the side of his nose.

“Also there in containment field rods of course,” he quickly added, trying to thoroughly answer the question. “I had to increase amperage to perfect balance to keep *accelerated particle projection emitter beam* from causing second little accident.” Tesla pointed to the corner of a nearby building. The corner of the building was gone.

“Amperage too low and beam travels through evil furry targets into other things, and too high, beam just bounces off.” Seeing the growing horror on his partner’s face Tesla quickly added, ”Don’t worry, don’t worry, we sent lab assistant with note to landlord telling him of dangerous lightning strike and advised him to invest in more lightning rods.” Tesla gave his partner another conspiratorial wink and smiled. “Balance for current output is perfect now, not to worry Thomas.”

Edison scanned the rooftop and counted the so-called containment rods. There had to be fifty of them surrounding the rooftop, each one representing a chunk of his missing funds.

“And you...mixed...the platinum with other metals?”

“Yes, yes,” Tesla nodded happily as he thought his partner was finally catching on. “Platinum was next to worthless by itself but when mixed into alloy proved to be perfect!”

“Worthless?”

Edison’s vision blurred and he felt his head begin to spin as his partner blithely wrote off the loss of ninety pounds of precious metal. He didn’t need the Serb to tell him that there was no getting the platinum back out of the alloy now. He reflexively reached an arm out to steady himself, bracing against Tesla’s shoulder.

For his part, Tesla’s eyes bulged in his head as went completely rigid, shocked, slightly horrified and thoroughly confused as to what would be an appropriate response to Edison’s display of emotion.

After a series of deep breaths, Edison was able to stand on his own again. Slowly, a new idea began to coalesce in his mind, and with it, a sense of hope. A sense of hope that was tinged a distinct, shiny shade of yellow. The precise color of newly minted hard currency.

“Nikola my friend, tell me more about your ladies’ *defensive chromatic accelerated particle emitter* please,” Edison said, an interested smile spreading across his face.

A fat, grey pigeon landed on Tesla’s shoulder as he happily complied with his partner’s request.

...TO BE CONTINUED!