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Dread Eagle

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1. Location of attack on HMAS Borealis
2. Location of Taranis when discovered by Beatrice

PROLOGUE

Soon shall thy arm, unconquer'd steam! afar
Drag the slow barge, or drive the rapid car,
Or on wide-waving wings expanded bear
The flying chariot through the fields of air.
Erasmus Darwin, 1781

1 MAY 1845

Napoleon Bonaparte stood upon the steel gantry high above the factory floor. In the claw of his arthritic hand, where once he had wielded a sword, he now clutched the bulb of his walking stick. He was seventy-five years old, and looked it. Yet, despite the extra weight, the silver hair and sagging, grey face, there remained something about him – something in the piercing strength of his dark eyes – that recalled the young man who first bestrode the world half a century ago.

The tour guide gestured with his hand at the view beyond the gantry railing. 'Behold, *Titan*!' he declared theatrically. 'When she is ready in four weeks' time, she will be the largest, most powerful warcraft that ever took to the skies.'

Napoleon surveyed the view with the same steely concentration he once used to study troop formations on the eve of battle. The cathedral-sized hall was dominated by the immense metal frame of an airship, suspended from the roof by gigantic hydraulic arms. Hundreds of ant-sized workers laboured on the wooden scaffolding that covered much of the structure. Huge cranes lifted iron girders up to the scaffolding platforms. Men strapped into harnesses dangling from the roof clambered over the giant airship skeleton, welding the girders into place and sending glittering showers of sparks towards the distant floor.

Napoleon turned to his Minister of Foreign Affairs, who had reluctantly accompanied him on the tour. Talleyrand, who was even older than Napoleon, had for many years been obliged to use to a wheelchair. Napoleon had to raise his voice in order to make himself heard above the deafening whine and clatter of tools. 'I brought you here, my friend,' he shouted, 'so you can see with your own eyes the progress we have made.'

'Impressive,' nodded Talleyrand wearily. 'But I still maintain that the timing is all wrong for an invasion of Britain.'

'The timing will never be right as far as you are concerned!' bellowed Napoleon. 'I may be dead in a year, or even a month, so my doctors keep telling me. If I must wait until you say we are ready, I will be leading the invasion in a hearse!'

'We have enough problems in our own back yard,' persisted Talleyrand. 'We don't need another foreign adventure. There are nationalist mobs on the streets of Vienna, Prague and Madrid, demanding bread and political rights. We could be facing another 1830...'

'The people will never be satisfied!' thundered Napoleon. 'I've given them justice, freedom, education. I've given them the Code Napoléon. What more can they possibly want?'

'Food in their bellies,' murmured Talleyrand.

'Well, we shall give them food soon enough – stripped from the bountiful earth of Kent, Sussex and Hampshire.'

'And you think the British will simply yield this territory to us?'

Napoleon gestured to the airship before them. 'They will have no choice – especially when *Titan* wears the Aetheric Shield. Dressed in her shield of immortality, this great ship will carry the invasion to the very heart of the British Empire: the City of London. We'll blast Nelson's Column from the skies!' He looked charmed by the thought. 'That will be sweet revenge for Trafalgar!'

The tour guide, who had been listening carefully to every word of this conversation, now handed out helmets to Napoleon, Talleyrand and their personal bodyguards. 'Would your excellencies care for a tour of the factory floor?' he asked, guiding the four distinguished visitors gently in the direction of an