

*The ultimate goal of any story published in Tales of the Shadowmen is to, not change, but deepen the appreciation the reader has for the characters being pastiched. For example, one can hardly imagine the Nyctalope without taking for granted the new elements added to his biography by Roman Leary or Emmanuel Gorlier; the same could be said of Fantômas, Arsène Lupin, Doc Savage/Ardan, Doctor Who/Omega, or even The Little Prince, whose "more real than real" exploits have been chronicled in our pages. In a similar fashion, one hopes that, after reading the following story, the reader will never look at the classic French New Wave films of the 1960s Alphaville and Last Year in Marienbad in quite the same way...*

### **Jean-Marc Lofficier: J.C. in Alphaville**

Jerry: "I promised them nothing less than the Millennium."  
Beesley: "I'm afraid we'll have to put back the Millennium for a while."  
Michael Moorcock. *A Cure for Cancer*.

#### *Berlin, 1944: The Men Who Would Be Gods*

They were four. Four brilliant men. Four evil men. They already had more wealth and power than most men on Earth, but they wanted more. They wanted their own world to shape and rule to their heart's desire.

They wanted to be gods.

They secretly shepherded Adolf Hitler's meteoritic rise to power, because they recognized in him a bit of themselves, and they thought he might make it possible for them to achieve their dreams.

They were wrong

Misshapen Rotwang was the architect whose visionary madness inspired Albert Speer and Leni Riefenstahl; he was the necromancer who had sent Heinrich Himmler's *Ahnenerbe* looking for the Spear of Destiny and the Holy Grail in Montserrat and Rennes-le-Château.

Leonard Orlok, last scion of an ancient and dark dynasty, was a mathematician who worked with Leonard Zuse on the design of the Z series of binary electrically driven mechanical calculators, before creating the world's first thinking machine, the Alpha-10.

"M," a tall, gaunt, sinister physicist, was the younger brother of the notorious crime-lord Mabuse; like him, he ruled over an invisible empire of gamblers and whores at the heart of Berlin, playing bizarre variations of the Game of Nim with satanic abandon for the souls of his victims.

The last of the four was dwarfish Ohisver Müller, an apikoric Jew and an alchemist, who was privy to the secrets of Rabbi Loew and Ramon de Tarrega. Some claimed he could animate clay and make gold, and had masterminded the Wall Street *krach* of 1929 which, ultimately, had secured power for the Nazis.

The Four had put their trust in Hitler, but their madness eventually infected the Führer, and his dream of a 1000-Year Reich died a miserable death in the Russian winter of 1943.

The Four easily managed to avoid the *Götterdämmerung* of 1945. Not for them the shameful benches of Nuremberg, or the hangman's noose! Rotwang went to Pasadena, California, changed his name to Blicero, but still worked on his crazy dreams. Orlok relocated to France, changed his name to Von Braun, and continued designing thinking machines. M escaped to Argentina, changed his name to Morel, and became a writer of some repute. And Ohisver Müller fled to Turkey, didn't have to change his name and continued to despoil life much as he had before.

But, at night, when the mundane duties of their days had been discharged, the Four still dreamed of being gods.

#### *Rennes-le-Château, September 1954*

Natasha Von Braun had just turned 14. She smiled because she was happy. To celebrate her birthday, her father had invited three friends from his days in Berlin that she wasn't supposed to talk about.

They had brought their own children, including little Maria, who was the same age as she was.

The four of them played in the *pinède* behind the property. The white-walled house, which was now known to the locals as "*la maison de l'Allemand*," had been built on the hillside of the picturesque village of Rennes-le-Château, in Southern France, in the shadow of the Tour Magdalène, the folly built by Father Béranger Saunière in the 19th century.

While the children played hide and seek in the woods, the Four, having enjoyed the delicious lunch cooked by an elderly local woman, went out on the stone terrace and, sitting under multi-colored parasols, began to discuss what had brought them all together again.

"I take it that you've finally succeeded, Orlok?" said the beefy, ruddy-skinned man with piercing black eyes and long slick hair pulled back in a pony tail.

"Please, don't call me Orlok, Rotwang," said Natasha's father. "My name is now Von Braun. Leonard Von Braun. But, yes, I believe that success is within our grasp."

"And my name is now Dominus Blicero, don't you forget it, but we remain who we are. In this company, I shall continue to call you Orlok, and you can continue to call me Rotwang. Now, you will forgive my skepticism, because you have made such claims before."

Ohisver Müller, a small, wizened man—almost a homunculus—whose features were strangely ageless and whose almost colorless eyes sparkled with infinite cunning, jumped in:

"Rotwang is right. It is hard to erase the memories of our failure at Germelshausen."

"It was not Orlok's fault if we failed at Germelshausen," said the fourth member of the cabal, a tall, gaunt, saturnine man, usually known only by his initial, M. "We weren't ready yet."

"I have sunk a huge amount of money into this operation..." began Müller.

"We have all contributed equally," interrupted Rotwang. "Don't forget it was I who killed Otto Rahn after he found the Spear of Destiny, and lied to Himmler about it."

"And I who delivered a true copy of the *Legamaton*," added Müller.

Orlok-Von Braun made a pacifying gesture with his hands.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen! The reason we failed at Germelshausen is that we didn't have the raw computing power necessary to create order out of chaos. Now, with my new Alpha-60 machine, and M's equations, we can fabricate our own pocket realities in the Outlands, those dregs of creation existing on the edge of the multiverse. With the Spear of Destiny, the primordial energy that remains there can be shaped according to our own desires to bring about the very worlds we wish to bring into existence.

"For a long time, we have each wished for our own perfect world, what Hitler promised us, but failed to deliver. But now, the time is right, my friends. The Conjunction of a Million Spheres is almost upon us. The Pattern of Amber has been desecrated. The Infinite Earths are in Crisis. The Gunslingers of Gilead are no more, and Wampus has fought his last battle on Labyrinth. The world is turning. We have the dreams, and now, we have the power to will them into existence..."

"Metropolis," whispered Rotwang.

"Müllertown," said Müller.

"Marienbad," muttered M.

"...And my own Alphaville," finished Von Braun.

#### *The Castle, 1964*

"You come highly recommended, Herr Cornelius," said the tall, cadaverous, white-haired old German dressed in an old-fashioned grey suit, of the type worn by bankers before the Great War.

The interview room was painted in drab yellow and brown. The paint had flaked off in a few places, leading Jerry to reflect that the Castle had seen better days. It was lit by two single 40 watt bulbs, barely bright enough to cast shadows. A simple oak table separated the two men. In the Castle, it was late winter afternoon all the time.

"We aim to please, Mr. Klamm," replied Jerry Cornelius, a tall, androgynous, dark-haired young Englishman dressed in the latest and brightest Carnaby Street fashion.

The English Assassin lit up an *Acapulco Gold* cigarette and looked for an ashtray. From somewhere behind him, Herr Erlanger, Klamm's non-descript secretary, brought him one.

"Our common friend, Fräulein Persson, advised us that you were the best man for the job, and I'm now inclined to agree with her," said Klamm, perusing a brittle sheet of yellowed onion-skin paper which Jerry presumed was a letter of recommendation from Mrs. P.

"What is the job exactly? Your secretary here was disappointingly vague when he approached me," asked Jerry, indicating Erlanger, who had returned to stand silently near the door.

"Yes, I gave strict instructions to Herr Erlanger to be the soul of discretion," answered Klamm. "It is not good when too many people know of our business, as I am sure you will agree. Now, what do you know of the Outlands, Herr Cornelius?"

"What I've picked up here and there, mostly. They're bits of 'what was' mixed up with 'what might bes' located on the edge of creation, right?"

"We at the Castle prefer our definitions to be more scientifically exact, but I commend you for your excellent grasp of our problem."

"What problem?" inquired Jerry, who still didn't understand what the officious German wanted from him.

"The problem is, as you've accurately stated, the 'what-might-bes,' Herr Cornelius. Too many of them can disrupt the structure of the multiverse..."

"I thought Chaos was taking care of that?" interrupted Jerry.

“A common misconception, I’m afraid. Both Chaos and Law are in accord with each other. There is always a Balance, as you well know. But the Outlands are outside the multiverse. The Balance exerts no power there. However, as long as they remain, shall we say, on the periphery of things, no one bothers about them. But when they start encroaching onto reality and disturb the equilibrium, then we have to...”

“‘We?’”

This time, Klamm ignored the interruption and continued:

“... prune the excrescent or superfluous manifestations.”

“I see. So that’s why you need me—to, er, ‘prune’ a bit of excrescent creation which threatens you. I can do the job all right, Mr. Klamm, but I’m going to need more details. A lot more details.”

“Have no fear, Herr Cornelius, you will be adequately briefed... The excrescence we’re talking about was formed just about ten years ago... His creator, Leonard Von Orlok, *alias* Leonard Von Braun, brought it into existence—and others just like it—right out of the stuff of creation itself. He called it Alphaville. It now threatens to expand and invade the rest of the multiverse. We have already dispatched several agents through the Outlands. One of them is waiting for you there.”

“For me?”

“Didn’t you understand? That is what we want you to do, Herr Cornelius,” said Klamm. “Find Alphaville—and destroy it.”

### *Alphaville*

“*I’m very well, thank you, not at all,*” responded the parking attendant in an emotionless, mechanical tone when Jerry handed him the key to his Lotus Seven.

The English Assassin had parked near the Grand Omega Minus Square. He was now dressed in a leather bomber jacket and wore a long, white silk scarf.

Stepping outside the parking garage, Jerry reflected that Alphaville looked like Paris reimagined by Albert Speer, and inhabited by extras from a Leni Riefenstahl movie. It was a glamorous, but depressing sight.

“Mr. Cornelius?”

A beefy man with dark hair and the look of a beaten dog, dressed in a rumpled dark suit under a trenchcoat, had appeared as if out of nowhere.

“My name is Henry Dickson. I work for the Castle.”

“Henry Dickson? I knew your father.”

“Everyone does,” sighed the detective.

“I’m eager to hear your report,” said Jerry. “Shall we find a place to have a drink?”

“There are no cafés in Alphaville,” replied Dickson, glumly.

“No bars? No pubs? What do people here do for fun?”

“They don’t.”

“Don’t?”

“Have fun,” explained Dickson. “Come to my hotel room. I think I still have a bottle of Loch Lomond left from my last trip to the Outlands.”

Dickson’s hotel room at the Bunker Palace Hotel was as sad and rumpled as the detective. It consisted of a bed, a nightstand, a dresser, a small desk and a chair, all white. It was lit by a fluorescent tube that managed to be both too bright, and yet not bright enough, depending on where one was sitting.

Once inside, Dickson found the bottle of scotch in the drawer of the night stand. Its label wasn’t Loch Lomond but ZAT 77. Jerry made a face.

“It’s that or tap water,” said Dickson, getting two glasses.

“To your health then,” said Jerry, grabbing one of the glasses.

Jerry settled on the formica and vinyl chair, while Dickson sat on the edge of the bed.

“I think I’ve managed to get what we need,” finally said the detective.

“I’m listening,” said the English assassin.

“Von Braun—Orlok—lied to his partners. Well, not lied, maybe oversold them... He didn’t tell them the whole truth...”

“Which was?”

“To create a place like this...” Dickson made a circle with his hand to encompass all that was around them. “...you need more than a super-computer, no matter how advanced it is. Alpha-60 might have laid out the plans for Alphaville, and the other cities, it might even sustain them, but it didn’t create them.”

“Who did then?”

“A Prince of Hell, Duke Murmur, with whom the Four entered into a compact. In exchange for a prize, Murmur did what the Fallen do best: create this mockery of life, this soulless travesty of all that’s holy.”

“Have you identified what that prize was?”

“Yes, I have.”

“So, what is it?”

“It is not a what, but a who.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Are you familiar with Dostoyevsky’s *Brother Karamazov*, Mr. Cornelius?”

“I read it a long time ago.”

“In it, Ivan Karamazov asserts that neither truth nor harmony—meaning utopia—is worth the suffering of a child.”

“I still don’t follow you.”

“Karamazov was wrong. Utopia is precisely worth the suffering of a child. Like his vampire ancestors, Orlok has taken the life of a child—his child—to create his personal utopia.”

“Natasha?”

Natasha Von Braun had turned 24. The fact didn’t matter to her, because she was dead inside. To everyone, she appeared to be a stunningly beautiful dark-haired woman, but her empty eyes told another story, for they revealed the absence of her soul.

The inhabitants of Alphaville had been made, or conditioned, by Alpha-60 to be automatons, productive social units. Natasha’s life, however, had winked out of existence ten years earlier, when Duke Murmur of Hell had snatched her soul. If she remembered at all what had happened that day in Rennes-le-Château, it was like the experience of a librarian pulling out an index card from a book and looking at the information printed on it. The memory of her spiritual death was just one more bit of information that had been catalogued in her mind, but remained unfelt.

Using the *Legamaton*, or *Key of Solomon*, the Four had summoned Duke Murmur and traded the souls of their own children for their precious utopias. As Dostoyevsky had sensed, it was with the tears of a child that worlds were created.

Outwardly, Natasha Von Braun seemed alive, but inside, she was dead. She moved about Alphaville like a diligent ant through an anthill, with a purpose, but without a soul. She went shopping, she dined out, she attended functions organized by Alpha-60, and did everything required of her without the least emotion.

Sometimes, she even went to the movies.

Jerry Cornelius had been surprised to discover they had movies in Alphaville. He thought the medium too fanciful to be allowed to even exist in Leonard Orlok’s model city. He was wrong.

“Sometimes reality is too complex for oral communication,” had declared Alpha-60. “But film embodies it in a form which enables it to be spread all over the world.”

So he and Henry Dickson had gone to see *Tarzan vs. IBM* at the Grand Rex. To tell the truth, it was a bit different from what Jerry had expected. Tarzan—the villain of the piece—was a slobbering, raging, barely articulate man-ape spreading anarchy in excremental fashion—quite literally, throwing poop at the world, while IBM—Integrated Basic Man—was the perfectly well-adjusted and socially productive superhero who managed to stop the beast, thanks to the application of General Semantics.

The audience was polite, laughing and applauding in a controlled fashion at all the appropriate moments.

*All in all, it was a terrible way to spend an evening*, thought Jerry. He wouldn’t have agreed to go if Dickson hadn’t been able to secure two seats next to Natasha Von Braun’s.

Jerry pulled out his needle gun.

*I walk down these corridors, through these halls, these galleries, in this structure of another century, this enormous, luxurious, baroque, lugubrious hotel, where corridors succeed endless corridors*, thought Jerry Cornelius, as he carried Natasha’s inert body to his room in the Bunker Palace Hotel.

After the kidnapping, he and Dickson had split up. The detective had gone to prepare the next step of their mission, while Jerry had taken the girl to his car and driven to a safe place, a room that Dickson had booked in advance at the Bunker Palace Hotel.

Soon, Natasha began to regain consciousness. She half sat up on the couch and gazed at her kidnapper with profound amazement, as if she understood nothing of what she saw.

With a slow, gentle gesture, she brushed her hair back from her forehead and blinked her eyes, dazzled by the room’s bright lights. She was trying to get her thoughts together and was looking for words to express them.

“Didn’t we meet at that hotel in Marienbad last year?” she asked.

“I don’t think so,” said Jerry. “I’ve never been to the Outlands before.”

In Alphaville, if you watched a movie, the movie also watched you. The kidnapping of Natasha Von Braun had been monitored and analyzed by Alpha-60.

The image of Jerry Cornelius, however, did not compute. Each frame of the film showed a different man: an albino, a negative man, a dark-skinned warrior, a golden boy... Alpha-60 could not make sense of it and filed it for further evaluation. But the image of Henry Dickson was crystal clear. He could be seen. Tracked. Captured. And so he was.

[TO BE CONTINUED IN THE BOOK...]