The light bulb flickered to life, casting its light, infinitesimally small under the bright stars above, onto the grass around its base. I looked at Tesla, amazed. He grinned as he pulled the light bulb out of the soft soil and the light faded. “The conductivity of the soil here was one reason I chose Colorado for my laboratory,” he said. “I am searching for a way to transmit and then harness electricity through the ground.” Tesla paused, perhaps for dramatic effect, and gazed into the heavens. “It would change the world.”

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September 1899. Colorado Springs, Colorado.

I sat at the bar stool, gazing into my whiskey. Late afternoon sunlight streamed in through plate glass windows that offered a picturesque view of the Rocky Mountains. A few ceiling fans rotated slowly, swirling the warm, musty air.

“Always hated them fans,” said the barkeep, a big, round man with a shaved head and a cheeky eye. “Pointless, I say.”

I took a sip, murmuring some agreement, but my mind was preoccupied thinking of the pictures I had just developed. Those shots of Pikes Peak weren’t my best work, but they developed fine, and the contrast caught the eye well. The door squeaked open and a man hurried into the bar.

“Gentlemen of the *Horsetail Saloon*,” he announced with a flourish, “knowing the quality of the patronage here, would any of you know where I could find a photographer, professional in his work, free tomorrow night, and looking for excitement? And please no reporter types; those ones are always a pain to deal with.” The few other men in the bar gave him a glance, then turned away with grumbling disdain. The man stepped into the sunlight, illuminating his face, and suddenly I recognized him. It was Nikola Tesla, that scientist who had just moved his laboratory to Colorado Springs. Obviously the dramatic personality given to him by the newspapers was indeed true. Being a photographer, I knew much about the chemical sciences, but nothing about the nature of electricity, Tesla’s specialty. And my train left the morning after next, so I had nothing going on tomorrow night.

“I am a photographer,” I announced, and Tesla turned to me with delight. His carefully trimmed mustache and inquisitive gaze matched the newspaper photographs exactly.

“Excellent!” he said, and sat down on the stool next to me. “My name is Nikola Tesla,” he said, and I noticed a slight Eastern European accent.

“Yes, I recognized you from the newspaper,” I replied. “My name is William Henry Jackson.” We shook hands.

“It’s a pleasure, Mr. Jackson,” Tesla said. There was something about him that gave me a sense of anticipation, almost an aura of optimism and excitement. “I have seen a few of your works myself. Some of my favorite photographs were captured with your camera.”

“Well, thank you for that, Mr. Tesla,” I replied. “What kind of excitement will be happening tomorrow night that needs recording?”

“As you must know if you have seen me in the papers, I am conducting some high-voltage experiments with the thinner mountain air here. I created a sort of artificial

lightning a few months ago, but now I need to go bigger for my experiments. I feel tomorrow's test will yield results never before seen by mankind."

"And you want someone to take pictures of this experiment?"

"Yes. I think it will prove most important for future years." He pulled out a small, battered pocket watch from inside his vest. "Damn! I have a previous engagement I need to attend to. Meet me here tomorrow night at 7:30. I should have everything prepared by then."

"Alright," I replied, somewhat taken aback.

"Farewell, Mr. Jackson. I will see you again soon," Tesla said, and he swept out the door.

"That's Tesla for ya," the barkeep said, giving me wink. "Always th' dramatic type. Never tells ya anythin' straight up. Comes in here offin for a drink. 'Ave fun tomorrow night. Should be a show."

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Tesla arrived at 7:30 sharp in a clattering motorcar, just as the sun began to disappear behind the mountains. I was waiting for him with a few glass plates, my camera, and my assistant, Carl, to help carry my equipment.

"Off we go, gentlemen!" Tesla called as we loaded my gear into the trunk.

"Where exactly is your laboratory?" I asked, jittering and bumping on the dusty road.

"Just off of Kiowa and Foote Avenue," he replied. "It's not too far away."

After a short while in the bumpy car, we pulled up in front of a strange building. It was large and wooden, almost like a barn, and shooting above it stood a metal tower that stretched high into the sky.

"One hundred and forty-two feet tall," Tesla said proudly, noticing my gaze. "See that ball on top? Copper. Maximum conductivity." The car rolled to a stop on the crunchy gravel drive, and we unloaded the gear from the trunk.

"Hurry along, Mr. Jackson!" Tesla cried. "The experiment must begin, and Mother Nature waits for no man!"

Tesla opened the rough metal door of the laboratory with the squealing of hinges. Showing me in with a wave of his arm, I stepped into the dark room, Carl with my camera following behind. A cool swirl of air brought with it a musty, electric smell. The thin moonlight from the doorway splayed a few feet into the lab before fading into a deep blackness. Swinging the large door shut with an echoing clash, Tesla sent us all into darkness.

"One moment gentlemen. I apologize for the dark. It can get quite expensive keeping the generator running all the time." My ears followed Tesla fumbling along the wall, searching for the lights. "Aha!" he exclaimed, and I heard a small click. An electric hum started resonating throughout the room, and the lights slowly came to life. The circular room was large, probably seventy feet in diameter, and standing in the center was the strangest contraption I had ever seen. The whole thing stood about thirty-five feet tall. Stabilized on a set of wooden feet was a large cylinder of wooden latticework, twenty feet around. A thin metal cylinder ran from the floor up and protruded ten feet above the wooden slats. At the very top was a coil of metal surrounding the cylinder, along with

another ball of thick copper. Scattered around the edges of the room were a few tall coils of wire. I hung up my heavy wool coat on a hook near the door.

"Have you ever seen one of my coils before, Mr. Jackson?" Tesla asked as he strode across the room to a set of dials and gauges. He took off his battered overcoat, shook out the wrinkles, then placed it on the back of a spindly-legged revolving chair. He began examining the board and flicking switches.

"I've heard of their invention, but never seen one operated in person," I admitted. "I was under the impression that they were fairly small, however."

"They usually are, but I needed more for this experiment," he said. "You can set up your camera on that ledge over there, by the way," he said, gesturing. "It should be mostly out of the way there, and I believe it will provide a most dramatic angle." I sent Carl to the wooden staircase leading to the platform with the camera.

"What are those extra coils of wire around the walls for?" I asked.

"It attracts the electricity coming from the main coil and helps the conductivity of the experiment. Come over here and help me with this," Tesla asked, and led me to a metal turn-crank in the wall.

"What does this do?" I asked?

"Sometime in the short past," he said, as we started to turn the crank, "we had some… flammability issues with the roof."

"You set the roof on fire?" I asked incredulously.

"That's one way to put it, I suppose," he replied with a quick wink and smile. "Anyways, it needed to be replaced, and Edison had a field day with it, claiming my, 'dangerous' alternating current had caused the accident. Utter nonsense, of course, just like every preposterous accusation of my AC's supposed danger. The same thing would have happened with DC! And you would have paid twice as much to do it, too." He sent me a look of disgust. "Sorry. Edison and I are in a slight disagreement on this issue. Anyways, this time we made the roof retractable so it wouldn't happen again."

I grunted as the crank slowly turned. I could feel heavy gears grinding in the walls as we continued to work. Glancing up, I saw the roof had already rolled back partway to expose a dark, clear night sky. The wooden boards slowly reeled into a roll at the end of the room, up near the ceiling. A few more twists, then the roof was totally peeled back.

"I just love the beautiful, clear air here, don't you?" Tesla asked, staring into the sky. "It reminds me of home, back in Serbia."

"That is one reason why I decided to come to the west," I replied, looking at the man. "Beauty is everywhere."

"Are you ready for the spectacular, Mr. Jackson?" Tesla asked with a mischievous glance. He quickly turned away and sprung back to his station. He was growing more excited by the minute. I saw Tesla move another lever and the humming sound began to slowly and subtly crescendo.

"The camera is ready, Mr. Jackson!" Carl shouted from the ledge.

"Very good!" I replied, and ran over to the staircase. Tesla's excitement was contagious; I couldn't wait to see the results of this experiment.

"Mr. Jackson!" Tesla shouted above the steadily increasing buzz. "Remember: There is no reason for any panic! Everything done here will never harm you or your pictures!" I could feel the electrical tension in the air. It stretched throughout the building, and the hairs on the back of my neck prickled. I quickly stepped behind the camera and

made a few minute adjustments. “I hope you came to see a show!” Tesla shouted. Then, ceremoniously, he twisted a large silver knob on his console.

Immediately, a thick shock of pure electricity shot from the large coil in the center to the small one our ledge was next to. Accompanying it came an intense, sharp, electrical buzzing sound like I had never heard before. I startled back, nearly tipping over my camera, and Carl was so shocked he nearly tumbled off the platform. The bolt disappeared, and three more massive streaks of lightning spun across the room. The harsh buzzing sound continued, reverberating in the large laboratory. I could feel the building beginning to shake slightly, trying to cope with the immense power in the room. I smelled metallic electricity on the air, like the redolence of static electricity gathering on the clouds just before a rainstorm breaks. The current streaming across the lab continued to flash, branching out in all directions. All I could do was stand there, stunned. Tesla’s experiment was amazing. As lightning flashed, Tesla strode towards a chair in the center of the room, eyes transfixed on the display. He sat down and began taking notes in a small journal. He crossed his legs unconcernedly, entranced.

I vaguely heard a dull shout and turned to see Carl pointing at the camera with hurried gestures. I quickly crouched down and carefully snapped the shutter. Straightening up, I looked through the flashing light and noise and caught Telsa’s eye. He pointed upwards towards the sky with a look of amazement and joy. Bolts of lightning shot out from the large copper ball at the top of the mast, scattering light in all directions. The electricity enveloped me, and I felt the power coursing through the air. The bolts in the sky blasted out, and I saw a few jagged shocks a hundred feet long. I could only imagine what someone watching this from miles away would be thinking as they saw this man-made lightning storm. A blue arc of electricity suddenly started winding up and down the central cylinder of the coil, lazily displaying its intense power. Tesla continued scribbling down notes in his journal, glancing back between the book and the electric show all around him.

Suddenly, there was a bang and sparks flew off the coil. I jumped back in surprise as the electricity cut out, sending the room and sky into darkness. An eerie silence permeated the room, and I smelled burnt metal. A few rays of moonlight bounced into the now darkened room.

“Ha!” A sharp sound broke the silence. Tesla laughed again. “The station manager at El Paso Power will have my head for this!”

“Do you get your power from there for your experiments?” I cautiously asked.

“Yes!” Tesla answered back. “And I daresay we probably burned out the dynamo at the company’s main station, sending the entire city into darkness! Here, come outside with me. There’s something I want to show you.”

I hastily snapped the shutter closed again. We managed to clamber down the rickety wooden stairs and followed Tesla’s clicking shoe heels to the door. Tesla swung the door open, letting in a rush of cool evening air. I grabbed my coat from the hook by the door and, swinging it over my shoulders, stepped out into the beautiful Colorado world.

The moon shone down from the star-speckled sky, illuminating the dark buildings in town. The stars began shining a little brighter, now that the lights from Colorado Springs were gone.

"Look at this," Tesla said. He had a light bulb in his hand and, crouching, he screwed it into the dirt at his feet. The light bulb flickered to life, casting its light, infinitesimally small under the bright stars above, onto the grass around its base. I looked at Tesla, amazed. He grinned as he pulled the light bulb out of the soft soil and the light faded. "The conductivity of the soil here was one reason I chose Colorado for my laboratory," he said. "I am searching for a way to transmit and then harness electricity through the ground." Tesla paused, perhaps for dramatic effect, and gazed into the heavens. "It would change the world."