

**SteampunX -  
Episode One: Funk and Puck  
by  
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Smashwords Edition

## Puck

The Birch Stag leapt through the forest with mechanical grace. His lacquered body glinting as he landed where the sun broke the canopy only to bound again deeper into the woods. Puck watched from her perch atop a fallen tree. The smooth whirr of the wooden creature's clockwork mechanics mimicked the buzz of insects and faded as it disappeared beyond her vision. She allowed the silence to swallow her until the stag passed beyond all her senses.

"What makes you think you'll ever find it?" she asked her twin, Funk, who sat behind her sorting through a stack of stones. His attention commanded completely by the task. He meticulously browsed the pile and collected a few the size of arrowheads, if not the shape.

"I'm the best hunter in the Ten Hundred Nations." He replied without looking up.

"You're not a hunter at all, just a boy trying to impress some men who don't have any use for him." Funk ignored her. He often did. She placed her hand on the trunk and cart-wheeled to the ground. She settled herself into a bloom of wildflowers, in imitation of her brother, and assembled a bouquet.

"The Birch Stag isn't meant to be hunted. Two Trunks says it's a symbol of the Nations."

Funk stopped to consider his answer, running his hand through his dirty blond hair. "All stags are meant to be hunted. That's why the Great Spirit created them. They honor us with their lives. Why create a stag if not to hunt?"

"The Great Spirit didn't create this stag; the wizard did." Puck wove the flowers into a daisy chain.

"It doesn't matter who created it. A stag is meant to be hunted."

"The wizard doesn't think that way. He's crazy. How many fires has he started? The village burned down three times before Two Trunks sent him away."

Funk continued at his task without acknowledging her.

Puck persisted, "That's just the times I remember and I'm still young."

"Not so young."

"Thirteen summers is young. That's what Two Trunks says, too young to hunt this stag or any other."

"I didn't bring Two Trunks on this hunt with me, or you for that matter. If you don't like it, why don't you go back to the village?"

A look of hurt flashed across Puck's face, but her brother didn't notice. She squared her shoulders and crowned herself with the wildflowers. "Because!" she yelled, frightening a family of robins from a nearby nest. "I am Victoria! Queen of Angland! Your Lady and Master!" She danced, her limbs flailing about in wild exaggeration. The edges of Funk's lips curled up, just slightly at his sister's antics and she knew she'd won.

She saw the stag again then, but this time so did her brother. He stood on a nearby overhang. His antlers, untrimmed branches, contrasted his elegantly-carved torso. The creature's glass eyes glared at the twins. Her brother pulled and loosed an arrow, before a word could pass between them.

The hard thunk of the shaft intersecting a piece of finely planed wood startled them. The stag jumped down the overhang, arrow still embedded where, had he been a creature of flesh, his heart would have been.

The twins shared an excited glance before bouncing off through the wood. By the time they reached the overhang, the stag vanished behind a distant oak. His wooden chassis provided an excellent, if unintended, camouflage. They followed between the trees. Their bare feet propelling them over rock and log with a speed only a Native could achieve. Still the wizard's mechanical miracle outdistanced them.

Even with controlled breaths the effort caught up with Puck, whose desire for the prize couldn't match her brother's. She faked a trip and rolled to a stop in a bed of leaves. Her body tingled with the effort and she let herself lay on the ground, watching the sky through a break in the canopy. The pounding of her heart in her ears deafened her. She watched the branches sway in the wind as her heartbeat faded until she could hear the music of the forest, a combination of birdsong and rustling leaves. She closed her eyes when her brother's head eclipsed her vision.

"Tired?"

"Yes, thank you. I just thought I would take a little nap." Puck pulled herself up to her elbows looking around for a mechanical deer carcass. "Did you catch him?"

"Catching a stag is not like catching a nap. It doesn't overtake you. You have to overtake it."

"Did you compose that while you were watching him disappear into the woods?"

Before Funk could answer a loud crack shattered the still of the forest. The birdsong morphed into panicked screeches as all the nearby flocks took flight simultaneously. The beating of wings masked the shaking leaves. Funk fell to the ground beside his sister. Puck rolled onto her stomach. Two more cracks sounded at irregular intervals, like thunder from a blue sky. Though the bombast echoed throughout the forest, the twins were keen enough to trace back the sound to its origin, somewhere in front of them. After many moments without another sound and with nothing and no one in view, Funk whispered a question.

"Is it time to run?"

Puck rose in response and bolted in the direction of the thunder. "I meant run away," Funk said as he raced off after her. They blazed through the forest, adjusting their strides to minimize the noise. Soon they sounded like nothing more than two squirrels hopping through the underbrush. Voices echoed ahead. They stopped and crept forward just enough to make out the words.

"Avez-vous le cœur?" The deep voice drowned the soft sounds of the language. Puck thought it might be French, though she'd only heard the tongue on one or two occasions in her life. It definitely wasn't Esperanto, the common language, or English, which she'd learned a smattering of. Nor was it the voice of Kanien'keha, which she and Funk had been speaking all their lives.

Who would be speaking French? The Neufraçaise never came this far north into the territories of the Ten Hundred Nations. Unable to restrain her curiosity, Puck peeked around the trunk of the tree she'd been using for cover.

"Oui, oui." The new voice belonged to a tall black man who was bent in half over a pile of shattered wood. She quickly took count and came up with five interlopers, three blacks and

two whites. The man who'd first spoke was a mountain of meat and cloth trimmed with a fine beaver pelt coat that framed his neckless head. The clothing of the other men paled in comparison. By stature or dress the big man stuck out as the chief. In her mind Puck had already designated him Buffalo, after the legendary beasts of the prairie tribes. If a buffalo ever chose to walk on two legs, he might look like this. Similarly she thought of the three black men as Crows and the other white man as Crane, naming them mostly in comparison to the hulking Buffalo.

From atop the pile of debris at the feet of the men Puck saw a birch branch. It took a moment for her to recognize the mess as the Birch Stag. His remains had been shattered.

Each man held a stick, no, a gun. Her mind took a moment to connect the evidence to the crime. She'd never seen a real firearm. Despite her unfamiliarity with the actual artifact she'd wielded many a gun in her childhood imagination. When her friends would play Natives and Columbians, she'd often volunteer for the villainous Columbian role, just so she could pretend to have death on a hair-trigger. Pow, pow, pow, she'd scream while pointing a stick at her peers.

Guns were forbidden in the Ten Hundred Nations. Just touching a gun was a crime against the People. Firing them only compounded the criminality. To kill the stag? Puck had already expressed her concerns with Funk, who'd ignored them. The stag symbolized her people and the Ten Hundred Nations as a whole. The wizard had set it free on the hundredth anniversary of the Treaty of New Paris. Puck thought of the stag as an oversized toy, but others, like Two Trunks, wouldn't likely be so casual about it.

Without warning a snap and sizzle exploded from the corpse of the Birch Stag. The crow who had been arm deep in the wreckage flew back four man-lengths, tumbling into a field of ferns. Dark smoke rose from the heart of the dead beast and an acrid smell wafted to her nose on the wind. To see a man propelled through the air by no visual means astonished her. She imagined the spirit of the great animal must have thrived beyond death, plowing into the defiler with its mighty rack, defending itself even in death. As she watched the stag's body ignite and the smoke grow and thicken, she discerned the silhouette of a stag in the outline of the cloud.

The two other Crows ran to help their fallen comrade who shook his head and stretched his arms as he rose. His body hid any injury, but his singed shirt sleeves told a tale of the damage. Ignoring the plight of the fallen Crow, Crane approached the stag's body, pulling a large cloth from his pack. He draped it over the creature as if performing some final rite. The smoke smothered, he pulled at the mechanical innards until they came free in his hands. Sparks, snaps and hisses escaped from the stag's body before it went silent.

Puck watched the sacrilege. All creatures had a spirit. The Birch Stag was no less a creature for having been crafted by man. She'd witnessed the murder of the stag but also this final defilement. These strangers from another land had stolen his spirit. She watched Crane coax the others into hoisting the creature's smothered heart into the woods. The Buffalo Man had disappeared in the same direction.

She didn't see the arrow fly, but she watched it pierce Crane's shoulder and heard the machinery clatter to the forest floor. The scream that followed sounded like an unfed infant wailing for attention. Puck looked to Funk who already had another arrow at the ready. The French men were just as fast. Their weapons raised in Funk and Puck's direction. The guns'

explosive fire rang in Puck's ears and shook her spirit. She had nothing to defend herself except her fists and a pocketful of pebbles.

She gripped the rocks tight in her hand feeling the indent of each stone on her flesh. After a moment the explosions ceased but she could still hear the echoes bouncing about the distant parts of the forest. Without exposing her body to the men on the far side she turned her head in the direction of her brother. Like her he stood stick-straight against a tree hiding himself. She thanked the spirits that he didn't lay upon the ground dead. She tried to catch his eyes and noticed his paling skin. Though twins Funk had always been lighter in skin tone than Puck, a vestige of their Grandmother, who as a child had been a German, before the Nation had taken her. Now the amber of his skin had drained to dull yellow. His bow lay broken on the ground a splash of red marking the grip where it had been shattered. She glanced up. He had wrapped his right hand tightly in the front of his breechcloth. The blood seeped through creating a crimson stain.

Puck's heart pounded. A sheen of sweat overtook her. She was afraid, but that wouldn't do. Puck didn't like fear. She didn't condone it in others or herself. She'd seen how it could overtake a person, make them not themselves. With a surge of purpose she pressed her spirit back into play. The fear flushed out of her like a rain-drenched wash and with her body silent again she remembered the disadvantage of playing the Columbians. Muzzle-loading, a slow, arduous process that the other children would make sure you mimed, lest you decimate their ranks with your automatic gunfire.

The pause in gunfire wasn't strategic, it was functional. She poked her head around the trunk. The Buffalo Man, the Crane and two of the Crows had disappeared into the wilderness. They felt the fear that she'd just conquered. The last Crow stared at the barrel of his rifle, jamming the ramrod down frantically. As she hid he leveled the rifle to his shoulder. She glanced up at Funk who remained unmoved, but all the whiter for the passage of time. Time to play.

Pulling the rocks out of her pocket, she first threw one at Funk, gaining his attention. She gave him a big wink and a smile. He didn't quite smile, but the life came into his eyes. With a hearty heave she arched the remaining stones through the air away from her brother. They came down with a titter and tink, an unexpected rain. The gunshot was expected and predictable. The startled Crow let the fear overtake him, jumping at pebbles.

Puck shot north, toward the village, jumping, springing, almost dancing along the way. In her corner eye she saw her brother, as silent as a hare, just keeping up, cradling his bloody hand.

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### **Funk**

Funk watched the blood from his right hand pool into his left and drip through his fingers. Two Trunks paced about the wall of the longhouse gathering jars of herbs and scraps of cloth. Dark had fallen and light bulbs lit the cavernous hall. Puck, as usual, ran off at the mouth while her brother took the stoic role.

"They pulled its heart right from the body, but not before it got in one last buck." Her voice sparkled as she spoke.

"And why were you so deep in the forest?"

"Hunting the stag."

"So either way you intended to come back with news of its death?" Two Trunks settled in front of Funk, pulling his hand forward and tugging on the gory mess of flesh and bone. Funk gripped his left fist, not allowing the pain show on his face. Two Trunks submerged the bloody digits in a jar of water she'd placed between them. She looked in his eyes. "You have to stop letting your sister march you into trouble."

"I marched myself," Funk said as Two Trunks wrapped his three remaining digits in cloth. "It was my man hunt. If the Buffalo Man hadn't taken him, I would have the stag and my own name now."

She pressed some herbs into his palm before wrapping the appendage fully. "You're so eager to be an adult. You don't know what you ask for. A child is a seed with one mission: to grow. With singular purpose it breaches the soil and touches the sunlight. It spreads its leaves and drinks the water without concern for others for it is always right to do so. But a man or woman is a tree who must constantly choose and change and accommodate. May the bird nest in its branches or the serpent? Will it give a limb to an archer for a bow or to an old man for a cane? Who will it shelter when the rain comes? And when will it give its whole spirit to another for home or canoe or tinder? The child's life is a simple one, enjoy it while you can, it goes quickly."

"That's what I told him," said Puck who balanced on a log marking the edge of an extinct fire pit.

"You did not!" Funk shouted, breaking his controlled visage, something only his sister could inspire. Puck made the antlers with her hands and wiggled her lips at him. Funk went to reciprocate only to find his left hand bound into a ball and completely unusable for the purpose. Puck noticed too and for once ceased her mocking at an appropriate time.

"Will I be able to use my hand again?" Funk asked Two Trunks, worry mellowing him.

"What little medicine I have will not be enough to save your hand. You will need to seek help from one more experienced. In your haste to grow up, you've stumbled into events that must be dealt with. The spirits must want you to become a man as much as you yourself do. You must find Thunder."

"The wizard?" Puck said and then in her excitement she tumbled into the ashes. A black cloud rose up where her bottom landed coating her backside.

"You must have suspected when you went hunting his creation that you would need to confront the creator." Two Trunks said. "Thunder must know of the Birch Stag's fate and of these men. He also has the medicine your hand will need if you're to keep it and this letter came for him." She helped Puck out of the ashes and handed her a scroll of paper. "The spirits chose your fate when you chose to push forward nature. The time has come for you, Funk. This may be the last time I call you that name, for you will either return a man or die a boy."

The journey to Thunder's longhouse took three days on foot. The time passed without incident. Yet with each day the paleness in Funk's features spread. The pain grew with it, though he kept this from his sister and focused his attention on predicting what the wizard would be like and what he would think of the boy who shot his stag.

On the morning of the last day Funk didn't wake on his own. The comfort of sleep seduced him and when Puck came to wake him he shook her off. He finally woke to a splash of cold water from a nearby stream. Even the surprise couldn't rouse Funk quickly though it did trigger the knots in his stomach to purge the dinner of the previous evening. The vomit splashed to the floor mixing with the water. Startled, Puck dropped the jar she'd used to carry the water.

"I didn't mean to hurt you," said Puck before even approaching to see if her brother was okay. It wasn't the first time she'd hurt him without intent and she wanted to pardon her guilt before she dealt with the aftermath.

Funk was too tired to be angry. He'd been pushing his body for days and the pain in his arm had spread to his whole body. The few times he checked the wound it had worsened. His flesh had become brown and now black. His body had transformed his usually boundless energy into pain. He stumbled to rise and then waited bent over double and breathing deeply. The bandage had unspooled from his hand and the black flesh showed underneath.

"You're all right. Right?" Puck asked. She looked at the vomit and his hand and then his face. She was concerned, an emotion she did not show often.

"I'm fine. Your little trick surprised the dinner out of me, that's all." Funk stood. "It's time to go. We should reach the wizard by lunch." Puck was all too happy to walk along side her brother and pretend that nothing was wrong. After a few dozen steps she was smiling again.

By the time they entered the wizard's clearing Funk had pulled it together. He'd always held his thoughts and emotions close. It didn't take much more effort to hold his insides in, despite their protests.

It was unusual for a man to live alone in the forest. Villages kept people safe and sane. The Ten Hundred Nations had changed that somewhat. Villages had been homes to families, and clans, and tribes, three names for the same thing. Now the People of the Flint had thrived and spread so well that it was possible to first meet family years into your life. The wizard Thunder was a cousin or uncle or grandfather to the twins, they weren't sure which, yet they had barely met him. He rarely came into town since Two Trunks banished him to the woods.

They looked on at the wizard's longhouse and at found it ordinary. It sat alone in a clearing, but otherwise its appearance didn't vary from those in the village. A closer look revealed that the ground and walls were pockmarked by dark splatters of char. The extravagance of a whole longhouse with only one occupant intrigued Funk. However, when he considered the stories of the wizard and the damage his work with the spirits had done, Funk supposed it made sense to give him a wide berth and a house of his own to destroy.

Puck hopped up to the doorway and immediately pulled the curtain aside.

Pop!

At that moment a dark cloud of ash exploded outward. She took two steps back waving away the smoke from her face. Two coughs escaped her lips but were soon drowned out by much deeper and more consistent coughs coming from the longhouse.

A solid shadow emerged from the curtain bringing with it a fresh cloud of black smoke. The shadow stumbled forward releasing a deep, throaty, howling cough. After bending over double in a hacking fit that saw a ball of black phlegm expelled to the ground, the shadow recovered. It stood tall and stared with its white on black eyes at the much shorter Puck.

"Wizard?" Puck asked. A pair of torso-less legs emerged from behind the curtain interrupting the nascent conversation. A fire burned atop its waist. The bizarre half-man wobbled about drunkenly.

"Stop those legs!" shouted the shadow. It made a grab for the creature, but came back with singed hands from the flame. The legs lurched and lumbered. Puck stepped to the side and watched them pass, smiling widely. "This cannot happen again," the shadow said under its breath while making another lunge for the legs. All ill-timed cough and a misplaced step sent the shadow onto its stomach where the coughing fit continued.

Puck jumped into the fray, but only to share a dance with the legs. She hopped around them enjoying every nuance of the novelty. As she moved she laughed uncontrollably.

Funk watched the scene. The players raced around. The flaming appendages darted about in a manner more random than any animal could produce. Puck's usual careless glee overwhelmed her to the point where she seemed more sprite than human. The wizard rose, revealing himself to be human after all, as a good portion of the soot had been rubbed off on the ground, leaving the shadow behind. He ran to the side of the longhouse and grabbed a jar of water, placed there seemingly for this precise happenstance. The wizard tried to anticipate where the legs would be and failed drastically. He heaved the jar dousing Puck from head-to-toe. Her giddiness exploded over the top so that she could hardly catch her breath for laughing so hard. Funk, too tired and too entranced to intervene, waited. In moments the limbs raced in his direction and with the practiced ease of any young man he extended his leg and sent them sprawling to the ground.

The device walked well, but lacked the capacity to stand. The legs kept striding and the device made wide circles in the sand. Funk kicked enough dirt into the tumult to extinguish the flame.

When the dust and steam and smoke had settled to dirt and mud and ash, the wizard approached the still spinning legs. In the interim he'd retrieved a staff and glove from his longhouse. Now he truly looked the part of a medicine man. He thrust the staff between the spinning legs. The mechanical whir of the device pitched up to an ear-splitting whine. The Wizard grabbed down with his gloved hand and pulled out the heart of the half-man. All sound and motion ceased. In that moment of silence as he stared intently at the spirit heart in his hand the wizard spoke.

"I am Thunder. What need do you have of me?"

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## **Puck**

Puck set her eyes level with the table top and peered across the miniature army. Each little soldier had legs like the ones that she'd so recently danced with and a torso that sat swiveled at a half-right turn on the waist. They didn't have heads, which made them all the more interesting. Heads usually just get in the way. Puck imagined herself in among them, leading this mechanical army into a fiery battlefield. She'd wear a uniform, like the English, but brighter red and with more feathers. She'd point her fingers and the headless automata would race to fulfill her command, lest her temper get short.

She raised herself up to survey the rest of the longhouse. The tin soldiers stood on one of many tables that filled the room, each held some half-wonder or semi-miracle: mechanical beasts flayed and laid out like butchered elk, half-built flying contraptions, bulbs of trapped lightning and indistinguishable piles of wire and wood. The wizard paced about throwing things from one pile to another, ignoring Puck and her brother, though he was in the act of helping them.

"Here it is!" The wizard said, coming back from a stack of random floor debris with an odd device. It resembled a dowsing rod, of the type the English used to locate water. The wizard held it not by the handles but by the shaft.

"What does it do?" Funk, sweat-drenched and haggard, leaned against a table with his good hand, his body on the edge of collapse.

"What does it do?" the wizard echoed, "It solves a problem, specifically yours." The wizard toggled a switch on the side of the device and an arc of lightning jumped from one of the free ends to the other. The air popped and sizzled around it. "Have you heard of the Jo-Ge-Oh?"

"The little people." Puck offered.

"Yes, the Jo-Ge-Oh are tiny creatures that share the world with us. You must know the tale of Dirty Clothes, the orphan whose uncle treated him horribly. One day he helped the Jo-Ge-Oh capture a squirrel. The little people rewarded him by taking him to their village, teaching them their ways and giving him the finest of clothes, so that he was Dirty Clothes no longer. He returned with this knowledge and shared it with the nation, so that they might grow strong."

"What do the little people have to do with my hand?" asked Funk, always the pragmatist.

"You think perhaps that the little people are only a story? That they don't exist?"

"It matters little to me if they exist or not. I am not a medicine man. I am only a boy with a problem, as you say."

"The Jo-Ge-Oh are your problem, for they do exist, but they are smaller than you can imagine. They are so tiny that they cannot be seen by a man's eyes, or a boy's. You are the Earth to them. They live on your body, settling, hunting and reproducing, just as we do. When you have a wound such as yours the Jo-Ge-Oh will move into your body. They dig deep as the wide-faces do. Your blood is their oil. Your bone is their gold. Like all people, they can be greedy. They take what they do not need and they will destroy you to do it. They've already taken your hand."

Funk held his hand in front of him. Staring intently, squinting and trying to make out the miniature people that might be infesting it. Puck bounced over and did the same.

"I see one!" Puck said. "He must be from the west, he has a little teepee." Funk went to take a swipe at her, but she was too fast for him on a good day, and this was not a good day.

"Does your rod kill the Jo-Ge-Oh?"

"No, nothing I can do can kill them all. They are the greatest army on earth. They live on and in all of us, to different degrees. But I can do something. I will take your hand. My lightning rod will burn through your skin. As it passes through your flesh it will seal the wound. The little people will not be able to enter your body again."

"You can't save my hand?"

"You lost your hand the moment the shot passed through it. I hope to keep you from death. Would you cut off your hand to save your life?"

Then in his fatigue and fear, Funk began to shake. His voice escaped his mouth in the manner his sister hadn't heard in years. The tone was just as he used when he would cry himself to sleep calling out to the spirit of their mother. "Will it hurt?"

"Yes, most definitely. Now come and place your arm on this table. The Jo-Ge-Oh move fast. There is no time to waste."

Puck migrated away from the table. Her curiosity drove her toward the grisly scene, but her brother's face pushed her back. She didn't want to see him like this. She poked around the various tables looking for some distraction. Much to her dismay, few of the devices combusted or lit up or even moved when she fiddled with them. She took special notices of switches like the one on the lightening rod. Funk's whimpers and cries floated in the air. She found a large railing against one wall. A small metal ball, like a finely crafted piece of shot, sat atop. Funk's scream tore through the longhouse. Puck pushed the ball. It rolled easily on the rail and soon she was tossing it back and forth between her hands. Funk's voice gave out. The smell of burnt flesh filled the building. Puck found a promising lever. She heard Funk fall to the floor, presumably with one less hand. She flipped the switch. A whine entered the room and pitched up quickly. Puck covered her ears and watched as the ball disappeared down the railing. It launched so fast she thought it had simply vanished, until she noticed the hole in the far wall.

"What are you doing, girl?" The wizard approached his tunic soaked with the blood of her brother. "These are not toys for children."

"Life is a toy to a child." Puck retorted. She'd picked up the expression from Two Trunks and it fit here.

"Your brother is ..."

A shriek came from outside the building, in the direction of Puck's lost shot. Soon after came the now familiar sound of gun fire.

"We've come for you, wizard!" a familiar deep voice came from outside.

Puck looked up at Thunder. She didn't like the look in his eye.

He handed her a small iron rod, bent into a half circle.

"Hold this," he said and foolishly she did. With a few flicked switches Puck found herself pulled by the rod onto a pile of scrap metal. Her body pinned, she struggled against the rod, but couldn't budge.

"Stay here," he said. "It's safe."

As if she had a choice.

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## **Thunder**

Thunder peered through the back curtain of his laboratory. The Buffalo Man stood in the middle of his clearing. He looked just as the children had described him, right down the beaver pelt neck ruff. The children had mentioned five hunters total in the woods. Three blacks and two whites. In this group he saw only three men, the Buffalo and the two Crows, as the girl called them. He could tell by the forced deference that the black men were slaves. They must have come from the south. New France wasn't the only nation to hold onto the idea of human ownership, but they were certainly the most vehement about it.

"Come on out!" the Buffalo Man continued to speak in Esperanto, the trading tongue, but the thickness of his accented speech revealed his French heritage. Thunder didn't know his intentions, but it would be foolish to just stroll out and hand himself over.

He thought of what tools he had at his disposal to wage battle. He had some rifles of his own. He'd engineered and bored them himself. He'd taken extra time to lace the wooden handles in filigreed flowers, even though by all rights he could never show them to anyone. If he walked out now guns in hand, either the children would turn him into the Clan Mothers for the violation of the Philadelphia Convention or the Frenchmen would report it to the English. He could risk a bullet in his head now, but drawing a gun could shatter the century long peace that seemed to be always on the cusp of evaporating. He needed an alternate plan.

"Let me go!" yelled the girl he'd just stuck to a large piece of metal. "You don't even know what you're doing."

"I'm keeping you safe." Thunder replied as he dug through scrap metal.

"They're not after me," she said.

He glanced in her direction. He saw two tomahawks wedged in a post behind her.

"What type of girl wants to run headfirst into a loaded rifle?" he asked.

Guilt, fear and despair all played across the girl's face in that moment. Then she looked over to her brother's unconscious body and her expression cleared. "Puck," she said as if that was enough. He shook his head as he walked past her and grabbed the axe from the table. The tomahawk was traditional, intimidating, and could be used over distance, just what he needed. He'd be outgunned but at least he'd cut a mean figure.

He gestured at the girl with the tip of the axe. "Stay here and keep your brother safe." Her brother had passed out from the procedure and still lay unconscious on the ground. Thunder wanted to see the results of his efforts, but if he didn't do something now, they'd all be dead in the morning anyway.

"You didn't really give me the option."

Thunder opened the curtain and emerged from the longhouse. The Buffalo Man raised his rifle in Thunder's direction and the two slaves followed suit.

"You are wizard? The one called medicine man?" Buffalo Man's Esperanto erupted from his mouth in thick and unpracticed gushes. It came across as a phonetic reading, no meaning beneath the words.

"I am Thunder," he responded while gesturing with the tomahawks, hoping to bring them to the attention of the attackers. "Why do you come with guns into our peaceful land? Such weapons are forbidden in all the Ten Hundred Nations. Their presence is an insult, their firing a heresy."

"I am Neufraconaise." Only the French word sounded natural coming from the Buffalo Man's lips. "Our people are long time friends. Mine is a mission of peace."

"Your peace doesn't come silently. What is your mission then?"

"I have come, many days' journey, to find you and bring you to my master, the Marquis de Chartres. He has need of your magic."

"Then I am not the man you seek. I am not a man of magic. I study the spirit and medicine that makes the world move. It is what you call science. I cannot help you."

"You call the lightening? You burn the village? You are the one we seek," Buffalo Man said.

"I will not go. My work is here." Thunder turned back toward the longhouse certain that the confrontation had not ended, but that he must play his part to advance the plot. The appearance of the young girl's eyes peeking from behind the curtain surprised him. This girl had a nimble body and no sense. She could easily get herself killed. The rapping of a rifle shot interrupted his thought. No metal had pierced his body. He turned again to face his attackers.

The Buffalo Man held the rifle in his hand. A plume of smoke wafted up from the barrel.

"If you no come, we will take you and your village will burn by our hand. This time, no one survives." The two slaves continued to hold Thunder in their aim. He knew it would come to this. He must surrender himself. Even if he was quick enough to get one tomahawk off, the second slave would shoot him dead. They'd already violated the terms of the Convention; little else would be beneath them. He raised his hands to symbolize his surrender when he heard a familiar sound, one of his generator's gaining power. He glanced back at the longhouse just in time to see the metal ball explode through the wall. It was too fast to follow with his eyes. He turned his head back and one slave lay stunned on the ground.

In a single motion he pitched his tomahawk at the standing slave, now distracted by his peer's collapse. Thunder flinched to see the axe pierce his chest square in the heart. He hadn't meant to kill him, but he was trained not to miss.

The Buffalo Man, now with an unloaded rifle and no associates, pulled a Colt revolver from his belt. Thunder dove away from the gunshots as the Buffalo Man fled and fired simultaneously. From the ground he tried to toss his other tomahawk. It wedged itself in a tree trunk, an arms-length from the fleeing blaggard as he disappeared into the woods.

The girl's head popped out from behind the curtain. "Did I get 'em?" she asked with the enthusiasm that matched her age, if not the context.

"Little girl. You are crazy. You could have been hurt."

"Don't call me girl. I don't call you Ugly Old Man. My name is Puck and, by the way, you're welcome."

Thunder shook his head. He walked toward the fallen men. The one who'd been beamed by the ball bearing rolled about on the ground. Thunder's victim lay silent. He gestured back at Puck, "Stay here," he said. "This is no sight for children." But before he'd finished his sentence she'd already raced past him. She'd picked the dead man to examine, of course, and as Thunder reached the man, Puck had already removed the axe from his chest.

He ripped it from her hands. She remained unmoved. Her face gave off no emotion and she neither protested nor consented to the loss of the weapon.

Thunder's chest tightened as he hefted the bloody blade. He'd never killed a man, though like all men of his tribe he'd trained for it. It pained him that this man was a slave and not acting of his own volition. Like most civilized men, he abhorred slavery. The conditions of the institution drove the men mad in many unpredictable ways, but inevitably they tended toward escape or obedience. In this way any slave you might meet, when they did range beyond the borders of New France, would follow the directions of his master to the death, as had happened here. The murmurs of the second slave reminded him. The matter was not settled.

"You better kill him," Puck said, her face still eerily unexpressive. "He'd do the same to you."

"I live by the rules of our grandmothers. One does not do to others what one does not want done to themselves."

Puck looked over the dead man. "So, you want an axe in your chest then." Before the stunned wizard could speak, Puck had somehow maneuvered the axe back into her own hand and now stood over the groaning man like an executioner, weapon perched high above her head in a cartoonish exaggeration.

"Stop!" Thunder reached out but it was too late. She had already taken a hard swing at the wiggling man. Only as her stroke completed did he notice she'd dropped the axe at the top of her swing, letting it fall to the sand between her legs. The corners of her lips crept up in a spritely smile.

"You scare easy for a wizard."

"I'm not a wizard. I am a man of medicine. You fear for the spirit of your brother, that he will leave you, but you show no care for this man who has died. His spirit has been disconnected from his life and the physical world. We gain nothing from his death, but dishonor. You mock his spirit and the spirit of his brother. This is not the way of a child; it's the way of a demon."

Puck's shoulders fell and her head sank. A sudden rumble from the woods made them both snap to attention. The sound called from the direction that the Buffalo Man had vanished. Above the canopy of the trees a wafting grey cloud had appeared. A second rumble sounded but refused to cease.

"Get back in the house!" Thunder screamed to the girl over the cacophony. A melody of breaking branches joined the rhythm of the rumble. He'd missed the exodus of the animals that signaled intruders in the woods, but one hare now frantically bounced ahead of the coming chaos. Thunder grabbed his still bloody tomahawk from the ground, keeping one eye always on the woods. He'd been in many a dangerous situation in his life, but they'd almost always been of his own making. He gripped the handle of the axe tightly.

An explosion of leaves, dust and smoke blossomed into the clearing. Thunder shielded his eyes from the debris with his free arm. When he dared to look again he saw the behemoth. He thought perhaps the spirit of the Buffalo did protect this strange French man for this new intruder was as big and fast as that prairie dweller. It stampeded into the clearing. Despite the pound of footsteps it didn't run on legs but on wheels, that peculiar obsession of the Columbians. A chain held the six wheels together and provided traction. The sun glinted off the silver body that had been ornately detailed with beautiful ironwork. Smoke rose from the funnel, exposing the metal monster's means of propulsion. He recognized it as a locomotive. Only this one carried its tracks with it. Despite his reverie the machine continued unabated in his direction.

He let the machine bear down on him. At a body-length's distance, he jumped to the side. The machine carried ever forward unable to significantly shift its momentum. Thunder understood the limitations of the design. He'd tried something similar in miniature many times. The mass of the vehicle combined with the limited turning radius of a chained wheel system made it unidirectional over short distances. An explosion sounded as the hulking mass intersected his longhouse. The sound shook his body. The thought of the children inside shook his heart.

The logs of the wall collapsed onto the chassis of the trackless engine, burying it. Small explosions erupted from the exposed interior and soon fire escaped from the building like blood from a torn vein.

He looked around for Puck. Over the tumult of the still running engine and the explosions of many of his current projects, he struggled to hear a voice or plea for help. The Buffalo Engine began to shake and convulse. The collapse hadn't been enough to stop the rampage, just delay it. He could dodge the machine all day, until he exhausted himself and collapsed. He could run, but all his designs were in that longhouse and only half of them would burn. The Buffalo Man had come for his knowledge and if Thunder ran, he'd be giving it right over. Though he rarely designed weapons, he knew the mind that created the metal monster before him could easily turn all his work toward war. Even if he did run, he couldn't leave behind the children who'd come to him for help.

As the Buffalo Engine shook its way out of the pile, Thunder examined it for weaknesses. Like the locomotives it resembled, the body was primarily metal, heavy, impenetrable metal. A few well guarded holes adorned each side, too small to fit anything through and slanted enough to make it impractical. The funnel had a wide brim, like an inverted cornucopia producing endless ash and heat. This would lead to steam pipes and a boiler which he might be able to sabotage with the right method. His options seemed limited to two, extinguish the reactions that powered the engine or accelerate them to the point of catastrophic failure, a notion he was all too familiar with. Neither of those results would be had by a tomahawk.

The Engine roared out of its hole and back again in his direction, shedding burning logs as it came. The matter of evasion now assured, he didn't wait as long before trotting a wide right from the machine. He noticed the rifle protruding through one of those small holes only seconds before it fired. He took a diving leap to the ground, scratching up his torso, but getting below the shot. He scrambled to the burning hole in his longhouse, looked back at the repositioning rifle and then ran through the flames in front of him.

Puck stood just beyond the smoke and the fire. She chewed diligently on a wad of tar. "Not bad, Ugly Old Man."

"You're safe!" Thunder said, "Where's your brother?"

"I'm here," the boy's voice had returned to its original atonal strength. The paleness still sat upon his skin coated by a sheen of sweat. He cradled his amputated limb in front of him and stared at Thunder with hawk eyes. The nature of the medicine man is to see the spirits everywhere, but he wondered if these two might not be animates, embodied spirits, come to save or destroy him. Still, they lived, so he must protect them.

"I need something. "He looked around his burning lab, trying to find a tool for the job.

"How about a plan?" Puck offered.

He looked up at her. She smiled widely, her teeth stained from the pitch in her mouth. "Tar!" He looked to the shelves along the remaining part of the broken wall. A collection of resins sat at waist height. This is where Puck had gotten her treat and this is where Thunder would get his salvation. He looked toward the flaming portal. He could just see the Engine maneuvering around outside, taking a series of small turns until it could return for another ramming run. The metal cylinder that sat closest to the flames had begun to bubble in the heat. Only as he watched the batter brew did he realize how hot the longhouse had become.

Even if the Buffalo Engine didn't return they'd have to evacuate before they broiled to death. Thunder donned a set of heavy gloves and reached into the flames to retrieve the tar.

"If I pour this down the funnel, the Engine will stop," he said as much to reassure himself as the children.

"How do you not get shot?" Puck asked, not losing the grimy smile.

"I'm faster than it." He approached the far curtain, no longer willing to dance with the flames.

"Not while carrying a tar jar. You need a distraction." Just like that she was through the fire and out the hole. Thunder heard a shot almost immediately. They'd been waiting. He rushed outside.

He need not have worried. If Thunder had been the hare bouncing just ahead of the Buffalo's hooves, Puck was the wolf herding the mechanism to her whim. She dipped, hopped and dove, so that the lumbering beast had to keep turning just to find her last position. When a rifle would appear from one of the openings, she'd pause just long enough to be caught in its sights, only to vanish before the pin could drop.

Thunder lugged the bucket across the impromptu battlefield. Shifting this way and that in an attempt to make himself a difficult target. The rifles reappeared primed and ready to fire in his direction. He hefted the tar gauging its weight to determine if he might reach the funnel by throwing. He gave a mighty heave just as the rapport sounded. The jar exploded in the air sending a shower of tar across the field. Thunder shielded his face just in time to receive Funk's tackle. He landed hard on the ground, but clear of the rifles limited range as they couldn't pitch forward through their tiny windows.

He looked up at the young brave who'd saved his life. Over his shoulder the dynamo that powered Thunder's electric saw hung on one leather strap. In the boy's single hand he held the device that had so recently taken the other. It sparked to life with a few flipped switches. Thunder wondered how the boy had learned to use it so quickly. Before he could say anything Funk marched to face the beast, which had now turned for another ram. The saw couldn't pierce the hide of the beast, not in time to save them. Thunder watched the showdown of the mouse and the Buffalo.

Funk charged forward. His feet became more and more covered in tar. He slowed considerably and as the tar cooled on his feet; he stopped, stuck in a puddle. A great puff of black smoke escaped from the funnel and the Buffalo surged forward. No longer able to move, Funk just stood his face impassionate as ever, as death approached on iron tracks. He held tight the electric saw whose spark and crackle was subsumed by the roar of the approaching monster. Thunder averted his eyes for a moment, afraid to see another death this day, but then returned his gaze to the boy. He owed him that at least, to watch him die.

The girl, Puck, had somehow found her way onto the back of the monster and rode it like a Columbian horse. Thunder's mind jumped, into the future and the moment when that electric saw hit the metal skin of the iron buffalo. The current would be conducted through the beast and into the girl. He might lose them both yet.

"Get off the Engine!" He yelled so loud it actually pierced the tumult enough to be heard. The girl took a flying somersault off the back of the monster just as it ran over her brother. Funk leaned back as the machine overcame him and there was a pop as the electric blade made contact with the machine. In that moment, all forward motion stopped. The engine

continued to exhale in white puffs of steam, but it no longer rolled forward. Funk had been jarred out of the tar and lay unconscious in the mud, where they'd earlier wrestled the legs. Thunder didn't move for many moments, unsure of what might happen next. Finally, Puck approached and offered him her hand, so that he could rise.

"Is your brother ...?"

"He's fine. I can see him breathing." The girl walked toward her sibling with the casualness of a summer stroll. "Does this happen to you every day?" she asked.

"Not every day, but some days," he lied.

"Brutal," she said and it was brutal, but she said it with a smile.

\*

### **Funk**

A spike of tobacco smoke woke Funk like a slap in the face. He sat up quickly, unsure of his surroundings. Tobacco and wood smoke filled the chamber. His quick movement caused ripples in the air. The room was suffocating and he breathed deeply on impulse, like a drowning man. The smell of tar lingered in his nose. A crash of lightening reverberated in his ears. These were remnants of his former life. Funk had entered the Spirit world.

Spirit dancers appeared in the smoke. They surrounded him, fading in and out of his vision. Chants and shaking rattles replaced the thunder in his head. A flute inserted itself playfully and Puck came to his mind. The melody evoked her wild ways as it flittered about the steady voices and heavy rattles. The dancers spun and turned. Red and black faces with hideous deformities taunted him in the haze, the faces of Old Broken Nose.

The sweat poured from his head as the smoke parted. There his sister danced to the melody of the flute. She reached out her hand and he took it. He led her back to the old times, the days before days.

The world was new. Only the waters covered the Earth and only sea animals lived there. Funk floated through this vision. He reached out his hand to his sister and saw that it had become a wing. Puck too was a bird, soaring over the waters. As they flew, a hole opened up in the sky.

A woman appeared, falling through the sky with nowhere to land. The Sky-Woman's belly was large with child. Puck and Funk raced to catch her. Puck's wings grew to encompass the Sky-Woman. His sister holding her aloft, Funk dived deep into the ocean, desperate to produce some land on which for her to rest. He plunged to the bottom of the sea and pulled up a meager scrap of plant. He resurfaced and placed it upon the waters. It sank back into the depths. Funk watched his sister struggle to hold the weight up. He couldn't help alone and so he reached out to the animals begging for their help. Many gathered and each attempted to create some land. At first the land eluded them, until a simple turtle rose from the ocean. A frog sat on his back. The frog opened its mouth and out, onto the turtle's shell, spewed forth a volume of mud unseen in this primeval land. The mud pile grew and grew until it covered the turtle, but it didn't stop there. The land continued to grow. This was the birth of Anowarakowa, Turtle Island, Funk's home. Puck alighted on the growing mass and let the Sky-Woman rest upon it.

Soon the woman gave birth as the Funk and Puck sat perched nearby. She had not one child, but two. The first she named Sapling and the second she named Flint. In a blink the infants were men, walking about on this ever-new land. Where Sapling went he created good and useful things: rivers that flowed two ways and fish with no bones. Flint would follow his brother and pervert his creations. Redirecting the two-way rivers and adding small, sharp bones to fish. In this way Flint undid the miracles of Sapling and made the world difficult.

One day, as Funk watched, Sapling came upon a stranger. Humans had not yet been created, but this one was of the mankind. Funk recognized him immediately as Thunder. He called out to him, but only squawks escaped his beak. As Sapling did, Thunder created. Unlike Sapling or his brother, Thunder's creations were useless, ornamental. They gave no value to the world, but neither did they steal it, like Flint's perversions. The Birch Stag appeared from Thunders fingertips and bounded out into a forest. Sapling nodded.

"Stranger, you have some small fraction of my power to create and you use it well. I'm impressed."

Thunder replied, "We are equals in this."

Sapling's eyes darted about, "You are worthy, but I am the creator."

Thunder spoke in words that echoed his namesake, "Let us demonstrate our powers in a contest." Sapling gave a curt nod. "We shall see who can move mountains." With this Thunder turned toward a rocky peak in the middle distance. He held out his hands and closed his eyes. Slowly, soundlessly the mountain crept across the landscape until the two demigods stood in its foothills, though they had moved not at all.

Surprise played across Sapling's face. He could not deny the stranger's skill.

Sapling pointed to a mountain on the far distant horizon. "I will move that mountain," he said, "but you must not look."

Thunder looked at the Creator and then at the mountain. With a nod of his own he agreed to the conditions. He faced the Creator. Almost immediately his curiosity overcame him. He swiveled his head around and the sheer mountainside slammed into his face. He flew back into the rubble. He lay there for a few moments before popping up again like a mole from its hole. Thunder's face had been disfigured. His skin was black and red and his nose bent right from his face. It was the face of Grandfather Broken Nose. The Creator laughed.

"You have power and pride, but also knowledge and curiosity. You will be good for this world."

Grandfather Broken Nose jumped to his feet and began to dance vigorously, stirring up a mighty wind. Funk felt the gust on his feathers.

He sat up, quickly unsure of his surroundings.

The masked dancers reappeared through the smoke. Their dance celebrated Grandfather Broken Nose and they asked his help to heal Funk. He heard their prayers, muffled though they were from behind the wooden masks. He'd heard the words before, when his mother died. Grandfather had not come then. Funk knew he could die, like she did, except worse for he would die a boy.

In the song a second melody arose. This one too was familiar. He'd heard it placing his ear against the lodge in the Mid-Winter's festival. It was the song of growth, the song of adulthood. The naming song. The song told him, that he was a man now, that he had a new name. Free of his old self Funk pushed on eager to start a new life.

\*

## Thunder

The masked woman emerged from the longhouse followed by a cloud of tobacco smoke. Thunder approached her. She removed her false face.

"How's the boy?" Thunder asked.

"The spirits are with him. By the grace of Grandfather and your toy, he shall live." Two Trunks replied.

"He's indomitable and his sister's the same." Thunder said. "Who are they?"

"Orphans of the village. Their mother died years ago; their father was never known. You mean to take them?"

"The Neufrancaise are attacking us. A war could be coming or it could be this Marquis de Chartres. It's hard to say. The slave we questioned claimed to know nothing. He's used to beatings. Our methods are useless in extracting information." Thunder held one of the captured pistols. He rotated it in his hands, noting the construction. "It's been so long since the Columbians have moved against us. I thought perhaps that war was over."

"You have knowledge but lack wisdom. It's the way of your new medicine. The old ones know, men will always find reasons to fight." She unclasped her cloak and laid it across her forearm. For a moment, Thunder noticed her beauty, but the moment passed. He had other concerns.

She chastised him, "You didn't answer my question."

"Did you name him?" he asked.

"Always you choose questions over answers. Yes, he is a man. His name is Red Hand."

"He knows the face of the one who got away. The Buffalo Man is dead in his spirit engine, along with his slave, but there was another, the Crane. I will need him to come. As a man he can make that choice."

"His sister will go to. You cannot separate them."

"She's still a girl and not yet subject to the call of the Clan Mothers. She can do as she will."

A grin flickered across Two Trunks face. "Such is the way. Women grow into responsibility and men grow out of it."

They walked now to a bench and sat. Thunder expertly spun the pistol on his finger. A silence settled between them.

Two Trunks broke the silence with a plea. "There is no wisdom in going after them." Her voice had softened around the words. "They are looking to take you or kill you. Why walk into that?"

"They took my stag's heart. They destroyed my work." He thought of the letter the children had delivered. He hadn't read it until after the attack and now it lay in his satchel. "Like a cog the World is turning. I'm afraid I might be the one who wound the clock."

Two Trunks placed her hand on his and left it there for a long moment.

\*

Dear Dr. John Thunder,

I hope you will excuse my continued use of the appellation “doctor.” I know your people do not recognize its use or meaning, but I can only assure you that it is a title that befits you more than many of the New York fops who so eagerly attach it to their calling cards. I write on a matter of some concern to both of us and our ongoing correspondence.

The Convention, and of course you know of which one I speak for it is the very declaration that forever impedes our respective innovations, has come under attack here by the oddest assortment of gentlemen and knaves. The matter of its efficacy has been put forth more and more often in parlors and pubs across this fair city. It is as if someone has stirred the hornet hive and now each insect is buzzing its own song of protectionism or warmongering. This is all well and good for our purposes. Soon we might converse more freely in regards to our respective areas of expertise and break the silence that prohibits your use of combustion and my use of electricity. Unfortunately, the hive sings a different song. I hear a secret strain which suggests that while all knowledge should be acceptable to the English, the Natives should by no means given access to firearms, and it is always firearms. No mention is made of steam engines or aerostatic globes or any of the other machines that we've so long discussed and dissected together in these letters. I cross often the circles of power and yet I cannot find the origin of this sentiment. It could, I suppose, have sprung out spontaneously, as Athena from the head of Zeus, but I fear a more sinister genesis is likely.

I write this as a warning to you and also to myself. You and I alone know how far we've ventured into each other's fields. A written Act cannot confine the mind of man and so we may be excused from letting our inquiry drift into realms that may violate the letter of the Convention, if not the spirit. However, this new frenzy has put the fear in me that you or I might be held up as examples to, or scapegoats of, local mobs, should a war come. Perhaps my mind, accustomed as it is to speculation, jumps too far to consider such a thing, but I thought it better to write you now and let you know that my intentions have always been true. Should the phantom sentiment become corporeal, I'll do my best to send you word and also to defend our work as the necessary and honest exchange of colleagues and not as the act of treason that some may accuse.

I hope this letter finds you well. My apologies for not including any recent patents. The matter at hand necessitated a quick missive and I didn't have the time to procure any.

Your Friend,

Professor Charles Redlaw

###

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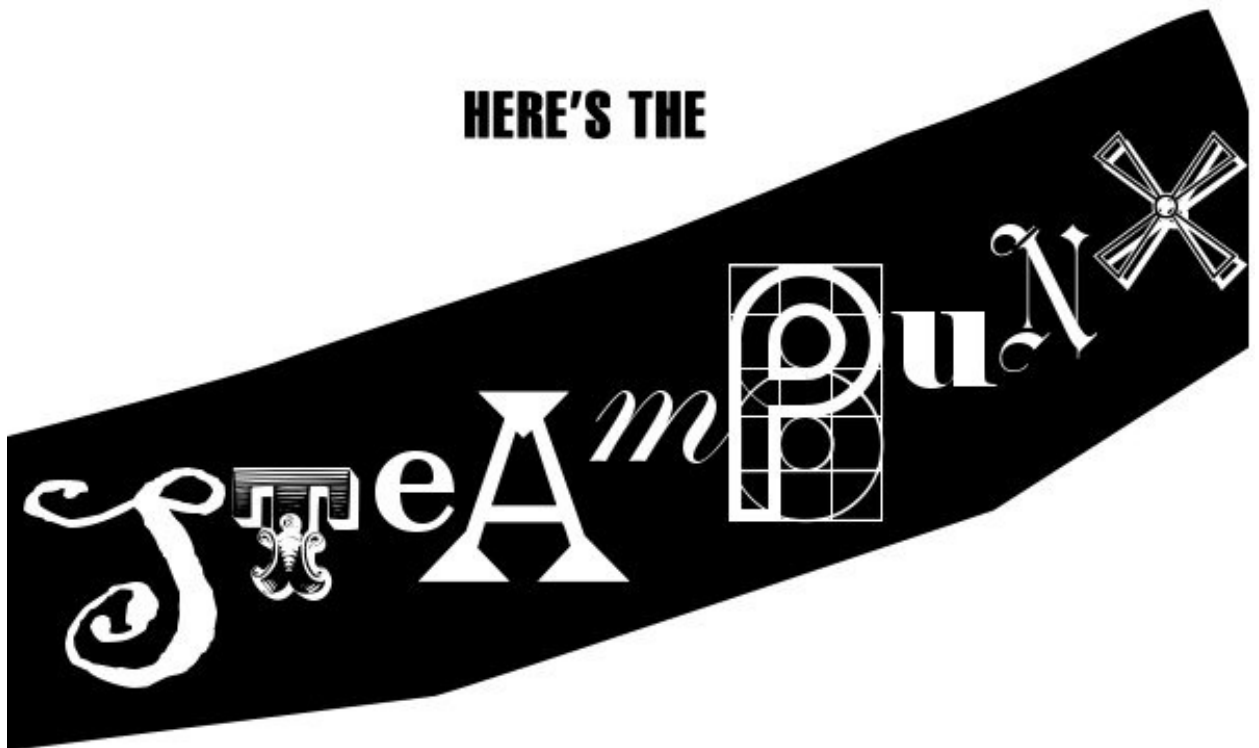
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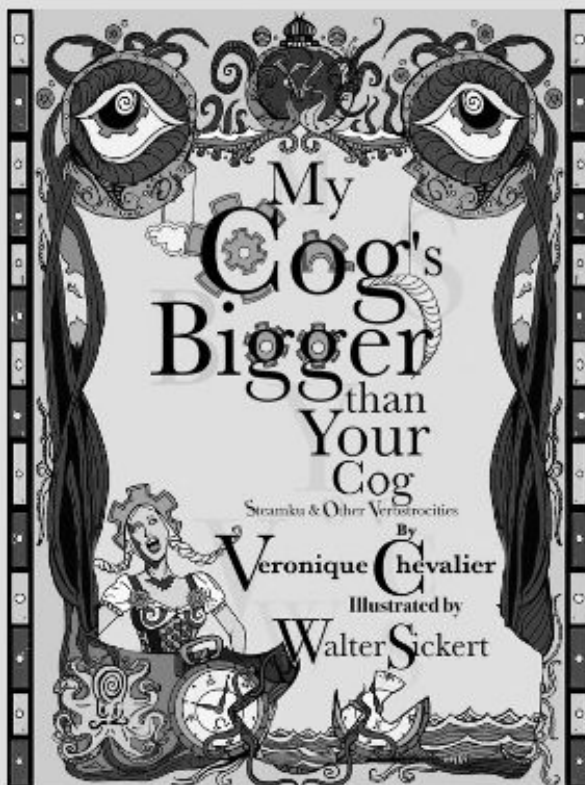
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