

# HEARTS OF SMOKE *and* STEAM



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*The*  
**SOCIETY OF STEAM**  
BOOK TWO

**HEARTS OF SMOKE and STEAM**

ANDREW P. MAYER



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*To my mother, June Mayer,*  
living proof of the virtues of good manners, common sense,  
and just the right amount of righteousness



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# Prologue

**T**he rest of the Paragons had arrived—scouring the empty park and trying to make sense of the remains of the battle they had missed.

Their show of force would terrify and delight the frightened tourists peeking out the nearby hotel windows, watching the scene below. Seeing the city's greatest heroes in action would be something wonderful to tell the people back home, but it was meaningless—the real threat had already escaped.

The hot air blasting out from the vent had kept him warm while he watched the tragedy through a pair of opera glasses he had modified so that they could be strapped to his head. He had seen it all: the Automaton being torn apart under the arm of Liberty, the arrival of Sarah Stanton, her confrontation with her father.

But he couldn't interfere. There were still too many questions left unanswered for him to betray Eschaton now.

The only moment that had truly pulled at his conscience was when he had witnessed Lord Eschaton ripping the heart out of the mechanical man. Anubis had failed to stop him achieving the single greatest step in his plan, and it had taken all of his willpower not to leap down and confront the madman then and there.

And even if he could have saved the clockwork man, it would have made no actual difference. The Paragons were still doomed by their own hubris, and whatever the Automaton was, he was not human.

From his rooftop vantage point he watched the Paragons frantically scurrying around—angry, but without purpose. The Industrialist screamed loudly enough that Anubis could hear his cries as the harpoon was pulled from his arm.

Where there had once been seven Paragons, now only four remained, one of them confined to a wheelchair . . .

Anubis had already made one attempt to involve himself with their affairs. The end result had been the death of the Sleuth. Giving the old man the information he had wanted had ultimately simply been another futile action piled on top of all the others that he had already made. He would need to be more careful in the future.

Watching the heroes running through the streets helpless and confused only confirmed what Anubis had decided on the day that Sir Darby died; if there was any hope that he would be able to put a stop to Lord Eschaton's plans, he must work alone. He could only betray the villain once, and he would need to be sure he could destroy him.

But there was also the girl. "She has fire," he whispered to himself. Her passion was still undiminished by cynicism. It would be worth keeping an eye on *her*.

He had noted the direction she took when she ran off into the darkness of the city. She had left her father and the Paragons behind. It would be worth seeing where she would go . . .

Slipping his mask back over his head, Anubis hooked the end of his staff onto the edge of the rooftop, and lowered himself down on metal wire toward the streets below.

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# The Burning Bush

**A**lexander Stanton had always found the Hall's main courtyard gloomy and a bit useless. He had even disliked the idea of it, and when Darby had presented him his original design for the Hall of Paragons, Stanton had responded by asking if they might be able to use the garden space to increase the size of the gymnasium instead.

Darby had objected, of course. He had pointed out that there were activities which it would be better for them to hold outside, in the fresh air—not the least of which would be his daily breathing exercises. “That,” he had told the Industrialist on more than one occasion, “might be something you could join me in.” Stanton had never managed to find the time, and now it was too late.

And there was some sense to the argument that a group of gentlemen adventurers might need some open air space, especially when you had some members who were able to take to the sky, while others wore costumes that produced large volumes of noxious fumes and fire.

So, after losing yet another argument to Darby's superior intellect, the courtyard had been built as originally planned, and that was where the Paragons sat now—seated on particularly uncomfortable stone chairs behind the center of the thick granite slab that Darby had named the “philosopher's table.” Alexander's nickname for it was “the pain in my arse.”

The rest of the dreary yard stretched out in front of him: floored mostly by concrete, walled on all sides by granite, and decorated with a number of sad-looking trees and bushes that were regularly replaced by the building staff after they inevitably turned brown and died from lack of direct contact with sunlight.

Tryouts were always a sedentary activity for the active members, and even though the sun had finally managed to burn wanly through the cloud cover,

the north end of the courtyard received none of it. He supposed that spending enough time in the cold shade would turn any man a philosopher.

And April had been quite chilly. Mrs. Farrows had, with her usual efficiency, already packed away most of his winter woolens for the season. Alexander had been forced to wear a black evening coat over his dress costume.

Standing in front of them was one of the few men who had managed to seem impressive enough to bother seeing in person: the Hydraulic-man. His real name was Chadwick Prescott, and he was currently doing his best to prove that his claims of superhuman fighting prowess were genuine.

The costume that he had put together was actually far more impressive than Alexander had imagined it would be, and the design had clearly been significantly upgraded since the one he had described on his initial application to the Paragons.

The outfit had a snake theme, the motif playing off the fact that the word *hydra* was contained within *hydraulic*. Alexander found the wordplay a bit too forced to be clever, although it was far less ridiculous than some names he had encountered.

By manipulating a series of levers that sat on a metal panel on his arm, Chadwick could raise and lower the different snake heads arrayed on his shoulders. Attached to the bottom of each was a cloth-wrapped hose leading to a metal canister strapped to his back. These containers provided the liquids spat out by the heads, keeping them at pressure so they could travel over a distance.

With serpents standing on either shoulder, the mask had been fashioned to make him look as if his own head was the largest snake of all. Alexander smiled to himself as he wondered if Prescott could, if necessary, spit at his opponents with his toxic saliva.

Acid sprayed from one of the Hydraulic-man's snake heads and landed on the concrete with a hiss, burning a long scar across the ground where it fell.

Stanton felt his nose curl from the smoke. The fumes were acrid and probably most unhealthy. He felt thankful for their quick dissipation into the plentiful outdoor air, and then grimaced as it dawned on him that Darby's foresight had once again proven far better than his.

Grüsser began clapping loudly at the Hydraulic-man's ridiculous per-

formance. Stanton had guessed correctly that the round Prussian would be thrilled by the idea of having another liquid-themed hero in their ranks, but his enthusiasm alone wouldn't be enough to make the Hydraulic-man a Paragon.

Grabbing another one of the levers on his sleeve, Chadwick lowered the acid-spitting head and began to shift a new snake up into position.

Alexander audibly sighed and sat up in his chair. "Thank you Mister Chadwick. I think we've seen quite enough."

"Industrialist, if you could just give me a chance, I think you'll find that this last Hydra-head is not only the most effective, but also my most entertaining!"

"Ya, Stanton, I want to see it!" Grüsser interjected with dramatic enthusiasm.

"Thank you, Herr Submersible," Chadwick replied. As it locked into place, two small points of flame appeared in front of the snake's mouth, giving it a pair of flickering fangs. Turning to face away from the crowd, he pressed another lever, and a jet of liquid fire arced spectacularly across the courtyard, then splashed against the far wall.

As it struck the stone, it bloomed into a large fireball, enveloping a half-dead shrubbery nearby. The bush ignited instantly, and then began to burn with such enthusiasm it almost appeared joyful to have been put out of its misery.

A blush crept up and over the man's face. It wasn't until that moment that Stanton noticed how young he appeared to be, although his application had placed him in his early thirties. "Oh my goodness! I'm so sorry." He clutched at the levers on his wrist, desperately trying to bring up the next snake head. "I'll put it out!"

Stanton looked across the table at Nathaniel and gave him a smile and a wink. "A most impressive use of a biblical theme!"

"Now if he can only make it speak," Nathaniel chimed in.

"I apologize." Prescott blushed and Stanton actually found his nervousness quaint, although it was something the boy was going to need to lose if he was ever going to be ready to go into the field. "I hope my demonstration was satisfactory."

Stanton tried to reassure him. “We all make mistakes, sir. It’s how you handle them that truly matters.” A calm head would be doubly important for someone with high-pressure canisters of fuel and acid strapped to his back.

Hughes looked up from where he had been quietly gnawing on his thumbnail. Ever since the incident at the Darby house the man had a disturbed, far-away look in his eyes, and his words came out without emotion, as if he was being woken from an unpleasant dream that he couldn’t quite puzzle out. “Interesting technology. Of course, you’d need a significant upgrade to your apparatus before we’d be able to make you a full member.”

Stanton had hoped they would keep their reviews to themselves until after the demonstration, but it seemed clear that Hughes had no intention of playing along. “And what would you suggest, Hephaestus?” The fire had robbed Hughes of what remained of his ability to walk, his legs having been so badly burned during the battle against the Automaton that the doctor’s only option had been to amputate both of them above the knee. All that was left were a pair of wriggling stumps—still wrapped and healing.

The last vestiges of his red hair had also vanished. What was left was entirely gray, except for a few stray wisps of orange that were the only reminders of the man he had once been.

Unable to continue as a fighting member of the team, he had turned his hands to invention. Although he had shown only a limited aptitude for it before, it seemed that he had a previously hidden talent that was now flourishing. “Increase the power of the sprayers, find a more rapid way for him to raise and lower the snake heads. Better control and more accurate aim.” He rattled off the phrases like a shopping list.

Although he was nowhere near the level of genius that Darby was, Hughes had quickly proven himself to be a capable engineer, showing skill with old man’s work. Not only had he helped to complete work on Nathaniel’s Turbine costume, he’d followed the gas lines in the wall to uncover a previously unknown store of fortified steam.

Without Darby’s amazing gas, their devices would become nothing more than complicated hunks of metal. There was still a question as to how they would come by more once this supply was gone, but the hidden cache had been a godsend when they needed it most.

Clearly there were more reserves to be had in Darby's main laboratory, but so far they'd been unable to figure out a way to unlock the massive gate in the basement that sealed the way in. For now, they could afford to be patient while Hughes attempted to pick the lock. But when the steam started to run out, they would have to resort to more desperate measures to gain access.

Hughes began to rise up on the device that had acted as his chair. The frame lifted him up with a hiss, a metal plate rising against his back and pulling him into place as he rose. His harness sank down into the machine's "chest," essentially a set of padded metal ribs that held him in place. Underneath him were a pair of mechanical legs, and they began to walk.

Having lost his battle suit in the ruins of the Darby mansion, Hughes had built himself this new machine and rechristened himself as "Hephaestus." The irony wasn't lost on anyone familiar with Greek mythology—he had named himself after the blacksmith god who had created two mechanical assistants to make up for his crippled legs.

But even if the design didn't make him appear fully human, it was still a masterpiece. The machine was beautiful, the limbs showing many of the elegant hallmarks of something Darby might have built. The top half, where Hughes was held in place, was far more utilitarian. If you stared at it long enough, it almost appeared as if Hughes was being swallowed up by the decapitated torso of a mechanical man.

The device crossed the floor with a waddle, Hughes swaying slightly from side to side as it took each clanking step forward. It seemed like a somewhat precarious situation, but even after only a week's practice using his new lower limbs, it was already clear that he was becoming more agile with their use with every passing day.

Even though he had managed to find a mechanized solution to make up for the loss of his legs, Stanton felt as if the man's personality had also been burned away in the blaze that had destroyed the Darby mansion, and there was no prosthetic that could replace it. Hughes had previously been quick to anger and always looking for confrontation—now he was quiet and grim.

Alexander didn't miss the challenges and confrontations, but whatever transformation the man he had once called Iron-Clad had gone through in the flames, he was convinced that it wasn't for the better.

He looked up to see Hughes staring at him. “Will that work for you, Stanton?” The face was an emotionless mask.

Alexander hesitated for a second, letting his thoughts come together. He had always considered himself to be a man of focus and action, but lately he found himself easily distracted, his thoughts constantly headed in ten different directions at once.

He wondered how the others regarded him, since. “That’s a very good idea.” He stood up from his chair and walked up to the candidate. Chadwick was clearly nervous at having the two Paragons examining him so closely.

“So, Hephaestus,” said Alexander, drawing out the name as he pretended to examine the equipment with authority, “what else do you think we could do for him if he joined us?”

Hughes’s frame clanked as he walked around him, small wisps of fortified steam released from the hips with each step. “Hydraulic?” he snapped at the man. “Kept under pressure?”

“V-valves,” the man replied, stammering slightly. His eyes darted back and forth between them. “The central canister powers all the heads separately.”

“You considered a single snake?” Hughes stopped right behind him. The legs leaned forward and he hung halfway out of the chassis, leaning hard against the ribs. He looked intently at the equipment.

“I did, but I was concerned at what might happen if the liquids were to combine. The acid and the fuel are both highly volatile.”

“Yes, you’d want a reliable valve,” Hughes replied in an absentminded tone. He paused for a moment, and then made a rhythmic clicking sound against his teeth.

Stanton tapped one of the snakes that lay flush against Prescott’s shoulder. “And he wouldn’t be much of a hydra, would he?”

“Yes, er . . . no,” Chadwick responded with a shake of his head.

“I’m sure that we could make improvements,” Hughes said, “but your basic design seems sound enough, if overly simplistic to be useful in battle. If damaged . . .”

“I can fight with my fists if that’s a problem.” He had directed the answer at Hughes, but it was Stanton who responded.

“It’s not a problem, Chadwick. And yes, a man needs more than fancy gadgets to win a fight. But it isn’t his fists that turn the tide—it takes bravery and nerves of steel.”

He could see the man’s brows knitting underneath his mask. “Are you accusing me of something, sir?” His nervousness has been replaced by an air of indignation.

“No need to get angry.” Alexander gave him a quick smile. “And it’s good to see that you’re capable of defending yourself when challenged. I think you have great potential.” He paused for a moment before continuing. He actually liked the man on some level, but the Paragons were supposed to be the best of the best. They couldn’t take just anyone, and this man seemed only half baked . . .

“I think we’ve seen enough for today, Mister Prescott. You’ve given us a great deal to think about.” Alexander nodded at the door. “Thank you very much for showing us what you can do. We’ll let you know our decision as soon as possible.”

The Hydraulic-man nodded his head. “Thank you all very much,” he said as he left, but the tone in his voice wasn’t a happy one.

As soon as the door had closed, Nathaniel spoke. “I’m not sure, but I’m getting the sense that William didn’t like him.”

Alexander grimaced. “Is that what it was, Bill?”

Hughes clanked his way back over to the table, then lifted his head. “I think we’re learning that the game is changing.” The look in his eyes was terrifying, as if he was holding back an avalanche with sheer force of will. “Since the death of Darby, this has become a war. You’ve fought in a war, Stanton, you know what that means.” Again he started to suck on his teeth, and then let out a click. It was an annoying habit that seemed to have come with his new persona.

“I do, Bill. But our goal has always been to prevent destruction. Even if we are at war, it’s still our duty to protect the innocent.”

“First you have to protect your own.” He turned to face Nathaniel. “Isn’t that right, Turbine?”

The young Paragon reached up to touch the back of his head where the battle with the Automaton had left a permanent scar, but said nothing.

Instead, Grüsser broke the silence in his usual clumsy way. “Vell, if anyone cares to know vat I zink, I liked him.”

“I like him as well, Grüsser, but this isn’t a popularity contest.” Alexander turned to the other men at the table. “The man clearly needs more time to come into his own. We can put it to a vote once we’ve seen all the candidates . . . Let’s take a moment to gather our thoughts and then we’ll see King Jupiter.”

He turned and pointed to the still-burning shrubbery. “And can we get someone to please put that out?”