

Memories of Steam

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Chapter 1

Introduction 20

Welcome to a world of Steam and Fantasy.

Chapter 2

The Fog (2024 words)

The sun shone bright and clear over the village as I packed the last items in the basket for the weekly supply run to the foreigners base. I brushed my long blonde hair aside and smiled as I thought of them. They arrived a week ago in their glorious airship and they descended like angels from the heaven. Of course I had heard of airships and the great steam machines of the empire, I wasn't a backwater or something, but actually seeing one! As it turned out the foreigners were a science party from the University of Edinburgh who came to explore the mystery of this tempered island amidst the cold sea of ice and they were a dull bunch indeed. Except John. John the youngest of them, the one who wasn't an old geezer. The one i would see again in just a short while...

Father called from behind the counter of the Inn for me to be careful and back before sunset but i just waved him off and shouldered the backpack and went on my way. It's a mild day as I head with the foreigners scheduled supplies out towards the village exit where the road leads to the islands centre and the black basalt obelisks that ring our village loom up before me. I touch one of them for good luck as I always do and then laugh at the superstition. As if stones could bring luck. John with his scientific wisdom would probably scold me for being so foolish and guiltily I place my hand on the tiny piece of black stone hanging from my neck. "I would not be too quick to discard the old ways, young One" rasps a voice behind me. Startled i turn around to see the villages hag giving me an amused smile. "I.. I..." I stammer as my cheeks redden. She chuckles and continues "These men who think they have all the answers... There is more in heaven and earth than they can explain, more than they bargained for. These stones were here before them and they will protect us after they are long gone. But i guess at your age you are probably more interested in that young fellow" she chuckles again and waves me off. "Well go on then it's about time you sought yourself a man." Embarrassed by her I turned away with reddened cheeks and stormed along the path along the green meadows and boulders that were strewn among them.

"Stupid old hag." I curse as soon as I am a safe distance from the village, what does she know of love and continue along the path and soon enough I leave the grass plains behind me and start to climb into the hills. Up here the winds are swifter and bite harder and I start to shiver. It's not far now, the scientists have their base camp at the foot of 'old Firespitter' the old volcano

that dominates this part of the island and I thank the spirits that old Spitter isn't in a foul mood and that the air only slightly smells like rotten eggs.

I arrive at the base camp only to find it deserted. I stomp my foot on the ground. "So much for hoping to find a galant gentlemen here waiting for me to shower me with compliments" I grumble as I put the backpack on the ground and start to look around for someone. "Hello? John? Professor?..." I call out as I wander around the deserted camp but there does not seem to be anyone around. The only thing I find is a small path that leads towards old Firespitter and seems to vanish in his flank. The rocky flanks are strewn with black stones and the path goes around a big boulder and ends in a cavern opening. My heart was pounding loudly in my chest as I peeked into the darkness. I couldn't see anything! But wait where this footsteps that where echoing along? Carefully I inched into the cave and went silently stepped towards the first bend as massive black somethign darted around it. I screamed as his big black head with big round glassy eyes shot towards my face. I tried to get away and took a step back as it collided with me my head banging hard against the stone wall and I went to the floor in deep dark oblivion...

Groaning I opened my eyes again and felt for my head then I realized I wasn't in the cave anymore. Waves of dizzyness rushed over me as I tried to turn my head around to see where i was and with an urgh and the realization that I was in one of the camp tents i sank back down. John rushed through the tent flap. "Careful you hit your pretty bad back in that cave." he told me as he knelt beside the makeshift bed i was lying on and touched my hair gingerly. His tocuh was gentle but his eyes looked haunted.

//TODO: stopping first person writing. i'll have to rewrite the earlier parts
"Wha-what happend in the cave? Gods, wahat was that monster?" stammered Jana as she held her aching head. "Monster?" John looked confused. "Yes that thing with the big black head and the glass eyes." John looked non-plussed and then remembered. "Do you mean this?" and held up a black rubber contraption with two big glass eyes inset a cartridge where the mouth would be. "It's a gas mask we use them when the air is not safe..." he fell silent and whispered "like in the cave." He began to shiver and wrapped his arms around him and seemed to forget about her. Jana reached silently out for him and lay her hand on his arm. "What happened in the cave?" she asked. Slowly he began to focus on her again. "...I don't know. We were excavating, trying to find a way deeper when we reached a chamber. We don't know who build it but there was the outline of a door. The others debated how to proceed but the Professor wanted to open it." he shudders and shake his head. "We should never have broken the stone with our pickaxes. There was something like a foul smelling wind coming out of it and Jameson sent me to get the gasmasks for safety but the PProfessor was already sticking his head in the hole. I came back to the camp and after putting one of the masks one went back inside..." he bites his lips and stops breathes heavily before he continues. "When I came back to the chamber there was chaos. It was filled waist high with some kind of smoke or fog and there seemed to be somethign moving inside it. The Professor, Jameson and the rest where trying to fight somethig off that had grabbed them by their feet or legs. I panicked and ran..." Suddenly he sat upright. "What if it follows me out here? We have to run! We aren't safe." Jana still groggy from

her head injury slowly came into a sitting position and everything swam in front of her. "I don't know if I can walk like this John." she said grabbing the bed posts hoping the spinning would stop. "I'll help you but please we must leave before it gets dark and whatever is in that cave tries to follow us" John begged and put her arms around her. Jana slowly stood with his help and together they left the tent. A pitiful pair they were, he scared half to death and she not able to walk straight properly and wasn't there laughter just at the edge of their hearing?. John looked around haunted and together they started on the path down from the hills.

Their progress was slow, John had to guide Jane carefully in her foggy state and the tendrils of fear followed them and brushed against their minds constantly. More than once he could barely keep her from losing her balance when stone got loose beneath her foot and rolled downhill. But the further they got away the better progress they seemed able to make and Jane's head was slowly getting clearer again although she had a nasty bump on the back of her head and her blond hair was crusted in blood. And finally they reached the bottom of the hillscape and the grass meadows lay before them dew glistening on the grass. They made better progress now but as the sun sank towards the horizon the temperature fell and the dew turned slowly into mist. Soon their feet began to drag paths of clear air through a thin layer of vapory mists but after while the mist got thicker and the only sign of the grass was the whispering sounds it made as their feet glided through it. John gasped as his mind played a trick on him and he thought for a moment that he saw one of the things from the cave sliding through the mists Jane suddenly stopped looking suddenly awake and stammered. "Mi-ist. Not good.... Ghosts." "What do you mean ghosts?" John asked as he looked into her eyes. But Jane's face was vague again, her eyes hidden in the wooly gaze of her head injury. He sighed and took her hand and they started again through the sea of mists. Somehow it seemed to him as if after the short stop the mists seemed to hold them back, its tendrils licking against their legs and keeping them ever so slightly back with each step. He felt the fear that vanished as they reached the grass plans rise again and tried to urge Jane along more quickly. The quicker pace seemed to clear her head again at least slightly. "Children stories" she whispered "monsters in the fog. To scare the children to remain in the village at night." She held John's hand firmly. "Please don't let me alone." He gulped down his own fear to fight her rising panic and tried to sound confident "Never!" Each grasping the other's hand they started to run towards the village keeping themselves from tumbling when one of them misstepped in the mists. And run they did, each one of them seeing something move in the corner of their eyes now and then as a feeling of being hunted hung heavily in the air. And was that just the long grass sliding over their feet or was that something slick and slimy just now? Dusk settled and they breathed heavily from exertion as finally the ring of stones around the village came into view. "There we made it." John shouted happily just as a roar sounded behind them and the slithering sound of something started to close in on them. Jane shrieked and missed a step her foot going deep into a hole straining her ankle and she splashed down onto the wet ground. John stopped and helped her up again panic in his eyes and dragged her towards the stones throwing scared looks behind. Was it just the swirling mists or have that been tentacles? He slogged with Jane leaning heavily on him towards the stones. Only a short distance

remained. They might still make it even though he could almost feel a cold evil breath on his neck. The Stones loomed up before him impossibly, almost like a wall now and his heart jumped with joy. Suddenly something made a cracking sound like a whip behind him and he felt a strong slimy tentacle wrap around his foot. "No!" he screamed. He was so close but the tentacle gripped his foot and yanked heavily as he lost his balance. He threw Jana forward and tried to regain his balance as he landed on all fours and was slowly dragged back into the mist. Jana propelled by John's push stumbled forward passing between the stones before she hit the ground. Dazed with pain and her injuries she fell on the dry and mist-free ground of the village mumbling "We made it John... We made it... John?"

Chapter 3

A time for murder

Paris by night is a sight unlike any other. The pearl of the Seine is alive with the flicker of the gaslights along its big streets like the Champs-Élysées. Golden hued veins that turn Paris from just a city into something more the pulsing throbbing heart of a libertarian society. Where the good people may walk the streets at night in safety and engage in pleasantries. So very much unlike the miserable heart of the Commonwealth, London, with its gray streets and gray weather and constant rain. Here in this city of Gas, Light, and Steam is where the true future of humanity lies. At least that is what they want you to believe. Like everything even Paris has two sides and the more brilliant one side is the darker and edgier the other usually is. Here deep in the side streets of Paris' old quarters there wasn't much to see of the shining new future. the gaslights were flaky at best and the houses not connected to the cities pipe heating system smelled of biting smoke from the wood stoves. But here people at least could afford a home without being a rich merchant and here one could still find places like the Coq d'Or, a seedy tavern with cheap women and even cheaper wine, where one could have peace from the games of the gentry. Or so I had thought...

You didn't had to look up as she entered the tavern, you just knew it. Her presences filled the smoky tavern and the sudden silence filled the room as the patrons regarded her. I emptied the last dregs of a bottle of cheap red and regarded her fine silk dress as she made her way over to my table. People parting in front of her like waves in front of a ship. The clockwork pendant hanging from her neck marked her as an artisans apprentice, but a very rich artisan as it seemed. "Commissaire Renard?" Her eyes rested with thinly veiled contempt on my unshaven face. "Not anymore." I muttered "that rank is a thing of the past my young lady. What brings you to this arse end of the town? I somehow doubt you are here for the company?" She regarded me coldly as if she was trying to reach a decision and then suddenly sat down and picked up the empty bottle. With a sigh she discarded it and waved the barman to bring another. "No I am indeed not here for your... charming... company. But I need help and a little bird told me you would be the one I wanted." Mustering me again she added to herself "Although I am beginning to doubt that bird." The barman arrived with another bottle and two cleanest glasses I had seen in this tavern so far. She waved him away. "A bird by the name of...?" I asked. She hesitated a moment and then told me "Laroche." "My old partner."

I acknowledged and sighed. "Did he tell you to bring me back to the path of good and righteousness?" "No, he said you were a bastard. A drunk cynical bastard. But if I would need someone with a brain that would work for money you'd be the best there is." Laughing I took another swig of wine and regarded her a bit more curiously. "You know he just might be right for a change. But I guess you are asking yourself if this drunk still has any kind of brains left. Well let me tell you even half drunk I have more wits than those fools at the gendarmerie together." A sardonic smile crossed her face as she sneered. "Then how is it that the commissaire Laroche is parading around in a nice uniform while you waste your time drinking?" she looked around "and probably whoring away your last franc?" "It's because brains aren't in high demand in this world and neither is the truth over some facts my little dove. And don't you worry about my life, since my old 'friends' throw some scraps." I looked at her "my way now and then I manage. So tell me what happened? Some scary thief pinched some gems from you? Need me to point you to the nearest fence where you can buy them back?" Anger flared in her eyes but she didn't explode at my jibe as I expected. Instead the anger was held in check with iron determination as she slowly and pointedly spoke out "It's not thievery commissaire. It is murder."

Those words hit me like a bucket of cold water and sobered me up. My eye searched her face, really looking at her for the first time. The tale was all there for those who knew how to see. The outrage carefully hidden under an icy layer of control, the way her jawline clenched when she said the words and the deep sadness that replaced her eyes. This woman lost someone close to her and she was far from over it. I placed my glass carefully in front of me. "What happened?" She took a deep breath. "La rue St. Germaine happened." "The watch accident?" Her eyes flared and her hand slapped on the table. "It wasn't an accident! No normal watch could have malfunctioned like this." "The boy? the one who was killed, he must have done a lot of things didn't he?" "He... George... he was just a messenger boy, but he was a decent man. We were engaged." A tear appeared in her eye and she cleared it away with her hand. "This simply shouldn't have happened." Watching her I sighed. "What makes you so sure it was murder? Did he have money troubles? Was he threatened in any way? And why doesn't the gendarmerie investigate if there is doubt?" "The gendarmerie?" she snorted "those cretins wouldn't know a spring from a cock, much less of how they fit together in a watch but for me it is second nature. I am an artisan clockwork and springs are my lifeblood and there is no way a malfunctioned watch could wind up that much tension and..." "And still keep the time accurately." I finished. Those words hit me like a bucket of cold water and sobered me up. My eye searched her face, really looking at her for the first time. The tale was all there for those who knew how to see. The outrage carefully hidden under an icy layer of control, the way her jawline clenched when she said the words and the deep sadness that replaced her eyes. This woman lost someone close to her and she was far from over it. I placed my glass carefully in front of me. "What happened?" She took a deep breath. "La rue St. Germaine happened." "The watch accident?" Her eyes flared and her hand slapped on the table. "It wasn't an accident! No normal watch could have malfunctioned like this." "The boy? the one who was killed, he must have done a lot of things didn't he?" "He... George... he was just a messenger boy, but he was a decent man. We were engaged." A tear appeared in her eye and she cleared it away with her hand. "This simply

shouldn't have happened." Watchier sentence. She gave me a baffled look and then nodded. "The watch was important for his work. He did a lot of timed deliveries and some merchants only keep certain hours for messages and he was one of the most reliable messenger," she explained. "And since he was good at his job and since his fiancée was an artisan he couldn't do with an inaccurate watch" I reasoned. "So it is a mystery but why me? there are lots of other investigators in this town..." I asked. "Lots of fools who will tell me what they think I want to hear but I don't need kind words. I need answers and the truth" she stared at her hands "If it really was an accident I need to know and if it wasn't as I suspect I need to know why and who so that whoever is responsible gets what he deserves," she said with the tension of a steel spring winding up in that last sentence. "Laroche told me that you are the best there is and that while you will take my money you won't be bought. That you will tell the truth no matter what I want to hear. That you are 'the french who can't be bought'." I snickered "Oh I can be bought but noone could afford the price till now." Misunderstanding she threw a bag of coins on the table. "This are all of our savings for our wedding. Take it but bring me those answers." she glared. My hands waved soothingly "That is not what I meant but I'm still not convinced that it was anything else than an accident. But you got me intrigued. I will look into it and ask a few old friends. Maybe even Laroche and then we will talk again." She gave me a long calculating look and then nodded. "You will find me at the artisans school. My name is Angelique." then she stood up and left the tavern leaving the bag of coins on the table. er sentence. She gave me a baffled look and then nodded. "The watch was important for his work. He did a lot of timed deliveries and some merchants only keep certain hours for messages and he was one of the most reliable messenger," she explained. "And since he was good at his job and since his fiancée was an artisan he couldn't do with an inaccurate watch" I reasoned. "So it is a mystery but why me? there are lots of other investigators in this town..." I asked. "Lots of fools who will tell me what they think I want to hear but I don't need kind words. I need answers and the truth" she stared at her hands "If it really was an accident I need to know and if it wasn't as I suspect I need to know why and who so that whoever is responsible gets what he deserves," she said with the tension of a steel spring winding up in that last sentence. "Laroche told me that you are the best there is and that while you will take my money you won't be bought. That you will tell the truth no matter what I want to hear. That you are 'the french who can't be bought'." I snickered "Oh I can be bought but noone could afford the price till now." Misunderstanding she threw a bag of coins on the table. "This are all of our savings for our wedding. Take it but bring me those answers." she glared. My hands waved soothingly "That is not what I meant but I'm still not convinced that it was anything else than an accident. But you got me intrigued. I will look into it and ask a few old friends. Maybe even Laroche and then we will talk again." She gave me a long calculating look and then nodded. "You will find me at the artisans school. My name is Angelique." then she stood up and left the tavern leaving the bag of coins on the table.

Coming Home is always a strange feeling but especially for me. Home is not the place where my bed stands and where I go to sleep. At least not for me. I had been one of those gendarmes that were married to their job. So coming back to the old gothic style building with its high arches and the brass

pneumatic delivery tubes that gave it the resemblance of a heart beating with the pulse of information evoked a lot of old memories in me. Bitter memories were the freshest so I avoided the high arched front doors with their reception area and wandered around to the back. Noone was in sight which was good. I slendered over to the fire exits. Smoking was prohibited in the building when i worked there and I assumed it was still. But most smokers creatures of habit as they were couldn't go a whole day without one. One of them eventually found out how to open a fire exit without tripping the alarm. Which wasn't that hard from the inside, but after a smoker locked himself out a few times and got a scolding from his superiors they learned another trick. I started rattling at the dors and smiled as the second one popped open. Namely how to fix the lock so that they couldn't get themselves locked out anymore. Fools. I didn't bother with makeup or anything which might wonder someone who didnt work in a big ministry before. Most ministries are like an anthill, there are a lot of checks to make sure only the right people get in but once you are in everyone just assumes you are one of the good ones. And like most anthills there were too many people for anyone to know each face so just striding down the hallway like you were allowed to be there and not look anyone in the face when you could help it was the best cover you could hope for. That I knew exactly where I was going helped a lot of course. I turned the corner of a long hallway and stood in front of a little used stairway in a sidewing. I followed the steps downwards till the wood paneled walls gave way to floored walls telling me I reached the level of the morgue. I made my way to the room of records where the reports of the autpsies were being held. I pushed open the door and stared on a table with a teapot and two teacups and a collection of biscuits. "Come in come in..." the old doc Smith beckoned. "Laroche mentioned that I might have a visitor soon, so I hope you don't mind if I prepared some tea." Astonished I entered the room and closed the door behind me. "So the sly bastard reckoned I'd take his bait and come here?" I asked Smith. "Well he might have been inclined to send the yound lady on her way if I didnt voiced some suspisions as well." I raises my eyebrows. The doc took his brassrimmed spectacles of and started to methodically clean them and I sighed impatiently. He placed them onhis nose again and continued "Well you see I am a man of science, but of the science of the human body not of clockwork. But for all that I know the damage that poor boy suffered shouldn't have been that extensive. That much force requires high grade springs whereas that type of accident is normally best explained by low grade materials." He looked at me and nodded satisfied that I wasn't surprised. And I think we all know your interest in a difficult mistery is seemingly the only thing that nowadays manages to draw you away from the bottle and to a cup of tea with an old friend." He reached for the teapot and poured each of us a cup "Somethign that happens far to seldom and under much too unhappy circumstances for my tastes these days." He added. A smirk stole on my lips "You always had a curious way of sending a message my friend. But strange as your ways are they seem to work, you got me into this game, so waht can you tell me about this mistery besides that it was an impossible clock?" Carefully picking up the fine china I took a sip. English black tea with just a hint of lemon. "Well as you understand I can't give information about an open case to someone outside. Even if that someone was a valued member of the gendarmerie like yourself. So I can't tell you that we have young victimne maybe 20years old. healthy apart from that hole in his chest. And of course

you aren't to know that he hasn't had any trouble with the law so far, a clean record, not even a reprimand for gambling so that debts are at least unlikely." "Besides debtors rather tend to break a few bones than to kill. Death makes paying off kind of hard." I interjected "Yes yes of course. What I meant none of the usual directions seem to lead somewhere. Of course if you had access to the file" he pointed to a vanilla envelope on a table "you might make your own enquiries with the relatives coworkers etc. Now If i just could remember where I put the file, I'm getting kind of forgetful on my old days you see? I'm sure I have it somewhere around here since noone could have taken it, since we all know only people who are allowed here come this far into the building." he winked "maybe i left it in my upstairs office, I think I might go and check there now."

The End