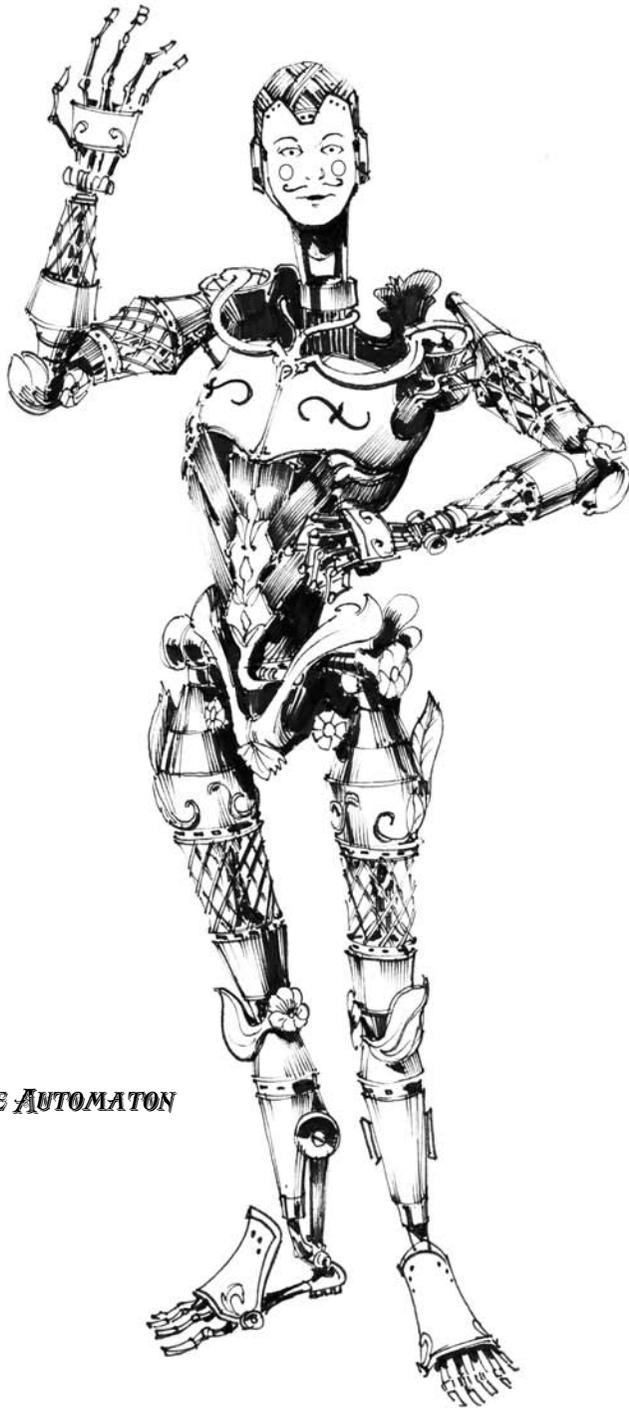


POWER UNDER PRESSURE



THE AUTOMATON

The
SOCIETY OF STEAM
BOOK THREE

POWER UNDER PRESSURE

ANDREW P. MAYER



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*For Jack Kirby,
who unleashed the Power Cosmic, and made heroes of us all*

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Spiritus Sanctus

Emilio Armando pushed back his hat and mopped the sweat from his brow. While his workshop was a perfect place to work in the winter months, the change of seasons had transformed his beloved space into a sweatbox. May had been relatively gentle, but now the last vestiges of spring were disappearing and the sun was rising earlier and higher day by day, beating down longer on the wooden and iron train car that contained his steam-powered machines. Without some modifications, he'd be completely unable to work in the studio by day, and would instead be relegated to spending only the nights inside.

Hidden and gathering dust in a nearby cupboard drawer were the extensive plans he had put together to allow him to regulate the temperature all year round—with the obvious exception of the infernal temperatures that often arrived in late July and August. Any day when the mercury topped the 100-degree mark, the heat would be impossible to escape from.

And the arrival of a steam engine and other materials that he had liberated from the Theater Mechanique after the tragedy only added to the problem, although the main boiler was being kept outside. It would ultimately power an array of vents and fans that might allow him to work in an environment where the bulk of his day wasn't spent wringing out his handkerchief. So far, that hadn't happened.

Ever since he'd first seen Vincent's workshop out in the garden behind the theater, Emilio had harbored a secret dream of converting his own workplace into one of equal grandeur. Of course, he would have never imagined that it would be possible for him to afford the equipment. But, it had turned out that owning a junkyard had allowed him to gather up almost all the valuable material from the condemned building as scrap. Even the cost of hauling

it back on the ferry had been such that he had been forced to sell some of it to simply pay for the transport costs.

Still, he was now in possession of not only a massively powerful steam engine, but lathes and drills that he could once have only dreamed of. And yet all the new equipment had left his once-perfect little workshop a shambles, and getting it back together was a project in itself. Like the old tale of the Monkey's Paw, having all your dreams come true was turning out to be far more of a curse than a blessing. The fact that it had all arisen from the same tragedy that had disfigured his sister only made the irony sharper. There had been such a cost in blood—the price paid by both Vincent and his sister.

Emilio squinted and shook his head with a single violent nod as he tried to break the connection between these machines and Viola's scarred face. It had been weeks since the accident, but when he closed his eyes he could still see her the way that she had been when the wounds had been fresh: the huge gashes in her flesh, like a piece of meat from the butcher. But finding some good in the bad did not make him a monster.

Letting out a sound that landed perfectly between a grunt and a sigh, he sat himself back down at his workbench and picked up one of the metal rings he had machined the previous night. He dropped it down over a set of metal pins sticking up from the object strapped to the table in front of him. There was no mistaking that it had been designed as a long metal limb, and the metal collar had been put into position where a human might have a shoulder.

It was a tight fit, but he had been very precise with his measurements, and with the application of a little oil he managed to shuffle it back and forth until it set firmly in place against the armature. When he was sure it was fully down he gave the ring another turn, looking to find where the catch was supposed to lock into the ring, and instead it slipped free.

"Dammit!" he said, surprising even himself with his choice to say the word in English. Frustrated by his stupidity, Emilio tried to wrestle the metal into place. When that didn't work, he pulled his hands away and let out a grunt.

He let out another, and then a third, before he finally pounded the palm of his hand against his forehead.

After a moment he took a deep breath and tried again to seat the ring. Taking more care this time, he finally found the catch and locked it into place. Reaching and taking another ring, he placed a second cirlet on the outside. It caught the flanged edge of the inner circle. The steel armature gave a satisfying creak as it all pulled into place, the thread biting deeper and deeper into the brass plate with every turn. When he was done, Emilio gave the interior elements a spin, making sure that they hadn't pulled everything together so tightly that it could no longer move freely. Once he was sure that it was working properly, he strapped the entire armature into a brace on the side of the table using a few lengths of leather and some iron eyelets that had been built just for that purpose.

He took a moment to dab away more of the sweat from his eyes. As he let them close, his mind's eye resolved the other indelible image from that evening: the cold look he had seen in Sarah's eyes when she had been helping him with her sister. She had done all the right things, but there was something in her that had seemed less concerned with the human carnage, and more focused on revenge.

It was only later that she had told him that she had just discovered her father had died as well. He had been aware of the ability of New Yorkers to stuff down their passions, but until he'd seen it for himself it had seemed impossible that someone could go through so much suffering and barely shed a tear. There was a great deal of rage under the calm exterior, and it would have to come out eventually. Perhaps that's what it took to be a hero, but if it was, he didn't like it at all.

Grabbing some wire from a spool, Emilio threaded the metal through a small eyelet that he had drilled into one of the exposed pins. He wound it a few more times and then gave it a hard tug to make sure that it wouldn't pull free, then snipped it with a pair of pliers. Next he threaded it through a brass knurl at the elbow, and finished it off at the brass bolt at the wrist. Once that was done, he started back up the limb, reversing the weave and wrapping it back around the post exactly five times. He finished it off by placing a metal cap over the pin and tapped it down gently with a wooden mallet. He gave the wire a tug, and then let it go. It responded with a single musical note.

"Hmm." Emilio stared at his handiwork for a few more seconds. "The

best I can do,” he said as he rolled his eyes. He pulled out more wire, winding it into place with exactly the same movements as the first.

He did this six more times until the main bolt had been completely surrounded by the taut wires that spread out through it. As he ran his fingers across the strings, they all let out the same note. He had been working the entire day, and now late into the night, but it had been worth the effort.

The idea to use wire as a replacement for muscle had come to him when someone had brought a load of the fine-quality metal string to him at the junkyard. The distinctive script of the word *Steinway* had been burned into the top and bottom of the wooden spools. His English might have been limited, but Emilio didn't need to know how to read English to recognize the famous name. The world-famous piano factory was in Queens—only a few miles away—and it wasn't hard to imagine that the load had been “liberated” from a truck just before it made its way into the factory. Emilio had purchased it from a fellow named Willy. The man had owed him a favor ever since he'd constructed a metal replacement for his missing left leg, and told him that he might be able to make something better if he could get his hands on some high-quality steel string. The man had been very excited about having an even better model made for him from his ill-gotten gains.

Emilio frowned at the thought. Life came with more compromises than he cared to admit. He looked down at the arm in front of him. He was creating something that he would be proud of, but the Automaton he had met at the theater had been a monster. While it had intended to save Sarah, the machine had been more than willing to crush any other creature of flesh and bone that got in its way.

For weeks afterwards the newspaper headlines were filled with lurid stories of sightings of the mechanical man popping up all over New York. “The Mad Machine” had been given the blame for everything from murder and witchcraft to rape and impregnation—as highly unlikely as the possibility of *that* might have seemed. And the Automaton's innocence was guaranteed: Tom's metal heart had sat inert in a box in the corner of the room since that day, the Alpha Element removed and held safely around Sarah's neck.

The other bit of nonsense that the newspapers seemed to be unable to stop discussing was the possibility that Tom might have also been responsible for

the damage to the Hall of Paragons and Alexander Stanton's murder. It was a theory that the Paragons' new leader, King Jupiter, had only been too happy to support, giving the reporters long quotes of how the Paragons had bravely driven the creature off when it had tried to somehow bond with the very structure of the building. It was a lie that served Lord Eschaton very well.

All the lurid headlines and ridiculous stories had driven Sarah to the brink of madness, although lately it seemed that her grief had begun to subside. Perhaps there was some power in denial, but her wounded feelings seemed to have left behind the same kind of ragged scars on her soul that had appeared on his sister's face. Both of the women in his life were forever altered.

It also seemed that since the incident Sarah's passions for him had cooled as well. He knew that she had lost so much, but after the events in the theater he had been determined to be there for her in whatever capacity she had desired. But despite his honorable intentions, when it turned out that she wanted nothing more than a protector and friend, he had discovered he was disappointed. The truth was that he wanted to be more, and having her so close, and yet no longer willing even to touch him, was both perplexing and frustrating. In his place she seemed to have instead developed a taste for vermouth, and she was no longer interested in the kisses that had followed it the first time she had drunk it.

Emilio tightened the straps, pinning the arm even more firmly into its vise, and then picked up the spanner again. There had been a time, not so long ago, when his attention to his work would have been so absolute that he would have been unable to hear a hammer blow, let alone the quiet whimper from the back of the room that distracted his attention. But his legendary concentration—like so many other things, seemed to have been left behind in the shattered rubble of the Theater Mechanique. "You can come out, Viola. I know you're there."

There was a moment of silence, broken by a quiet swear in a woman's voice. "I know you know," she said angrily. As she came out from hiding, Viola avoided the lights that blazed down from ceiling. Her face was almost invisible behind the dark cloak of shadows and hair. "I don't care. I just want to watch you work."

Emilio turned and sighed. "I can't concentrate when you're in the room."

“Why not? You never had a problem before.”

Even if she was no longer quite the hellion she had once been, Emilio knew her well enough to recognize that her deeper nature was unchanged: Viola had always been a woman of strong desire, it was simply that her wants were deeper and darker than they had ever been before, and the anger that had once been directed at the world had turned inward. He could tell that she wanted *something*, but he could just no longer discern what it was. “Because things aren’t the same as they were before, Viola. You know that.”

His sister crept out from the darkness, and the arc light above his workbench illuminated the ruin of her face. Her fiery curls were straight and mousy brown, dirty from lack of washing. She had always been a woman of contrasts; smiles had risen and fallen across her features like a storm, each grin or smirk as much a threat as a reaction. Now the disparities were no longer simply a reflection of her inner emotions, but a permanent mask.

Sarah’s doctor was clearly a talented man—he had done the best he could under the circumstances. But even with the surgeon’s fine handiwork, the scars had pulled her lip up into a permanent sneer. Emilio had wanted to pretend that there was no irony to it, but the truth of it was that the damage had gone straight down to the ugliest part of Viola’s soul and forced her to wear it as her face.

She turned and stepped over to the frame where the completed portions of Tom’s new body had been bolted together in anticipation of his return to life. Viola caressed the brass and steel. His legs were done, but the arms were not attached and the head was only half-finished. Emilio had almost finished one arm, and its mirror twin would be done much more quickly. The Automaton’s new body would be ready in a matter of days.

He had never seen Tom’s original frame up close, although Sarah had described it to Emilio as best she could. From what he had seen and studied of Darby’s work, the professor’s machines had always been dependable and solid—devices designed to be long-lasting and bulletproof. That kind of stolid, reliable craftsmanship was a trademark of the old man, and Emilio would have tried to emulate it if he thought he could, but he was far more fascinated by creating things of beauty than sacrificing it for reliability.

And with no blueprints to work from except for the words he had dis-

covered etched into Tom's heart, Emilio had gone in a different direction—one that expressed his own sensibilities. Inspired by Tom's previous appearance in the orchestra pit, he had given the new body the shape of an instrument, with the inner workings exposed and the structure of his body riddled with rococo swirls that harkened back to the art of Emilio's ancestors in Italy. It was more of a framework than the whole of a man, a handsome skeleton on which Tom could, once he had returned to an animated existence, rebuild in any way he chose.

Viola looked through the empty hole in the front of his head. For an instant she began to frown, then winced from some pain the expression caused her twisted features. She dropped back to a neutral expression. "You haven't made him a face yet."

Emilio nodded. "Sarah wants a porcelain face, like the one he used to wear. I'm having Alfonso make it."

As Viola contemplated his answer she ran her hands up a series of thicker wires that rose up through a gimbal in Tom's neck, the twisted strings sprouting out like a fountain of metal through the center, each one strung into a separate slot around the circumference of his metal skull. The crown had been bolted into the head through the center, locking the wires into place.

Emilio considered asking his sister to stop fondling the Automaton's lifeless body, but decided he didn't need to hear the argument she would make defending her actions.

When she finally did speak Viola's tone of contempt punctuated the derision in her words, "Alfonso? That Venetian pig?" Ever since the incident there was no one who was spared her wrath, but those she had known and loved were always the fiercest targets of Viola's anger.

"He's a fine artist."

"He's a dog with paint-covered paws." She refused to look at Emilio while she talked to him, instead choosing to concentrate on the details of the new body that her brother was creating. "The only reason his art makes him any money is he hires the models with the biggest chests he can find."

Emilio wanted to point out that his sister had once been one of those models, and that any dog who could draw a decent picture of a woman with a good-sized bust would find plenty of people who would gladly pay to see

it, no matter the shape of the hands that drew it. Instead he held his words. His sister's barbed tongue was sharper than it had ever been before, and he had no desire to be sliced apart by it yet again. "As you say, sister."

Her head tilted toward him, the anger clearly visible even in her half-formed expression. "I do say. Tell her to find someone else." She was also clearly eager to fight.

"Maybe you should tell Sarah that yourself."

"I will."

Emilio fought back an urge to laugh out loud. Sarah and his sister had hardly been on the best terms before the accident. Now neither woman seemed able to stand in the same room with the other for more than a few minutes without one of them doing or saying something that would send the other storming out the nearest door.

At least in Sarah's face he saw a dash of pity behind her anger. Although she seemed obsessed with determining how to battle the man who had murdered her father and Darby, she had some thought to the consequences of her actions. She still blamed herself for what had happened to Viola at the theater, and he hoped that Sarah had the good sense to see that revenge would only lead to greater sadness.

His sister, on the other hand, could not hide her almost-limitless contempt for everything she hated. Emilio supposed that to some degree she was of a mind with Sarah when it came to taking revenge on the Children of Eschaton, and their leader. But her anger was hardly limited to "justice" against him. Since the moment that Sarah Stanton girl had entered their life, it was his Viola who had paid the greatest price for their transgressions amongst the Paragons. He had tried to point out the risks she would take if she tried to involve herself even more deeply in the affairs of these gentlemen adventurers.

The Italian girl reached her hand through the empty face and began to pluck the wires inside Tom's head. The taut strings gave out a series of musical plinks. "We should give him a new face—something made of metal. *Una fronte infrangibile.*"

Resisting the urge to make her stop attacking his creation, Emilio let her continue to strum the wires and took the opportunity to look more closely at

Viola's damaged face. The wounds had healed cleanly, the scars pink and tight across her skin. It was as if the explosion had left behind a permanent impression in her flesh—a single instant of violence that would remain a part of her for the rest of her days. It was a tragedy, and yet everyone had agreed that her recovery was miraculous given the damage.

Viola flicked her eyes toward him, catching him in his fascination. Emilio looked away, but it was already too late. She swept back a curtain of limp hair to reveal her face more clearly. "Do you want to see more, brother? I'd be glad to show you."

"No," he said. He could feel his face flushing red, and turned his attention back to the arm. He locked the cap in place, and after giving each one of the strings a pull to make sure they were taut, he began to free up the straps.

"Are you sure? I want you to see what you've done to me."

He looked up at Viola with shock. What was it she had just said? "I didn't . . ." Did she really believe it was his fault?

She stared at him, unblinking and emotionless. It felt like an inquisition, and Emilio wanted to protest. And beyond his anger he wanted to reach out and offer his sister comfort, but she had never been that kind of a girl. Even if a part of her wanted affection, another part of her would judge him as weak for offering it. With Viola it was never possible to give her love until she asked for it, and right now it seemed she was only capable of giving and receiving pain. "You're distracting me, Viola. I need to finish this."

Viola nodded absentmindedly, ignoring his request. She dropped her hands down, letting her fingers stroke the machine's metal ribs. "Do you think he'll really come back?"

She reached into the chest cavity and ran the edge of her index finger around the empty space where his heart would go. A series of small gears hung in the empty air, waiting for the engine that would give them life. "Maybe he doesn't want to come back. Maybe he's had enough of a world filled with nothing but violence and hatred for a metal man." She let out a sharp laugh. "Let's rename him, brother—*L'Abominio*. What do you think?"

Before Sarah had started ignoring her, Viola had been constantly pointing out that the Automaton was gone when they needed him the most.

He knew that Viola must, on some level, blame Tom for what had happened to her, even if he was only the catalyst and not the bomb itself.

But Emilio had promised Sarah that he would help bring the metal man back. And, although it was hard to admit, it had been his failure to be able to repair the creature's heart properly that had forced him to bring it to Vincent, and that act had ultimately put them all in danger. This time he had the tools he needed, and he would do it right. "He'll come back, and I'm letting Sarah choose his face."

"Really?" She let out a short mocking laugh. "Doesn't the metal man get a say?"

Emilio nodded. "I suppose so, but he has to come back and say it."

After they had returned to the junkyard, they had tried placing him into a number of different machines, hoping to re-create the miracle of his rebirth. Sarah had hoped that simply having the Alpha Element would bring Tom back to life. But even with that it seemed that more was needed. Until they could figure out what it was, the Automaton would not return.

Emilio believed that although the Automaton was capable of transforming himself, in order to return to life the mechanical man needed to be given a familiar form to inhabit. Sarah was dubious that Tom was so bonded to the human form that he would be unable to return to life without it, but having no better theories to offer, she agreed that Emilio should construct a new body in the hopes that placing Tom's heart into the form of a man might convince him to return.

But whatever it was that had re-ignited the Automaton backstage at the theater, so far they had failed to re-create the conditions needed, and Emilio was beginning to doubt that this new body would be any better.

Viola's hands still played with the frame. "Can you talk to Alfonso for me, brother? I want a new face too." He knew she was testing him, trying to get him angry at her so they could have a reason to fight.

"If that's what you want."

"You've seen my face. Why *wouldn't* I want a new one?" She stopped playing with the Automaton's body and stepped around it to get closer to her brother. "Can I pick what I'm to look like, or are you going to let Sarah choose that too?" She began to laugh. The sound of it was low and mean,

tinged with what Emilio was beginning to suspect might be a permanent touch of madness, although she clearly knew the pain that her words were causing him. “She’s so good at getting you to do whatever she wants.”

It was hard to tell whether the redness he could feel spreading across his face was the result of shame or anger. The two were so thoroughly mixed together that they felt like a single emotion. “If you really want a metal face, I’ll build you one.” Was she being serious, or would she mock him for offering?

“You would do that for me, wouldn’t you?” She looked up at him and caught his eyes. For a moment he saw a flash of her old playful spirit sparkling within them. “I want my new face to be steel, and I want it to be covered in flowers.” It faded away an instant later.

Emilio sighed. “You are my sister. I would do anything to make you whole again.” He flexed the limb a few times, testing the gimbal he had created for it to move with. “I love you, Viola.”

There was no reply. “Viola?” he said as he turned to look for her, but the girl had disappeared. Perhaps she was getting better, but he worried that she was healing like a badly set bone, forever changed and diminished by the experience.

He pulled the wires in the arm taut and the limb contracted, quickly at first, and then slowing as the metal strings found their natural tension. What he was creating was an odd mockery of genuine life, but that was his goal, wasn’t it? Even if the Automaton would return to his animated state, he would still be a creature with a steel heart. Still, the thought of the metal man’s return brought a smile to Emilio’s lips. He had done a good job, and this would be his greatest triumph: a machine of far greater grace and complexity than the crude form of the Pneumatic Colossus. He would prove himself to Sarah and she would give him another chance.