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The People's Machine
by Tobias S. Buckell

Inquisitor, warrior, and priest Ixtli's fast-paced journey by airship began in Tenochtitlan, facing the solemn row of white robed pipiltin. The rulers of the grandest city of the world had roused him from his house, burly Jaguar Scouts with rifles throwing open his doors and shouting him awake.

"I'm to go to New Amsterdam?" Ixtli could hardly keep the distaste out of his voice. The colonies were cold now, and filthy, and smelly.

Mecatli, the eldest of the pipiltin and rumored favorite of the Steel Emperor, explained. "There has been a murder there."

"And have the British lost the ability to police their own?" Ixtli had little love for the far north.

"The murder is of a young man. His heart has been removed in what looks like an Eagle sacrifice. Find out the truth of the matter, and whether apostate priests have immigrated to New Amsterdam."

This was news to Ixtli. Followers of the sacrifice usually inhabited border lands between cities, scattered and un-united. None of them tried to keep the old ways in any Mexica city.

But in the chaos of a savage, foreign city like New Amsterdam, maybe they could rebuild their followers.

"And if I find it's so?" Ixtli asked the pipiltin.

"Find the truth," they told him. "If it is true, then we will have to root out the heresy from a distance. But if it is not true, we need to find out what is happening."

And seven hours later Ixtli was passing out of his father country and into the great swathe of territory the French called Louisiana, the large airship he'd booked passage on powering hard against the winds. After a refueling stop at the end of the first day's travel it was over the Indian lands, and then finally, they touched down on the edges of New Amsterdam airfield. Two days. The world was shrinking, Ixtli thought, and he did not know if that was a good thing.

Pale faces looked up at Ixtli, colonials dressed in little more than rags, tying off the airship's ropes as they fell down towards the trampled grass. They shouted in guttural languages: English, Dutch, French. Ixtli knew many of them from his days along the Mexica coast, fighting them all during the invasions of '89.

The airship's gondola finally kissed the earth, and ramps were pulled out.

Ixtli walked off, porters following with his suitcases. The cold hit him and he shivered in his purple and red robes, the feather in his carefully tied hair twisted in the biting wind.

A bulbous-nosed man in a thick wool cape and earmuffs strode confidently forward, his hand extended. "Gordon Doyle, sir, at your service!"

Ixtli looked down and did not take the man's hand in his own, but gave him a slight nod of his head. "I am Ixtli."

"Splendid, what's your last name?"

"I am just Ixtli." He stared at Gordon, who rubbed his hand on his cape and fumbled around with a pipe.

"Well, Ixtli, I just arrived from London the day before it happened. Scotland Yard needed me over here to find the Albany Rapist. Bad series of events, that. Poor urchins, bad way to end it, very sensational, all over the papers."

Gordon was a jittery man. "Did you solve it?" Ixtli asked.

"Um, no, not yet. But come, I have a hansom waiting."

#

The murder site was in the Colonial Museum, a massive neo-Dutch structure embedded in the east side of New Amsterdam's Central Park. The drive whipped the massive beast of a horse up to speed and took them down the Manhattan thoroughfares.

"It's such a vibrant city, this," Gordon said, the acrid smell of his pipe wafting across over the smell of horse shit and garbage. The city, as packed and heavy with people as it was, placed its garbage on the streets to be picked up.

At least the city had sewers.

Ixtli leaned back, looking up at the buildings. This island was denser than Tenochtitlan. Large buildings, some over ten stories high and made of brick, lined the road on his left. Greenery and park, with cook fires and shantytowns that dotted it, lined his right.

Gordon noticed Ixtli looking. "Revolutionaries. This year's batch anyway. The Crown recently seized the land of the 'Americans.' Think they would have learned their lesson from the last time. Damn terrorists."

"You let them camp on your public lands?"

"Well, the homeless are always a problem in the big cities. They skulk around here hoping one day to rise up again."

The cab lurched to a stop and the horse farted. Ixtli leapt down into the mud and walked up to the giant, imposing steps of the Colonial Museum. He was chilled to the core and wanted out of the wind. "Have you investigated any of the revolutionaries in the park?"

Gordon cleared his throat loudly. "Dear God, man, what do you take me for, a simpleton? Of course."

Ixtli ignored the reaction and stepped through the brass doorframes and into the museum past waiting policemen. Come see the original colonial declaration of secession, poster proclaimed, next to an encased poster that showed a snake cut in thirteen pieces.

"Let's see this."

#

The young man in question had been left for two days under the request of the Mexica via telegraph. There was the telltale sign of faint bloating. Both Gordon and Ixtli held handkerchiefs to their noses as they approached the body.

Ixtli peered in at the body, then looked around. "The room has not been touched, or the floor cleaned? Was there blood on the floor apart from what the body pooled out?"

"None of that nature," Gordon confirmed.

"The manner in which the chest has been split, while similar, is done in a much more calculated manner than any normal ceremonial practice. And then there is one other thing."

"Entrails are still in his body." Gordon stabbed the air with his pipe. "Usually both are burnt, are they not?"

"There is also no blood on this floor, from ripping them out. This was done in a surgical manner, with the heart being removed and taken out in a waterproof container. No doubt to sensationalize and excite people in New Amsterdam," Ixtli said. "This is not the work of a warrior priest."

And that was a relief.

Gordon did not look as relieved, however. He made a face. "Well, I guess that rather leaves it all up in the air."

"Do you have any other leads?"

"Nothing of any particular sorts," Gordon said. "You were our best, as it would have allowed us to start questioning around certain areas."

Ixtli shook his head. "Round up the brown skinned?"

Gordon at least had the decency of looking somewhat embarrassed. "One of the guards saw someone."

"Dark skinned."

"Red, is actually what he said." Gordon hailed a hansom. Ixtli looked over at the curb, where a small group of dirty urchins had melted out of the bush to stare at them. Cold hard stares, devoid of curiosity.

One of them held a small, stiff piece of paper in his left hand, fingering it reverently.

"Red like me?" They melted back into the bushes of Central Park under Ixtli's stare.

The hansom shook as Gordon stepped in. "We didn't pull out an artist's palette and paints. When your embassy found the headline and details, and said they were sending you over, we had hoped they might know something. The method of death is... unique." Gordon tapped the driver perched on the rear of the cab and gave him directions to the hotel Ixtli would be staying at.

"Ah, you talk about the past, Mr. Doyle, and nothing but the past. You should know better."

And on this note, Gordon smiled. "And yet you are here, sir. So speedily. So sanctioned by your country. It suggests that there may have been something."

The man, Ixtli thought, didn't miss much. "Do you know what I am, Mr. Doyle?"

"I have my suspicions."

"I am no spy. I am an inquisitor. It is my job to find heretics. It is my job to find them and stop their heresy." They clip clopped their way down into the maze of New Amsterdam's chaotic business. "When your people invaded..."

"The Spanish, sir, the Spanish, not us..."

Ixtli shrugged. To him one European was just as another. "...they had several advantages against us. Guns, steel, disease, but most importantly, the numbers and fighters of Tlaxcala who hated our taxes and loss of life to the blade of the priest. When Cortez took our leader hostage and Moctezuma stood before our city and told us to bow to the Spanish, we stoned him to death and elected a new leader, and drove the white men from our city. We fought back and forth, dying of disease, but fighting for our existence.

"We'd already killed our emperor. We were bound by tradition, and religion, but it kept hindering us. The living city leaders decided only radical new ways of thinking could save us, and the first was to renounce our taxes on tributary cities, and claim that we would no longer sacrifice the unwilling to our gods. And we made good with actions. It was bloody and long, Gordon, but an idea, an idea is something amazing. Particularly when it spreads.

"So what I do, is help that idea. That blood sacrifice isn't required, that people are equal under the Mexica, and that we are an alternative to the way of the invaders. And those who want the old religions, the old ways, I hunt them down, Mr. Doyle, I hunt them down and exact a terrible price from them."

"And you are here to make sure your image as past savages isn't continued?"

"Something like that." The Mexica made a point of stealing the brightest heretics from Europe over the last three hundred years. You wouldn't get burned in Tenochtitlan, you could print your seditions against European thought there, and anything useful, anything invented, all benefited the Mexica.

Anything that faulted that haven needed to be destroyed.

That was Ixtli's job.

#

In the sitting room of the cramped, smelly, dank hotel room that professed to be properly heated, Ixtli removed his colorful cape, hung the gold armband of his profession up, and sighed.

Gordon Doyle followed him in and looked around. "Grand, this. I had a last thing. You never asked if we had identified the body."

"I had assumed you would tell me when you felt it was important. Is it?"

"Important. Somewhat. The grandson of one of the prominent revolutionaries." Gordon stood there, waiting for some reaction.

"I have no theories, certainly there is no reason I know that my country would need some dissident killed in a way that makes us look culpable." Ixtli shivered. This was like standing up on a mountain. "Isn't our business over, now? You can go find some other brown skinned people as your suspects."

With a tap of a finger on his awkwardly sized hat Gordon backed out the door. "I'll give you a ride in the morning to the airfield."

"My thanks."

Ixtli sat near the heater for a while, trying to warm up, and then finally gave the

attempt up as futile and crawled under the thick and scratchy woolen blankets.

His feet never seemed to stop aching, but after a while he relaxed and fell into a light sleep with the odd shiver or two spaced a few minutes apart.

That was until he heard a foot creak on a nearby floorboard.

Ixtli rolled off and under his bed just as a large club smacked into his pillow. Just as quickly Ixtli rolled back out and swept the attacker off his feet with one good kick to the nearest kneecap and a sweeping motion with his other leg.

He was rewarded with a half-hearted jab to his thigh with the club. Stone chips ripped at his skin.

It was a macehuitl, the club.

What on earth was someone doing with a museum piece like that?

But that was just a feint. The attacker grabbed him for a takedown, and they were both on the floor, rolling around, Ixtli realizing that the man's heavy weight lent him a major advantage.

It was a scraping, heaving, bloody bashing fight that resembled something between a Grecian wrestling match and a cock fight, and it ended only when Ixtli wrestled the macehuitl away and clubbed the man in his face.

#

Ixtli looked something like a stereotype when Gordon responded to his urgent message, delivered to the concierge by the pneumatic speaking tube in his room: He sat on his bed, still holding the squat fighting club with the sharp stone bits embedded on its sides, blood dripping, the vanquished foe by his feet.

"Dear God!" Gordon said.

"He isn't Mexica," Ixtli said.

"Well, someone is working awfully hard to make sure it looks like that."

Ixtli looked down at the man and bent to rifle his pockets. No papers of any sort. Except for a stiff, beige card with holes poked through it. Ixtli held it up. "But we do have something here."

Gordon looked at it. "A loom card?"

Ixtli nodded. "It's your best clue yet, they didn't count on an ambassador being a skilled warrior. Find out who makes it, or even who purchased it. We don't have much time before they find out their man is dead."

"I'll get right on it. I'll send some men up to get the body. They'll also and keep guard in a new room that we'll be getting you into."

"Thank you." But Ixtli didn't think he would be sleeping.

He called down to the concierge to pass on the message that he would not be taking the next airship home.

Ixtli would see this to its end.

#

Gordon found him in the restaurant poring over hot coffee before sunbreak, the closest thing Ixtli could get to cocoa. It warmed him.

"I heard you weren't returning to your homeland?" Gordon asked.

"News travels quickly." Ixtli stirred in honey. "I want to know who wants me dead. A professional courtesy, I had hoped you would understand."

"A case could take weeks, or months, to crack. It's not a case of roughing up the bystanders and accusing people of crimes. It's a methodical thing, filled with suppositions and theories that need validated or checked. One must be cool and moderate, and uninvolved."

"By then your trail will have gone cold." Ixtli sipped the coffee. Passable. Very passable. He smiled for the first time in the last two days. "I think, Mr. Doyle, that you and I have something in common."

"What's that?"

"We're both children of the enlightenment."

Gordon stiffened. "I wouldn't say that around here. French revolutionaries and colonialist terrorists were the children of the enlightenment."

Ixtli laughed. "Not politically. I am speaking of your reverence for the truth, the interest in where the trail will lead. And now I have the greatest mystery in front of me: someone wants me dead. I admit, I'm very curious."

Gordon didn't look so sure. Ixtli kept a mask of geniality on. It was not quite true, what he'd said. Underneath he simmered to find the true assassin behind all this.

"Okay," Gordon said. "But you are unarmed, right? I don't want you causing any trouble."

"I am unarmed." Ixtli spread his arms.

Gordon slapped the loom card on the table. "Then we visit the makers of this. And tonight we'll switch you to a new hotel."

#

The giant brick building near the docks of New Amsterdam, chimneys looming overhead, was the HOLLERITH MACHINE COMPANY. A Mr. Jason Finesson waited for them, resplendent in tails and a tall hat, spectacles clamped down over his nose hard enough to leave a welt.

"Detective." He shook Gordon's hand, and then turned to Ixtli. "And sir."

Ixtli gave a nod of the head and turned to Gordon, who pulled out the offending card. Ixtli wasn't sure why they were at a machining company, but he declined to say anything out loud. If a card could control a loom for weavers, maybe it could control other kinds of machines.

"Ah." Mr. Finesson looked at the card. "A punch card. Your message, you do say you found it at a crime scene?"

Gordon nodded. "Yes."

"How curious." Finesson held it up to the gaslight in the corner of the room. A bored looking secretary with perfectly slicked back hair in a black suit sat poring over a ledger laid out across his desk by the entrance. "Well, I can tell you the very machine it was made on."

"Excellent." Gordon looked elated. The thrill of the hunt.

"But that won't help you much," Finesson continued. "Our customers use these in bulk for all sorts of things. I couldn't tell you which customer this comes from."

Ixtli had been staring at the man. He looked assured, confident, and as if he were

telling the truth. "You are the manager here?"

"Yes."

"What exactly do your customers use these things for?"

"Ah, let me show you."

Finesson escorted them back through the dim hallways of the building into a large room several stories high that looked like it was the lovechild of a swiss watchmaker and a train engineer. Massive gears and wheels strained, clicking away on bearings the size of a man. All throughout pulleys and shafts spun, and a massive steam boiler, fit to power a trans-Atlantic ship squatted in the center of the room, steam hissing lazily out the pipes connected to it.

"Last summer we were commissioned to count the census of the colonies, sirs. Since then we've processed merchant accounts, calculated the mysteries of the universe for leading scientists, and been available for engineers."

"That's a mechanical adding machine," Ixtli said. "I've heard of these."

Finesson pranced around the entryway like a circus grandmaster. "Oh, but it's so much more. Complex maths, instructions, this is a computing machine, gentleman. One of only four or five like it in the world! I'll wager you, sirs, that if you could take the mathematics of policing, and reduce it to calculations and variables and insert it into this machine, we could run your police force."

"Another child of the enlightenment I presume," Gordon said out of the side of his mouth to Ixtli, who was still gaping at the machine.

"Even better," said Finesson. "I've talked to your counterparts, the Dutch constabulary here in New Amsterdam. Yes the British do an excellent job of co-ruling this tiny island, but why be so reactive? You know the study of physiognomy, wherein you can determine a person's character merely by studying their unique facial characteristics?"

Both Ixtli and Gordon nodded.

"Indeed, well I suggested to his Excellency Mr. Van Ostrand that were we take sketches of all the criminals encountered by his forces, load them into our device to find points of similarity, and then begin sketching in all manner of our population to load into our machine to find criminals before they commit their crimes. It would revolutionize your jobs, men."

Gordon and Ixtli glanced at each other. Ixtli spoke first. "And what if you were fingered by the device?"

"What? I'm no criminal," Finesson said. "How dare you! I have nothing to fear."

"I take it the Dutch have not invested in this idea?" Gordon changed the subject quickly.

"No," Finesson looked down at his shoe. "More's the pity."

"Indeed." Ixtli picked up a stray punch card and looked at it. It made no apparent sense to him, hundreds and hundreds of tiny pockmarks.

A man on the table held out his hand. "The order in which we feed them into the machine is important, it tells them what to do."

"Well Mr. Finesson, we would like your customer's records."

"And do you have a writ?"

Ixtli glanced at Gordon, who shook his head. "Not yet sir."

"If my customers found out I turned over my books so easily, I could lose a great

deal of business. There are forms and numbers and calculations being done by businesses here that would not want their information spread about the city."

"I understand."

And with that, a frustrated Gordon and Ixtli were back out, headed back to the hotel.

"That was a waste," Gordon said, stuffing a new pipe and looking annoyed.

"Physiognomy..."

"Maybe that isn't so." Ixtli held a mirror in his hand, as if checking the makeup on his face. Behind them dashed an urchin, doing his best to keep up. In these crowded streets it was feasible. He rapped the roof to get the driver's attention and handed him paper money. "Stop here. I need you to wander off to one of these stores and purchase something. Take your time."

"Yessir." The driver's large sideburns rippled in the wind as he leapt out and strode past them.

"What on earth is this about?" Gordon

"Observation, Mr. Doyle. There is an urchin following us, and that same very creature was outside the Colonial Museum when we last left it. Is it coincidence that the very same urchin following us now, and that the previous time I saw him, seemed to have one of these punchcards on his person?"

"I would think not," muttered Gordon.

"Me neither."

Gordon looked around. "This is not a part of New Amsterdam for strangers to tarry in. Particularly ones in colorful capes such as yourself."

"Exactly the reason I chose it," Ixtli said, scanning the crowds pushing against street vendors, people dodging carriages. A tram thundered by, ringing its bell furiously. He pointed a young man out to Gordon. "Call that one over. The one selling those rotten looking apples."

"Boy!"

The boy in question jogged over with the box of apples in front of his stomach, suspicion embedded in his glare. "What you want?"

Gordon showed his badge and grabbed the boy before he could turn and run.

Ixtli handed the boy a thick wad of paper money. "We have a job for you. That's half what you'll get if you succeed."

"It'd beat selling dodgy apples, you'll make a couple week's worth from us," Gordon said, catching on. "And you don't want me asking where you gone and got them from, now do you?"

The struggling ceased. "What you wanting then?"

"There's a mangy sort following this vehicle, no don't look, and we want you to follow him in turn. No doubt he'll spring off to inform someone of where we are when we reach our hotel. Follow him, but don't let him see you. Find us back at the Waldorf Hotel. Ask for Doyle."

The boy tugged on his cap. "Yessir."

"And here is our driver," Ixtli said. "Take the apples so the urchin suspects nothing."

Gordon did, and the driver, taking it all in stride, just asked, "Shall I restart the cab, sirs?"

"Yes, let's move on."

The driver disappeared behind them. The cab shook as he climbed into his perch looking over the cab, and then the hansom jerked into motion. Ixtli settled back in.

"Clever," said Gordon.

"If it works." Ixtli looked down at the rotted apples. He was going to gibe Gordon about the hungry on the streets of New Amsterdam, and then decided to leave the man alone.

"So now we retire to the hotel and wait."

"You told me this was a pursuit for the moderate and patient."

Gordon sighed.

#

Their urchin showed up outside the hotel as they were just setting in to dine. Ixtli spotted the hotel confronting the young boy as he maintained his need to see them right away.

Ixtli and Gordon walked out to the street. "What do you have for us?"

"I know where the boy went." The boy was still out of breath from his run.

"Take us there!"

"What about my money?"

Ixtli felt around in his cape, pulled out enough for the cabfare, and looked at Gordon, who patted his pockets. "I left what I had on the table for the meal."

"We'll get to a bank, but after you show us where the boy went."

"Damn it, I knew you was going to gyp me."

"Look at us, do we look like the sort to play games like that?" Gordon yelled.

The boy looked him up and down. "I guess not," he conceded. "But I'm going to get my money." On that he was dead certain.

They hailed a hansom. "East River Waterfront," the boy said. They piled in, squeezing the boy between them. He reeked of sweat and body odor, and he grumbled about their lack of payment all the way.

As the great East River Bridge loomed and they slowed, the boy crawled up to poke his head around to the back and guide the cabbie towards a set of large brick warehouses.

HOLLERITH WAREHOUSING.

"Hah," Gordon said. "Nothing to fear from physiognomy indeed."

"Finesson could be innocent but unaware." Ixtli jumped out of the hansom and paid the cabbie.

Gordon agreed, and handed the driver a card he'd scribbled something on. "The constabulary will triple your usual if you hang around at the ready."

The driver nodded and accepted the promise of payment.

"Look," the boy said. "Be careful. The boys I followed was Constitutionalists. You don't want to tangle with that lot."

"Thank you," Ixtli patted him on the shoulder. "If we're not back in fifteen minutes, call the police."

"Like hell," the boy said.

"They'll pay you," Gordon said.

"I'll consider it."

And then he was gone, watching them from the shadows. No doubt ready to rabbit off on a moment's notice, but held there by the desire for his money to come back.

#

"So what are we looking for?" Gordon asked as they circled the building.

"An easy opening," Ixtli replied. There was a rumbling that seemed to permeate through the ground all around.

"We don't have a writ to enter."

"But I have diplomatic immunity." Ixtli found a window that was loose, and with some persuading, forced it open. "Care to accompany lest my life be threatened and an incident between our respective countries occurs?"

Gordon licked his lips. "Damned if I do..."

Ixtli waited for the second part of the sentence. None came, so he pulled himself up and over into the warehouse.

Gordon scrambled up and in after him. The warehouse was dark, shadows of pallets and crates loomed all around them. Gordon took out an electric torch and clicked it on.

The entire warehouse lit up, gaslamps all throughout springing up to full flame. A crowd of very serious looking childlike faces started at them, and at their head, a giant of man, a dockworker, reached with a long coil of loop.

"Welcome to these United Peoples," he growled. Ixtli stared at the long tattoo of a chopped up snake on his left forearm. Don't tread on me, it said.

Ixtli doubted anyone would be able to, not with all that muscle.

Three more dockworkers stepped forward, surrounding them.

In short order both men were tied up despite both giving a brief struggle.

"May I ask why we're being detained?" Gordon asked. He had a purple bruise over his left eye, and Ixtli admired his cool under the situation. Ixtli himself considered a prayer to the gods.

"You damn well know you was trespassing," the giant of a man growled. "Don't play coy, eh?"

"Okay. So what are we waiting for?"

"Who."

The three men melted aside, giving way to man in a stovepipe hat and long tails. A craggy face regarded them both. This was interesting. They weren't dead yet.

"Mr. Hollerith?" Ixtli asked.

The man removed his hat and handed it over to an urchin. A stool was presented for him to sit on. "Justin Hollerith. Are you here to assassinate me?"

"Here to find the killer of that boy at the Colonial Museum," Gordon said.

"Well huzzah," Hollerith said. "You have found the killer."

Gordon tensed in his chair. "You?"

Hollerith shook his head. He snapped his fingers and the mass of urchins shifted. A massive curtain slowly rolled aside to reveal a machine that made the one at Hollerith's offices look like a toy.

The entire warehouse was filled with rotating shafts that went on and on, and

thousands of gears. Young boys ran from station to station with armloads of punchcards.

That explained the vibrating floors and roads outside. Ixtli glanced around, wondering how it would be explained to his family that he had died, strapped to a chair in some dirty city up north.

No honor in this, he thought. None at all.

"Here is your killer," Hollerith said. "How do you plan on bringing it to justice?"

Gordon shook his head. "I don't understand."

Hollerith spread his arms wide to indicate the sheer presence of the machine.

"You, Aztec, should know what we are going through right now."

"Indeed?" Ixtli perked up. The man was still talking, waiting for something, eager to prove... something. If they could keep them talking, then maybe there would time for the boy outside to go for the police.

If he did ever go. That was a gamble.

"The tyrants and occupiers of our lands." Hollerith got up and Ixtli tensed. "The colonies tried to rise once, to be crushed on their boots."

"You're a dissident," Gordon hissed.

"Revolutionaries! Visionaries!" Hollerith stood up. "Gentleman, what you see before you is the engine of a new future. The British boot will be forced back. This machine is the constitution of the new United States of America."

"The what?" Ixtli remembered that the boy had called these people constitutionalists.

Now Hollerith paced in front of them. "A set of rules for governing us, the fair, impartial, and written by the people. The tyrants refused to let man rule himself, and so we've had to go underground. Slowly, building our ranks. We have citizens all throughout the thirteen colonies, waiting for their moment to rise up."

One of the dockworkers took out a punch card from the end of a station. "Mister Hollerith." He handed it over.

Hollerith glanced at the card. He blinked. "I hold here your future gentlemen."

Ixtli looked at the complex pattern of holes. "Really? The machine dictates your actions?"

"What is government but a set of programmed instructions we all agree upon? And in a democracy, it is blind, and her instructions carried out by men. This is no different.

"The things that happen to us, we feed them into the computer, and it sorts its responses and hands them back to us on our cards, telling us how to serve it best. Judgments, foreign policies, and now... war. It is our destiny, it always has been, to spill out throughout this country and claim it for ourselves. To spread from sea to sea. Already telegraph operators string throughout the thirteen, even through the Indian lands between us and the west coast, passing and coordinating instructions on with other constitutional machines running in parallel all throughout the land. The US will rise again."

"Manifest destiny, embodied within the unflinching intelligence of a computing machine," Ixtli said.

"You've heard of the theory? The machine decided that a diplomatic incident would be what we needed. It said to look out for anything resembling one, so that we could use that to gain recruits, and worry people about the threat of foreign murderers here in our city."

"That theory is that your race is somehow owed it all: the lands of the Mexica, the Indians, and what the British rule already. Yes, I've heard this before. In Texcaco, yes, in the Mexica-Americas war. Many of your border men, out of the reach of the British, were prodded on by the Louisiana French by having that belief dangled before them. An ugly scene."

"This will be different." Hollerith looked at the punch card. "I'm sorry, but as enemies of the state, you will not have a trial. You will be executed as spies. So says the Constitution."

"So says the Constitution," murmured the hundreds in the warehouse.

"You'll be taken to a room, where ten blindfolded men with rifles will fire. The Constitution will randomly load a pair of guns. Take them away."

Gordon struggled again, but Ixtli remained calm. "Now you are killing harmless public servants in the name of your cause, just like any other group of dissidents."

Hollerith refused the bait. "I have sworn to protect the Constitution, gentlemen, from all its enemies. Your rhetoric will have little impact on me."

The three dockworkers moved in, and Ixtli walked with them through the rows of furiously spinning clockwork and blank government officials' faces.

#

They were forced into a tiny closet, and the door was barred shut.

"Thanks for delaying them," Gordon said, leaning against the wall.

"I did what I could." Ixtli moved around in the dark, trying to find out if there was anything useful, but it had been cleared out of anything.

"When they find us dead, I imagine my heart will be cut out," Gordon said. "And you will be dead nearby of a gunshot, maybe?"

"It will stir up enmity, feed unity and a sense that they need to cohere against an outside force."

It wasn't just his death, but the betrayal of his country. Ixtli kicked at the door in frustration.

"Hey," a familiar voice hissed. The door cracked open and in slipped the boy. He left the door ajar, the welcome light bringing their temporary cell out of the deep dark and into murkiness. "I knew you'd get yourselves in it deep and end up losing me my money."

"Did you call the police?" Gordon asked.

"Police? No damn police. Just Slim Tim."

"Who's Slim Tim?" Ixtli moved closer to the boy.

"Who's Slim Tim? he asks. Slim Tim is me!" Slim Tim slit the ropes off.

"And no one noticed you?" Gordon asked.

Slim Tim shrugged. "They was busy with the lights." He smiled, and then counted off his fingers. On the last one something boomed loudly and Slim Tim chuckled. Light flashed and danced brightly.

Gordon pulled the last of his rope free. "Let's make a break for it."

They glanced out of the closet. Nothing but people tending the machine.

"Run," Ixtli said.

#

They skirted the dark walls, ducking and weaving around the dangerous moving parts of the living machine. The escape almost worked, but near the doors a man throwing switches paused, frowned, and shouted at them.

The cry went up all throughout the warehouse, and the ten men with rifles ran through an aisle of machinery, blindfolds loose around their necks. "Stop."

"Only two of the guns will kill us," Ixtli said. "Run for it, and whoever survives, get out to call the officials."

"Scatter," Gordon said, and they did. All ten rifles fired, and Ixtli felt relief. Nothing had hit him, no bullets pinged, they were all blanks. He turned the corner with the other three before the second round of fire, this one not loaded with blanks, could be fired.

They burst out of the main doors, ran down the corners out to where the hansom waited, and all three piled in shouting "go, go, go."

"You pay me now," Slim Tim said. "Very next thing."

Ixtli grabbed Slim Tim's shoulders. "You're damn right we pay you next." He shook the boy. "You will make a small fortune tonight, Mr. Tim, a small fortune."

#

Gordon met Ixtli the next morning at the airfield before he left and stuck his hand out. "Mr. Ixtli, my thanks."

Ixtli regarded the offered hand. A strange custom. He took it carefully and finished the American ritual, a sign of respect for what they had both been through. "Did you get Hollerith?"

Gordon shook his head. "They smashed the machine, and took their punch cards with them. We reduced their abilities, significantly though, thanks to you."

"Thanks to you." Ixtli's superiors would find this a fascinating tale. He wondered what they would do with the information. Computer run governments and humans no better than automatons, run by small dots on a piece of paper.

"What a barbarous idea, letting machines rule you."

Ixtli looked around. "What is a government but rules and ideas that set down on paper for rules, and then interpreted and run by individual human machines? Is it really that far fetched?"

"But cogs and wheels? We will find these people and their cards and burn them out."

Ixtli nodded, relieved. The Constitutionlists had taken all their punch cards with them. Good. "Of course, that is the typical response of a nation. But Gordon, as you help this out, remember this: all ten of those weapons fired were blank, we were never hit."

"What do you mean?"

"A government is the will of its people, and the will of Hollerith is twisted. Him and his people want land, and revolution, and blood. Revenge against the British. Manifest destiny above all else.

"But if the pure ideals of an idea were really input into a machine, maybe it fought back, Mr. Doyle. Maybe it told all those soldiers to load blanks. And Hollerith indicated that maybe the machine hadn't ordered that man's death at the museum, but merely

suggested they look for such an incident."

"Maybe," Gordon said. "Maybe."

"Consider it, that the ideas are what are important. If you ever come to Tenochtitlan, make sure to visit," Ixtli smiled. "Where the pursuit of truth reigns free, and all manner of theories live side by side, jostling each other."

They shook hands again, and then Gordon grabbed Ixtli's shoulder.

"I have a favor to ask, now that we have solved this crime and my men are looking for Hollerith, might I get your permission to send my notes and files to my brother. He fancies himself something of a writer and follows such things. Intrigue, and the sort."

"Of course," Ixtli said. "What is your brother's name?"

"Arthur."

"Just make sure my name is changed," Ixtli laughed. And with that last bit of business, the two men separated. Ixtli boarded the airship.

#

Somewhere past French Louisiana and over tribal lands, Ixtli reached under his coat and pulled out a stack of punch cards. An insurrection, guided by machine, could be imminently useful.

The basis of the computing machine's rules could be corrupted, maybe even by telegraph commands, or hidden series of codes activated by punch cards slipped in by an agent. An agent who had been called north by a special signal, thanks to a series of preprogrammed instructions.

Ixtli's world faced threats. Spanish to the south, English colonies and French to the north, and the intermediate and forever fickle tribal societies in the midlands. Tenochtitlan was always aware of the need to keep Europeans on their toes. Keeping the Europeans divided and fighting among themselves kept them from focusing their eyes on new land.

So now Ixtli held up the punchcards he had taken, the ones he'd replaced were now with the dissidents, and none the wises.

He leaned out over the window, and dropped the cards out to flutter in the wind.

Where they would land, he had no idea. It was not his place to know, or ask. He was just another agent in the vast machine that was his government.

-the end-

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