

THE CLOCKWORK HEART



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The Clockwork Heart



THE metal barrow was still nearly empty, only a few broken bits clattering about in the bottom. Dante Winter stopped and gave the glowering sky a long, considering look. Did he have time to attempt a bit more collecting, or should he hurry back to his home before the downpour began? It was his empty purse that decided him. He hadn't been eating well, and the rent was due in a few days. If he didn't find some items to refurbish and sell soon, he ran a real risk of finding himself homeless.

He felt ill at the idea of being out in the world without his small refuge.

Thunder rumbled ominously, but his determination paid off when he sifted through a small heap of refuse and discovered a clockwork mermaid the length of his forearm. She was filthy, but Dante could tell the parts were finely wrought by a master's hand. It had likely been an expensive device when it was new, intended primarily to sit on a shelf and be admired. But someone had got hold of her—a child, perhaps—and treated her roughly. The gears no longer turned, stilling the motion Dante could see in his mind's eye: the tail fluttering

smoothly and her arms and head moving in synchrony. One piece of the tail fin was missing, much of the brass was corroded and dented, and most of the enameled colors had been scraped away from her face and scales.

Dante turned his find over in his hands, inspecting it carefully. Yes, he decided. It would take many hours of work, but he could restore her. Annette Swan, whose shop specialized in expensive toys with nautical themes, would pay well for such a bauble. Dante could earn enough for another month's rent at least.

He set the mermaid gingerly in his barrow and gave her a gentle pat. "I'll have you better than new in no time at all," he said. "You'll find a much finer home than a rubbish heap."

Smiling, he turned the barrow around and headed toward home. But he hadn't gone far when it occurred to him that the mermaid would look especially nice with some adornments. A zinc chain about her waist, inset with bits of colored glass to simulate jewels. Maybe a matching chain around her neck. He tried to ignore the idea. Thoughts such as this had led to the falling out with his father, who had a solid reputation for producing well-made, inexpensive watches but had no patience for his son's impulses to add bits of decoration and whimsy to the timepieces.

But pleasing his father was no longer a consideration, Dante reminded himself. So he turned the barrow aside, toward a large mound of broken glass. He wouldn't need much—just a few tiny bits. He already had some small lumps of zinc in his workshop.

The first fat drops of rain began to fall as he sifted through the colored shards. He used his arm to push his untidy strands of hair away from his face, then poked cautiously at the sharp rubble. He always wore gloves when he was collecting—he couldn't afford to injure his hands—but the leather wouldn't withstand the most dangerous splin-

ters. He had no trouble finding dark-green glass, but it took considerably longer to unearth the precise shade of blue he was hoping for. He didn't have any luck at all finding red, but then he hadn't expected to. Red glass got its color from gold and was therefore more expensive and rarer than other hues.

Well, his mermaid would do well enough with sea colors. He needed to hurry up—his clothing was soaked already and he was beginning to shiver.

He kept his head down as he pushed the barrow between piles of debris. Cold rain ran under his collar and mud squished into the holes in his boots, chilling him even more. He longed for his hot stove and kettle, and he wondered if he could manage to find enough food in his cupboards for a stew, or at least a decent soup. Probably not. But he was so wet already, he might as well make a detour to the butcher shop to beg a marrow bone. Mr. Powders was occasionally willing to grant him a small amount of credit. And the greengrocer—maybe he had a few sprouted potatoes or wilted carrots he'd be willing to spare, a tiny onion or two. Dante closed his eyes and shuddered, picturing himself interacting with so many people all in one afternoon. Perhaps he'd make do with tea and dry biscuits instead.

His eyes were still closed when he tripped over something, nearly landing headfirst in his barrow.

Normally the refuse was kept in neat enough piles and the passages between them were clear. In fact, before Mr. Abernethy had granted him access to the rubbish heap—a privilege for which Dante paid five sovereigns annually—Dante had been required to promise to keep everything tidy as he scavenged. But now something was sticking into the pathway. It took Dante a moment to recognize it was an arm.

For a brief moment, his heart constricted as he imagined a corpse among the rubbish. He pictured his mother very clearly as he'd last seen her: sheets and nightdress and skin

equally white. But no, that had been almost ten years earlier, when he was hardly more than a boy. And the arm in the mud before him glinted dully from bits of metal.

He pushed the barrow to the side and crouched for closer inspection. It was a mechanical arm, and although it was sheathed in synthetic skin, the covering had been torn in several places, revealing a delicate structure of metal and wire.

A wise man would have stood and hurried away. But Dante was not wise, and there was something about the arm that made his throat feel tight. Perhaps it was the way the fingers were bent and hooked into the mud, as if in an attempt to claw free of the pile of garbage.

Dante began clearing the rubbish away.

Although the rain was sheeting down, making his grasp slippery and his body tremble, he was able to move the garbage quickly because the pieces were mostly large: a broken wicker chair, some warped sheets of tin roofing, a staved-in trunk. Soon he had excavated enough to see that the arm was attached to a body.

“A golem!” he exclaimed, although he wasn’t truly surprised. The human-shaped automatons were terribly expensive, and the few people wealthy enough to afford them usually kept them safely indoors, sharing them only with their closest friends. But he was aware golems existed, and he’d caught sight of them twice in his life: one being led by a leash down High Street by its owner, and another displayed in a shop window in a part of the city far too good for the likes of Dante. He’d never seen one so closely.

This golem was in very poor condition. Its limbs were twisted grotesquely, its skull slightly indented on one side. One eye was gone and the other—an unnatural but beautiful shade of lavender—stared sightlessly. Its skin was ripped in

many places. Its hair, long strands of indeterminate color, was hopelessly snarled.

Dante shook his head over the waste of it, of someone destroying such a wonderful piece of craftsmanship.

And then the golem moaned.

Dante's feet slipped in the mud as he scrambled backward and he narrowly avoided falling. He could see now that the golem's torso was moving ever so slightly, its back rising and falling as the bellows of its lungs moved in and out.

Good Lord. If he were able to repair the golem, how much could he sell it for? It might be too damaged to salvage, or fixing it might be beyond his skills. But if he were successful, he wouldn't have to worry about rent and food for a year at least. Maybe longer. He could afford new boots and some better tools. He could buy a warmer coat.

Dante—tall, broad shouldered, heavy boned—was built more like a laborer than a craftsman. He was naturally muscular despite his poor diet and uneven exercise. His father used to make disparaging remarks about his size, as if Dante had grown so large just to spite him. But today Dante was glad for his strength because the golem was as heavy as a man. It made another noise as Dante set it in the barrow, a sort of drawn-out groan. Broken gears shifting, maybe. He made sure the mermaid and the other small items he'd collected weren't crushed under the golem's weight, and then he set out for home.



DANTE'S home was small, crowded, and messy. It was really more a shed than a house; not so long ago it had served as storage and as a repair shop for his landlord's steam carriage. But the landlord had bought two more steam carriages—larger, grander models—and housed them in a

more spacious garage. This old building had stood empty until Dante worked up enough courage to ask if he might rent it. Although Mr. Sainsworth was wealthy, he was never one to turn down a few more coins, so he'd acquiesced willingly enough.

It had taken only a bit of work to make the place habitable. Gas lanterns were already installed, as were a sink and stove. An outhouse stood a few yards away. Sometimes Dante missed the large copper tub he'd enjoyed in his parents' house, but he made do with the sink and a few towels. He'd scrounged an old iron bed that needed only a few repairs, a slightly wobbly table, a pair of unmatched chairs, and a few pots and pans and the like. He'd bought the cheapest mattress he could find—something his back sometimes regretted—and a few linens. The building already came equipped with an enormous workbench and several sets of shelves.

His home was a bit dreary. He hadn't bothered to decorate it, having neither the money nor the time for such frivolities. But today it didn't matter, because all he craved was some warmth and dry clothing.

He parked the barrow in its usual corner next to the workbench, lit the stove and lanterns, and began stripping. His boots were completely sodden, so he set them as close to the stove as he dared. He hung his wet clothes on the line near one wall. As he waited for the kettle to boil, he towed himself off and tugged on his spare set of clothing. It was in as poor repair as the other.

Finally, he poured himself a mug of tea, grabbed a hunk of stale bread and his last bit of cheese, and sat at the table.

He could have lived more comfortably if he'd chosen to work for others. He was skilled at his work; even his father had admitted that. But his soul had been ground away with each day spent under the old man's critical gaze, creating or

repairing one featureless timepiece after another. So he'd left. He'd obtained a position in a master craftsman's workshop, assembling delicate jewelry and clockwork toys for the very rich. But even there he hadn't been allowed to use his imagination— everything was made to his employer's orders. Besides, he felt uncomfortable being surrounded by the other men and women who worked there. At first they tried to chat with him, but his responses were awkward and stilted, and soon they ignored him instead. *Standoffish*, they'd said. *Thinks he's too good for us*.

So now he was on his own, with no master and no judgmental coworkers. He could repair things however he fancied, as long as he could find the proper components. He didn't yearn for wealth or recognition; if he could afford only a few more comforts, he'd be quite content. A man like him needed little more.

The tea was good, hot enough to burn his tongue. It warmed him from the inside out, and his belly was satisfied by the bread and cheese.

He stood and stretched, then ambled over to the barrow. After turning up the flame in a nearby lantern, he considered his options.

The golem looked even more pathetic in the strong light, its body folded into an untidy heap in the barrow. Dante cleared a space on the bench—an effort that took him some time—then lifted the golem and arranged it supine along the surface. Its chest was moving, making a rattling wheeze with each intake of breath. “Why *do* the golems breathe? It's not as if they're living beings.” He stroked his bristly chin. “I expect it's to make them appear more human.” The golem's maker had made other efforts toward realism as well: flat brown nipples, a shallow navel, a soft plump penis nestled above a pink scrotum. But aside from the messy tangle on its head, it was hairless. And of course with its current level of

damage, with its innards showing quite clearly and its form twisted into impossible angles, it was very clear the golem was nothing but a broken machine.

“Ah, but such a clever machine!” As Dante cleansed away the mud and grime, he marveled at the workmanship. The automaton’s skeleton was of some alloy that was both light and strong. Ingenious pumps worked fluids through a mechanical vascular system. Where a man’s heart would be, the golem had a compact engine. Dante made an incision in the skin and was delighted to discover that the engine still functioned, beating as steadily as his own, but he couldn’t work out what fueled it.

He knew the golem possessed a mechanical brain as well, some kind of device that permitted it to learn simple commands and perform certain tasks. He was tempted to take a peek inside its head, but he suspected he wouldn’t understand what he saw. Alchemy and magics, according to the rumors. Those were the things that made golems work.

“Damn,” he said after more inspection simply turned up more mysteries. He rubbed his eyes wearily. He wasn’t going to be able to repair the golem—its workings were beyond him. His dreams of prepaid rent and warm coats faded away. He consoled himself with the thought that maybe he could at least use some of the golem parts in another project.

He’d work on the mermaid instead, he decided. He reached for the golem, intending to store it on one of his shelves with the other broken bits and pieces. But when he touched it, the golem made another sound—a tiny whimper. It turned its head slightly and *looked* at him.

And gods help him, but Dante saw emotion in that single lavender eye. Fear. Pain. Despair.

Golems were machines, and machines did not possess feelings. In fact, sometimes Dante fancied himself a machine as well, cold and unemotional, incapable of love or joy. More

than once he'd dreamt of splitting open his own skin and finding nothing but clockwork.

"Can you understand me?" Dante asked quietly.

The golem tried to answer, but its jaw was broken and the sounds it made were too garbled to be words. It nodded twice, very slightly.

It was horrible. Nothing so mangled should be capable of movement, let alone... thought. Consciousness of a sort. Dante felt as if he might be sick. He grabbed a dusty sheet of canvas from the nearby shelf and quickly draped it over the golem. He'd work on the mermaid. At least he might earn a bit of money from that.

He cleaned the mermaid carefully. Free of grime, it looked better already. He pulled his stool to the bench, settled his magnifying lenses on his nose, and reached for his most delicate tools. He'd fix the interior mechanisms first and then worry about the decorations. With great care, he removed a few of the metal plates to expose the gears that moved her tail.

Usually when he worked he lost all sense of time and place. It was as if his mind and body ceased to exist, or perhaps shifted to a different plane of existence, and the tools became extensions of his fingers. Very often he'd finish a project and find the stove gone cold, his back and legs horribly cramped from hours of sitting.

But not this evening. Yes, he managed to repair the tiny clockwork so the mermaid's tail moved sinuously, and he even began the more laborious task of working on the bits that controlled her arms and head. But he never became completely immersed in his work. His gaze kept straying over the lenses of his spectacles to the canvas-covered form on the table, even though the lump was silent and unmoving. There was a presence in his home now, and it made him very uncomfortable.

Finally, he made a small noise of frustration and disgust, and he set the mermaid aside. If it hadn't still been raining hard, he would have gone for a walk. Yes, it was well past dark, but he frequently walked for miles at night. The later the hour, the fewer people he would encounter—people who looked askance at his shabby clothing or, worse, attempted to speak to him. He never knew quite what to say in response to idle pleasantries. It was as if everyone else in the world had received a script but his had been misplaced.

Frowning at his forced incarceration, he heated another kettle of water. He didn't make proper tea this time. Instead, he added a bit of crumbled dried mint to his cup, as well as a few chamomile flowers. He hoped that might help fight off the rawness he was feeling in his throat. "Can't afford to become ill," he muttered. He drank the concoction too quickly and burned his tongue again.

He was hungry, but there was no point dwelling on that. He stripped off his trousers, coat, and shirt, leaving only his threadbare long underpants and undershirt and his thick woolen socks, which needed darning. He doused all the lanterns except the one beside his bed, then climbed under the quilts. He opened his sketchbook and began to draw the mermaid as she would look once he completed the repairs.

The charcoal pencil flew over the page, rapidly tracing the sleek lines of her body, the details of her face and hair, the jewels Dante planned to add. But he didn't stop drawing once the mermaid was complete. He added a sandy sea bottom dotted with shells and fronds of greenery. A small school of fish materialized over her left shoulder. They were fanciful, quite unlike any of the drab creatures the fishmongers sold. Off to the left and far in the background, he sketched a few lines suggesting an ancient shipwreck. And there—just barely visible at the edge of the page—was a large tail fin. A merman swimming away. The mermaid's friend,

perhaps. She looked as if she were engaged in a playful pursuit.

“Stupid,” Dante said when the drawing was complete. His sketches were of no use whatsoever. His father used to tear them to pieces when he found them. Dante should probably do the same. But he didn’t. In fact, he found himself smiling slightly at the pencil mermaid, sharing in her happiness.

He set the notebook and pencil aside and reached for the lantern. But just as his fingers touched the switch, he thought he heard a noise. Not the rustle of the mice that occasionally ventured into his home in search of crumbs. This was more like a whimper. It was so quiet he could almost tell himself he’d imagined it. Maybe it was just a gust of wind.

But he was a poor liar, even to himself. “Damn it all,” he growled as he shoved away the blankets and climbed out of bed.

The workbench was cloaked in shadows so thick Dante could almost feel them. The room smelled of dust and damp and mint. The rainfall had slowed and was making a steady dull pounding on the roof.

Oddly, Dante’s heart was pounding too—*thud-thump, thud-thump*, like a gear slightly out of balance.

His hand was uncharacteristically clumsy, so it took him a moment to light the lantern. And even then he simply stood for a moment or two, staring down at the canvas.

“It’s only a machine,” he said. He’d never hesitated over a machine before. He was confident around engines and devices, secure in the knowledge that if he didn’t already know what made them run, he could work it out quickly enough. But now....

“Enough!” he said sternly in his father’s voice, and he tugged the canvas away.

The golem’s face had once been beautiful, with broad cheekbones, a long straight nose, and a full upper lip. Now

that its hair was dry, the strands glowed rust-red in the lantern light. The golem had impossibly long eyelashes as well, even on the lid over the crushed and empty socket, and tiny lines had been artfully made near the corners of its eyes and across its forehead, so it resembled a human face rather than a mask.

The golem looked at him. Dante could discern its pupil contracting and dilating minutely as the golem's gaze continued. What wonders of optics had been created for this toy?

"Do you *want* things?" Dante hadn't meant to speak and was startled by his own slightly hoarse voice.

The golem blinked twice and then nodded.

"Do you want to..." Live wasn't the right word. Dante rubbed his head. "Do you want to exist? Or I can... can end you."

The golem's eye widened and the fingers of one hand curled. "Do you want me to try to repair you? I'm not certain I can." The golem tried to speak. Dante was fairly certain it said *please*.

With a sigh—but also with a certain amount of strange excitement racing through his nerves—Dante reached for his tools.



THE rain had stopped. The sun shone weakly through the high windows of his home, illuminating the dust motes dancing in the air. Dante set down his tool and stretched his cramped back and shoulder muscles, then rubbed his sore fingers. "I can't do any more right now," he said.

He'd been speaking to the golem as he worked. He usually mumbled to himself, little half-intelligible phrases of instruction about what to do next. Sometimes praise or

curses, depending on how the repairs were going. But this night the golem had been watching him—listening to him—and it had felt natural to offer a brief explanation of what he was about to do. “I’m trying to straighten this bit of metal here” or “This tubing needs unsnarling.” And he’d discovered that if he didn’t give warnings, the golem would moan in seeming pain as Dante prodded its workings. Its limbs would shudder with tension and its wheezy breaths would speed up. But if Dante did explain, the golem was... calmer.

Now it lay on his worktable, arms and legs newly straightened. Dante had soldered patches onto its broken skeleton, had straightened the pneumatic system so it now ran smoothly, had improvised replacement parts for missing or broken gears. Another solid day or two of work might bring the golem into reasonable working order. But he couldn’t do much for the damaged skin beyond some clumsy stitching to hold the tears together. He couldn’t replace the missing eye. And he couldn’t repair the caved-in portion of the skull, at least not without great risk of destruction to the engine housed inside—the engine that allowed the golem to move and think and feel.

“I’ll never be able to sell you,” Dante said. “I’ve wasted all this effort.” But the effort didn’t *feel* wasted. Not when the golem looked at him.

Dante’s stomach was so empty it felt inside out, and his eyes were gritty with exhaustion. But instead of climbing into bed, he lifted the golem into his arms, carried it across the room, and settled it on his mattress. It looked more human there than on the workbench, which was unsettling. Dante pulled a blanket up to its chest. “Do you sleep?” he asked.

The golem regarded him silently. Dante hadn’t yet fixed its jaw. Shaking his head at his own foolishness, Dante walked to the stove.

He swayed on his feet as he waited for the kettle to heat.
His eyelids

were heavy. Perhaps he should invent a machine to prop them open.

Two mugs of tea did little to placate his hunger or alleviate his bone-deep fatigue. But they warmed him, at least, and his fingers obediently did his bidding as he turned again to repairing the mermaid.



ANNETTE SWAN pursed her lips at the deep shadows under Dante's eyes and the scruffy growth of his whiskers. But she took the fabric-wrapped bundle from him anyway and set it on her glass-topped counter. She carefully unwrapped the folds of material to reveal the mermaid. Just enough sunlight came in through the shop's front windows to make the toy's glass jewels sparkle.

Mrs. Swan still hadn't said a word, but her pale eyebrows rose slightly. Dante hoped that was a good sign.

"Did you make this yourself?" she asked. "No. I found it and repaired it."

"But the jewelry, was that original to the piece?"

Dante felt his cheeks warm slightly. "No."

She lifted the mermaid and peered at it more closely. After a few moments of turning it this way and that, of prodding at it here and there, she turned the tiny key located in the mermaid's flowing metal tresses. Dante had impulsively added a tiny bit of blue glass to the key, thinking it made the protuberance look more like an ornament and less like a piece of machinery. The mermaid's tail fluttered and her arms and head moved. The motions were pleasingly smooth and the inner gears were inaudible.

Mrs. Swan nodded and placed the toy back on the folds of cloth. "How much do you want for it?"

Oh, Dante hated this part. He was absolutely no good at haggling. He always felt as if he were being unreasonable in his demands and being cheated, both at the same time. But he needed the money very badly. After a quick glance around the shop, where he knew all the shiny baubles would bring high prices from wealthy customers, he straightened his back.

"Fifty sovereigns," he said.

This time, Mrs. Swan's brows rose even higher. "Fifty?" She was a tiny woman about Dante's age—and probably half his weight—but she carried herself with such confidence that he'd always been slightly terrified of her. In the past, he'd likely have backed down at once.

But not today. "Yes." He kept his tone very firm.

She regarded him with the same serene calculation with which she'd considered the mermaid. He tried not to squirm, and he hoped she couldn't hear the gurgles of his empty belly. Finally, she gave him the tiniest of smiles. "All right. Fifty it is. One moment, please."

Dante swallowed a groan of relief. He felt slightly faint, and not just from lack of sleep or food. Fifty sovereigns was far more than he'd ever earned from a single piece. It would be enough to keep him fed for some time and to buy a few incidentals besides.

Mrs. Swan left him at the counter as she disappeared into a back room. When she returned a few moments later, she held a red cloth bag. "Would you like to count it?" she asked, holding it out to him.

"No. I, um, I'm sure you...." His words ground to a halt as his cheeks burned. He was fairly certain she was teasing him, and he didn't know how to respond.

She chuckled lightly and pressed the bag into his hand. "It's because of the jewelry," she said. "You took a nice piece and made it truly special. It'll fetch a good price. I hope you bring me more like it soon."

"I... I'll try." He tucked the heavy purse into his inside coat pocket, the one that didn't have a hole in the lining.

"Perhaps you might have some rest first, though." "I... um... yes."

Mrs. Swan tilted her head at him, that little smile still playing at the corners of her lips. "Or perhaps you'd prefer a good meal first. I was going to have dinner soon myself."

Oh good *Lord!* Was she flirting with him? Dante's face went a new shade of scarlet. "I... have to go now...."

"Of course. Good afternoon, Mr. Winter."

He stumbled out of her shop and down the street.

Dinner was an excellent idea, he decided after a few blocks. Something hot and filling. But not here, in this neighborhood where all the shop windows displayed expensive amusements for the wealthy and where passersby viewed his scruffy appearance with some alarm. So he turned off the main street onto a smaller one, and then a smaller one still. He passed under rows of brick and stone buildings, each towering four or five stories above him. There were pots of red flowers in the windows, but also lines hung with laundry. Children raced about, laughing, finding him not worth their notice, and the smells of food wafted temptingly from kitchens. This was not far from the house where he grew up and where, presumably, his father still lived.

A few more blocks and the surroundings grew shabbier. Not as shabby as him, perhaps, but definitely many notches below Mrs. Swan's neighborhood. Slightly grubby shops sold home goods, used books, and vegetables. Steam rose into the sky above a few larger buildings, which no doubt housed fabrication workshops of one kind or another. There were no

steam omnibuses in this neighborhood, nor hackneys for hire. Just tired-looking people walking home from work.

Dante found a restaurant that met his needs: cheap but clean and not too crowded. He sat in the shadows of the back, letting the other patrons' conversations wash over him as he ate a decent hunk of beef with potatoes and green beans and drank a pint of fairly decent ale.

He thought about Mrs. Swan, who'd been widowed very young by the same cholera epidemic that took Dante's mother and sister. Mrs. Swan was pretty, with a heart-shaped face and with ash-blond hair she kept elaborately coiffed. She was friendly to him and didn't seem to mind his social ineptitude too much. Not only was she apparently rather well-off, but she owned a shop that made the perfect showcase for Dante's work—and she appreciated rather than reviled his attempts to make his pieces more decorative.

If Dante were different, he might try to court her.

With his stomach sated but his mind slightly troubled, he paid his bill and left. It was dusk, and a rare westerly breeze had cleared the air of coal smoke, bringing instead a faint tang of salt from the sea. Dante felt the unfamiliar weight of the coins in his purse, and instead of walking back home, he headed in the opposite direction, toward the river. He deliberately kept to the side streets, avoiding the crowds on the busier thoroughfares. Finally he came to a street he knew well and to a familiar row of pubs.

He'd visited these pubs quite often when he still worked for his father. The False Rose. King Edward's Arms. The Cat and Mouse. Each was much like the other—dark, redolent of sour ale, filled with silent men exchanging sidelong glances. Conversation wasn't expected. Was, in fact, almost discouraged. You paid your coppers for a pint and took a seat, and when your wandering gaze locked with someone else's, you each gave small nods. Separately, you'd walk to a long, gloomy

hallway at the back, where an attendant held his hand out for additional payment. You found an empty room, you removed as little clothing as possible, and you fucked. The act was so mechanical and passionless that even while he plunged in and out of another person's body, Dante always imagined himself a clockwork figure of one man screwing another.

Probably Mrs. Swan would not want that on her shelves.

He skulked on the street corner, watching as a tall man entered The Cat and Mouse. A moment later, two men left the Rose—one older and sporting a neat gray beard, the other very young and pretty. They were talking quietly with each other, laughing lightly as they walked. Neither glanced at Dante as they passed.

Instead of entering one of the pubs, Dante turned away. But although he was so tired he was numb, he didn't return home. He walked with intent to a neighborhood not far from Mrs. Swan's, where couples rolled slowly down the street in their private steamcars. The tops had been removed from all the steamcars so the occupants could take careful note of who was wearing what and accompanying whom. If they noticed Dante at all, they curled their lips slightly in distaste before looking swiftly away.

The shops here had tall, broad windows displaying extravagant suits and dresses, crystal vases and bowls, breathtakingly expensive necklaces and earrings. It was in this neighborhood that Dante had once seen a golem on display. It had been posed like a classic statue, but its violet eyes had followed the movements of passersby.

There were no golems visible tonight. One shop had a child-sized steamcar, as elaborate as the fanciest real ones and, according to the sign, fully functional. Another shop sold exotic pets: dogs with fur dyed in candy-floss colors, chattering monkeys, sad-eyed fairies with jewel-toned wings. Dante shuffled past all the bright windows and turned onto a

narrower, slightly less grand street. He stopped in front of a window in which swaths of rich fabrics were draped in appealing array. He took a deep breath and went inside.

Two gray-haired women stood at the long counter. They gave him twin scowls of disapproval, but he tried his best approximation of a winning smile as he approached them.

“Yes?” demanded the shorter woman imperiously. “Um, good evening. I... I need some fabric.”

She narrowed her eyes. “For what purpose?”

“Er...” He swallowed. “I make toys. I’m working on a sort of, uh, doll right now, and I need something to simulate skin. Please.”

Her icy glare didn’t thaw, but the other woman looked thoughtful. “The fabric must look like skin, but must it also feel like it?”

“As much as possible, yes. But I’d like it to be fairly.. sturdy. I don’t want it to tear.”

“Silk,” she said confidently. “Upholstery silk. It’s very strong but smooth to the touch.” She was already moving out from behind the counter. Dante trailed in her wake as she led the way through a forest of fabric bolts. The material came in every imaginable color and pattern. Some of it was brocaded in gold or silver, while others had intricate scenes embroidered on them. He wondered whether the work was done by hand or by machine. Could a machine produce something so beautiful and complex?

The saleswoman stopped in front of a densely packed shelf. “What precise tone were you looking for?”

Well, that was a good question. Although he’d spent many hours working on the golem, he’d paid little attention to the exact shade of its skin. “Um... something like my skin, I suppose.”

She wore a pair of lenses on a chain around her neck. She put them to her eyes and peered at him for a moment, then

turned to scan the shelf. Her hand hovered indecisively before she grabbed one of the bolts and held it next to Dante. “Yes. Will this do?”

He reached over to touch it very gently. It did feel a bit like cool skin. “I think so.”

The fabric cost him a shocking amount of money, but he smiled anyway as he walked home.



THE golem was exactly where Dante had left it: on his bed, the blankets tucked up to its armpits. But it turned its head to watch Dante as he entered the building and removed his outer clothes. It even smiled a bit. Dante was surprised how pleasant it was to come home to someone—no, he reminded himself sternly. Something.

“I can’t work on you tonight,” Dante announced a bit petulantly. “I’m far too tired. I need to sleep.”

The golem blinked at him for a moment. And then, to Dante’s utter shock, it rolled itself off the bed, landing on the hard floor with a thump and a moan.

Dante rushed over. The golem had pulled the blanket with it as it fell and was now wrapped like a museum mummy. It took Dante a few awkward moments to unwind the blanket. He examined the golem anxiously for fresh damage, and he was relieved to find none. “Don’t undo all the work I’ve done on you!” he scolded.

Now the golem looked distressed. It tried to raise onto its knees—for what purpose Dante couldn’t imagine—and he pushed it back down gently but firmly. “Just stay there. Don’t... don’t do anything.”

The golem froze.

Dante sighed before tossing one of the blankets over the troublesome thing. He wasn’t sure why he bothered. Wasn’t

as if it could get a chill. But it *looked* cold, huddled naked on his unswept floor.

“Oh, you are a fool,” he grumbled. And then he got ready for bed.



HE SLEPT later than he'd intended. When he woke up, the golem was right where he'd left it, curled up next to his bed. It smiled tentatively at him as he sat up and rubbed his eyes.

Dante left the golem there as he performed his morning ablutions and ate a hearty breakfast. He couldn't remember the last time he'd managed sausage and eggs, and today he even had some lovely sliced tomatoes and two thick slabs of toast. He was glad he'd stopped at the grocer's on the way home the previous night. His mood was uncharacteristically light as he carried the golem to the workbench.

“I'm going to fix your jaw first,” he said, which made the golem smile crookedly.

Repairing the jaw took a long time, as did the broken bits of the golem's fingers and feet. But when he was done, the golem could wiggle its digits freely, and its mouth opened and closed without causing obvious discomfort. As it turned out, the silk fabric was not a very precise color match—it was a few shades lighter than the skin—and the stitching that held the patches was more uneven than Dante liked.

He took a break for a very late lunch, chewing on an apple and some cheese while he stood beside the bench, giving his work a critical view. The limbs were straight and the gears moved well. The damage that remained, although quite extensive, was mostly cosmetic. He thought the automaton should work all right, even if it looked terrible. “Can you speak?” he asked.

“Yes, master.”

Dante was so taken aback at the sound of the golem’s voice that he barely noticed the honorific. He’d expected the golem to sound like a machine, perhaps creaky and stilted. But it didn’t. Its voice was deep and warm and very human.

“What’s your name?”

The golem smiled. “Whatever master wishes.”

“Well, yes. But didn’t you have a name before? With your previous... owner.”

The smile faded and the golem looked away. “He called me Puppet,” the golem whispered.

Dante winced and wondered if the machine could truly feel shame. “Well, that won’t do. How about...” He stroked his whiskers as he thought. “Talon! It’s perfect.”

“Talon?” The golem seemed pleased by the name, if puzzled.

“A mythological figure. A living statue created to protect an island and a goddess.”

Oh. When the golem smiled like that, he was almost beautiful, despite the devastation to his face. And when had it become he? Perhaps that happened with the giving of a name.

“Thank you, master. I like it very much,” Talon said.

Good. But don’t... don’t call me that.”

“What shall I call you then, sir?”

“My name is Dante.”

“May I move, Dante?”

“You.... Of course. I’d like to see how well you’re functioning anyway.”

“Thank you.” Slowly and deliberately, Talon sat up. Dante stepped back as Talon swung his legs over the side of the bench and began to stand. His knees buckled, and Dante darted forward to catch him before he fell. After a moment or two of steadying, Talon was able to stand on his own.

At which point he swiftly dropped to his knees and bent his back in a deep bow. "Thank you, sir. Dante. Thank you."

Dante felt his face grow warm. "For.... Don't.... For what?"

Talon remained on his knees but straightened his back to look up at Dante.

"Good Lord!" Dante exclaimed. "You can cry?" Because Talon's eye was shining and a trail of moisture ran down his cheek.

"I can cry. Thank you for rescuing me. For repairing me."

"Oh. Well... it's what I do." Dante shifted his feet uncomfortably. "Stand up now. Let's see how well you're working."

For at least an hour, Talon moved about obediently while Dante inspected him. A few gears required adjustment, but in the end Dante was reasonably satisfied. Talon had a slight limp that Dante just couldn't fix, but Talon said he was free of pain at least. In fact, Talon seemed very happy indeed, until he walked to a corner of the large room and caught a glimpse of himself in Dante's ancient frameless looking glass.

"Oh!" Talon exclaimed. His legs wobbled and he nearly fell.

Dante rushed to his side. "What? What's wrong?"

Talon stared at his reflection. "I didn't realize.... How can I serve you like this?" More tears dripped down his face and he fell to his knees again, this time in despair rather than gratitude.

Dante's mouth was dry and his stomach heaved. He'd known how golems were used by their owners. He'd heard the jokes and innuendos, and he knew it wasn't out of a preference for detail that golems were designed to be anatomically correct. He'd always been mystified why someone would get pleasure out of fucking a machine. But now that he'd spent some time around one of those machines and knew what Talon was like, sex with him seemed much more like rape.

Dante set a hand on Talon's shoulder. "I've work for you to do here, if you like."

Talon twisted his head to look up at him. "Work?"

"I... I'm sorry I can't do a better job repairing you. You're very complex and I haven't the knowledge...." He swallowed. "Could you... could you perhaps help with my domestic chores? This place is a mess. My clothes need mending. My shelves have become terribly disorganized."

Talon scrambled to his feet and wiped the tears from his cheek. "You'll keep me, then?"

"Of course. If you like."

Talon folded his arms around Dante.

People rarely touched Dante. He couldn't remember receiving hugs when he was a child, and he'd never managed to form a close friendship with anyone. Even on those occasions when he'd visited the False Rose or a neighboring pub, the contact between him and other men had been limited to what was necessary. There had been no caresses, no gentle strokes, no lips pressed to neck or shoulder.

Dante stood there awkwardly, not returning Talon's embrace. But he couldn't help noticing how their bodies fit together. Talon was a few inches shorter than him and somewhat more delicately built. He didn't feel like a machine, and when he rested his head on Dante's shoulder and sighed, he sounded very human.

When Talon pulled away a moment later, he looked quizzical. "I'm sorry, ma—Dante. Do you prefer if I don't touch you?" The corners of his mouth turned down and he glanced away. "I disgust you."

"You don't. I'm just... I'm not very good with people."

And now Talon looked back, surprised and delighted. Who knew a machine could be so mercurial in mood? "People? You view me as a person?"

"Er... yes, I suppose so. In a broad sense...." But Dante

didn't get to finish his thought, because Talon was laughing. If an automaton could cry, it was no great wonder he could laugh as well, Dante thought. But Talon's happiness turned out to be infectious, so that soon Dante was chuckling as well. Good Lord, when had Dante last laughed?

Still grinning broadly, Talon reached up to stroke Dante's cheek. "Thank you. You can't know... Well, thank you. I will serve you well, I promise. Anything you ask of me."

Dante took a half step back. "I think... what I'd ask of you now is that you get dressed."

Talon had to wear Dante's spare set of clothing, which was too large for him. And he'd obviously never worn clothes before, so Dante had to help him. Afterward, Talon spent a long time staring at his reflection in the looking glass, bubbling with amazement at how much he now looked like a man, at least if one overlooked the devastation to his face. Dante discovered his own cheeks were aching from the unaccustomed smiling.

Talon had never performed any household chores before so Dante had to demonstrate, but Talon learned very quickly. He asked a thousand questions—not just what and how, but also why, and every time Dante satisfied his curiosity, Talon's joy grew a little more. Dante had the sense that Talon had rarely been indulged this way by his previous owner, that his first master had preferred to order him about instead. But Dante was having *fun*. Huh.

While Talon apparently possessed an inexhaustible store of energy—from a still-undiscovered source—Dante did not. The hour grew late and the mattress grew ever more tempting. Finally, when Talon was considering how he might reach the high windows to clean them, Dante shook his head. "Not tonight. I need to sleep."

"Oh! Of course! I'm sorry." Actually, Talon didn't look

especially sorry. He grinned impishly, as if he'd been planning to keep Dante awake all night.

Dante looked around the room. "I can't afford to buy another bed for you just now...."

"I can't share yours?"

"I don't think.... That's not a good idea."

"When it's dark, you won't see how ugly I am. You can imagine—" "No!"

Talon flinched at the harsh tone, so Dante made an effort to calm himself. "I won't use you that way," he said.

"Why not? It's what I was made for. I belong to you and you can do whatever you wish with me."

Dante was not in the mood to explain ethics and morals to an automaton, especially when he was a bit fuzzy himself on the matter. "What I wish is to go to sleep. You can take a blanket and find a place for yourself on the floor. I'll buy you something more comfortable when I've enough money."

Talon nodded obediently. He watched silently as Dante readied himself for bed—seeming slightly alarmed when Dante left to use the outhouse and then relieved when he returned. And when Dante stripped to his underclothes and climbed into bed, Talon curled up on the floor right next to him.

Dante was smiling as he doused the lantern.



IT WAS a very strange thing. Dante had spent his life in solitude, and yet he adjusted quickly and comfortably to constant companionship. Perhaps because Talon was a machine, albeit a very human one. Dante had always felt relaxed around machines.

Talon turned out to be excellent company. He worked very hard at cleaning; soon their home was immaculate. He

organized Dante's shelves of materials so the bits of metal and wire and glass were laid out in much more sensible order. Not only did that save time, since Dante didn't waste minutes searching for that piece of something he knew he'd stashed *somewhere*, but Dante also rediscovered things he'd forgotten he had collected. And he found himself more readily inspired, his creative indulgences flowing much more easily from mind to fingers.

He sold two more pieces—a reworked scuttling crab with a jeweled shell to Mrs. Swan and a watch with an intricately engraved case to a shop specializing in timepieces. His purse was fatter with coins than ever before. He paid three months' rent in advance, filled his cupboards with dry goods, and bought Talon a suit of clothes and a mattress of his own. Talon wordlessly insisted on placing his mattress as close as possible to Dante's, and he positively preened in his new outfit.

Talon also learned to cook, even though he didn't eat. He was no great chef, and occasionally his choices were startling or even inedible, but most of the time his meals were at least as good as anything Dante could have managed. Besides, cooking kept Talon busy, and he was always truly delighted to watch Dante enjoy what he'd prepared.

Oh, Talon had his annoying traits too. He talked. A lot. And while Dante didn't usually mind, the constant chatter could irritate him when he was trying to work. Still, he rarely asked Talon to be quiet, because Talon was so clearly thrilled to have the freedom to speak. He never explicitly told Dante that his former master had rarely permitted him to talk—in fact, he very rarely mentioned his previous existence at all—but that was the impression Dante received.

Talon could be a bit of a mother hen. If Dante worked too long, Talon would gently ease the tools from his fingers and pull him away from the workbench. He'd make Dante eat or

exercise or sleep, whichever Talon deemed appropriate for the time. And if Dante tried to leave home with his hair uncombed or his face unshaven, Talon clucked at him, sat him down, and groomed him. “You’re so very handsome,” he’d say as he untangled Dante’s curls. “If you’d only make yourself more presentable and smile more often, you wouldn’t be so lonely.”

“I’m not lonely,” Dante would answer, and for the first time in his life those words were almost true.

One afternoon, Dante laced on his boots.

Talon abandoned his sweeping to rush over. “You’ve a rip on your sleeve. Let me try to sew it.”

“You needn’t bother right now. I’m only going to the rubbish heaps. I need to begin a new project or we’ll be broke again soon.”

“Oh.” Talon glanced quickly at the door and then away. He hadn’t been outside even once since Dante had brought him home.

“Would you like to come with?” Dante asked.

Talon’s eye went wide but then his face fell. “People might see me.”

“They might. I sometimes pass a few between here and there. Is that a problem?”

“I don’t want.... I’ll bring shame on you.”

“Why on earth would you do that?” Dante asked in genuine puzzlement.

Talon brushed his fingers over the ruined part of his face.

And for once, it was Dante who initiated a touch. He retraced the path of Talon’s fingers with his own, gently brushing over dented skull, missing eye, badly patched skin. “I am not ashamed of you,” he said truthfully.

Talon kissed him.

Dante was taken entirely by surprise and froze in place—which didn’t deter Talon at all. Talon simply tugged Dante’s

head down so as not to have to strain upward, then wound his fingers through Dante's hair and held on tight. Of their own accord, as if some hidden mechanism had been activated, Dante's arms rose and wrapped around Talon. Talon's tongue teased at Dante's lips until he opened them, and then slid inside. Talon tasted slightly metallic, like blood, and his tongue was amazingly soft and agile. Dante wondered for the first time what it was made of, and then forgot that thought immediately when Talon pressed tightly against his body.

After a moment, Dante pulled back slightly. "You can... you can..." He cleared his throat.

Talon laughed and pushed his hips forward so that his arousal was even more evident against Dante's. "I am fully functional. I can want, Dante. I want you. I can feel you wanting me back. Please?"

For a moment, Dante considered saying yes. Good gods, he wanted to. But then he shook his head and moved back. "I can't. We can't."

"Because I'm not real?"

"Talon, I think you're more real than I am. But you can't... you can't choose freely, and I won't take advantage—"

"But I do! I have. You've never forced me to do anything. I told you. I *want* this."

"You want this because you were made to."

"So were you! Perhaps you weren't built in a workshop like me, but humans are made to want one another, to yearn for friendship and touch and sex and love. You can't stop yourself from needing those things any more than I can."

"I can! I don't need anyone. I told you from the start, I'm no good with people. I have nothing but a clockwork heart."

Talon's answer was almost a whisper. "Even a clockwork heart can love."

Dante shook his head and went to fetch his coat.



THEY were silent as they walked to the rubbish heap. Dante was slightly in the lead, while Talon followed, pushing the empty barrow. The sky was its usual pewter gray, smelling slightly of sulfur and smoke. As he commonly did, Dante chose a dirt and cinder path along a dried-up creek bed. They saw nobody except for a shriveled old man walking a flop-eared dog. He didn't look at them as they passed.

Mr. Abernethy lived in a tiny shack at the entrance to the rubbish heaps. Dante rarely saw him, although he suspected the other man often watched him from inside. Today, though, Mr. Abernethy appeared in the doorway, pipe in one hand and bottle in the other.

"Who's that, then?" He jerked his pointed chin in Talon's direction.

"My... assistant."

Mr. Abernethy squinted for a moment and then shrugged. "Assistant, eh? Coming up in the world." It wasn't clear whether he was mocking Dante.

"A little," Dante replied.

"But you're still clawing through rubbish."

"Because sometimes I find a real treasure there."

With another shrug, Mr. Abernethy ducked back into his hut.

Dante led the way to some of the likelier spots. At first, Talon only watched as Dante sorted through the debris, casting most things aside but placing a few bits and pieces in the barrow. But then Talon seemed to get in the spirit of things, and he began going through the piles too. Sometimes he'd hold something up—a bit of metal, a broken something—and Dante would say yea or nay. Talon had a good eye and managed to find a few items Dante might have overlooked—a nearly intact panel of stained glass, a wooden box full of

bearing balls. It was nice to work together, Dante concluded. And the barrow filled more quickly too.

They were heading to the exit when Dante slowed and then stopped. Talon halted as well. "Did you see something, Dante?"

"No. It's only... this is where I found you." He pointed at one heap of cast-off wreckage that wasn't much different from any of the others.

"Oh."

"The most valuable thing I've ever discovered here."

"But I'm worth nothing. Nobody would buy me."

"You're worth everything, and I'd never sell you." Dante cleared his throat and looked away.

Talon let go of the barrow handles and moved to Dante's side. They looked at the rubbish. After several long minutes, Talon sighed. "Master was nothing like you. He was cruel. It didn't matter how obedient I was or how hard I tried to please him. I think it made him feel powerful to make me feel weak."

Dante settled his arm on Talon's shoulders. "I'm sorry."

"He never saw me as anything but a toy. And when he grew tired of me... well, he was like a petulant child. He broke me. And then he threw me away." Talon's voice grew quieter, hoarser. "I don't know if I can die, Dante. I thought I'd be here forever. Alone." He made a choked sound and turned to burrow his face into Dante's shoulder.

Dante stroked Talon's copper hair. "I will never throw you away. Stay with me as long as you want. You won't be alone."

Talon responded by sobbing and holding him tight. Dante's own words echoed in his ears. *Won't be alone*. Gods, maybe Talon was right. Maybe even Dante could need.

Dante remained lost in contemplation as they returned home. This time they passed several people, each of whom gave Talon startled looks. The first time it happened, Talon

flinched and ducked his head. But Dante kept his back straight and head up, and he looked into the eyes of each person, daring them to say anything about his golem. His Talon. None of them did, and soon Talon was walking taller as well, as if Dante's pride had spilled over to him.

Back at home, Talon helped put away their new supplies. "Would you like me to make you dinner now?" he asked when they were done.

"Not yet. I want to get started working." "What will you make next?"

"I'm trying to decide. I could repair those opera glasses and they'd sell for quite a lot, but I'd have to buy a set of lenses first. Maybe I should fix that folding knife. It won't fetch more than a sovereign or so but should be a quick job."

As Dante stroked his chin in thought, Talon padded across the room to the bed. He picked up Dante's sketchbook, leafed through it for a moment, and carried it over. "Why not make this?" he asked, holding the page for Dante to view. A sailing ship floating through the waves, with three sails, a jaunty flag, and a figurehead of a warrior. A sea monster's giant tentacles were reaching up, ready to grab the hull.

Dante flapped a dismissive hand. "That's just... something I imagined. A frivolity."

"But it could be really spectacular! You could make the ship rock back and forth so it looks as if it's moving through the waves. And the tentacles could appear and then disappear."

That was exactly what Dante had imagined. "I don't make things, Talon. I'm only... a repairman. I find broken things and I fix them."

"You're more than that! You *create* things!" Talon slammed the sketchbook onto the workbench and took a step back, arms spread wide at his sides. "Look at me! You took a

broken golem—a heap of worthless garbage—and you turned me into a man. Not... not a pretty man, but a real one. You can damn well make a stupid toy boat!”

The gears of Dante’s heart moved quickly and the bellows in his chest rushed air in and out. Electricity zipped through the wires of his nerves. And then an amazing thing happened. He looked at Talon and saw a man—an imperfect man, but very beautiful—and at the same time the metal and glass inside Dante softened. Became bones and muscles and hot, salty blood.

Dante became a real man too.

With a wordless cry, he lurched forward and scooped Talon into a tight embrace.

What followed after that was no less of a revelation. To make love instead of simply fucking. To play with Talon’s body, finding what would make Talon gasp and moan, and to experience Talon doing the same to him. To ease into welcoming tightness—not as his partner lay splayed against a wall, but in his own bed—and to look down at a face that had become familiar and beloved. To see a single lavender eye fill with tears of happiness, and to lick those tears away and find them sweet, a balm to his soul like mint tea and chamomile to a sore throat. To find every bit of his lover’s body beautiful, patches, dents, and all. To hear his lover say he found Dante beautiful too, and to know Talon meant it, no matter how flawed Dante was.

Afterward, they lay naked together in the bed Dante vowed they would share from then on, and they traded soft secrets as the night bloomed. Talon said he would like to learn to read, and he thought maybe he would like to see more of the world than the tiny bits he’d been afforded so far. He said he’d overheard his old master talking about passenger ships that sailed through the sky. Talon wondered what it would be like to see the world as a bird does.

And Dante vowed he would no longer simply fix things. With the confidence Talon gave him, he would let his imagination roam freely, and he would create things. Wonderful things, with all the gorgeous, useless bits of ornament his heart desired. And maybe he'd become wealthy from his work but that wouldn't matter, because as long as he had his hands, his tools, and Talon, his heart would be content.

His beating, warm, loving, loved, *human* heart.



About the Author

KIM FIELDING is very pleased every time someone calls her eclectic. She has migrated back and forth across the western two-thirds of the United States and currently lives in California, where she long ago ran out of bookshelf space. She's a university professor who dreams of being able to travel and write full time. She also dreams of having two perfectly behaved children, a husband who isn't obsessed with football, and a house that cleans itself. Some dreams are more easily obtained than others.

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