

Like Clockwork (Man to Clockwork Daughter TGTF)

By FoxFaceStories

A Commission for Azena

Malcolm is an ordinary man who finds himself magically shunted into a fantasy world when a lonely dwarven artificer crafts a clockwork girl automata to be his daughter. Now stuck as Elaia, a being of metal and cogs and glass, the new female construct must figure out her new reality, as well as her relationship with her fatherly creator.

Like Clockwork

Malcolm turned on the hobby light at his desk and looked carefully over the many cogs, gears, and parts before him. Working carefully with his steady hands, he began to fix up the old pocket watch with expert precision, rewinding it with its new mainspring and refitting the crown. Some of the internal mechanism had decayed, so he worked with his most minor implements to scrape off what rust he could, reshine the interior, and refit the cogs as necessary. Then, once this was sufficiently done, he fitted it back together again. With a careful polish he had the brass device looking good as new. Another satisfactory piece completed, and there was the usual thrill of a job well done.

When the owner of the watch came to pick it up and pay the bill later that day, he was astonished.

“My God, it looks just like new! Are you sure it’s the same watch?”

Malcolm blushed a little, finding it difficult to meet the man’s gaze. He fiddled with his next project as he gave a quick, monotonous reply. “It’s the same, yes. I just gave it some polish.”

“You’ve done more than that, I’d say! You’ve made it brand spanking new! Tell your employer he does great work, then! And obviously your polish is excellent as a finish. How much do I owe you?”

Malcolm awkwardly took payment, again struggling to meet the man’s gaze. He didn’t have the heart nor the confidence to tell the customer that there was no employer, that the young, mid-twenties man with straw-coloured, wiry hair in front of him was the only repairman in the shop, and that he had been since he was nineteen when his previous employer had moved away and left him the use of the shop so long as he could pay the bills. Well, Malcolm had managed to do so since, though only just some months. Profit wasn’t really a major concern for him so much as the comfort the work brought. He had always been fascinated by watches, clocks, old automata of any kind, the more vintage the better. He loved taking such things apart and fixing them, and it was a wonderfully private life; he’d

never had a girlfriend or even had sex. Such possibilities made him far too nervous and stressed, whereas fixing up old devices like new gave his mind peace. The only issue was the customers. If there was a way to never interact with people again, then it would be far better for him, he reasoned. One on one was fine, but as soon as two people entered, or one with a lot of presence and unpredictable hand movements and facial gestures, it was like his brain was being overloaded. Yes, far better to work alone and enjoy his pastime.

Unfortunately for Malcolm, it was these very qualities that were about to attract a force from another world. He was just finishing up for the night with his own personal obsession - repairing a gorgeous phonograph to working condition - when out of nowhere a great crackling of energy sparked from the wall in front of him. He jolted to his feet, terrified as the wall appeared to open with a blue portal that vibrated with unnatural energy.

“What!?” he cried. “What is that!?”

The portal extended, howling with energy that sent sparks of lightning throughout the room. Malcolm screamed as hundreds of his tools and parts and current work was sucked up into the portal in a stream of metal and glass. He tried to pull himself back, but the power of the portal was only growing, and like a great eye it was trained upon him.

“Please! Someone help me! Please!”

But it was too late. The young man slid towards the portal, grabbing onto his desk and trying to use it to stop himself going in. His strength was miniscule, however, his frame lanky, and soon he was pulled into the strange magical opening, screaming for aid even as it closed.

And then he was gone from this world.

Flint Brassborn worked upon his masterpiece, excited that his dream was finally coming to life. The dwarf looked every part a fine noble in the city of Durin, what with his fine red and gold vest, his expensive breeches, and his proud manner. And, of course, being an older dwarf, he had a long grey beard with intricate braids that nearly touched the floor. The only thing that gave him away as more than a noble were the thick engineering gloves upon his hands as he worked, fine-tuning the large chamber in front of him and the beautiful automata within it.

“Soon, my sweet daughter,” he said in his husky voice, his eyes slightly wet with emotion and hope. “Soon, I shall give you life.”

The clockwork girl in the chamber did not respond, nor could she. Unlike the other automata and constructs within his large Durin estate, this one was special. Flint gestured for one of his regular golems to begin fitting the brass pipes through which electricity

generated from the windmills upon the roof would flow, and a large brass-plated being, far taller than the dwarf, loyally obeyed his commands. This was true of all the other 'life' in Flint's home. He was the last of his clan and had sired no children, nor did he have a wife to sire them with any longer. All his life had been devoted to artificery, with clockwork machinery being his greatest passion. In his early days, he had gained fame and fortune thanks to his inventions, crafting siege weapons that could vault explosives over city walls at far greater distances than any catapult, or battering rams that ran on their own, risking no soldier life. Many wars that might not have been launched had done so thanks to his inventions, and despite his initial glee at his success and growing wealth - like any good dwarf - he began to see the results of his work. It all came crashing down when an entirely futile war with the goblins began, and his entire family was taken from him. He had loved his wife dearly, and the hole in his heart there had never been filled again.

Since then, he had secluded himself further away, retiring to the multicultural city of Durin rather than a dwarven stronghold, and focused himself on making smaller mechanical items that could be used in daily life to help people. Clocks and watches were among his favourites, but there were many other inventions: mechanical wheelchairs for the injured, automated rising beds for the infirm, servant golems and clockwork maids to make life easier, and clever piping and power redirection for public heated baths. Over the years, Flint had become something of a beloved figure in the city, albeit an intensely private and clearly eccentric one. It was rare to see him venture out, but the creations flowed, and the people were happy.

Now, however, he had set aside that work for something different. A growing ache had risen within the old dwarf, a desperate need for company. For legacy. He was getting older, and while he still had many decades left as a dwarf, all members of his kind reached a time in their life when their Masterwork, whatever that may be, became its own calling. For the self-isolated and lonely Flint Brassborn, this Masterwork came in the form of something he had come to truly desire: a legacy. A child. A *daughter*. His wife had so wanted a daughter.

And so there was the clockwork woman before him, the product of years of research, artificery, and careful creation. A being of brass, copper, silver and steel in the shape of a human woman, with light skin-coloured fabric carefully affixed to her torso, feet, hands, and face. Said face had carefully crafted lips and ocean blue eyes, and the hairpiece was bought from the finest eastern merchants, leaving the figure with raven-black hair that fell to just below her chin. In Flint's eyes, she was beautiful, the perfect heir, and now it was time to give her life, and to give his own life meaning once more.

"Are the electrical connections secure?" he asked the nearest large golem.

The creature nodded, mute.

“Good. Then it’s time to complete my life’s work. It’s time for me to have a family again.”

With a great breath of nervous anticipation, Flint touched the glass that preserved the clockwork woman’s chamber when he wasn’t working on her, checking that the large winding key upon her back was still sufficiently wound up and ready to go. Her water measurements had been applied also, to help generate the steam necessary to aid her locomotion. After ascertaining that everything was fine, he checked a second time, then a third, and finally, after a great deal of silence, he then moved to the great lever in the centre of the room.

“Elaia,” he uttered to himself. “That is what I shall name you. That was what we wanted to call you, had you been born all those years ago.”

He pulled the lever. The electric coils cycled up, and the grand room of elegant brass and copper lit up in bright hues of blue and white, sparking with energy. The nobleman dwarf’s eyes bulged as he took in the sight: above the clockwork girl’s head opened a shimmering blue portal, one even he hadn’t expected to create. He had done so much research, paid adventurers to delve into the most hidden places, gained secrets of alchemy and divined the nature of soul creation. He knew what he was doing was radical, but the formula he had refined surely had the power to create a ‘like soul’ for his automata!

There was a great howl, a scream, and then, to Flint’s shock, numerous small devices and gadgets fell through the portal around the clockwork woman’s feet. He ran forward, terrified that her casing would be damaged, only to be knocked back as the portal screamed once more. He toppled, hitting his head on the lever and causing it to stop the process. The man tumbled to the floor, his vision going dark from the unexpected injury. He looked up just in time to see the clockwork woman’s head move . . .

Something was wrong. Something was so very wrong. Malcolm didn’t recognise his surroundings; it was like something out of a dream he’d had; an entire interior chamber like that of a brass and copper watch, elegantly fashioned into a grand room. Glass had shattered around him, and there was a short figure on the ground who looked short and stout. He was breathing but unconscious.

“Where am I?” Malcolm asked. “How did I get -”

He stopped, claspng his hands over his mouth. His voice - it sounded like a woman’s! Even weirder, like a woman’s through an old radio program or run through a vacuum cleaner. There was a metallic reverberation to it that was entirely unnatural.

“Unnatural,” he repeated, sampling that voice again. It was that of a young woman, perhaps just twenty years old or so, almost innocent in its sweetness. “Unnatural.”

He peered at his hands. Yes, very unnatural. They weren't his hands at all. In fact, the skin that should have been there was entirely nonexistent, replaced by pale, skin-coloured fabric that clung tight to the digits and palms. The arms, on the other hand, were entirely metallic, and almost beautiful steel and silver sheen, with small glass plating that revealed the shifting cogs and gears within. Upon his torso was the shape of a woman's chest, a solid bust that was likewise fake, lacking nipples entirely. Malcolm could feel the ticking and shifting of internal mechanisms, the tight strip unwinding within him, the heating and boiling of something that generated power in an altogether different way.

"I can't - it's a dream. I had to be dreaming."

Stepping forward, the changed figure almost tripped over. Not only was he shorter than he had been, but he no longer possessed muscles, just mechanisms. Something hissed from his back, and numerous clicks and whirs accompanied his movements. Hair fell against his face until he cleared it away, but his sensation of everything was so much duller, particularly the metal parts of himself.

"This can't be real. I was making watches. I was making watches, I was -"

He stopped, gazing to his side. There was a mirror on the wall, and he advanced towards it. He had to ignore the other clockwork creatures in the room, even the larger brass golems; his mind simply couldn't deal with that right now. Instead, his gaze was fixed entirely on his reflection; on the strangely beautiful and utterly artificial woman in front of him.

"That can't be . . . that's me?"

She was a clockwork human. A being of metal and glass, of rivets and cogs. The fabric that had been carefully attached to her face simulated the appearance of one perfectly, and it was thankfully fully articulated: her own wide-eyed shock in the mirror was clear. There was something slightly uncanny and clearly artificial about this woman, what with the visible seams upon her face and slightly choppy movements as she expressed herself, like camera footage that had been undercranked.

The rest of her form was similarly feminine and beautiful, but in an eerily ethereal way, all bells and whistles and unliving cogs and gears. She had no clothing, but her nudity meant little given that she had no private parts, but it certainly gave one a view of the delicate, slender body type she had. Her figure had a perfectly contoured hourglass, but it was not exaggerated: this was the image of a woman intended to be as much ballerina as beauty, and this was mirrored in her movements, which were utterly exact.

The only problem was that this woman, whoever she may be, was currently *Malcolm*.

"My God," she said in her sweet birdsong of a voice, that mechanical trill following it. "It is real. This isn't a dream."

He shifted to the side, examining more of his body. The poor man gasped at what he saw jutting out from between his shoulder blades: a large windup key, as if he truly were one

of the miniature ballerina dolls from a music body. It was ever so slowly winding away, and he could sense the power it was giving his body. He adjusted again, noticing the transparent glass that formed his elbows and kneecaps, and the sides of his hips; these showed water softly steaming away, producing movement in his limbs and core. It was, understandably, the most alien series of sensations Malcolm had ever felt. He had always adored clockwork, and so his mind was already forming connections, mapping how this new body worked.

“The steam and water keep the servos and shunts lubricated, and the windup strip is the equivalent of my heart . . .”

The clockwork man-turned-girl calmed, if only a little. Focusing on the details, on the mechanics, helped deal with the insanity of the situation. But he couldn't stay here.

“Need to get back. Need my body! I'm not meant to be here.”

He moved quickly - shockingly so, thanks to his new body - to try and get out of this place. It was like a fantasy palace or grand manor, filled with paintings of dwarven clans and images of great inventions. The stunning brasswork nearly made him pause several times, but a number of automatons, some of them with clock-like faces, were dispersed throughout the rooms, and some even talked in monotonous, non-sentient voices.

'Please return to the master's room.'

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They advanced towards him but made no move to use force, and so the confused man used his clockwork body to escape the manor, bursting out through the front doors and into a great curated garden, a number of copper golems snipping the bushes into perfect shapes. Malcolm darted past them and vaulted over the gate; he could barely believe he could just so high or land with such finesse! From there he emerged out into a great city, and the sight of him would have taken his breath away had he still possessed lungs.

It was a grand fantasy city, sloping down towards the sea. Upon a great cliff face was a huge set of towers that could only be the resident palace, while entire suburbs of medieval buildings and streets bustled with activity. Moving through them, eyes turned his way, though not so many to tell him that he was an utterly unusual sight.

“Another one malfunctioning!” someone muttered, and Malcolm gasped: it was a figure who appeared to have the visage of a dragon! Or at least a dragon-folk, of sorts. He was conversing with a gnome-like figure, while a classic fantasy orc served them beer.

“I'm not malfunctioning!” he cried, voice tinny. He was feeling a little exhausted. “I'm trying to get home! I need to get home!”

“To your master?” a woman called out. “Who do you belong to?”

“I don't belong to anyone! I'm not a golem! I'm not even a girl! Something's wrong with me!”

"I'd say so!" a succubus-looking woman said with a laugh.

But Malcolm was still in a panic. His limbs were starting to stiffen, his source of steam running out. His windkey was turning more slowly, and everything was becoming tiring, like he was about to enter a deep sleep.

"I don't understand, this can't be real," he said, voice becoming warbled, like the metal inside him was bending unnaturally. "This can't . . . be . . . real . . ."

His eyes began to close. Someone was yelling in the distance, calling out a name. It sounded oddly familiar, almost as if it was Malcolm's name, albeit one he'd never been called by.

"Elaia!" the husky voice cried. "Elaia!"

It was almost soothing to hear.

Flint felt terrible. How could he not have predicted a soul would panic like this upon creation? Foolish, foolish, foolish! This time, he had Elaia in a much more natural environment, one with gorgeous trees and a blue sky, but his golems were blocking the gates. He had initially thought about restraining her, but already he could see the life in her, just from her panic and confusion hours ago on the street. No, he couldn't do that to his daughter. Seeing that face animated, the way her movements were so elegant and feminine, he knew he'd succeeded. And now, he had to be a *father*.

Slowly but surely, Flint Brassborn wound up Elaia's keep. He'd already refilled her with water, and this time used the full amount, and also turned the key fully. She'd have more energy this time, and he'd have time to explain. Slowly, her eyes opened, the steel eyelids rising up and concealing themselves behind her fabric face. For a solid minute, she couldn't talk. Instead, she sprung to her feet, touching her mechanical mouth beneath the skin-coloured fabric, and looking about as if under attack. It was only when Flint managed to soothe her by his words ("I mean no harm! Please sit and I shall explain all, your voice will return soon!") that she sat back down again, by which point her steam production had got going, allowing her voice to work.

"What?" she said. "Where am I? Was it a - oh God! It's you! Where am I?"

"Hush, child. You're in my garden. I thought this might be a better place to awaken you, my dearest Elaia."

"Elaia? That's not . . . why does that name sound familiar? Why do I have a fake body? Where is my heart and my lungs?"

Her voice was fearful, and she could barely look at him. It made Flint's heart ache. She held up her hands and looked at them, moving them deliberately.

“What have you done with me?”

She was seated upon one of the calm benches, the one before the ember tree he liked to watch in bloom to centre his thoughts. He stood besides her, his dwarven nature making them even in height.

“The name sounds familiar because it *is* your name, Elaia. And you do not have a ‘fake’ body, simply an . . . artificial one. Made from the greatest artificery I have ever summoned. You have a heart, of sorts. It simply pumps steam throughout your body, instead of blood. And consider your wind-up nature to be like your lungs: you must keep doing it, or else you will fall unconscious, in a sense.” He slapped his forehead. “Oh, where are my manners! I should introduce myself, especially as you are my creation, my child. I am Flint Brassborn, sole remaining member of the Brassborn Clan. You are in the grand coastal city of Durin. I know all of this is a shock, but you are the work of many, many years, Elaia. I have worked with the greatest researchers, delved the deepest puzzles, in order to find and forge a like soul to place within the body I have made for you. I . . . I have worked so many years to make a daughter, and I truly hope that you are her.”

It was at this point that the clockwork girl’s metallic eyebrows rose, her artificial eyes going wide. “D-daughter? Created? I’m not Elaia, even if the name sounds familiar. I am Malcolm! I don’t know what Durin is, but it’s clearly not my world! You need to get me back to my world! I’m human there! I’m a human *man!*”

Flint, who had felt things were going well, suddenly stalled. He’d had grand plans for the day: a tour through his garden as he talked about himself and his life, a series of questions to get a sense of how much knowledge Elaia had, what was innate and what needed to be introduced to her. He would speak to her as a father would, imbuing her with a sense of self worth and projecting fatherly life, and inspiring curiosity about not only her new existence but existence everywhere! Instead, with this new revelation, there was only one reaction he could give.

“I’m sorry, *what!?*”

The story took a long time to explain. The dwarf - and it seemed he really *was* a fantasy dwarf - walked Malcolm/Elaia through his magnificent gardens as the new clockwork girl told it. In his usual way of interacting with people there was a great deal of awkwardness: Malcolm veered off into unnecessary and in-depth explanations of his school grades, how he’d lost his parents, the way his former employer had left him in charge of the store, and then dived deep into discussing the minutiae of clock repair work and his own grand project to repair an old phonograph and then make his own replica.

“Your *Masterworm*,” Flint said, though Malcolm kept calling him ‘Mr Brassborn’ as if he were a customer.

“I guess so?” Malcolm said. “Is that a dwarven thing?”

“You’ve never heard of a dwarven Masterwork before?”

“Well, my world doesn’t have dwarves. Well, it has little people-”

“Halflings? Gnomes?”

“No, just people who are . . . little. I’m explaining this poorly. I’m . . . not good with people. I never have been. I just liked repairing and making things and working with cogs and gears. And now I *am* cogs and gears!”

His movements became jerky and unnatural, almost a little panicky. The only thing he was thankful for was the clothing he had now been dressed in, though it was far too feminine still: a purple dress with a brass clap over one shoulder. It fell to his ankles, but there was a hole at the back for his large windup key. His arms were bare, their glass and steel and brass construction obvious to anyone.

“Now I’m cogs and gears,” he repeated. “It’s amazing, and so very wrong!”

Flint Brassborn stroked his braided grey beard as he considered this.

“I think I know what happened,” he said. “By the Gods - Gods, plural, on this plane of existence, my girl - but it’s so obvious! Creating a soul may not be possible after all, at least without the lurid nature of biological reproduction! But when I tried to forge a ‘like’ soul, my alchemy and artificery tore a hole into your plane and snatched you up. Your soul must have been very much attuned to my own, Elaia.”

Malcolm/Elaia sighed, or at least tried to. She could produce the sound, but not the sensation. So much of her feeling was quite dull, except around the fabric-covered parts of her body, and even then it was . . . different. Her internal pistons chugged away, and there was an elegance to that, but it scared her.

“What do you mean, attuned?”

Flint actually smiled. “Isn’t it obvious? From all that you’ve told me, you and I share a great deal! We are both lonesome by nature, and we have both lost our families! We both have a great passion for creation and repair, and specifically with artificery! Cogs and gears, just like you said! And, to be perfectly frank, I don’t think either of us are particularly, well, *good* at being social. One on one, I can do, and it seems you can too, but I can barely meet the eyes of a crowd. Can you?”

Malcolm didn’t shiver anymore, but his body did *vibrate* somewhat, purely from the nervousness.

“I - well - just imagining it makes me nervous. I liked my shop, but didn’t like customers. I always feel like I say the wrong thing, or miss a clue of what someone is saying.”

“It is the same for me, my girl!”

Elaia crossed her arms, the whirl of her movements was something she was still getting used to, let alone the audible *clink* of metal touching metal.

“I’m not a girl! I told you, I’m a man. I have been a man all my life!”

“But you said ‘Elaia’ felt familiar and right for you?”

She clenched her fists, that dull feeling between her fingers continually frustrating. Her key wound a little faster, as if her frustration alone was using up energy. Goodness knows, her water was boiling faster.

“It does, but only because of that alchemy you used! I start to think of myself as female and have to stop! Look, I just want to repair clocks in peace - you need to send me back!”

Flint Brassborn paused, scratching his beard. “I would rather you stay. I didn’t mean to infuse your soul into Elaia, but you are her now, are you not? And you have not seen this world, or what I can give you! Please, all I have wanted these past years is a daughter, can’t you try being Elaia for just a few weeks? It would take me that time to repair my chamber and try - and it would be a gamble - to send you back anyway!”

Elaia thought about this. She gazed down at her form - how strange to not only be a mechanical being, but have the shape of a woman! The breasts alone were a dead giveaway. She - *he*, he thought, shifting his gender identity back against the grain - was just glad they didn’t bounce or wobble. *That* would be far too much.

They had reached the interior of Flint’s home by this point, the grand entrance hall staffed by golems and constructs that were of his own design. Even Malcolm could see how much more inferior they were to his own design, though. They lacked the supreme elegance of his clockwork body, the surface finish, the detailed expressions, the precision and care that had been poured into his body.

“I . . . suppose I have no choice,” he admitted.

“You make it sound like I kidnapped you,” Flint replied.

“You sort of did, even if accidentally.”

Flint placed a hand on the fabric of Malcolm’s shoulder. “I am sorry about this, truly I am. I just . . . I just ask that you try. I promise I will take care of you, Elaia-”

“Malcolm.”

“I know, but here you are Elaia, are you not? Please, just give me the chance to at least show you the life you could have, and what a father I could be! Besides, all my workshops will be available to you, to tinker as you desire! Not to mention you can study your own body and get a better sense of how you work.”

Malcolm/Elaia was about to try and voice his frustrations again, but something in Flint’s words piqued his/her interest.

“Did you just say workshops? As in, workshops plural?”

Flint did everything he could to try and make Elaia comfortable and blessed over the coming days. It was very difficult: she was from another world, not just a human one but one in which she was a man! He could well understand that she would be made uncomfortable in her new existence, so he tried to prioritise everything that would lighten up her curiosity, while also giving her the space she needed. After giving her a proper tour of his immense mansion and its numerous workshop basements, he found himself answering a slew of questions. Fitting for one with a similar one-track mind to him, they were not at all about the wider world as he expected, but instead the particular aspects of artificery.

“And how is this different from working as a mechanist or repairman?”

“Do the guards and golems have souls or magic to make them work, or are they purely clockwork?”

“Is gold more plentiful here? It’s a great conductor of electricity so I imagine it would be necessary in your line of work?”

“Why do your clocks go to thirteen instead of twelve? Wait, what does this implement do?”

It was like looking at a young version of himself, in spirit if not in appearance. Despite knowing he had to be cautious with his feelings, it was hard not to be flooded with a warm fatherly affection for Elaia, particularly when her questions turned to her own body. He gave rigorous instructions over the next few days, teaching her how to maintain her body, and despite the sheer plethora of information he had to impart, she rarely forgot a single thing.

“Your windup key keeps your body running. It is the most crucial component, as it compresses the main spring. This powers all the mechanics of your body, including your power to move and think.”

“And the steam? Am I correct in guessing that this connects to some kind of bladderbag or soft fake organ that allows me to mimicry sound?”

“Very good! Though it’s more of a series of glasswork imitations rather than a ‘bladderbag’ as you put it. Think of how you can make sound by running your fingers along the edges of a wine glasses filled with various amounts of liquid.”

“But I need to keep the water filled?”

“Yes!” Flint said excitedly, “and it will be affected by how much you speak as well as some of the more delicate movements - the process also lubricated the ball bearings that form the joints of your limbs.”

“I knew it!” Malcolm said, unusually loudly, filling with excitement himself. “So the more precision I try to use, the more I must fill the water. And if I think too much or use too much energy?”

“Then the windup becomes necessary sooner than later. If you were just to sit there and think, you could last at least five days, I imagine. But with movement, windup will be necessary at least once a day, as you’ve found already. Or more with heavy burdens.”

“Fascinating,” Elaia said. “May I - I mean, while I’m stuck here - may I test the limits?”

Nothing could have made Flint happier. “I shall set up some tests for you tomorrow, if you like? I could . . . I could even show you your blueprints. Who knows? If you learn enough while here, or choose to stay, *you* could make your own body a Masterwork and improve beyond my design.”

At this, Elaia looked down at the floor, and it was clear she was trying not to smile.

“I suppose I could at least try. It would at least inspire me when I get back.”

Flint tried not to look too crestfallen. He was indeed working on ways to get Elaia’s soul back, but chronurgy was a difficult art; he needed to return the soul to the moment in that other plane when it was stolen. Otherwise the soul would bounce off a now-dead body! Still, he wanted to hope she would stay. It had only been a few days . . . things could change.

Malcolm was *fascinated* by it all. It was almost hard to cling onto the sense of anger and feelings of wrongness in the wake of all he (or she?) was discovering and researching. This truly was a fantasy world, one with dragons, elves, mighty fallen civilisations and true magic. But best of all - and this said a lot about the kind of person Malcolm was - there was *clockwork. Mechanics. Artificery* beyond anything he could possibly have dreamed of. Sure, he missed his fleshy body, but there was also something uniquely strange and wonderful about literally *becoming* the kind of tinkerer’s creation he’d always idly dreamed about. Some kids wanted to be dragons, others wanted to be clockwork people, he supposed, though becoming an obviously *female* one, voice and movements and slightly swaying hips and all, was the source of a bit more embarrassment.

Over the course of his first week and a half as a clockwork girl, Malcolm became increasingly confident and practised in not just his artificial body, but his own maintenance of it. He could wind up his own key thanks to the way he could bend his limbs more than any real human, but it was so much nicer to have someone else do it, for some reason. To that end, he often asked the various golems and artificial servants in the Brassborn household to

attend to that need, and they obeyed his commands, what with the girl having been giving command over them thanks to Flint.

“Mhmmmm,” she murmured, each time her key was wound up. “Ahhhh, that’s . . . that feels rather nice.”

It wasn’t like sexual pleasure in any degree, though it certainly was pleasurable. Rather, it was more akin to receiving a really lovely massage. The sensation of having her joints and cogs and gears all re-energised thanks to her mainspring being rewound was soothing as hell. In fact, it actually did what massage promised to do but didn’t always achieve: it literally gave her energy and a sensation of wellness again.

Of course, there were downsides to the process. With all the energy she - no, *he*, he had to keep reminding himself of that particular fact - put into learning and exploring and obsessing over mechanical minutiae, the mainspring at the core of Malcolm’s clockwork body wound down more rapidly than it otherwise would have. The result of this was, surprisingly, not unlike what it felt like to be at the end of one’s rope after a long day: Malcolm became tired, had difficulty thinking, and motion became a struggle. He found himself resting against things (for some reason, leather couches specifically seemed comfortable to his form) or even falling ‘asleep’ at his desk.

“You have to be careful!” Flint said, his voice agitated as if he really was a concerned father. “Elaia, you can’t let your key wind down while tucked away in the cog sheds looking for the perfect fitting?”

“Why not?” Malcolm responded, as if the question made no sense. “I had to find the right cog. Sizing is important.”

Flint placed his hand upon his forehead, running it over his grey hairs.

“Elaia, I was worried sick about you! I was looking all around the manor, I had the entire clockwork staff on high alert. I was thinking of even committing a godsdamned crime by recalling all my servant creations from the city and sending them in a stream here! I didn’t find you for eight hours!”

Malcolm looked at the ground, his standard reaction to such awkwardness.

“S-sorry,” he said, his voice fragile and feminine, that same mechanical trill following it. “I didn’t realise . . . you would do all that for me?”

Flint’s facial expression warmed. “Of course I would, Elaia. I’d do anything for you. Even if you choose to return, I would never dare let anything or anyone injure you.”

“But . . . you would have been in trouble if you’d recalled all those servant creations from the city?”

“Bah!” he said, sweeping a hand aside as if it meant nothing. “It’s nothing. I put you here. You are my responsibility, and I couldn’t bear . . .”

Tears actually formed in his eyes, and this too startled Malcolm. What was even more startling was when the man actually hugged him, for the first time. The sensation was surprisingly . . . warming. In fact, the water in his system produced more steam than usual. Slowly, without quite knowing why, Malcolm closed his arms around the smaller dwarven figure, lowering from his height to be even with the dwarf.

“It’s okay,” he said. “I’ll be more responsible.”

“Thank you . . . Malcolm,” Flint said, getting control of his breath again. It was the first time he had called the clockwork girl by his actual name. And yet, for some reason, it sounded . . . wrong.

“Actually,” the construct said, recognising her dawning femininity, “I think it’s okay if you call me Elaia. I’m a clockwork girl while I’m here, aren’t I?”

From the way Flint held her tighter, she got the sense she’d said the right thing. Words could be miscommunicated, expressions too, but a hug? Even for Elaia, that was easy.

Elaia was rather nervous. It was going to be her first true outing into the city of Durin, not counting her escapade when she’d first been shunted into her new body. To that end, she was fussing over her appearance as if she’d been a woman all her life, playing with her hair as if it wasn’t entirely static in appearance, and trying on different kinds of clothing made available to her, courtesy of Flint’s riches. Given the metallic sheen of her body, as well as its brass and copper aspects, she had found that she rather liked blue as a colour. It matched her new eyes as well, and while she had never really had a good aesthetic of what was handsome or pretty or attractive, being quite the recluse, her sense of aesthetic when it came to *clockwork* was impeccable.

“If I might be so bold, Elaia,” Flint said, making sure to get approval to come in after knocking, “you really are taking the part of the young woman in how you fret over your appearance.”

Elaia chuckled nervously. She didn’t really have a nakedness to conceal, but she felt a need to conceal it anyway, and was glad for Brassborn’s courtesy in knocking.

“It’s very strange. I didn’t much care about my appearance before, and didn’t understand anyone’s obsession for it. But now I want to treat myself like a Rolex watch!”

“I assume that’s an expensive device.”

“Very! Does . . . does this dress look good?”

She turned in it, the three-panel mirror showing her from all sides, including the large metal windup key. The blue dress swished around her metallic ankles, but she could barely

feel it. Around her simulated bust and stomach, where a stylish belt was located, *that* she could feel. It was strangely comfortable, and she had to admit she looked like a perfect display item in it.

“Elaia, you look simply beautiful,” Flint said. “As remarkable as any daughter I could wish to have. Er, if you don’t mind me saying. I know you’re not really my daughter, but an old man can always dare to dream.”

Elaia could not blush, but the steam in her system boiled a little more quickly. She reached over to a small jug, popped a hatch in her elbow, and filled herself up.

“It’s quite alright. I have to present as such when we go out anyway. Would you . . . would you mind winding up my key? I want to feel energetic when I go out.”

Flint was more than happy to. In some ways, perhaps it was like a parent helping make last second adjustments for their children, as a calming exercise. He carefully wound her up, and she purred a little.

“It’s very calming,” she noted, and it truly was. “Was that an intentional part of the design?”

“No,” he admitted, “but I’m glad you feel it so. There are many things I didn’t intend, but I hope they work out alright anyway.”

The meaning of his words skipped past Elaia’s more literal mind completely.

“I feel much more energetic now. I was thinking we could use a dual spring coil design, actually, to ease the tension on the mainspring. It could give me a ‘back up’ supply of energy, of sorts, and work in emergencies if my mainspring is damaged.”

Flint paused. “By the Gods, that’s incredible. But would it fit in your chest?”

Again, that embarrassment could have made Elaia red, were it not for her design. “Well, the bust would have to be bigger, but yes, I think it can be done.”

“Ah, to have such a brilliant daughter! If you stay for merely another week, I will have considered this whole experience worthwhile, Elaia! You are utterly brilliant! Consider me proud!”

Elaia had no real lips to bite, but she simulated the movement anyway. Her key wound a little faster.

Elaia moved with unbelievable grace this time, exiting Flint’s manor alongside him, her arm looped through his like a dutiful daughter. Her hair was complemented by a small piece of jewellery that had the Brassborn sigil upon it, a hammer striking an anvil in classical dwarven fashion, with a cog forming the outside shape. Even from a distance, her mechanical nature was obvious; her motion was simultaneously eerily smooth yet also somewhat unnatural,

though the more energy and steam she used the more of an undercranked appearance she would evoke.

“How are you going, my dear?” Flint asked as she clung a little tighter to his arm.

“I’m - I’m fine,” she said, looking at the cobblestone road rather than what was ahead. She could feel the eyes of numerous Durin citizens watching her as if she were a curiosity. Some were lionfolk, one appeared to be a humanoid lizard, while others had the aspect of humans, albeit with a mix of halflings and dwarves among them. Flint kept a confident smile, moving throughout the city and giving his clockwork daughter the tour.

“Would it help if I kept talking? I could list the names of various places of interest and their histories? We could talk about locations, rather than thinking about the people.”

It was like the dwarf had read Elaia’s mind. Even with greater confidence in her artificial body and fully wound up key, she couldn’t help but feel utterly flummoxed by the sheer mass of people of all kinds of races who moved and darted around her.

“That would be most helpful,” she whispered, tapping her fingers on the steel of her leg and feeling the dull sensation there. “Please, I would like to hear it.”

“Well, up over the cliff face there is the Palace of Durin, but it isn’t home to a King or Prince, nor even a Queen. In fact, the council of the city is locally elected, ever since the Great Social War one hundred and fifty years ago. There are museums and courtrooms there as well, using up all that space. On the other end of the bay you can see the Lighthouse of Zun. She is our sun god. I don’t particularly worship her, but others do, and a holy fire remains forever lit to guide sailors through darkness. Speaking off, there are the four dockyards spread across our shoreline down the hillside. See the largest one? That’s the Amaranth Docks, named for, believe it or not, the most famous rogue and cat burglar in Durin history, though a renowned beauty was she. She used the docks as a haunting ground, of sorts, giving money away to local sailors as an act of rebellions. You can imagine why they named the dock after her? Ah, and there is the Kingdom of Kogs. You’ll rather like that one: it’s where I get my supplies. It has more watches in than any other place on the continent, and-”

Even as a sapient automaton, Elaia’s eyes could go wide. She pointed out it, excitement clear upon her face. “I want to go there!” she announced. “Please, can we go? The other places sound fascinating, but that sounds extraordinary.”

Flint chuckled. “We truly are like souls. I can see why yours came to me in this realm once I started my ritual. All the wonders of the world and it is the tinkerer’s workshop that calls to you the most!”

Elaia actually *grinned*, giving a sheepish expression. She shrugged a little, her clockwork mechanisms whining. “If I don’t get to see it, I think all my nervous energy will cause me to have need of a windup anyway!”

Flint laughed. "Well, let's take the long route. I'll show the markets and the Ethereal House, a great little traveller's locale, and get you accustomed to the geography of the city, and then we'll come to the Kingdom of Kogs."

He laughed, held out his arm, and once more Elaia took it, finding comfort in it. And the strange thing was, that comfort extended to her feelings about her surroundings. Durin was an excitable city, not nearly so populated as her home city on Earth, but far more chaotic in its numerous fantasy races, its magical taverns, the stampede of city guard responding to some local crisis, and so forth. Elaia had enjoyed fantasy in the past, but that was a far cry from being immersed within it. She had the sense that the sensory overload would have had her holding her head and hiding herself away where she still her old self. But some combination of the fortitude of her new body and Flint's fatherly presence gave her the presence of mind to actually start enjoying her surroundings. In the end, they spent well over an hour walking around just a fraction of the city before bending back around to see the Kingdom of Kogs, and she considered it more than worthwhile. A number of individuals recognised Flint, calling him 'Lord Brassborn' due to his noble title, and a number of queries went in her direction too. She had been prepared to act like a regular automaton, but Flint instead spoke about her with pride.

"Oh no, she is no mere construct," he said, gesturing to her sleek form. "This is my Masterwork, my greatest invention, and already the dearest possible person to my heart. This is my daughter, Elaia."

The human trader named Garvis that they were chatting to had to blink a few times and take that in, clearly expecting this to initially be some kind of joke.

"Wait, are you serious, Flint?"

"More than serious. Say hello, Elaia. Garvis, meet Elaia. She has a real soul, a true heart, even if it is a mechanical one."

Cautiously, Elaia bowed. "Um, hello? Sorry, I'm not very good at introductions. I'm still getting very used to this."

Garvis' jaw dropped. "You are serious. Are you telling me that you were born yesterday?"

Elaia chuckled awkwardly, her cogs grinding for a moment from the tension. "Oh, no! I am twenty three years old. My soul was summoned into this form from another plane of existence."

More blinks, and this time it was Flint grinning sheepishly.

"Well, um, how are you liking it so far?"

Elaia examined her own arm, felt the inner workings of her cogs, the twisting of her key and the boiling of steam within her.

“I was quite scared at first. I no longer had flesh and blood, and everything about me was like a watch. And yet . . . I think I’m rather coming to like it. It is so fascinating to be made of the very things I loved to study. Also, I keep thinking of ways to improve myself, such as streamlining the steam piping flow and using steel-flaps to regulate the flow more cleanly, rather than simply relying on larger water supplies. And that’s not even getting into-”

Garvis burst out laughing, and actually slapped Elaia on the shoulder, briefly confusing her as to this strangely hostile action.

“Well, I definitely believe you now, Flint! Not to mention that she’s your daughter, wherever she may have come from originally. She’s got your spark, alright, and your brains, and your *obsession* with tinkering, ha!”

They parted from Garbis, having purchased a crate of fine fruit that Flint favoured. While it looked delicious, Elaia didn’t actually have a hunger or thirst anymore, but she could appreciate the aesthetics of food.

“Perhaps I shall develop a way to taste again?” she suggested.

“Perhaps, if you are willing to give this life of yours some further time,” Flint suggested.

She fell silent. Her key was turning a little quicker as a result of her carrying a heavy load. Her body was much stronger than even a fit human male’s, and that was quite exciting, but it also used up her energy faster. She’d need her ‘father’ to wind her up again at some point, though her water was in good quantity for now.

“Did I say something wrong, before?” Elaia asked, her mainspring turning just that little bit faster.

“About what, my dear daughter?”

They moved out of the markets towards the Kingdom of Kogs, and a few more faces turned her way in interest.

“When I spoke at length about fixing myself up, and how much I liked this body. I felt like I was saying all the wrong things. I often embarrass people like that. My employer used to find it annoying. I always try to talk to others and then I go down some rabbithole without thinking. I think on some level, I was always a mechanical being before I actually became one.”

Flint paused and took her by the shoulders.

“Elaia, whatever you decided, whether you want to be my daughter or not, whether you choose to stay or not, I want you to know that *you did nothing wrong*. Not everyone understands people like us. Not everyone can, or sadly wants to. But one thing Garvis definitely knows now is your passion and your love of creativity and learning, and that is exactly the kind of person I always imagined my daughter to be, even if you are so different in many other ways than I could have imagined. And so much better, too.”

Elaia could not blush, but she could boil steam at a faster rate. Hell, for just a moment, it was almost like her cogs clicked against one another, jamming for a brief second in imitation of a skipped heartbeat.

“Th-thank you, Flint,” she said. “No one has ever talked to me like that before.”

It was at this moment that a young little dragonkin girl stepped shyly towards her, moving away from her mother nearby.

“Are you a real lady?” she asked nervously.

“I am,” Elaia said, and found a weird sense of pride in the mechanical and feminine nature of her voice. “My name is Elaia. What is yours?”

“I’m Kryee. You’re very pretty.”

More steam boiled. “Thank you very much, Kryee. You are pretty too.”

The girl, clearly thrilled at this, jumped on her feet. “Can I wind you up? With the key on your back?”

Elaia looked to Flint, who shrugged. “Your choice, my dear.”

But Elaia already knew the answer. If there was one demographic she could understand, it was children. They had a singular passion that could barely be swayed, just like her.

“I’d be more than happy for you to do so, Kyree.”

By the time they arrived back, Elaia was carrying several enormous crates of cogs, gears, tools, parts, a foldable table, and numerous other gadgets and gizmos from the Kingdom of Kogs. She had been there so long, in fact, that a small crowd had actually entered to see her in action, not that she noticed them much. Instead, Flint beamed with pride, observing his strange, wonderful would-be daughter obsessing over the possibilities of creation, having to sit down occasionally just to refill her steam or get her key wound up. In fact, eventually some members of the crowd volunteered to help her with that, and she sighed from relief as her energy was returned to her each time. The gnomish owners had been fascinated by her, but while Elaia was initially excited to be talking to them about artificery and its possibilities, it quickly became obvious that their interest in her was more as an object than a person, though it took her an embarrassingly long time to clue into this.

“I’m sorry about that,” Flint said as she placed down the heavy crates. With her permission, he wound her key again. It was unnecessary, but he knew it calmed her. “There are going to be some people who find you to be a person, but others who treat you as . . . different.”

Elaia nodded slowly, her gears clicking. “Yes, I’m aware. But . . . it’s not too much different from my own world, I suppose. And at least my differences are *fascinating*, right?”

“Very fascinating, my daughter. If I may still call you that.”

Elaia gave a light shrug, looking over to the crates again. “We purchased so much. It’s your money, I didn’t thi-

Flint waved a hand. “It’s alright. I am rich, as you might recall. Besides, I wanted you to have your own workshop. One for you to design as you wish.”

Elaia dropped the last crate she was handling. “My own workshop? My very own? Do you mean it?”

The dwarven man chuckled. “Of course! A grand artificer must have their own space to create and craft and forge their Masterwork. You are mine, dear Elaia, but already I know you will far exceed me in whatever you decide to create. But to do that, you need a space to call your own. That is, of course, if you choose to stay.”

Elaia frowned. She awkwardly ran her fabric-covered digits over the metal of her arm, the dull yet still present sensations so different from her human body. In so many ways, she had become a more pure person, at least by her strange standards. She was literally made of the hobby she so deeply loved, and the sensation of her cogs and mainspring turning and winding gave her a calm within her form that she had never felt as a man. But did she want to stay like this? Could she live as a clockwork daughter in this bizarre fantasy world?

Part of her knew that she could. It wasn’t like the world was so strange compared to her old one, anyway. In fact, she already felt like this one made more sense: it respected artificery, and such power could literally bring life and joy! And where she had been lanky and uncoordinated before, in this body and world she could move with a beautiful elegance, capturing the interest of others and letting them start the conversations, but also withdrawing here to the manor when she wanted her humble privacy.

“If I were to stay,” the clockwork girl said. “What would my life be like?”

Flint furrowed his brow, not daring quite yet to find hope in Elaia’s words. “Well, I suppose it would be with me, of course, here in our home. You would be my heir - I could even have the contract written up for you to inherit everything I own when I eventually pass, though that should not be for a century or so yet, ha!”

Elaia slid her fingers over the glass ports of her elbows, tapping at the steel and copper and brass further along. The craftsmanship was exquisite, and yet . . .

“I would want to change myself. I already have ideas for what could be improved. I could also leave a mark on my body: change my hair, my clothing, perhaps even . . .”

She held back from saying a ‘bigger bust.’ That was much too embarrassing, even if it did come from a new, and rather womanly, desire. She would keep such thoughts secret for now.

“Of course!” Flint said, becoming excited, so much so that he nearly tripped on his long grey beard. “It would be like . . . well, not puberty. But a sort of, er, coming into yourself! Finding yourself! A sort of self-actualisation. Not to mention some of your brilliant ideas of improving efficiency.”

Elaia grinned, even giggling a little at the man’s awkwardness. It occurred to her it was almost like laughing at a father’s amusing habits.

“Thank you, f-Flint. But I just don’t know if that would be enough.”

The excitement that had built up inside Flint now became crestfallen. His dwarven shoulders sagged. “I understand. I was a fool to think I could make a soul from another life into my daughter. You surprised me so much, becoming more than I could have ever dreamed of, but in that way, I suppose, is the lesson. I would not be a good father if I kept you caged in a body that is not yours.”

He gestured to the stairs on the right that led down to the workshop, the one in which the chamber that had ‘birthed’ her into her new life lay. He walked down the steps, and she followed him, her movements ballerina-perfect as her key wound upon her back.

“I should have told you straight away, but I wanted you to see the beauty of Durin, and to be a proud father in public, just once. Just once.”

The dwarf gestured to the chamber, which had been reconfigured with even more coils and great steampipes.

“I have done what I can, but I believe I can send you back, Elaia. You can become Malcolm again, as you deserve. All you have to do is step up into the chamber, and I can connect you to the coils, and then I simply pull this lever here.”

Elaia took in the chamber. She had no true heart, no true brain, but the segments of her mechanical mind whirred and ticked, boiling steam through her piping. So many thoughts swept through her: regret, sadness, joy, nostalgia . . . hope.

“Flint, I-”

“Before you go,” he interjected. “I just want to thank you. All my years of work were worth it, just for this day where I could take my daughter for a stroll. Your excitement, your passion, they are more than what I could have hoped for.”

Elaia knelt down to be even to the dwarf. She wasn’t the best at reading people, but she knew when a hug had to be developed. She gripped him tightly, though not too much so given her strength, and she felt his tears slide down her brass and steel frame.

“Thank you,” he repeated.

But Elaia pulled back, a serene smile upon her face. “No, thank you, *father*. Because thanks to you, I finally realise I don’t want to go back. I want to stay here, as your daughter.”

“You - you do!?”

She nodded. There were no waterworks, but perhaps she could add a water secretion tubing under each artificial eye in the future to better simulate the emotion?

“Yes, I do.”

“But you said it wasn’t enough!”

“Because I want to see more of this world, father, with you. And I want to build more. And I don’t want to be the only one of my kind, either. The artificery you used upon me, could it not be used for others? Could we not fine tune it, and create more intelligent golems, or caring maids, or - or if I ever want one, a child of my own?”

Flint swallowed. “That knowledge was beyond even my ability to find. I would not want to rip another soul from another plane.”

“But that’s where I come in! We can travel together. Father and daughter. That would give us a better chance to find this hidden power, wouldn’t it?”

Slowly, Flint began to nod. “Aye, that it would. It would indeed, my daughter!”

Elaia embraced him again, and this time, even if she could weep tears of joy, it was easy to imagine them anyway.

“Thank you, father,” she said again.

It was the sweetest sound that Flint Brassborn had ever known.

“Now, would you mind winding me up? I seem to have lost a lot of energy in all of this enthusiasm!”

The End