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Clockwork Angel

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I

THE DARK HOUSE

*Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade*
—William Ernest Henley, “Invictus”

“The Sisters would like to see you in their chambers, Miss Gray.”

Tessa set the book she had been reading down on the bedside table, and turned to see Miranda standing in the doorway of her small room—just as she did at this time every day, delivering the same message she delivered every day. In a moment Tessa would ask her to wait in the corridor, and Miranda would leave the room. Ten minutes later she’d return and say the same thing again. If Tessa didn’t come obediently after a few of these attempts, Miranda would seize her and drag her, kicking and screaming, down the stairs to the hot, stinking room where the Dark Sisters waited.

It had happened every day of the first week that Tessa had been in the Dark House, as she had come to call the place they kept her prisoner, until eventually Tessa had realized that the screaming and kicking didn't do much good and simply wasted her energy. Energy that was probably better saved for other things.

"One moment, Miranda," Tessa said. The maid bobbed an awkward curtsy and went out of the room, shutting the door behind her.

Tessa rose to her feet, glancing around the small room that had been her prison cell for six weeks. It was small, with flowered wallpaper, and sparsely furnished—a plain deal table with a white lace cloth over it where she ate her meals; the narrow brass bed where she slept; the cracked washstand and porcelain jug for her ablutions; the windowsill where she stacked her books, and the small chair where she sat each night and wrote letters to her brother—letters she knew she could never send, letters she kept hidden under her mattress where the Dark Sisters would not find them. It was her way of keeping a diary and of assuring herself, somehow, that she would see Nate again someday and be able to give them to him.

She crossed the room to the mirror that hung against the far wall, and smoothed down her hair. The Dark Sisters, as they in fact seemed to wish to be called, preferred her not to look messy, although they didn't appear to mind her appearance one way or the other past that—which was fortunate, because her reflection made her wince. There was the pale oval of her face dominated by hollow gray eyes—a shadowed face without color in its cheeks or hope in its expression. She wore the unflattering black schoolmarmish dress that the Sisters

had given her once she'd arrived; her trunk had never followed her, despite their promises, and this was now the only piece of clothing she owned. She looked away quickly.

She hadn't always flinched from her reflection. Nate, with his fair good looks, was the one in the family generally agreed to have inherited her mother's beauty, but Tessa had always been perfectly content with her own smooth brown hair and steady gray eyes. Jane Eyre had had brown hair, and plenty of other heroines besides. And it wasn't so bad being tall, either—taller than most of the boys her own age, it was true, but Aunt Harriet had always said that as long as a tall woman carried herself well, she would forever look regal.

She didn't look regal now, though. She looked pinched and bedraggled and altogether like a frightened scarecrow. She wondered if Nate would even recognize her if he saw her today.

At that thought her heart seemed to shrink inside her chest. *Nate*. He was the one she was doing all this for, but sometimes she missed him so much it felt like she'd swallowed broken glass. Without him, she was completely alone in the world. There was no one at all for her. No one in the world who cared whether she lived or died. Sometimes the horror of that thought threatened to overwhelm her and plunge her down into a bottomless darkness from which there would be no return. If no one in the entire world cared about you, did you really exist at all?

The click of the lock cut her thoughts off abruptly. The door opened; Miranda stood on the threshold.

"It is time to come with me now," she said. "Mrs. Black and Mrs. Dark are waiting."

Tessa looked at her in distaste. She couldn't guess how old

Miranda was. Nineteen? Twenty-five? There was something ageless about her smooth round face. Her hair was the color of ditch water, pulled back harshly behind her ears. Exactly like the Dark Sisters' coachman, she had eyes that protruded like a frog's and made her look like she was permanently surprised. Tessa thought they must be related.

As they went downstairs together, Miranda marching along with her graceless, clipped gait, Tessa raised her hand to touch the chain around her throat where the clockwork angel hung. It was habit—something she did each time she was forced to see the Dark Sisters. Somehow the feel of the pendant around her neck reassured her. She kept hold of it as they passed landing after landing. There were several levels of corridors to the Dark House, though Tessa had seen nothing of it but the Dark Sisters' chambers, the halls and stairs, and her own room. Finally they reached the shadowed cellar. It was dank down here, the walls clammy with unpleasant moisture, though apparently the Sisters didn't mind. Their office was ahead, through a set of wide double doors. A narrow corridor led away in the other direction, vanishing into darkness; Tessa had no idea what lay down that hallway, but something about the thickness of the shadows made her glad she had never found out.

The doors to the Sisters' office were open. Miranda didn't hesitate, but clomped inside, Tessa following after her with great reluctance. She hated this room more than any other place on earth.

To begin with, it was always hot and wet inside, like a swamp, even when the skies outside were gray and rainy. The walls seemed to seep moisture, and the upholstery on the seats and sofas was always blooming with mold. It smelled strange

as well, like the banks of the Hudson on a hot day: water and garbage and silt.

The Sisters were already there, as they always were, seated behind their enormous raised desk. They were their usual colorful selves, Mrs. Black in a dress of vibrant salmon pink and Mrs. Dark in a gown of peacock blue. Above the brilliantly colored satins, their faces were like deflated gray balloons. They both wore gloves despite how hot the room was.

“Leave us now, Miranda,” said Mrs. Black, who was spinning the heavy brass globe they kept on the desk with one plump, white-gloved finger. Tessa had many times tried to get a better look at the globe—something about the way the continents were laid out had never looked quite right to her, especially the space in the center of Europe—but the sisters always kept her away from it. “And shut the door behind you.”

Expressionless, Miranda did as asked. Tessa tried not to wince as the door shut behind her, closing off what little breeze there was in this airless place.

Mrs. Dark tilted her head to the side. “Come here, Theresa.” Of the two women, she was the more kind—more likely to wheedle and persuade than her sister, who liked to convince with slaps and hissed threats. “And take this.”

She held something out: a dilapidated bit of pink fabric tied in a bow, the sort that might be used as a girl’s hair ribbon.

She was used to being handed things by the Dark Sisters now. Things that had once belonged to people: tie pins and watches, mourning jewelry, and children’s toys. Once the laces of a boot; once a single earring, stained with blood.

“Take this,” said Mrs. Dark again, a hint of impatience in her voice. “And Change.”

Tessa took the bow. It lay in her hand, as light as a moth's wing, and the Dark Sisters stared impassively at her. She remembered books she had read, novels in which characters were on trial, standing quaking in the dock at the Old Bailey and praying for a verdict of not guilty. She often felt she was on trial herself in this room, without knowing of what crime she stood accused.

She turned the bow over in her hand, remembering the first time the Dark Sisters had handed an object to her—a woman's glove, with pearl buttons at the wrist. They had shouted at her to Change, had slapped her and shaken her as she'd told them over and over again with rising hysteria that she had no idea what they were talking about, no idea what they were asking her to do.

She hadn't cried, even though she'd wanted to. Tessa hated to cry, especially in front of people she didn't trust. And of the only two people in the world she trusted, one was dead and the other imprisoned. They had told her that, the Dark Sisters, had told her that they had Nate, and if she didn't do what they said, he would die. They'd showed her his ring, the one that had been her father's—stained with blood now—to prove it. They hadn't let her hold it or touch it, had snatched it back as she'd reached for it, but she'd recognized it. It was Nate's.

After that she had done everything they'd asked. Had drunk the potions they'd given her, done the hours of agonizing exercises, forced herself to think the way they wanted her to. They'd told her to imagine herself as clay, being shaped and molded on the potter's wheel, her form amorphous and changeable. They'd told her to reach down into the objects they'd given her, to imagine them as living things, and to draw out the spirit that animated them.

It had taken weeks, and the first time she had Changed, it had been so blindingly painful that she'd vomited and passed out. When she'd woken, she'd been lying on one of the mold-ering chaises in the Dark Sisters' rooms, a damp towel being sponged across her face. Mrs. Black had been leaning down over her, her breath as bitter as vinegar, her eyes alight. "You did well today, Theresa," she had said. "Very well."

That evening when Tessa had gone up to her room, there had been gifts for her, two new books on her bedside table. Somehow the Dark Sisters had realized that reading and novels were Tessa's passion. There was a copy of *Great Expectations* and—of all things—*Little Women*. Tessa had hugged the books to herself and, alone and unwatched in her room, had let herself cry.

It had grown easier since then, the Changing. Tessa still didn't understand what happened inside her to make it possible, but she had memorized the series of steps the Dark Sisters had taught her, the way a blind person might memorize the number of paces it takes to walk from their bed to the door of their room. She didn't know what was around her in the strange dark place they asked her to journey to, but she knew the pathway through it.

She drew on those memories now, tightening her grip on the ragged bit of pink fabric she held. She opened her mind and let the darkness come down, let the connection that bound her to the hair ribbon and the spirit inside it—the ghostly echo of the person who had once owned it—unravel like a golden thread leading through the shadows. The room she was in, the oppressive heat, the noisy breathing of the Dark Sisters, all of it fell away as she followed the thread, as the light grew more

intense around her and she wrapped herself in it as if she were wrapping herself in a blanket.

Her skin began to tingle and to sting with thousands of tiny shocks. This had been the worst part, once—the part that had convinced her she was dying. Now she was used to it, and bore it stoically as she shuddered all over, from her scalp to her toes. The clockwork angel around her throat seemed to tick faster, as if in rhythm with her speeding heart. The pressure inside her skin built—Tessa gasped—and her eyes, which had been closed, flew open as the sensation built to a crescendo—and then vanished.

It was over.

Tessa blinked dizzily. The first moment after a Change was always like blinking water out of your eyes after submerging yourself in a bath. She looked down at herself. Her new body was slight, almost frail, and the fabric of her dress hung loose, pooling on the floor at her feet. Her hands, clasped in front of her, were pale and thin, with chapped tips and bitten nails. Unfamiliar, alien hands.

“What is your name?” Mrs. Black demanded. She had risen to her feet and was looking down at Tessa with her pale eyes burning. She looked almost hungry.

Tessa didn’t have to answer. The girl whose skin she wore answered for her, speaking through her the way spirits were said to speak through their mediums—but Tessa hated to think about it that way; the Change was so much more intimate, so much more frightening, than that. “Emma,” the voice that came from Tessa said. “Miss Emma Bayliss, ma’am.”

“And who are you, Emma Bayliss?”

The voice replied, words tumbling out of Tessa’s mouth,