Tanglefoot
A Story of the Clockwork Century

Cherie Priest
Stonewall Jackson survived Chancellorsville. England broke the Union’s naval blockade, and formally recognized the Confederate States of America. Atlanta never burned.

It is 1880. The American Civil War has raged for nearly two decades, driving technology in strange and terrible directions. Combat dirigibles skulk across the sky and armored vehicles crawl along the land. Military scientists twist the laws of man and nature, and barter their souls for weapons powered by light, fire, and steam.

But life struggles forward for soldiers and ordinary citizens. The fractured nation is dotted with stricken towns and epic scenes of devastation—some manmade, and some more mysterious. In the western territories cities are swallowed by gas and walled away to rot while the frontiers are strip-mined for resources. On the borders between North and South, spies scour and scheme, and smugglers build economies more stable than their governments.

This is the Clockwork Century.

It is dark here, and different.
Part One:

Hunkered shoulders and skinny, bent knees cast a crooked shadow from the back corner of the laboratory, where the old man tried to remember the next step in his formula, or possibly—as Edwin was forced to consider—the scientist simply struggled to recall his own name. On the table against the wall, the once estimable Dr. Archibald Smeeks muttered, spackling his test tubes with spittle and becoming increasingly agitated until Edwin called out, “Doctor?”

The doctor settled himself, steadying his hands and closing his mouth. He crouched on his stool, cringing away from the boy’s voice, and crumpled his over-long work apron with his feet. “Who’s there?” he asked.

“Only me, sir.”

“Who?”

“Me. It’s only…me.”

With a startled shudder of recognition he asked, “The orphan?”

“Yes sir. Just the orphan.”

Dr. Smeeks turned around, the bottom of his pants twisting in a circle on the smooth wooden seat. He reached to his forehead, where a prodigious set of multi-lensed goggles was perched. From the left side, he tugged a monocle to extend it on a hinged metal arm, and he used it to peer across the room, down onto the floor, where Edwin was sitting cross-legged in a pile of discarded machinery parts.

“Ah,” the old doctor said. “There you are, yes. I didn’t hear you tinkering, and I only wondered where you might be hiding. Of course, I remember you.”

“I believe you do, sir,” Edwin said politely. In fact, he very strongly doubted it today, but Dr. Smeeks was trying to appear quite fully aware of his surroundings and it would’ve been rude to contradict him. “I didn’t mean to interrupt your work. You sounded upset. I wanted to ask if everything was all right.”

“All right?” Dr. Smeeks returned his monocle to its original position, so that it no longer shrank his fluffy white eyebrow down to a tame and reasonable arch. His wiry goatee quivered as he wondered about his own state. “Oh yes. Everything’s quite all right. I think for a moment that I was distracted.”

He scooted around on the stool so that he once again faced the cluttered table with its vials, coils, and tiny gray crucibles. His right hand selected a test tube with a hand-lettered label and runny green contents. His left hand reached for a set of tongs, though he set them aside almost immediately in favor of a half-rolled piece of paper that bore the stains and streaks of a hundred unidentifiable splatters.

“Edwin,” he said, and Edwin was just short of stunned to hear his name. “Boy, could you join me a moment? I’m afraid I’ve gone and confused myself.”

“Yes sir.”

Edwin lived in the basement by the grace of Dr. Smeeks, who had asked the sanitarium for an assistant. These days, the old fellow could not remember requesting such an arrangement and could scarcely confirm or deny it anymore, no matter how often Edwin reminded him.

Therefore Edwin made a point to keep himself useful.

The basement laboratory was a quieter home than the crowded group ward on the top floor, where the children of the patients were kept and raised; and the boy didn’t mind the doctor’s failing mental state, since what was left of him was kind and often friendly. And sometimes, in a glimmering flash between moments of pitiful bewilderment, Edwin saw the doctor for who he once had been—a brilliant man with a mind that was honored and admired for its
flexibility and prowess.

In its way, the Waverly Hills Sanitarium was a testament to his outstanding imagination.

The hospital had incorporated many of the physicians’ favorites into the daily routine of the patients, including a kerosene-powered bladed machine that whipped fresh air down the halls to offset the oppressive summer heat. The physicians had also integrated his Moving Mechanical Doors that opened with the push of a switch; and Dr. Smeeks’ wonderful Steam-Powered Dish-Cleaning Device was a huge hit in the kitchen. His Sheet-Sorting Slings made him a celebrity in the laundry rooms, and the Sanitary Rotating Manure Chutes had made him a demi-god to the stable-hands.

But half-finished and barely finished inventions littered every corner and covered every table in the basement, where the famed and elderly genius lived out the last of his years.

So long as he did not remember how much he’d forgotten, he appeared content.

Edwin approached the doctor’s side and peered dutifully at the stained schematics on the discolored piece of linen paper. “It’s coming along nicely, sir,” he said.

For a moment Dr. Smeeks did not reply. He was staring down hard at the sheet, trying to make it tell him something, and accusing it of secrets. Then he said, “I’m forced to agree with you, lad. Could you tell me, what is it I was working on? Suddenly...suddenly the numbers aren’t speaking to me. Which project was I addressing, do you know?”

“These are the notes for your Therapeutic Bath Appliance. Those numbers to the right are your guesses for the most healthful solution of water, salt, and lavender. You were collecting lemongrass.”

“Lemongrass? I was going to put that in the water? Whatever would’ve possessed me to do such a thing?” he asked, baffled by his own processes. He’d only drawn the notes a day or two before.

Edwin was a good student, even when Dr. Smeeks was a feeble teacher. He prompted the old fellow as gently as he could. “You’d been reading about Dr. Kellog’s hydrotherapy treatments in Battle Creek, and you felt you could improve on them.”

“Battle Creek, yes. The Sanitarium there. Good Christian folks. They keep a strict diet; it seems to work well for the patients, or so the literature on the subject tells me. But yes,” he said more strongly. “Yes, I remember. There must be a more efficient way to warm the water, and make it more pleasing to the senses. The soothing qualities of lavender have been documented for thousands of years, and its antiseptic properties should help keep the water fresh.” He turned to Edwin and asked, with the lamplight flickering in his lenses, “Doesn’t it sound nice?”

“I don’t really like to take baths,” the boy confessed. “But if the water was warm and it smelled real nice, I think I’d like it better.”

Dr. Smeeks made a little shrug and said, “It’d be less for the purposes of cleanliness and more for the therapy of the inmates here. Some of the more restless or violent ones, you understand.”

“Yes sir.”

“And how’s your mother?” the doctor asked. “Has she responded well to treatment? I heard her coughing last night, and I was wondering if I couldn’t concoct a syrup that might give her comfort.”

Edwin said, “She wasn’t coughing last night. You must’ve heard someone else.”

“Perhaps you’re right. Perhaps it was Mrs.…What’s her name? The heavy nurse with the northern accent?”

“Mrs. Criddle.”

“That’s her, yes. That’s the one. I hope she isn’t contracting the consumption she works so very hard to treat.” He
returned his attention to the notes and lines on the brittle sheet before him.

Edwin did not tell Dr. Smeeks, for the fifth or sixth time, that his mother had been dead for months; and he did not mention that Mrs. Criddle’s accent had come with her from New Orleans. He’d learned that it was easier to agree, and probably kinder as well.

It became apparent that the old man’s attention had been reabsorbed by his paperwork and test tubes, so Edwin returned to his stack of mechanical refuse. He was almost eleven years old, and he’d lived in the basement with the doctor for nearly a year. In that time, he’d learned quite a lot about how a carefully fitted gear can turn, and how a pinpoint-sharp mind can rust; and he took what scraps he wanted to build his own toys, trinkets, and machines. After all, it was half the pleasure and privilege of living away from the other children—he could help himself to anything the doctor did not immediately require.

He didn’t like the other children much, and the feeling was mutual.

The other offspring of the unfortunate residents were loud and frantic. They believed Edwin was aloof when he was only thoughtful, and they treated him badly when he wished to be left alone.

All things considered, a cot beside a boiler in a room full of metal and chemicals was a significant step up in the world. And the fractured mind of the gentle old man was more companionable by far than the boys and girls who baked themselves daily on the roof, playing ball and beating one another while the orderlies weren’t looking.

Even so, Edwin had long suspected he could do better. Maybe he couldn’t find better, but he was increasingly confident that he could make better.

He turned a pair of old bolts over in his palm and concluded that they were solid enough beneath their grime that a bit of sandpaper would restore their luster and usefulness. All the gears and coils he needed were already stashed and assembled, but some details yet eluded him, and his new friend was not quite finished.

Not until it boasted the finer angles of a human face.

Already Edwin had bartered a bit of the doctor’s throat remedy to a taxidermist, an act which gained him two brown eyes meant for a badger. Instead, these eyes were fitted in a pounded brass mask with a cut strip of tin that made a sloping nose.

The face was coming together. But the bottom jaw was not connected, so the facsimile was not yet whole.

Edwin held the bolts up to his eye to inspect their threadings, and he decided that they would suffice. “These will work,” he said to himself.

Back at the table the doctor asked, “Hmm?”

“Nothing, sir. I’m going to go back to my cot and tinker.”

“Very good then. Enjoy yourself, Parker. Summon me if you need an extra hand,” he said, because that’s what he always said when Edwin announced that he intended to try his own small hands at inventing.

Parker was the youngest son of Dr. and Mrs. Smeeks. Edwin had seen him once, when he’d come to visit a year before at Christmas. The thin man with a fretful face had brought a box of clean, new vials and a large pad of lined paper, plus a gas-powered burner that had been made in Germany. But his father’s confusion was too much for him. He’d left, and he hadn’t returned.

So if Dr. Smeeks wanted to call Edwin “Parker” once in awhile, that was fine. Like Parker himself, Edwin was also thin, with a face marked by worry beyond his years; and Edwin was also handy with pencils, screwdrivers, and wrenches. The boy figured that the misunderstanding was understandable, if unfortunate, and he learned to answer to the other name when it was used to call him.

He took his old bolts back to his cot and picked up a tiny triangle of sandpaper.
Beside him, at the foot of his cot underneath the wool blanket, lay a lump in the shape of a boy perhaps half Edwin’s size. The lump was not a doll but an automaton, ready to wind, but not wound yet—not until it had a proper face, with a proper jaw.

When the bolts were as clean as the day they were cast, Edwin placed them gently on his pillow and reached inside the hatbox Mrs. Williams had given him. He withdrew the steel jawbone and examined it, comparing it against the bolts and deciding that the fit was satisfactory; and then he uncovered the boy-shaped lump.

“Good heavens, Edwin. What have you got there?”

Edwin jumped. The old scientist could be uncannily quiet, and he could not always be trusted to stick to his own business. Nervously, as if the automaton were something to be ashamed of, the boy said, “Sir, it’s…a machine. I made a machine, I think. It’s not a doll,” he clarified.

And Dr. Smeeks said, “I can see that it’s not a doll. You made this?”

“Yes sir. Just with odds and ends—things you weren’t using. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Mind? No. I don’t mind. Dear boy, it’s exceptional!” he said with what sounded like honest wonder and appreciation. It also sounded lucid, and focused, and Edwin was charmed to hear it.

The boy asked, “You think it’s good?”

“I think it must be. How does it work? Do you crank it, or—”

“It winds up.” He rolled the automaton over onto its back and pointed at a hole that was barely large enough to hold a pencil. “One of your old hex wrenches will do it.”

Dr. Smeeks turned the small machine over again, looking into the tangle of gears and loosely fixed coils where the brains would be. He touched its oiled joints and the clever little pistons that must surely work for muscles. He asked, “When you wind it, what does it do?”

Edwin faltered. “Sir, I…I don’t know. I haven’t wound him yet.”

“Haven’t wound him—well, I suppose that’s excuse enough. I see that you’ve taken my jar-lids for kneecaps, and that’s well and good. It’s a good fit. He’s made to walk a bit, isn’t he?”

“He ought to be able to walk, but I don’t think he can climb stairs. I haven’t tested him. I was waiting until I finished his face.” He held up the metal jawbone in one hand and the two shiny bolts in the other. “I’m almost done.”

“Do it then!” Dr. Smeeks exclaimed. He clapped his hands together and said, “How exciting! It’s your first invention, isn’t it?”

“Yes sir,” Edwin fibbed. He neglected to remind the doctor of his work on the Picky Boy Plate with a secret chamber to hide unwanted and uneaten food until it was safe to discreetly dispose of it. He did not mention his tireless pursuit and eventual production of the Automatic Expanding Shoe, for use by quickly growing children whose parents were too poor to routinely purchase more footwear.

“Go on,” the doctor urged. “Do you mind if I observe? I’m always happy to watch the success of a fellow colleague.”

Edwin blushed warmly across the back of his neck. He said, “No sir, and thank you. Here, if you could hold him for me—like that, on your legs, yes. I’ll take the bolts and…” with trembling fingers he fastened the final hardware and dabbed the creases with oil from a half-empty can.

And he was finished.

Edwin took the automaton from Dr. Smeeks and stood it upright on the floor, where the machine did not wobble or
topple, but stood fast and gazed blankly wherever its face was pointed.

The doctor said, “It’s a handsome machine you’ve made. What does it do again? I think you said, but I don’t recall.”

“I still need to wind it,” Edwin told him. “I need an L-shaped key. Do you have one?”

Dr. Smeeks jammed his hands into the baggy depths of his pockets and a great jangling noise declared the assorted contents. After a few seconds of fishing he withdrew a hex, but seeing that it was too large, he tossed it aside and dug for another one. “Will this work?”

“It ought to. Let me see.”

Edwin inserted the newer, smaller stick into the hole and gave it a twist. Within, the automaton springs tightened, coils contracted, and gears clicked together. Encouraged, the boy gave the wrench another turn, and then another. It felt as if he’d spent forever winding, when finally he could twist no further. The automaton’s internal workings resisted, and could not be persuaded to wind another inch.

The boy removed the hex key and stood up straight. On the automaton’s back, behind the place where its left shoulder blade ought to be, there was a sliding switch. Edwin put his finger to it and gave the switch a tiny shove.

Down in the machine’s belly, something small began to whir.

Edwin and the doctor watched with delight as the clockwork boy’s arms lifted and went back down to its sides. One leg rose at a time, and each was returned to the floor in a charming parody of marching-in-place. Its bolt-work neck turned from left to right, causing its tinted glass eyes to sweep the room.

“It works!” The doctor slapped Edwin on the back. “Parker, I swear–you’ve done a good thing. It’s a most excellent job, and with what? My leftovers, is that what you said?”

“Yes sir, that’s what I said. You remembered!”

“Of course I remembered. I remember you,” Dr. Smeeks said. “What will you call your new toy?”

“He’s my new friend. And I’m going to call him…Ted.”

“Ted?”

“Ted.” He did not explain that he’d once had a baby brother named Theodore, or that Theodore had died before his first birthday. This was something different, and anyway it didn’t matter what he told Dr. Smeeks, who wouldn’t long recall it.

“Well he’s very fine. Very fine indeed,” said the doctor. “You should take him upstairs and show him to Mrs. Criddle and Mrs. Williams. Oh—you should absolutely show him to your mother. I think she’ll be pleased.”

“Yes sir. I will, sir.”

“Your mother will be proud, and I will be proud. You’re learning so much, so fast. One day, I think, you should go to school. A bright boy like you shouldn’t hide in basements with old men like me. A head like yours is a commodity, son. It’s not a thing to be lightly wasted.”

To emphasize his point, he ruffled Edwin’s hair as he walked away.

Edwin sat on the edge of his cot, which brought him to eye-level with his creation. He said, “Ted?”

Ted’s jaw opened and closed with a metallic clack, but the mechanical child had no lungs, nor lips, and it did not speak.

The flesh-and-blood boy picked up Ted and carried him carefully under his arm, up the stairs and into the main body of the Waverly Hills Sanitarium. The first floor offices and corridors were mostly safe, and mostly empty—
populated by the bustling, concentrating men with clipboards and glasses, and very bland smiles that recognized Edwin without caring that he was present.

The sanitarium was very new. Some of its halls were freshly built and still stinking of mortar and the dust of construction. Its top floor rooms reeked faintly of paint and lead, as well as the medicines and bandages of the ill and the mad.

Edwin avoided the top floors where the other children lived, and he avoided the wards of the men who were kept in jackets and chains. He also avoided the sick wards, where the mad men and women were tended to.

Mrs. Criddle and Mrs. Williams worked in the kitchen and laundry, respectively; and they looked like sisters though they were not, in fact, related. Both were women of a stout and purposeful build, with great tangles of graying hair tied up in buns and covered in sanitary hair caps; and both women were the mothering sort who were stern with patients, but kind to the hapless orphans who milled from floor to floor when they weren’t organized and contained on the roof.

Edwin found Mrs. Criddle first, working a paddle through a metal vat of mashed potatoes that was large enough to hold the boy, Ted, and a third friend of comparable size. Her wide bottom rocked from side to side in time with the sweep of her elbows as she stirred the vat, humming to herself.

“Mrs. Criddle?”

She ceased her stirring. “Mm. Yes dear?”

“It’s Edwin, ma’am.”

“Of course it is!” She leaned the paddle against the side of the vat and flipped a lever to lower the fire. “Hello there, boy. It’s not time for supper, but what have you got there?”

He held Ted forward so she could inspect his new invention. “His name is Ted. I made him.”

“Ted, ah yes. Ted. That’s a good name for…for…a new friend.”

“That’s right!” Edwin brightened. “He’s my new friend. Watch, he can walk. Look at what he can do.”

He pressed the switch and the clockwork boy marched in place, and then staggered forward, catching itself with every step and clattering with every bend of its knees. Ted moved forward until it knocked its forehead on the leg of a counter, then stopped, and turned to the left to continue soldiering onward.

“Would you look at that?” Mrs. Criddle said with the awe of a woman who had no notion of how her own stove worked, much less anything else. “That’s amazing, is what it is. He just turned around like that, just like he knew!”

“He’s automatic,” Edwin said, as if this explained everything.

“Automatic indeed. Very nice, love. But Mr. Bird and Miss Emmie will be here in a few minutes, and the kitchen will be a busy place for a boy and his new friend. You’d best take him back downstairs.”

“First I want to go show Mrs. Williams.”

Mrs. Criddle shook her head. “Oh no, dear. I think you’d better not. She’s upstairs, with the other boys and girls, and well, I suppose you know. I think you’re better off down with Dr. Smeeks.”

Edwin sighed. “If I take him upstairs, they’ll only break him, won’t they?”

“I think they’re likely to try.”

“All right,” he agreed, and gathered Ted up under his arm.

“Come back in another hour, will you? You can get your own supper and carry the doctor’s while you’re at it.”
“Yes ma’am. I will.”

He retreated back down the pristine corridors and dodged between two empty gurneys, back down the stairs that would return him to the safety of the doctor, the laboratory, and his own cot. He made his descent quietly, so as not to disturb the doctor in case he was still working.

When Edwin peeked around the bottom corner, he saw the old scientist sitting on his stool once more, a wadded piece of linen paper crushed in his fist. A spilled test tube leaked runny gray liquid across the counter’s top, and made a dark stain across the doctor’s pants.

Over and over to himself he mumbled, “Wasn’t the lavender. Wasn’t the…it was only the…I saw the. I don’t…I can’t…where was the paper? Where were the plans? What was the plan? What?”

The shadow of Edwin’s head crept across the wall and when the doctor spotted it, he stopped himself and sat up straighter. “Parker, I’ve had a little bit of an accident. I’ve made a little bit of a mess.”

“Do you need any help, sir?”

“Help? I suppose I don’t. If I only knew…if I could only remember.” The doctor slid down off the stool, stumbling as his foot clipped the seat’s bottom rung. “Parker? Where’s the window? Didn’t we have a window?”

“Sir,” Edwin said, taking the old man’s arm and guiding him over to his bed, in a nook at the far end of the laboratory. “Sir, I think you should lie down. Mrs. Criddle says supper comes in an hour. You just lie down, and I’ll bring it to you when it’s ready.”

“Supper?” The many-lensed goggles he wore atop his head slid, and their strap came down over his left eye.

He sat Dr. Smeeks on the edge of his bed and removed the man’s shoes, then his eyewear. He placed everything neatly beside the feather mattress and pulled the doctor’s pillow to meet his downward-drooping head.

Edwin repeated, “I’ll bring you supper when it’s ready,” but Dr. Smeeks was already asleep.

And in the laboratory, over by the stairs, the whirring and clicking of a clockwork boy was clattering itself in circles, or so Edwin assumed. He couldn’t remember, had he left Ted on the stairs? He could’ve sworn he’d pressed the switch to deactivate his friend. But perhaps he hadn’t.

Regardless, he didn’t want the machine bounding clumsily around in the laboratory—not in that cluttered place piled with glass and gadgets.

Over his shoulder Edwin glanced, and saw the doctor snoozing lightly in his nook; and out in the laboratory, knocking its jar-lid knees against the bottom step, Ted had gone nowhere, and harmed nothing. Edwin picked Ted up and held the creation to his face, gazing into the glass badger eyes as if they might blink back at him.

He said, “You’re my friend, aren’t you? Everybody makes friends. I just made you for real.”

Ted’s jaw creaked down, opening its mouth so that Edwin could stare straight inside, at the springs and levers that made the toy boy move. Then its jaw retracted, and without a word, Ted had said its piece.

After supper, which Dr. Smeeks scarcely touched, and after an hour spent in the laundry room sharing Ted with Mrs. Williams, Edwin retreated to his cot and blew out the candle beside it. The cot wasn’t wide enough for Edwin and Ted to rest side-by-side, but Ted fit snugly between the wall and the bedding and Edwin left the machine there, to pass the night.

But the night did not pass fitfully.

First Edwin awakened to hear the doctor snuffling in his sleep, muttering about the peril of inadequate testing; and when the old man finally sank back into a fuller sleep, Edwin nearly followed him. Down in the basement there were no lights except for the dim, bioluminescent glow of living solutions in blown-glass beakers—and the
simmering wick of a hurricane lamp turned down low, but left alight enough for the boy to see his way to the privy if the urge struck him before dawn.

Here and there the bubble of an abandoned mixture seeped fizzily through a tube, and when Dr. Smeeks slept deeply enough to cease his ramblings, there was little noise to disturb anyone.

Even upstairs, when the wee hours came, most of the inmates and patients of the sanitarium were quiet—if not by their own cycles, then by the laudanum spooned down their throats before the shades were drawn.

Edwin lay on his back, his eyes closed against the faint, blue and green glows from the laboratory, and he waited for slumber to call him again. He reached to his left, to the spot between his cot and the wall. He patted the small slip of space there, feeling for a manufactured arm or leg, and finding Ted’s cool, unmoving form. And although there was scarcely any room, he pulled Ted out of the slot and tugged the clockwork boy into the cot after all, because doll or no, Ted was a comforting thing to hold.
Part Two:

Morning came, and the doctor was already awake when Edwin rose.

“Good morning sir.”

“Good morning, Edwin,” the doctor replied without looking over his shoulder. On their first exchange of the day, he’d remembered the right name. Edwin tried to take it as a sign that today would be a good day, and Dr. Smeeks would mostly remain Dr. Smeeks—without toppling into the befuddled tangle of fractured thoughts and faulty recollections.

He was standing by the hurricane lamp, with its wick trimmed higher so that he could read. An envelope was opened and discarded beside him.

“Is it a letter?” Edwin asked.

The doctor didn’t sound happy when he replied, “It’s a letter indeed.”

“Is something wrong?”

“It depends.” Dr. Smeeks folded the letter. “It’s a man who wants me to work for him.”

“That might be good,” Edwin said.

“No. Not from this man.”

The boy asked, “You know him?”

“I do. And I do not care for his aims. I will not help him,” he said firmly. “Not with his terrible quests for terrible weapons. I don’t do those things anymore. I haven’t done them for years.”

“You used to make weapons? Like guns, and cannons?”

Dr. Smeeks said, “Once upon a time.” And he said it sadly. “But no more. And if Ossian thinks he can bribe or bully me, he has another thing coming. Worst comes to worst, I suppose, I can plead a failing mind.”

Edwin felt like he ought to object as a matter of politeness, but when he said, “Sir,” the doctor waved his hand to stop whatever else the boy might add.

“Don’t, Parker. I know why I’m here. I know things, even when I can’t always quite remember them. But my old colleague says he intends to pay me a visit, and he can pay me all the visits he likes. He can offer to pay me all the Union money he likes, too—or Confederate money, or any other kind. I won’t make such terrible things, not anymore.”

He folded the letter in half and struck a match to light a candle. He held one corner of the letter over the candle and let it burn, until there was nothing left but the scrap between his fingertips—and then he released it, letting the smoldering flame turn even the last of the paper to ash.

“Perhaps he’ll catch me on a bad day, do you think? As likely as not, there will be no need for subterfuge.”

Edwin wanted to contribute, and he felt the drive to communicate with the doctor while communicating seemed possible. He said, “You should tell him to come in the afternoon. I hope you don’t mind me saying so, sir, but you seem much clearer in the mornings.”

“Is that a fact?” he asked, an eyebrow lifted aloft by genuine interest. “I’ll take your word for it, I suppose. Lord knows I’m in no position to argue. Is that…that noise…what’s that noise? It’s coming from your cot. Oh dear, I
Edwin declared, “Oh no!” as a protest, not as an exclamation of worry. “No, sir. That’s just Ted. I must’ve switched him on when I got up.”

“Ted? What’s a Ted?”

“It’s my…” Edwin almost regretted what he’d said before, about mornings and clarity. “It’s my new friend. I made him.”

“There’s a friend in your bunk? That doesn’t seem too proper.”

“No, he’s… I’ll show you.”

And once again they played the scene of discovery together—the doctor clapping Edwin on the back and ruffling his hair, and announcing that the automaton was a fine invention indeed. Edwin worked very hard to disguise his disappointment.

Finally Dr. Smeeks suggested that Edwin run to the washrooms upstairs and freshen himself to begin the day, and Edwin agreed.

The boy took his spring-and-gear companion along as he navigated the corridors while the doctors and nurses made their morning rounds. Dr. Havisham paused to examine Ted and declare the creation “outstanding.” Dr. Martin did likewise, and Nurse Evelyn offered him a peppermint sweet for being such an innovative youngster who never made any trouble.

Edwin cleaned his hands and face in one of the cold white basins in the washroom, where staff members and some of the more stable patients were allowed to refresh themselves. He set Ted on the countertop and pressed the automaton’s switch. While Edwin cleaned the night off his skin, Ted’s legs kicked a friendly time against the counter and its jaw bobbed like it was singing or chatting, or imagining splashing its feet in the basin.

When he was clean, Edwin set Ted on the floor and decided that—rather than carrying the automaton—he would simply let it walk the corridor until they reached the stairs to the basement.

The peculiar pair drew more than a few exclamations and stares, but Edwin was proud of Ted and he enjoyed the extended opportunity to show off.

Before the stairs and at the edge of the corridor where Edwin wasn’t supposed to go, for fear of the violent inmates, a red-haired woman blocked his way. If her plain cotton gown hadn’t marked her as a resident, the wildness around the corners of her eyes would’ve declared it well enough. There were red stripes on her skin where restraints were sometimes placed, and her feet were bare, leaving moist, sweaty prints on the black and white tiles.

“Madeline,” Dr. Simmons warned. “Madeline, it’s time to return to your room.”

But Madeline’s eyes were locked on the humming, marching automaton. She asked with a voice too girlish for her height, “What’s that?” and she did not budge, even when the doctor took her arm and signaled quietly for an orderly.

Edwin didn’t mind answering. He said, “His name is Ted. I made him.”

“Ted.” She chewed on the name and said, “Ted for now.”

Edwin frowned and asked, “What?”

He did not notice that Ted had stopped marching, or that Ted’s metal face was gazing up at Madeline. The clockwork boy had wound itself down, or maybe it was only listening.

Madeline did not blink at all, and perhaps she never did. She said, “He’s your Ted for now, but you must watch him.” She held out a pointing, directing, accusing finger and aimed it at Edwin, then at Ted. “Such empty children
are vulnerable.”

Edwin was forced to confess, or simply make a point of saying, “Miss, he’s only a machine.”

She nodded. “Yes, but he’s your boy, and he has no soul. There are things who would change that, and change it badly.”

“I know I shouldn’t take him upstairs,” Edwin said carefully. “I know I ought to keep him away from the other boys.”

Madeline shook her head, and the matted crimson curls swayed around her face. “Not what I mean, boy. Invisible things. Bad little souls that need bodies.”

An orderly arrived. He was a big, square man with shoulders like an ox’s yoke. His uniform was white, except for a streak of blood that was drying to brown. He took Madeline by one arm, more roughly than he needed to.

As Madeline was pulled away, back to her room or back to her restraints, she kept her eyes on Edwin and Ted, and she warned him still, waving her finger like a wand, “Keep him close, unless you want him stolen from you–unless you want his clockwork heart replaced with something stranger.”

Before she was removed from the corridor altogether, she lashed out one last time with her one free hand to seize the wall’s corner. It bought her another few seconds of eye contact–just enough to add, “Watch him close!”

Then she was gone.

Edwin reached for Ted and pulled the automaton to his chest, where its gear-driven heart clicked quietly against the real boy’s shirt. Ted’s mechanical jaw opened and closed, not biting but mumbling in the crook of Edwin’s neck.

“I will,” he promised. “I’ll watch him close.”

Several days passed quietly, except for the occasional frustrated rages of the senile doctor, and Ted’s company was a welcome diversion–if a somewhat unusual one. Though Edwin had designed Ted’s insides and stuffed the gears and coils himself, the automaton’s behavior was not altogether predictable.

Mostly, Ted remained a quiet little toy with the marching feet that tripped at stairs, at shoes, or any other obstacle left on the floor.

And if the clockwork character fell, it fell like a turtle and laid where it collapsed, arms and legs twitching impotently at the air until Edwin would come and set his friend upright. Several times Edwin unhooked Ted’s back panel, wondering precisely why the shut-off switch failed so often. But he never found any stretched spring or faulty coil to account for it. If he asked Ted, purely to speculate aloud, Ted’s shiny jaw would lower and lift, answering with the routine and rhythmic clicks of its agreeable guts.

But sometimes, if Edwin listened very hard, he could almost convince himself he heard words rattling around inside Ted’s chest. Even if it was only the echoing pings and chimes of metal moving metal, the boy’s eager ears would concentrate, and listen for whispers.

Once, he was nearly certain–practically positive–that Ted had said its own name. And that was silly, wasn’t it? No matter how much Edwin wanted to believe, he knew better…which did not stop him from wondering.

It was always Edwin’s job to bring meals down from the kitchen, and every time he climbed the stairs he made a point to secure Ted by turning it off and leaving it lying on its back, on Edwin’s cot. The doctor was doddering, and even unobstructed he sometimes stumbled on his own two feet, or the laces of his shoes.

So when the boy went for breakfast and returned to the laboratory with a pair of steaming meals on a covered tray, he was surprised to hear the whirring of gears and springs.

“Ted?” he called out, and then felt strange for it. “Doctor?” he tried instead, and he heard the old man muttering.
“Doctor, are you looking at Ted? You remember him, don’t you? Please don’t break him.”

At the bottom of the stairs, Dr. Smeeks was crouched over the prone and kicking Ted. The doctor said, “Underfoot, this thing is. Did it on purpose. I saw it. Turned itself on, sat itself up, and here it comes.”

But Edwin didn’t think the doctor was speaking to him. He was only speaking, and poking at Ted with a pencil like a boy prods an anthill.

“Sir? I turned him off, and I’m sorry if he turned himself on again. I’m not sure why it happens.”

“Because it wants to be on,” the doctor said firmly, and finally made eye contact. “It wants to make me fall, it practically told me so.”

“Ted never says anything,” Edwin said weakly. “He can’t talk.”

“He can talk. You can’t hear him. But I can hear him. I’ve heard him before, and he used to say pleasant things. He used to hum his name. Now he fusses and mutters like a demented old man. Yes,” he insisted, his eyes bugged and his eyebrows bushily hiked up his forehead. “Yes, this thing, when it mutters, it sounds like me.”

Edwin had another theory about the voices Dr. Smeeks occasionally heard, but he kept it to himself. “Sir, he cannot talk. He hasn’t got any lungs, or a tongue. Sir, I promise, he cannot speak.”

The doctor stood, and gazed down warily as Ted floundered. “He cannot flip his own switches either, yet he does.”

Edwin retrieved his friend and set it back on its little marching feet. “I must’ve done something wrong when I built him. I’ll try and fix it, sir. I’ll make him stop it.”

“Dear boy, I don’t believe you can.”

The doctor straightened himself and adjusted his lenses—a different pair, a set that Edwin had never seen before. He turned away from the boy and the automaton and reached for his paperwork again, saying, “Something smells good. Did you get breakfast?”

“Yes sir. Eggs and grits, with sausage.”

He was suddenly cheerful. “Wonderful! Won’t you join me here? I’ll clear you a spot.”

As he did so, Edwin moved the tray to the open space on the main laboratory table and removed the tray’s lid, revealing two sets of silverware and two plates loaded with food. He set one in front of the doctor, and took one for himself, and they ate with the kind of chatter that told Edwin Dr. Smeeks had already forgotten about his complaint with Ted.

As for Ted, the automaton stood still at the foot of the stairs—its face cocked at an angle that suggested it might be listening, or watching, or paying attention to something that no one else could see.

Edwin wouldn’t have liked to admit it, but when he glanced back at his friend, he felt a pang of unease. Nothing had changed and everything was fine; he was letting the doctor’s rattled mood unsettle him, that was all. Nothing had changed and everything was fine; but Ted was not marching and its arms were not swaying, and the switch behind the machine’s small shoulder was still set in the “on” position.

When the meal was finished and Edwin had gathered the empty plates to return them upstairs, he stopped by Ted and flipped the switch to the state of “off.” “You must’ve run down your winding,” he said. “That must be why you stopped moving.”

Then he called, “Doctor? I’m running upstairs to give these to Mrs. Criddle. I’ve turned Ted off, so he shouldn’t bother you, but keep an eye out, just in case. Maybe,” he said, balancing the tray on his crooked arm, “if you wanted to, you could open him up yourself and see if you can’t fix him.”
Dr. Smeeks didn’t answer, and Edwin left him alone—only for a few minutes, only long enough to return the tray with its plates and cutlery.”

It was long enough to return to strangeness.

Back in the laboratory Edwin found the doctor backed into a corner, holding a screwdriver and a large pair of scissors. Ted was seated on the edge of the laboratory table, its legs dangling over the side, unmoving, unmarching. The doctor looked alert and lucid—moreso than usual—and he did not quite look afraid. Shadows from the burners and beakers with their tiny glowing creatures made Dr. Smeeks look sinister and defensive, for the flickering bits of flame winked reflections off the edge of his scissors.

“Doctor?”

“I was only going to fix him, like you said.”

“Doctor, it’s all right.”

The doctor said, “No, I don’t believe it’s all right, not at all. That nasty little thing, Parker, I don’t like it.” He shook his head, and the lenses across his eyes rattled in their frames.

“But he’s my friend.”

“He’s no friend of mine.”

Edwin held his hands up, like he was trying to calm a startled horse. “Dr. Smeeks, I’ll take him. I’ll fix him, you don’t have to do it. He’s only a machine, you know. Just an invention. He can’t hurt you.”

“He tried.”

“Sir, I really don’t think—”

“He tried to bite me. Could’ve taken my fingers off, if I’d caught them in that bear-trap of a face. You keep it away from me, Edwin. Keep it away or I’ll pull it apart, and turn it into a can opener.”

Before Edwin’s very own eyes, Ted’s head turned with a series of clicks, until the machine fully faced the doctor. And if its eyes had been more than glass bits that were once assigned to a badger, then they might have narrowed or gleamed; but they were only glass bits, and they only cast back the fragments of light from the bright things in the laboratory.

“Ted, come here. Ted, come with me,” Edwin said, gently pulling the automaton down from the table. “Ted, no one’s going to turn you into a can opener. Maybe you got wound funny, or wound too tight,” he added, mostly for the doctor’s benefit. “I’ll open you up and tinker, and you’ll be just fine.”

Back in the corner the doctor relaxed, and dropped the scissors. He set the screwdriver down beside a row of test tubes and placed both hands down on the table’s corner. “Edwin?” he said, so softly that Edwin almost didn’t hear him. “Edwin, did we finish breakfast? I don’t see my plate.”

“Yes sir,” the boy swore. He clutched Ted closely, and held the automaton away from the doctor, out of the man’s line of sight should he turn around.

“Oh. I suppose that’s right,” he said, and again Ted had been spared by the doctor’s dementia.

Edwin stuck Ted down firmly between the wall and his cot, and for one daft moment he considered binding the machine’s feet with twine or wire to keep it from wandering. But the thought drifted out of his head, chased away by the unresponsive lump against the wall. He whispered, “I don’t know how you’re doing it, but you need to stop. I don’t want the doctor to turn you into a can opener.”

Then, as a compromise to his thoughts about hobbling the automaton, he dropped his blanket over the thing’s head.
Bedtime was awkward that night.

When he reached for the clockwork boy he remembered the slow, calculated turn of the machine’s head, and he recalled the blinking bright flashes of firelight in the glass badger eyes.

The doctor had settled in his nook and was sleeping, and Edwin was still awake. He reclaimed his blanket and settled down on his side, facing the wall and facing Ted until he dozed, or he must have dozed. He assumed it was only sleep that made the steel jaw lower and clack; and it was only a dream that made the gears twist and lock into syllables.

“Ted?” Edwin breathed, hearing himself but not recognizing the sound of his own word.

And the clockwork face breathed back, not its own name but something else–something that even in the sleepy state of midnight and calm, Edwin could not understand.

The boy asked in the tiniest whisper he could muster, “Ted?”

Ted’s steel jaw worked, and the air in its mouth made the shape of a, “No.” It said, more distinctly this time, and with greater volume, “Tan…gle…foot.”

Edwin closed his eyes, and was surprised to learn that they had not been closed already. He tugged his blanket up under his chin and could not understand why the rustle of the fabric seemed so loud, but not so loud as the clockwork voice.

I must be asleep, he believed.

And then, eventually, he was.

Though not for long.

His sleep was not good. He was too warm, and then too cold, and then something was missing. Through the halls of his nightmares mechanical feet marched to their own tune; in the confined and cluttered space of the laboratory there was movement too large to come from rats, and too deliberate to be the random flipping of a switch.

Edwin awakened and sat upright in the same moment, with the same fluid fear propelling both events.

There was no reason for it, or so he told himself; and this was ridiculous, it was only the old Dr. Smeeks and his slipping mind, infecting the boy with strange stories—turning the child against his only true friend. Edwin shot his fingers over to the wall where Ted ought to be jammed, waiting for its winding and for the sliding of the button on its back.

And he felt only the smooth, faintly damp texture of the painted stone.

His hands flapped and flailed, slapping at the emptiness and the flat, blank wall. “Ted?” he said, too loudly. “Ted?” he cried with even more volume, and he was answered by the short, swift footsteps that couldn’t have belonged to the doctor.

From his bed in the nook at the other end of the laboratory, the doctor answered with a groggy groan. “Parker?”

“Yes sir!” Edwin said, because it was close enough. “Sir, there’s…” and what could he say? That he feared his friend had become unhinged, and that Ted was fully wound, and roaming?

“What is it, son?”

The doctor’s voice came from miles away, at the bottom of a well—or that’s how it sounded to Edwin, who untangled himself from the sheets and toppled to the floor. He stopped his fall with his hands, and stood, but then could scarcely walk.
As a matter of necessity he dropped his bottom on the edge of the cot and felt for his feet, where something tight was cinched around his ankles.

There, he found a length of wire bent into a loop and secured.

It hobbled his legs together, cutting his stride in half.

“Parker?” the doctor asked, awakening further but confused. “Boy?”

Edwin forced his voice to project a calm he wasn’t feeling. “Sir, stay where you are, unless you have a light. My friend, Ted. He’s gotten loose again. I don’t want… I don’t want you to hurt yourself.”

“I can’t find my candle.”

“I can’t find mine either,” Edwin admitted. “You stay there. I’ll come to you.”

But across the floor the marching feet were treading steadily, and the boy had no idea where his automaton had gone. Every sound bounced off glass or wood, or banged around the room from wall to wall; and even the blue-gold shadows cast by the shimmering solutions could not reveal the clockwork boy.

Edwin struggled with the bizarre bind on his legs and stumbled forward regardless of it. No matter how hard his fingers twisted and pulled the wires only dug into his skin and cut it when he yanked too sharply. He gave up and stepped as wide as he could and found that, if he was careful, he could still walk and even, in half-hops and uneven staggers, he could run.

His light was nowhere to be found, and he gave up on that, too.

“Sir, I’m coming!” he cried out again, since the doctor was awake already and he wanted Ted to think he was aware, and acting. But what could Ted think? Ted was only a collection of cogs and springs.

Edwin remembered the red-haired Madeline with the strap-marks on her wrists. She’d said Ted had no soul, but she’d implied that one might come along.

The darkness baffled him, even in the laboratory he knew by heart. Hobbled as he was, and terrified by the pattering of unnatural feet, the basement’s windowless night worked against him and he panicked.

He needed help, but where could it come from?

The orderlies upstairs frightened him in a vague way, as harbingers of physical authority; and the doctors and nurses might think he was as crazy as the other children, wild and loud—or as mad as his mother.

Like Madeline.

Her name tinkled at the edge of his ears, or through the nightmare confusion that moved him in jilting circles. Maybe Madeline knew something he didn’t—maybe she could help. She wouldn’t make fun of him, at any rate. She wouldn’t tell him he was frightened for nothing, and to go back to sleep.

He knew where her room was located; at least he knew of its wing, and he could gather its direction.

The stairs jabbed up sharp and hard against his exploring fingers, and his hands were more free than his feet so he used them to climb—knocking his knees against each angle and bruising his shins with every yard. Along the wall above him there was a handrail someplace, but he couldn’t find it so he made do without it.

He crawled so fast that his ascent might have been called a scramble.

He hated to leave the doctor alone down there with Ted, but then again, the doctor had taken up the screwdriver and the scissors once before. Perhaps he could be trusted to defend himself again.

At the top of the stairs Edwin found more light and his eyes were relieved. He stood up, seized the handrail, and fell
forward because he’d already forgotten about the wire wrapped around his ankles. His hands stung from the landing, slapping hard against the tile floor, but he picked himself up and began a shuffling run, in tiny skips and dragging leaps down the corridor.

A gurney loomed skeletal and shining in the ambient light from the windows and the moon outside. Edwin fell past it and clipped it with his shoulder. The rattling of its wheels haunted him down the hallway, past the nurse’s station where an elderly woman was asleep with the most recent issue of Harper’s New Monthly Magazine lying across her breasts.

She didn’t budge, not even when the gurney rolled creakily into the center of the hallway, following in Edwin’s wake.

When he reached the right wing, he whispered, “Madeline? Madeline, can you hear me?”

All the windows in the doors to the inmate rooms were well off the ground and Edwin wasn’t tall enough to reach, so he couldn’t see inside. He hissed her name from door to door, and eventually she came forward. Her hands wrapped around the bars at the top, coiling around them like small white snakes. She held her face up to the small window and said, “Boy?”

He dashed to the door and pushed himself against it. “Madeline? It’s me.”

“The boy.” Her mouth was held up to the window; she must have been standing on her tip-toes to reach it.

Edwin stood on his tip-toes also, but he couldn’t touch the window, high above his head. He said, “I need your help. Something’s wrong with Ted.”

For a moment he heard only her breathing, rushed and hot above him. Then she said, “Not your Ted any longer. I warned you.”

“I know you did!” he said, almost crying. “I need your help! He tied my feet together, all tangled up—and I think he’s trying to hurt Dr. Smeeks!”

“Tangled, did he? Oh, that vicious little changeling,” she said, almost wheezing with exertion. She let go of whatever was holding her up, and Edwin heard her feet land back on the floor with a thump. She said through the door’s frame, beside its hinges, “You must let me out, little boy. If you let me out, I’ll come and help your doctor. I know what to do with changelings.”

It was a bad thought, and a bad plan. It was a bad thing to consider and Edwin knew it all too well; but when he looked back over his shoulder at the nurse’s station with the old lady snoring within, and when he thought of the clattering automaton roaming the laboratory darkness with his dear Dr. Smeeks, he leaped at the prospect of aid.

He reached for the lever to open the door and hung from it, letting it hold his full weight while he reached up to undo the lock.

Edwin no sooner heard the click of the fastener unlatching then the door burst open in a quick swing that knocked him off his hobbled feet. With a smarting head and bruised elbow he fought to stand again but Madeline grabbed him by the shoulder. She lifted him up as if he were as light as a doll, and she lugged him down the hallway. Her cotton shift billowed dirtily behind her, and her hair slapped Edwin in the eyes as she ran.

Edwin squeezed at her arm, trying to hold himself out of the way of the displaced gurneys and medical trays that clogged the hall; but his airborne feet smacked the window of the nurse’s station as Madeline swiftly hauled him past it, awakening the nurse and startling her into motion.

If Madeline noticed, she did not stop to comment.

She reached the top of the stairs and flung herself down them, her feet battering an alternating time so fast that her descent sounded like firecrackers. Edwin banged along behind her, twisted in her grip and unable to move quickly even if she were to set him down.
He wondered if he hadn’t made an awful mistake when she all but cast him aside. His body flopped gracelessly against a wall. But he was back on his feet in a moment and there was light in the laboratory—a flickering, uncertain light that was moving like mad.

Dr. Smeeks was holding it; he’d found his light after all, and he’d raised the wick on the hurricane lamp. The glass-jarred lantern gleamed and flashed as he swung it back and forth, sweeping the floor for something Edwin couldn’t see.

The doctor cried out, “Parker? Parker? Something’s here, something’s in the laboratory!”

And Edwin answered, “I know, sir! But I’ve brought help!”

The light shifted, the hurricane lamp swung, and Madeline was standing in front of the doctor—a blazing figure doused in gold and red, and black-edged shadows. She said nothing, but held out her hand and took the doctor’s wrist; she shoved his wrist up, forcing the lamp higher. The illumination increased accordingly and Edwin started to cry.

The laboratory was in a disarray so complete that it might never be restored to order. Glass glimmered in piles of dust, shattered tubes and broken beakers were smeared with the shining residue of the blue-green substance that lived and glowed in the dark. It spilled and died, losing its luminescence with every passing second—and there was the doctor, his hand held aloft and his lamp bathing the chaos with revelation.

Madeline turned away from him, standing close enough beneath the lamp so that her shadow did not temper its light. Her feet twisted on the glass-littered floor, cutting her toes and leaving smears of blood.

She demanded, “Where are you?”

She was answered by the tapping of marching feet, but it was a sound that came from all directions at once. And with it came a whisper, accompanied by the grinding discourse of a metal jaw.

“Tan…gles. Tan…gles…feet. Tanglefoot.”

“That’s your name then? Little changeling—little Tanglefoot? Come out here!” she fired the command into the corners of the room and let it echo there. “Come out here, and I’ll send you back to where you came from! Shame on you, taking a boy’s friend. Shame on you, binding his feet and tormenting his master!”

Tanglefoot replied, “Can…op…en…er” as if it explained everything, and Edwin thought that it might—but that it was no excuse.

“Ted, where are you?” he pleaded, tearing his eyes away from Madeline and scanning the room. Upstairs he could hear the thunder of footsteps—of orderlies and doctors, no doubt, freshly roused by the night nurse in her chamber.

Edwin said with a sob, “Madeline, they’re coming for you.”

She growled, “And I’m coming for him.”

She spied the automaton in the same second that Edwin saw it—not on the ground, marching its little legs in bumping patterns, but overhead, on a ledge where the doctor kept books. Tanglefoot was marching, yes, but it was marching towards them both with the doctor’s enormous scissors clutched between its clamping fingers.

“Ted!” Edwin screamed, and the machine hesitated. The boy did not know why, but there was much he did not know and there were many things he’d never understand—including how Madeline, fierce and barefoot, could move so quickly through the glass.

The madwoman seized the doctor’s hurricane lamp by its scalding cover, and Edwin could hear the sizzle of her skin as her fingers touched, and held, and then flung the oil-filled lamp at the oncoming machine with the glittering badger eyes.

The lamp shattered and the room was flooded with brilliance and burning.
Dr. Smeeks shrieked as splatters of flame sprinkled his hair and his nightshirt, but Edwin was there—shuffling fast into the doctor’s sleeping nook. The boy grabbed the top blanket and threw it at the doctor, then he joined the blanket and covered the old man, patting him down. When the last spark had been extinguished he left the doctor covered and held him in the corner, hugging the frail, quivering shape against himself while Madeline went to war.

Flames were licking along the books and Madeline’s hair was singed. Her shift was pocked with black-edged holes, and she had grabbed the gloves Dr. Smeeks used when he held his crucibles. They were made of asbestos, and they would help her hands.

Tanglefoot was spinning in place, howling above their heads from his fiery perch on the book ledge. It was the loudest sound Edwin had ever heard his improvised friend create, and it horrified him down to his bones.

Someone in a uniform reached the bottom of the stairs and was repulsed, repelled by the blast of fire. He shouted about it, hollering for water. He demanded it as he retreated, and Madeline didn’t pay him a fragment of attention.

Tanglefoot’s scissors fell to the ground, flung from its distracted hands. The smoldering handles were melting on the floor, making a black, sticky puddle where they settled.

With her gloved hands she scooped them up and stabbed, shoving the blades down into the body of the mobile inferno once named Ted. She withdrew the blades and shoved them down again because the clockwork boy still kicked, and the third time she jammed the scissors into the little body she jerked Ted down off the ledge and flung it to the floor.

The sound of breaking gears and splitting seams joined the popping gasp of the fire as it ate the books and gnawed at the ends of the tables.

“A blanket!” Madeline yelled. “Bring me a blanket!”

Reluctantly, Edwin uncovered the shrouded doctor and wadded the blanket between his hands. He threw the blanket to Madeline.

She caught it, and unwrapped it enough to flap it down atop the hissing machine, and she beat it again and again, smothering the fire as she struck the mechanical boy. Something broke beneath the sheet, and the chewing tongues of flame devoured the cloth that covered Tanglefoot’s joints—leaving only a tragic frame beneath the smoldering covers.

Suddenly and harshly, a bucket of water doused Madeline from behind.

Seconds later she was seized.

Edwin tried to intervene. He divided his attention between the doctor, who cowered against the wall, and the madwoman with the bleeding feet and hair that reeked like cooking trash.

He held up his hands and said, “Don’t! No, you can’t! No, she was only trying to help!” And he tripped over his own feet, and the pile of steaming clockwork parts on the floor. “No,” he cried, because he couldn’t speak without choking. “No, you can’t take her away. Don’t hurt her, please. It’s my fault.”

Dr. Williams was there, and Edwin didn’t know when he’d arrived. The smoke was stinging his eyes and the whimpers of Dr. Smeeks were distracting his ears, but there was Dr. Williams, preparing to administer a washcloth soaked in ether to Madeline’s face.

Dr. Williams said to his colleague, a burly man who held Madeline’s arms behind her back, “I don’t know how she escaped this time.”

Edwin insisted, “I did it!”

But Madeline gave him a glare and said, “The boy’s as daft as his mother. The clockwork boy, it called me, and I destroyed it. I let myself out, like the witch I am and the fiend you think I must be—”
And she might’ve said more, but the drug slipped up her nostrils and down her chest, and she sagged as she was dragged away.

“No,” Edwin gulped. “It isn’t fair. Don’t hurt her.”

No one was listening to him. Not Dr. Smeeks, huddled in a corner. Not Madeline, unconscious and leaving. And not the bundle of burned and smashed parts in a pile beneath the book ledge, under a woolen covering. Edwin tried to lift the burned-up blanket but pieces of Ted came with it, fused to the charred fabric.

Nothing moved, and nothing grumbled with malice in the disassembled stack of ash-smeared plates, gears, and screws.

Edwin returned to the doctor and climbed up against him, shuddering and moaning until Dr. Smeeks wrapped his arms around the boy to say, “There, there. Parker it’s only a little fire. I must’ve let the crucible heat too long, but look. They’re putting it out now. We’ll be fine.”

The boy’s chest seized up tight, and he bit his lips, and he sobbed.
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